

Philosophical Explorations

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND AND ACTION

Volume V • Number II • May 2002

Contents

J. David Velleman, *Motivation by Ideal* 89

Leslie Stevenson, *Six Levels of Mentality* 105

Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen and Karsten Klint Jensen, *Does Particularism Solve the Moral Problem?* 125

Discussion: La Caze on Envy and Resentment

Stan van Hooft, *La Caze on Envy and Resentment* 141

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Are Envy, Anger and Resentment Moral Emotions?* 148

Marguerite La Caze, *Revaluing Envy and Resentment* 155

Discussion: La Caze on Envy and Resentment

Are Envy, Anger, and Resentment Moral Emotions?

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev

Abstract

The moral status of emotions has recently become the focus of various philosophical investigations. Certain emotions that have traditionally been considered as negative, such as envy, jealousy, pleasure-in-others' misfortune, and pride, have been defended. Some traditionally "negative" emotions have even been declared to be moral emotions.¹

In this brief paper, I suggest two basic criteria according to which an emotion might be considered moral, and I then examine whether envy, anger, and resentment are moral emotions.

Criteria constituting a moral emotion

The issue of how we can determine whether an emotion is moral remains unclear. I believe that two central criteria are relevant here: (a) whether the core evaluative concern of the emotion is moral, and (b) whether the emotion tends to lead to beneficial moral consequences. The core evaluative concern (or theme) is the focus of concern of the emotional experience. If

this intrinsically normative concern refers to moral issues, then the emotion can be regarded as a moral emotion. In light of this criterion, compassion, which involves a positive evaluation of the other person who is suffering and a willingness to offer her substantial aid is a moral emotion. In this sense grief, which involves a negative evaluation of the irrevocable loss of someone very close and of great value to us, can also be considered as a moral emotion.

An emotion can be regarded as morally neutral in this sense if its core evaluative concern does not refer to moral aspects. In this sense, regret – which is basically a sorrow over a past alternative that was available to us, but that we missed – is morally neutral. The missed opportunity does not have to refer to the moral realm.

The second criterion does not refer to the emotion's intrinsic evaluative component, but to its consequences. According to this criterion, an emotion may be characterized as moral or immoral if its experience tends to lead to consequences that are, on balance, morally beneficial or harmful. The expression "tends to" could mean (a) that an emotion *necessarily* leads to beneficial or harmful moral consequences, (b) that it *always* does so, or (c) that it *normally* does so.² Hate is immoral from the perspective of this criterion (and probably from that of the former criterion as well). An emotion can be described as morally neutral in this sense if it is not obvious whether it tends to lead to morally beneficial or harmful considerations. Sexual desire may be considered by some people to fit this description.

The two criteria are not necessarily correlated. In many circumstances, intense grief, which is a moral emotion, may lead to harmful consequences – some of them even morally harmful. And a morally neutral emotion, such as regret, may lead to beneficial moral consequences.

Determining whether a given emotion is moral in light of the first criterion requires conceptual analysis and psychological examination of the nature of that emotion. Determining conclusively the moral status of an emotion in light of the second criterion is harder as it depends on various empirical findings, taking into account factors referring to the specific person, society, and given circumstances. With all emotions, we may be able to find circumstances in which experiencing the emotion may have positive moral value – this is true even for hate. However, saying that an emotion is moral in this respect requires further empirical examination concerning the dominance of such positive cases.

The classification of each emotion as moral, immoral, or morally neutral is not self-evident and sometimes may require the help of empirical studies. In any case, it is important to keep in mind these criteria when determining the moral status of each emotion.

Envy

In the philosophical and religious traditions, envy is often considered to be the most immoral emotion. Thus, for Aristotle, envy is intrinsically evil – it is very near to hatred. Spinoza also considers envy to be tantamount to hate, and Thomas Reid describes it as "the most malignant passion that can lodge in the human breast."³ Augustine considers envy to be the worst of sins – and indeed Christianity characterizes envy as one of the seven deadly sins, while Buddhism regards envy as one of the six types of poison.

In an interesting paper published in *Philosophical Explorations*, Marguerite La Caze argues that "both envy and resentment, in some important forms, are moral emotions connected with concern for justice. ... [G]iven their valuable moral

1 See, e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; La Caze, 2001; Kristjansson, 2001; Portmann, 1999, 2001.

2 This analysis of the expression "tends to" is suggested in Ellis' discussion of casual sex; see Ellis, (2001), p. 256.

3 Aristotle, *Rhetoric to Alexander*:1445a19; Spinoza (1677), IIIdef.aff.xxiii; Reid (1788), p. 567.

role, they ought not be condemned or suppressed."⁴ Although La Caze does not make the distinction between the two criteria of moral emotions discussed above, it seems that in her view envy is moral in both senses: it involves both "concern for justice" and it generates beneficial consequences, such as the recognition of injustice and motivation to work in order to improve one's situation. Envy, she believes, is not essentially a negative attitude in response to any benefit received by others, rather, it is often directed at undeserved success and beneficiaries of unjust circumstances. She believes the same is true of resentment.

In order to argue that envy is a moral emotion, it is not sufficient to show that some forms of envy are beneficial in certain circumstances. Many of our everyday activities – such as dancing, drinking wine, watching television, and participating in online communication – may sometimes have such beneficial outcomes, but still they are not necessarily considered as moral. Many people would probably classify the above activities as morally neutral.

Determining whether envy is moral, immoral, or morally neutral requires reference to the two criteria suggested above: their intrinsic core evaluative concern and their outcomes.

There is no common agreement about the core evaluative concern underlying envy. The principal two candidates are the object's immorality and the subject's inferiority. Let us consider whether one of these concerns can explain envy.

The claim that the moral concern is the central concern in envy is fraught with difficulties. Here are a few of them.

- (a) Envy addresses a partial, personal concern, rather than a moral concern: it entails the desire to improve our personal lot, not the desire to improve the well-being of other people.
- (b) Envy is often directed at people who have natural gifts (such as wisdom or beauty) or who are lucky; however, it is not immoral to have such gifts or to be lucky.
- (c) Sometimes the envious person wishes to deprive others of their greater benefits, even if this means depriving herself of some benefits as well. There can hardly be any moral justification for such a desire.

In light of these difficulties, it seems mistaken to assume that a moral concern is the core evaluative concern in envy. Let us see whether the subject's inferiority is the core evaluative concern.

The importance of the inferiority concern in envy conveys the weight we attach to our comparative stand. People compare themselves with others in order to reduce uncertainty and maintain or enhance self-esteem. An unfavorable comparison often leads to envy. It is our relative deprivation, rather than all types of deprivation, which bothers us in envy. A rich person can be envious of another who has just a little bit more. Envious want to be better, or at least not worse, more than they want to be better off. Since inferiority is comparative in nature – to be inferior is to be situated lower than someone else – its central place in envy also indicates the comparative nature of envy.

4 La Caze, (2001), p. 31.

It seems that the subject's perceived inferiority is indeed a core evaluative concern in envy; however, it is not the only such concern. Envy is not concerned with inferiority in general but with specific inferiority regarding people who are comparable to us. Since social comparison is chiefly limited to those who are similar to us, envy should be more typical when there is a small subject-object gap. We do not experience intense envy toward those who succeed in areas insignificant to us or those who are far above us. We envy those who are close to us. Accordingly, there is no linear positive correlation between the degree of inferiority and the intensity of envy.

Another factor should then be introduced in order to explain envy. As with the moral concern, this factor is normative, but it is not moral. I suggest that this factor is the claim of personal desert. Personal desert is different from moral entitlement. Claims of desert, such as "I deserve to win the lottery," are based on our sense of personal value; claims based on moral right, such as "she is entitled to receive a raise in her salary," often refer to obligations constitutive of the relationships with other agents. Claims of desert are not necessarily grounded in anyone's obligations, but rather in the rewards that people perceive themselves to deserve. Entitlement requires eligibility and satisfying some general rules, whereas deservingness requires satisfying certain conditions of personal worthiness that are not written down in any legal or official regulation. Although some claims of personal desert also express moral concerns, the two types of claims are different.

The inequality associated with envy is often connected to natural differences or to those arising from other impersonal causes. Since such inequality does not entail the immoral behavior or attitude of an agent, there is usually no occasion to blame anyone for this situation. Nevertheless, the situation may still be considered undeserved or unfair: it encapsulates some kind of personal injustice, since it places us in an undeserved situation. When we are envious of lucky people or those born with natural gifts, we are not accusing them – or anyone else – of behaving criminally or immorally; rather, we are perceiving that we occupy an undeserved inferior situation.

Combining the two types of concerns, we may say that the core evaluative concern of envy is a *negative evaluation of our undeserved inferiority*. In envy, the issue of our desert always accompanies the issue of our inferiority. Our concern is not a general moral concern for justice, but a specific personal concern for what we consider as our undeserved inferiority.⁵

The above considerations, which are completely absent from La Caze's discussion, can shed some light on the moral status of envy and on the issue of whether envy is moral, immoral, or morally neutral.

Envy is surely not a moral emotion, since its core evaluative concern – namely, the negative evaluation of our undeserved inferiority – is not moral. This concern does not express a moral concern regarding how people should be treated, but merely a personal concern, regarding what our fortune should be. Although this is not a moral concern, it is a normative one. All emotions involve a normative claim, which is expressed in their evaluative component, but this claim does

5 For further discussions on these issues, see Ben-Ze'ev, (2000), pp. 146-150, 282-289.

not have to be moral. Indeed, envy includes a normative claim – it argues something about how situations of fortunes ought to be. However, this is not a moral claim since it does not refer to the way we should treat other people.

Envy is also not an immoral emotion. (In this regard, La Caze is right.) Its core evaluative concern does not imply immoral behavior. It is not immoral to want to eliminate what I perceive as my undeserved inferiority. On the contrary, it is commendable to want to eliminate an undeserved state or alter undeserved circumstances.

From the perspective of its core evaluative concern, envy is neither moral nor immoral; in this sense, it can be regarded as morally neutral – though not normatively neutral.

Let us consider whether envy is a moral emotion regarding the second criterion, namely, its consequences. It is obvious that envy does not necessarily or even always lead to harmful moral consequences. There are many cases, and La Caze discusses some of them, in which envy has beneficial moral consequences. The more difficult question is whether envy normally leads to harmful consequences. It is hard to provide a definite empirical answer on this matter since such an answer depends upon personal, cultural, and circumstantial factors. Thus, for those people who have an envious character, envy is more likely to be harmful; the same holds of very competitive societies or circumstances. There are many cases of envy in which no harmful consequence results for the envied – although the unpleasant feeling of envy may be harmful for the envier.

As was the case when considering the nature of envy, when we consider its consequences, envy again cannot be characterized as a moral or immoral emotion. It is better considered as morally neutral while producing various beneficial and harmful consequences.

Anger and resentment

As in the case of envy, when we examine the morality or immorality of anger and resentment, we should distinguish between their core evaluative concerns and their consequences. Envy has been considered as morally neutral in light of both criteria.

Anger is typically an immediate response to what we consider as unjustified harm that someone has inflicted upon us or upon those related to us. In anger, the harm is often a kind of personal insult, and thus the wish for revenge entails the desire for retaliation for an unjust injury. The core evaluative concern in anger is then also moral: it involves a negative evaluation of another person performing an undeserved offense. We blame the other person for such an unjustified offense, whether or not the offense was deliberate, or due to negligence or lack of foresight. In anger, the other's action is not merely perceived as unjust, but also as depreciating our position. Like envy, anger may also involve a reference to our inferior position; but unlike the case of envy, the inferior position is caused by an unjust activity of another person. In this sense, anger involves a moral concern that is absent in envy. In light of its core evaluative concern, anger can be regarded as a moral emotion.

Resentment is similar to anger in involving a negative attitude toward a particular action of a blameworthy person. Resentment is usually a long-term attitude, whereas anger is often momentary. Resentment is typically directed at an action that repeats itself or at a general pattern of actions, whereas anger is often directed at novel actions. Resentment lacks the urge to attack that is so typical of anger. Regarding its core evaluative concern, resentment may be characterized as an emotional protest against what is perceived as morally unjust. In this sense, the basic evaluative concern in resentment is moral. Although resentment is sometimes directed at the superiority of others, it focuses on some injustice rather than on superiority itself. Unlike anger, which refers to immediate personal harm, resentment is usually directed at a moral injustice, the consequences of which are more remote. Resentment is more general than anger, as it refers not merely to blameworthy actions, as anger does, but it also expresses a negative attitude toward the fortunes of other agents, as does envy.

We can distinguish between discontent, envy, anger, and resentment. Discontent arises when we believe that something is wrong – namely, a better alternative is available. Envy occurs when the wrongness is related to our inferior situation. Resentment emerges when wrongdoing is perceived. Anger occurs when a particular person commits a specific wrongdoing. Anger and resentment convey an implicit moral accusation; such an accusation is absent in discontent and envy. When unjust treatment, rather than mere inferiority is perceived, resentment and anger are more dominant than envy.

Another way of examining the morality of anger and resentment focuses on their possible consequences. Do these emotions lead to negative moral consequences? Again, this is an empirical question that does not have definite answer. It seems, however, that a moderate intensity of anger and resentment may typically have positive consequences.

Conclusion

We have seen that although all emotions involve a normative claim, not all such claims refer to the moral domain. In order for an emotion to be moral, it should fulfill at least one of the following criteria: its core evaluative concern should be moral or the emotion should tend to lead to beneficial moral consequences. I have argued that envy does not fulfill either of these criteria and hence it cannot be regarded as a moral emotion (and in this regard, La Caze is wrong). Anger and resentment fulfill the first criteria and in this sense are moral emotions.



Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Department of Philosophy, University of Haifa, Haifa, 31905, Israel, benzeev@research.haifa.ac.il

References

- Aristotle, *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation*. (J. Barnes, Ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2000), *The subtlety of emotions*, Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press.
- Ellis, A. (2001), Causal sex, In Portmann (2001).
- Kristjansson, K. (2001), *Justifying emotions: Pride and jealousy*, London: Routledge.
- La Caze, M. (2001), "Envy and resentment", *Philosophical Explorations* IV, 31-45.
- Portmann, J. (1999), *When bad things happen to other people*, London: Routledge.
- Portmann, J. (Ed.), (2001), *In defense of sin*, New York: St. Martin.
- Reid, T. (1788), *Essays on the active powers of man*, In *Philosophical Works* (edited by W. Hamilton). Hildesheim: Georg Olms.
- Spinoza, B. (1677), *Ethics*. In E. Curley (Ed.), *The collected works of Spinoza*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1985).