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## COMMENTARY - ENVY NOURISHES CRISES. THE WHEAT AND WEEDS

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Our society could resolve much of its discontent by better handling its passions and feelings. Envy is one of the most devastating and dangerous of these feelings, particularly during crises. It needs to be controlled. In times gone by, people knew that unrestrained envy could produce disasters. So they developed an appropriate system of ethics to change and contain it, altering it to become good behavior.

Ancient civilizations wrote the golden rule - "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" - as a guide to preventing envy. The Bible alerts us to the power of envy through Cain's deed. Moved by his envious heart he denied brotherhood and committed the first fratricide. Despite these past teachings, our society underestimates envy and considers it the source of competition. Mainstream thought maintains that humanity's envious nature promotes checks and balances that may foster the Common Good. However, in reality it distorts competitions (with one player annihilating the other).

Modern society ignores that envy is the cause of numerous problems. Claims for meritocracy, namely, the self-praise and the sorrow (or pleasure) for the misfortune of others, are increasing. Envy provokes this increase. Although it causes quarrels and lawsuits, we do not create rules to stop it. Courts and citizens would save a great deal of moral and economic energy if it were brought under control. Furthermore, conspicuous consumption drags us into debt as we toil ever harder to increase our social status. Despite all this, the media praises competition driven by envy, and the market exploits this feeling to increase GDP. However, this economic growth brings about social dissatisfaction. GDP does not indicate nations' quality of life because it includes envy-driven consumption, which ultimately produces unhappiness.

One can easily identify envy. It is the suffering derived from the successes of others and the pleasure from their misfortunes. It incites envious people to act against what is good for and in favor of what hurts those they envy. The German word *Schadenfreude* expresses this very well; it literally means the joy derived from damage.

When passion moves action, vices may cause crime and damage others. The desire alone for something that is owned by another isn't a sin according to the tenth commandment. The Hebrew word *hamad* doesn't mean covet, but it means plotting to obtain the coveted thing (and commit an evil deed). One should overcome evil thoughts and feelings as soon as they arise, so that one will not do evil deeds, speak false words and make omissions.

Envy incites a mechanism of mutual damage. Envious people take pleasure in praising their successful deeds (and omitting their misfortunes) to those who envy them. This behavior triggers a spiral of hostility in which we are both victims and promoters. Thankfully, communities usually include selfless people. They break these vicious cycles by reducing enmity and spreading happiness. Spirituality and *agape*, when put into practice, are the source of this selflessness - *eros* and *philia* may cause envy while *agape* alone is inherently not envious. Families are the cradle of the fight against envy. Their members are virtuous mirrors of one another that reveal and eliminate envious feelings. Today we are a society poor in selfless people; humans need someone who will listen and sympathize with their misfortunes and successes.

Aristotle long ago pointed out that envy exists only among peers. Students do not envy their teachers, but their classmates. Emperors and masters weren't envied by their servants; followers hate, admire or wish to be like their superiors. Children envy their siblings, not their parents. One can easily identify envious people: They suffer from the syndrome of "even if...", where they add a negative comment after every compliment ("he is a nice person, even if..."). Thus, ancient social casts and

the structures of corporate hierarchy undermined this perverse feeling. A perfect hierarchical society includes no peers, only superiors and subordinates. Human beings obey and command willingly, but they struggle to build positive relationships with peers. A globalized and equal society is full of peers, increasing opportunities for envy.

Rather than just envy people that are better than us, we should respect them and cooperate. In an unchanging world, where everyone “eats from a single pie”, advantages gained by one are detrimental to his or her peers. This is called a “zero-sum game” (a participant's gains are exactly equal to the losses of the other participant or participants). This situation triggers envious feelings and reactions.

However, zero-sum game relationships rarely exist in reality. Healthy societies encourage cooperation, win-win relationships and mutual growth. If we nurture envy, win-win opportunities slip away. The worldview of envious people highlights competition, rivalry and destruction, which excludes mutually beneficial opportunities and reciprocity. Envy is a perverse shortcut for relational problem solving. Real solutions depend on one's ability to recognize and promote reciprocity. Immature admiration may turn into envy; only the respect and admiration of selfless people is pure and constructive.

In hard times, people tend to envy others, considering them rivals in zero-sum games. Crises nourish envy and vice versa. Today education promoting selflessness is much needed; people need to learn to respect their peers. Schools and families are the first crusaders of this transformation, which should then influence institutions (through fiscal systems, corporate incentives, etc.). Cooperation is the good seed and envy the tares. Our society should cultivate the good wheat and avoid the weeds.

*Translated by Cristian Sebok*