Gratitude: Combatting Envy in the Pursuit of Happiness

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In *The Conquest of Happiness*, the philosopher Bertrand Russell argues that envy greatly hinders the pursuit of happiness. However, he doesn't merely identify envy as a problem for those of us who wish to be happy, he also presents what he sees as the best solution to that problem: replacing envy with admiration. In what follows, I will argue that Russell is right about the problem with envy but wrong about the best solution. Specifically, I will argue that admiration perpetuates a focus on comparisons and lack, which in turn keeps individuals problematically focused on themselves. I argue that gratitude, which avoids this pitfall, makes a better replacement for envy than admiration does. But before I present my arguments, I will provide a more detailed account of Russell's ideas regarding envy and admiration and offer a summary of my research on philosophical treatments of gratitude.

Bertrand Russell was arguably one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Russell was famous for his work in logic, mathematics, and philosophy, often focusing on happiness and morality. His book, *The Conquest of Happiness*, is broken down into two sections. The first section discusses the particular vices that hinder happiness, and the second section focuses on virtues that facilitate happiness. In a chapter of the first section, Russell identifies envy as a vice that contributes to unhappiness.

Before I go any further, I should acknowledge that there are contentious philosophical debates regarding the nature of happiness. But I think we can sidestep those debates for present purposes. Whether we understand happiness as hedonists do, identifying happiness with pleasure, or whether we understand happiness as Aristotelians do, identifying happiness with life in accordance with virtue[1], does not matter for present purposes. I only intend to discuss happiness in relation to envy, and every point I will make about happiness and envy applies equally well to a wide variety of accounts of happiness, from the hedonists' to the Aristotelians', although Russell's talk of virtue and vice, and my conviction that happiness is the final end, aligns mostly neatly with the Aristotelean theoretical perspective.

Envy is understood as an emotion or a feeling. Russell states, "Envy, in fact, is one form of a vice, partly moral, partly intellectual, which consists in seeing things never in themselves but only in their relations" (Russell 84). Kant, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, which touches on envy briefly, offers a more expansive account of envy stating,

> Envy is a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress, even though it does not detract from one's own. [It is] a reluctance to see our well-being overshadowed by another's because the standard we use to see how well off we are is not the intrinsic worth of our own well-being but how it compares with that of others. [Envy] aims, at least in terms of one's wishes, at destroying others' good fortune (Kant 6:459).

Both Russell and Kant highlight that envy is based on comparisons; comparisons we make with the people around us, finding value in how we stack up to one another.

Another crucial aspect of envy is the wish to see misfortune befall the person of whom you are envious. Russell addresses this, writing, "If he can, [the envious person] deprives others of their advantages, which to him is as desirable as it would be to secure the same advantages himself. If this passion is allowed to run riot,

[1] I rely here upon the understanding of the hedonist view and the Aristotelian view provided by Dr. Richard Schubert at Cosumnes River College, Sacramento, in his Honors Seminar in Critical Thinking and Composition: Philosophy of Happiness during Spring 2024.

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it becomes fatal to all excellence, and even to the most useful exercise of exceptional skill". The goal of envy is not just to do better, but to see the other individual do worse.

With this in mind, Russell writes of envy as "an orgy of hatred," emphasizing the idea that envy traps one within oneself and maintains a circle of hatred (Russell 102). As someone focuses on another person in contrast to themselves, they maintain a constant focus on themselves. The concept of envy is reliant on the idea of comparison. But, the true root of envy is feeling a lack within one's own life, and in turn, feeling inferior to others who seem better off.

Russell states, "Of all the characteristics of ordinary human nature, envy is the most unfortunate; not only does the envious person wish to inflict misfortune and do so whenever he can with impunity, but he is also himself rendered unhappy by envy. Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, he derives pain from what others have" (Russell 81). Russell portrays envy as a vicious cycle, contending that "the envious man may say, 'what is the good of telling me that the cure for envy is happiness? I cannot find happiness while I continue to feel envy, and you tell me that I cannot cease to be envious until I find happiness" (83). As long as you continue to stay envious you can never be happy, but the cure to envy according to Russell is happiness. How then can this cycle be broken?

Russell proposes admiration as a replacement for envy. As Russell puts it, "Whoever wishes to increase human happiness must wish to increase admiration and to diminish envy". However, Russell never expands upon this remark in the remainder of his book. This makes it hard to understand exactly what he means by admiration and why he thinks admiration is the best replacement for envy, so, we will have to go beyond Russell in evaluating his suggestion.

As I see it, admiration can be defined as an emotion that results from contemplating, or even simply perceiving, excellence. Before we explore admiration beyond its mere definition, let us further consider the nature of envy. As we will see, doing so will position us well to understand the relationship between envy and admiration better.

According to various works of philosophy, envy can be categorized into different forms. I'll focus on just two of these for present purposes. A variation of envy, benign envy, is similar to the envy I have already described, which doesn't have a descriptive name in the literature, but which I think of as 'malicious envy'. Unlike malicious envy, benign envy doesn't involve the desire to see pain or lack in another's life. Rather, in the case of benign envy, an individual simply feels a lack in comparison to another. Philosophers disagree about whether or not benign envy should even be considered envy since benign envy is far closer to admiration than it is to malicious envy[2].

In their contributions to the volume *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*, Alfred Archer and Andre Grahle discuss both admiration and envy (Archer and Grahle 45-57). They identify a variety of envy they call 'emulative envy' in which an individual's envy inspires or motivates them to do more to reach the same level as the one envied (48). As emulative envy involves no desire for the defeat of the person envied, I consider it a variety of benign envy. I believe we can use Archer and Grahle's work to understand admiration and, in turn, use that understanding to evaluate Russell's claim that admiration is the best replacement for envy.

In canvassing other works in philosophy, I've noticed that many philosophers see admiration as very similar to benign envy (Van de Ven). But Archer and Grahle distinguish the two. They note that admiration is more focused on the admired, whereas envy focuses on the contrast between the self and the envied, focusing heavily on the actual comparison (p51). In his book *The Sickness Unto Death,* the Danish philosopher Soren

[2] See Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy's 1.3 section on "'benign envy' and 'individuous' envy."

Kierkegaard sums up the relationship between admiration and envy as follows: “Admiration is happy self-surrender; envy is unhappy self-assertion” (139). As Kierkegaard points out, admiration has positive connotations attached to it, while envy has negative connotations (139). As I see it, admiration and emulative envy, or envy in general, are often seen in the light of self-improvement, regardless of the intent or motive. Due to this, there is a positive importance attached to admiration and emulative envy for their motivational components. However, it’s important to remember, that this paper’s interest concerns the pursuit of happiness, and though self-motivation is a positive trait, it in itself does not equate to happiness or necessarily lead to happiness.

While I accept Russell’s claim that envy is a problem for those of us who wish to be happy, I think he is wrong to claim that replacing envy with admiration is the best solution. Based on my research on philosophical treatments of gratitude, I propose that, in the context of our pursuit of happiness, gratitude is a far better replacement for envy than admiration.

The topic of gratitude is philosophically contentious, as most topics of real philosophical interest are. For present purposes, we can follow Tony Manela’s definition of gratitude in his article on the subject in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Manela defines gratitude as, “The proper or called-for response in a beneficiary to benefits or beneficence from a benefactor”. According to Manela’s account, gratitude is not a mere emotion or feeling, rather it is a response. In contrast to envy and appreciation, which are mere emotions, gratitude demands action on the part of the beneficiary and the benefactor.

In ordinary speech, ‘thankfulness’, ‘appreciation’, and ‘gratitude’ are often used interchangeably. However, these terms have different meanings. ‘Gratitude’ itself is used in two importantly different ways (McAleer 55); that is, gratitude can be categorized as prepositional or propositional (Manela).[3]

Prepositional gratitude is A being grateful to B for C (McAleer 55). I am grateful to my coworker for covering my shift. There is an agency requirement for prepositional gratitude (McAleer 55), a benefactor is always necessary. Since in prepositional gratitude, you are grateful for something, there must always be a way to pay back the debt. If I am grateful to my coworker for covering my shift, I have to repay my coworker in some way.

Propositional gratitude is different. Propositional gratitude is A being grateful that D is occurring (McAleer 55). D is a circumstance, rather than a specific person.[4] I am grateful that I am not a STEM major. I am not necessarily grateful to anyone. Various studies link this second form of gratitude to thankfulness or appreciation (Diniz et al). As previously stated, gratitude requires action, similar to paying back a debt. If I am grateful that I am not a STEM major, who am I to repay for this? As I see it, unlike prepositional gratitude, propositional gratitude is essentially the same as thankfulness. Neither requires repaying a benefactor. Differentiating between prepositional gratitude, which I think of as gratitude proper, and propositional gratitude which is just thankfulness, is crucial to understanding whether gratitude or thankfulness should replace envy in the pursuit of happiness.

Let us return to Russell, who writes, “You cannot therefore get away from envy using success alone, for there will always be in history or legend some person even more successful than you are. You can get away from envy by enjoying the pleasures that come your way, by doing the work that you have to do, and by avoiding comparisons with those whom you imagine, perhaps quite falsely, to be more fortunate than yourself” (Russell 97).

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[3] McAleer uses the terms ‘targeted’ and ‘propositional’, but I prefer Manela’s usage of ‘prepositional’ and ‘propositional’.

[4] The idea of propositions here is certainly not original to me, but my way of expressing it (in terms of a circumstance that is occurring) is my own.

Russell emphasizes how harmful comparisons can be. But, as I see it, like comparison, admiration is focused on the other, on someone else, in a way that always relates to the self. Russell advises us to "enjoy the pleasures that come [our] way". Yet, enjoying the pleasures in life is only possible in the presence of both gratitude (that is, prepositional gratitude) and thankfulness (that is, propositional gratitude). Since comparisons are the basis of envy and admiration, one should not focus on comparisons that bring out feelings of lack and inferiority but rather focus on interactions and relationships that produce gratitude. This demands action, repaying the benefactors in one's life that provide these pleasures. This takes our focus off ourselves in the way that comparison and admiration do not allow and puts our focus on the good in our lives that is provided by others. McAleer, expounding on Manela's work, states that prepositional gratitude "is important for maintaining the reciprocity that holds a society…together" (McAleer 60).[5] We should replace our self-regarding self-absorption, whether it arises from envy, simple comparison or from admiration, with other-regarding intentional choices to repay the benefactors in our lives.

As I see it, since thankfulness lacks a benefactor, it is best viewed as a way of perceiving the world and a way of carrying yourself. Thankfulness is important in life. It is important to appreciate what you have, which may not have been granted by a benefactor and may be circumstantial or unintentional. Statements such as "I'm so happy to be alive," which may not have a benefactor in mind, excluding God or your mother, are needed to remind us of the pleasures and luxuries we enjoy. To be clear, I am not arguing that we should not be thankful, merely that, in so far as we wish to be happy, gratitude towards our benefactors is uniquely well-suited to replace envy in our lives.

I'm also not arguing that we should discourage competition or admiration in any way. Competition and admiration are both crucial to inspire and motivate individuals to strive to do better and succeed. It is just that, in the context of the pursuit of happiness, success, winning, and being the best are not the final, end-all goal. Rather, as Aristotle maintains in *Nichomachean Ethics*, it is happiness that is the final end or, as he would prefer to express it, the "most final end" or "final end without qualification" (Book 1, Section 7). We don't acquire happiness by being better than others. In fact, in pursuing happiness, focusing on harmful negative comparisons will only leave individuals focused on themselves rather than on the positives they have in their lives. As I see it, these positives should evoke appreciation, not merely admiration. Focusing on the positives in life produces gratitude and thankfulness, whereby gratitude, I mean making choices to repay our benefactors, and by thankfulness, I mean intentionally appreciating the natural positives and blessings that occur in our lives.

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[5] Of course, McAleer puts this in his own preferred terms, i.e., in terms of targeted gratitude.

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