Envy, Justice, and Democracy

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"For envy is a gadding passion,
and walketh the streets,
and doth not keep home"
(Sir Francis Bacon)

1. Introduction

This paper is framed within the broader context of the analytic-continental divide in political philosophy, a topic that has recently gained unexpected amounts of attention (Chin/Thomassen 2016). On the one hand, the questions posed, methodological discussions put forth, and arguments made in John Rawl's "A Theory of Justice", a seminal work in the analytic current of political philosophy, challenged conventional debates in mainstream conceptualizations of political thought and political philosophy (continental or not), especially in Japan. Rawls' work prompted methodological self-reflection within political science and a large-scale repositioning with or against the analytic tradition[1]. On the other hand, in continental political philosophy, there has been a growing interest toward a political science that considers the role of feelings and emotions and critically engages with the rationalist paradigm. Notably, there is Chantal Mouffe's critique of deliberative democracy based on the political significance of passion, Martha Nussbaum's more recent discussion on the role of emotions in politics (Nussbaum 2013), as well as Yannis Stavrakakis' attempt to introduce the concept of *jouissance* (enjoyment) into political theory from a standpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Stavrakakis 2011). Currently, efforts to re-evaluate the relationship between the two (or possibly more) independently developed schools of thought and to establish a framework for dialogue between them are only in their initial stages.

Between these two traditions, so to speak, the question of "envy"[2] appears vaguely as a middle ground. Hence, this essay is not only an attempt to examine a concrete dimension of the "politics of emotion," which has often been discussed in very general terms, but it is also a suitable topic for both analytic and continental political philosophy, to make them sit down at the same table, so to speak. In addition, this emotion might have decisive implications for the consideration of our current democratic moment, and the recent dominance of populism in Europe and the United States may be examined differently if we can gain a new perspective on this issue. Further, the emotion of envy has not yet garnered an extensive amount of attention within the field of political science. In fact, the situation has not changed much since the time Helmut Schoeck remarked in his extensive book on envy that „[i]t is most curious to note that at the beginning of this century, authors began to show an increasing tendency, above all in the social sciences and moral philosophy, to repress the concept of envy" (Schoeck 1987, 12). Or, in the words of Joan Copjec, "social and political theorists [...] have given no serious consideration to this vice and its injurious contributions to social relations" (Copjec 2002, 162). The significant exception to this fallacy, on which Copjec is also building, is John Rawls. This pa-

per aims to examine Rawls' arguments on envy, testing them against critiques stemming primarily from outside the analytic tradition, and to explore points of friction between these arguments. Given its ambiguity, the role played by this emotion in a democratic society is also to be examined.

2. On Envy

To initiate the discussion, I will refer to a range of arguments on envy to outline the contours of this unique emotion. In Book II Chapter 10 of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states the following:

> "[W]e feel it towards our equals; not with the idea of getting something for ourselves, but because the other people have it. We shall feel it, if we have, or think we have, equals; and by 'equals' I mean equals in birth, relationship, age, disposition, distinction, or wealth". (Aristotle 2018, 75[3])

Aristotle then categorically discusses those who become "targets of envy", his main point being that envy arises first and foremost between individuals that are *comparable* against each other. People may tend, for example, to envy their neighbour receiving a slightly more favourable treatment, but fewer may harbour envy toward holders of extreme wealth such as Donald Trump or Bill Gates.

Aristotle then clearly distinguishes envy from the feeling of indignation. While indignation can be understood as "distress caused by witnessing the unjust good fortune of others," envy is characterized as follows:

> "... a disturbing pain excited by the prosperity of others. But it is excited not by the prosperity of the undeserving, but by that of people who are like us or equal with us." (Aristotle 2018, 73)

This distinction will be essential in the subsequent discussion. There is no doubt that comparability constitutes a very fundamental trait in what defines envy.

Incidentally, this emotion is typically characterised in an overwhelmingly negative manner, as evidenced by the seminal example provided by Kant. For him, envy is "a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress, even though it does not detract from one's own" (Kant 2017, 567). John Stuart Mill further characterizes envy as "that most anti-social and odious of all passions" (Mill 2020, 63). Likewise, Fukuzawa Yukichi (said to have been influenced by Mill) also harshly condemns it in chapter thirteen of *An Encouragement of Learning*, stating that "Among the many vices of humanity, none is more harmful to social relations than envy".

Exempting envy, Fukuzawa argues that even what could traditionally be considered a vice, depending on its intensity and direction of influence, can transform into a virtue. Examples includegreed (*donrin*) turning to thrift (*sekken*) or slander (*hibō*) to disproof (*benbaku*). Only envy does not conform to this principle of duality. It is a genuine vice, nothing less than the "mother of all evils" and "the greatest misfortune of mankind":

> Envy stands as the sole vice that is wholly and inherently malevolent, possessing a fundamentally unethical nature irrespective of circumstance, place, or direction. Envy is something that works in the shadows, it does not actively pursue anything, but instead harbours resentment due to the circumstances of others. It does not look inward but demands much from others, and the means of satisfying this discontent lies not in benefiting itself, but in causing harm to others (Fukuzawa 1942, 116).

The reason Fukuzawa detests envy to such an extent is that he sees it not only as harming others but "undermining the well-being of society as a whole". In the context of seeking Japan's ideological independence and self-respect among movements during a period of confrontation with the West, elimination of such a destabilising factor was most likely

a pressing concern for Fukuzawa. On Fukuzawa's theory of envy, Karube states that "among all seventeen chapters of *An Encouragement of Learning*, it is rare to find such a thorough critique directed at a single subject. Chapter thirteen may very well be the only one to go this far" (Karube 2011, 147). This assessment illustrates the striking negativity of Fukuzawa's viewpoint.

Regardless, arguments attributing some positive aspects to envy do exist. Take for example the work of Francis Bacon. Of those who may be subject to envy, Bacon writes that "envy is ever joined with the comparing of a man's self; and where there is no comparison, there is no envy [...]" (Bacon, 2014, 31), expressing, as we can see, the same viewpoint as that of Aristoteles. He most certainly condemns envy as "the vilest affection, and the most depraved; [...] envy worketh subtilly, and in the dark, and to the prejudice of good things, such as is the wheat" (Bacon 2014:34). Nevertheless, there is a subtle kind of utility found within Bacon's argument, one which he labels "public envy":

> There is yet some good in public envy, whereas in private, there is none. For public envy, is as an ostracism, that eclipseth men, when they grow too great. And therefore it is a bridle also to great ones, to keep them within bounds. (Bacon 2014, 33).

According to Bacon, public envy spreads like an infection, and once it befalls individuals of the public, for example, "principal officers or ministers", it "turneth them into an ill odor", even if they had previously behaved virtuously (Bacon 2014, 33). However, the reason that this sort of public envy can be considered beneficial in some way likely lies in its resulting ability to deter excessive inequality. It is also noteworthy that the concept of ostracism is cited here, which refers to a democratic practice to prevent potential tyrants from rising to power in ancient Athens.

Finally, it would be remiss not to acknowledge Freud's contribution on this matter. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud cites the example of "the troop of women and girls, all of them in love in an enthusiastically sentimental way, who crowd round a singer or pianist after his performance." According to Freud, while each of them yearns to approach the performer first and foremost for themselves, they will eventually unite as a group and happily share the star's presence equally among everyone. Freud generalizes this empirical fact in the following way:

> "What appears later on in society in the shape of *Gemeingeist, esprit de corps*, 'group spirit', etc., does not belief its derivation from what was originally envy. No one must want to put themself forward, everyone must be the same and have the same. Social justice means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well, or, what is the same thing, may not be able to ask for them." (Freud 2018, 43)

At play here is a deep, dark feeling that states "[i]f one cannot be the favourite, in any case, nobody else shall be the favourite." (Freud 2018, 43), which explicitly goes against a simplistic understanding of fairness. This contribution by Freud stating that our idea of social justice and equality is based on envy is an unsettling prospect for our largely justice-centred understanding of contemporary political philosophy.

The concept of envy has drawn the interest of many philosophers and thinkers. John Rawls, a central figure in the analytic tradition of political philosophy is no exception to this. The next section will examine Rawls' theory of justice in detail, observing his efforts to disarm the emotion of envy in his construction of justice.

3. Rawls' Theory of Envy

While Rawls' *Theory of Justice* does not feature envy as prominently compared to concepts like the original position, the veil of ignorance, or the theory of reflective equilibrium, he still dedicates

two entire sections to the subject: Section 80: *The Problem of Envy* and Section 81: *Envy and Equality*.

The following section will examine the way in which envy is incorporated into Rawls' vision of a just society, and whether the framework of justice can effectively limit its destructive nature.

Firstly, the underlying assumptions made by Rawls must be considered. In his conception of justice, individuals in their original position are assumed to be consistently rational and unaffected by certain psychological tendencies. Thus, during the initial phase of the book he excludes the idea of envy from his argument, stating: "The special assumption I make is that a rational individual does not suffer from envy" (Rawls 1999, 124). He follows that under this condition, whoever finds themself in their original position can be assumed to always opt for principles of justice.

In the third part of the book, Rawls then revisits this point. He verifies his previously established framework by applying it onto real-world human experiences. He concludes that it is undesirable to let an emotion such as envy, which in his eyes is "to be feared and avoided", interfere with deciding the principles of justice. Nevertheless, he admits that "these inclinations do exist and, in some way, they must be reckoned with" (Rawls 1999, 465). Accordingly, Rawls' point of interest is whether the psychological phenomenon of envy can be accommodated by his theory, and whether it poses a significant threat to the principles of justice (mostly the difference principle in this case).

In Section 80, "The Problem of Envy," Rawls defines envy as follows:

> We may think of envy as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages. We envy people whose situation is superior to ours [...] and we are willing to deprive them of their greater benefits even if it's necessary to give up something ourselves. (Rawls 1999, 466[4])

However, Rawls acknowledges the existence of instances where envy is not necessarily irrational. While it is a vice in the truest sense, he concedes that "sometimes the circumstances evoking envy are so compelling that, given human beings as they are, no one can reasonably be asked to overcome his rancorous feelings. [...] For those suffering this hurt, envious feelings are not irrational" (Rawls 1999, 468). In instances where "a person's lesser position [...] may be so great as to wound his self-respect", envy can be an inevitable response. Rawls refers to this condition as "excusable envy." Rawls' primary concern is whether a society governed by the principles of justice will generate an excessive amount of excusable envy. The later section will delve deeper into his argument.

In Section 81, "Envy and Equality," Rawls identifies three conditions that "encourage hostile outbreaks of envy." The first condition states that "the least favored tend to be more envious of the better situation of the more favored, the less secure their self-respect and the greater the feeling that they cannot improve their prospects are" (Rawls 1999, 469). The second condition refers to the existence of certain factors that cause a lack of self-respect or confidence to be experienced as painful or humiliating (such as social structures or lifestyles that make the discrepancy between oneself and others feel painful). The third condition constitutes a belief that "[t]o alleviate their feelings of anguish and inferiority, [...] they have no choice but to impose a loss on those better placed even at some cost to themselves". When these three conditions coincide, hostile envy become excusable, even in circumstances involving the disruption of the prevailing social order.

The aim of Rawls' argument is to demonstrate that the just society he envisions alleviates these conditions: First, the conception of justice (equal dignity and fundamental rights) supports the self-esteem of citizens. Because "[m]embers of the community share a common

sense of justice and are firmly bound by the bonds of civic friendship" (Rawls 1999, 470), even if somebody were to be less fortunate, they would have no basis to consider themselves inferior. Second, in a well-ordered society, wealth disparities do not become excessive. A well-ordered society will "diminish the number of occasions when the less favoured are likely to experience their situation as impoverished and humiliating. Even if they have some liability to envy, it may never be strongly evoked." (Rawls 1999, 471). Finally, Rawls continues by asserting rather straightforwardly that his envisioned society offers constructive ways of improving one's circumstances. Thus, he gives the following verdict:

> I conclude, then, that the principles of justice are not likely to arouse excusable general envy (nor particular envy either) to a troublesome extent. By this test, the conception of justice again seems relatively stable. (Rawls 1999, 471)

However, the question remains as to whether this truly ensures the establishment of justice and its safeguarding from envy. Rawls somewhat abruptly stops his discussion of the subject, acknowledging that he has "not explained it thoroughly." One cannot help but sense a hint of insecurity lingering within this conclusion.

4. Rawls' Critics

As discussed in the previous section, Rawls argues that his conception of a just society is immune to the corrosive effects of envy. However, it is important to acknowledge the noteworthy criticism that has been directed towards this argument. This section will focus on critiques stemming from what can be collectively understood as the continental school of philosophy[5]. These criticisms, although possibly perceived as 'extrinsic' by Rawlsian proponents, might at times sharply reveal the limitations of his argument. Even if so, it would be too early to conclude that no productive dialogue is possible.

The first point of critique to be addressed is, in a sense, a classical one, namely the question of Rawls' assumption of the original position. For example, Renata Salecl raises concerns about Rawls's exclusion of envy from the original position. According to her:

> "Rawls's claim that envy must be excluded from the original position is therefore deeply symptomatic. Rawls justifies this exclusion, first, by the fact that if envy were admitted into the original position, it would allow for the choice of a system which would not be beneficial to all parties and, second, by the fact that a system defined by justice is very unlikely to generate strong feelings of envy. Rawls presupposes that we can regulate envy (admit it or not), and that it depends on the system (there is less envy in a just system). However, in the dialectic of desire, in as much as it is intersubjective, envy is always at work." (Salecl 1994, 88)

Salecl bases her argument on the psychoanalytic mechanism of "desire," arguing that no subject can make purely rational choices independent of their relationship with others. Rather, she posits that: "the subject desires an object insofar as it is the object of the other's desire. As Lacan puts it, desire is always the desire of the other" (Salecl 1994, 88). However, this critique may mean little for those who do not share the psychoanalytic framework. Furthermore, Rawls' methodological structure — wherein ideal theory is developed in the first part and non-ideal conditions are addressed later—makes it unlikely that such critiques of the original position would destabilize his overall argument[6].

A more compelling critique, however, questions Rawls' understanding of the nature of envy itself. He claims that "excusable envy" would diminish in his idea of a just society, yet this assumption is far from self-evident. Consider the case of social hierarchies. In the event that individuals are unable to attribute their lower status to systemic injustice or others' wrongdoing — due to the social order be-

ing perceived as just — it is important to consider where such dissatisfaction can be directed. Kozakai refers to this predicament as "the hell of justice":

> "If one's lower status or salary compared to a colleague hired at the same time can be attributed to an unfair evaluation by a spiteful supervisor, one's self-esteem remains intact. It is precisely the belief that hierarchical criteria are unjust that spares individuals from feelings of inferiority. Contrary to Rawls's optimism, a just society could be the most terrifying scenario. A society where the principles of social order are fully transparent may not be a utopia but a living hell for human beings." (Kozakai 2008, 246)

Similarly, Slavoj Žižek critiques Rawls' argument by arguing that such a society would inevitably generate conditions for the eruption of resentment:

> "What Rawls doesn't see is how such a society would create the conditions for an uncontrolled explosion of resentment: in it, I would know that my inferior status is fully justified and would be deprived of blaming my failure on social injustice." (Žižek 2006, 36)[7]

Ironically, the very success of Rawls' proposal might foreshadow the emergence of unintended and deeply problematic outcomes, which Rawls himself did not anticipate[8].

This critique stems from the idea that a reduction in disparity does not necessarily lead to a reduction in the factors that cause envy. As previously stated, disparities in Rawls' just society are considered not to become excessive by default. However, the question remains as to whether the reduction of disparities would instead provoke a more intense form of envy. As Aristotle observes, when envy arises between those who are comparable, when differences become smaller, and the other person becomes more accessible, then will those once unbridgeable differences not appear increasingly intolerable? The reduction of disparities does not always lead to a decrease in envy[9]. According to Rawls' classification, such envy would be deemed "inexcusable", thereby classifying the critique as extrinsic. Still, this intensely negative emotion, whether it is reasonable or not, unmistakably points to a weak link in Rawls' conceptual framework. "Envy threatens the separation of the citizen and the empirical subject; Rawls' doctrine appears exorbitant or unstable" (Dupuy 1993, 285).

5. Envy and Democracy

The critique directed at *A Theory of Justice* in the previous section can be summarized as follows: while Rawls views envy as dangerous, he has not sufficiently accounted for its somewhat unrefined nature. Envy does not simply vanish with the elimination of disparities. Nozick referred to its intractability as the "principle of the conservation of envy" (Nozick 1974, 245). Now, while envy has practically been made intractable in Rawls' just society, the question of whether it is entirely harmful to a democratic society and whether it would be preferable for it not to exist, is not so easily answered. For the last section of this paper, the relationship between envy and democracy will be considered.

To more thoroughly examine the equivocal nature of envy in democratic societies, it is necessary to turn to the insights of Tocqueville. It is well known that Tocqueville, in his study of American society, identified "equality of condition" as a fundamental fact. However, this movement toward equality was not just a reality limited to America. According to Tocqueville, it was also part of Europe's democratization process over the past 700 years. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe understood this chain of equalization, or more precisely the democratic revolution as something that "designates the end of a society of a hierarchic and inegalitarian type, ruled by a theological-political logic in which the social order had its foundation in divine will" Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 155).

Just as discontent with political inequality during the French Revolution ig-

nited criticisms of economic inequality, the democratic revolution is understood as a series of processes creating a more egalitarian society through the absorption of various demands and their transformation into a chain of equivalence. As Uno Shigeki points out, the role of "imagination" in this process is crucial. In other words, in societies prior to equalization, people did not see their superiors as objects of comparison. In such a society, no special justification is required for a state of inequality, nor is it likely to produce a feeling of envy towards one's superiors. However, once this "imagination that deems others as being equal to oneself" (Uno 2007, 62) is unleashed, people begin to experience dissatisfaction with political, economic, and other forms of inequality. This dissatisfaction is evident regardless of whether individuals recognise that superiors are human beings just like them or not. At this point, inequality will appear as something devoid of any legitimacy. Moreover, it's precisely because "special reasons are required to make inequality justifiable" (Uno 2007, 60), that makes it a distinct characteristic of a democratic society.

Uno refers to such individuals, endowed with new imaginative capacities, as "homo democraticus". However, they simultaneously embody what amounts to a "homo invidiosus", an "envious human". As previously noted, envy arises among equals, yet it must be pointed out that this requires a minimal difference to be present. In essence, envy is a sentiment that thrives on a delicate balance between equality and difference[10]. Assuming the notions of equality and difference to be fundamental components of democratic ideology, it can be deduced that envy is an inevitable aspect of a democratic society. Conversely, a society devoid of envy would either be completely homogenous without any differences between individuals, or a pre-modern one based on absolute differences disallowing any form of comparison whatsoever. It is therefore not possible to conclude the discussion in the manner proposed by Rawls, namely by uncritically embracing the absence of envy as a positive phenomenon. Instead, we must consider envy as both a condition and a consequence to democracy. Thus, whether desired or not, envy may be seen as an unavoidable form of "democratic ethos" or "democratic passion" in a descriptive, rather than normative, sense[11].

To conclude, this paper has provided an overview of the special properties of envy and examined how Rawls, as a central figure in analytic political philosophy, treats this emotion in relation to his conception of justice. According to Rawls, in a just and well-ordered society, individuals are not assumed to be excessively plagued by envy. This perspective has been subject to severe criticism both from within and outside the analytic tradition. In contrast, this analysis has been focusing more on critiques from non-analytic perspectives. What those have pointed out is that contrary to Rawls' diagnosis, a just society might not only be unable to suppress envy, but might, if anything, cause it to erupt. Finally, using Tocqueville's analysis as a reference, we have demonstrated that envy is unavoidable in a democratic society. The crucial point is the need to reframe this emotion as a democratic passion.

Now then, how meaningful can such a discussion really be? Will one simply shrug their shoulders again, claiming that I have failed to grasp Rawls's intentions properly? And yet, was it not Rawls himself who was particularly sensitive to such psychological and psychoanalytic criticisms? This is evident from the fact that, at the conclusion of his reflections on envy, he turns to consider Freud's arguments. Indeed, this passage is one of the few places in this extensive work where Rawls explicitly refers to Freud.

According to Rawls, Freud's claim that a sense of justice originates in envy is nothing more than a weakly grounded assertion. It is at least equally plausible, he argues, to trace the sense of justice back to the moral sentiment of "indignation." In order to adjudicate between these pos-

sibilities, however, one must carefully examine people's understanding of conceptions of justice and of the social circumstances in which they live.

Still, Rawls's rebuttal here is not decisive enough to entirely refute Freud's position, and the question of whether justice is, in the final analysis, nothing more than a mask for envy remains unresolved. That said, for Rawls it was necessary to respond to Freud directly and rigorously—not because Freud's argument could be dismissed as merely external or irrelevant, but rather because, as Copjec has put it, "Freud's critique stands squarely before the theory of justice as fairness, exposing the fact that this very theory is already contaminated by envy from the outset" (Copjec 2002: 236). It seems to me that in Rawls's posture here lies an important clue for how contemporary analytic political philosophy and continental political philosophy might engage with one another.

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Endnotes

[1] For an overview on historic development and methodological characteristics of the analytic current, see Inoue / Tamura (2014).

[2] Translator's note: In the original Japanese version, besides the term *shitto* 嫉妬, other words such as *netami* 妬み, *enbō* 怨望 or *senbō* 羨望 are all used interchangeably to refer to the English "envy" by the author.

[3] Translator's note: For works such as this one, where the author cites the Japanese translation of a certain source from another language, a corresponding English version is provided.

[4] Furthermore, Rawls explicitly acknowledges that his understanding of envy is derived from Kant's definition.

[5] The most representative critique from the analytic tradition of political philosophy is undoubtedly that of Nozick. For a counter-critique of Nozick's argument, see Young (1987). Young persuasively argues that the egalitarian posi-tion does not originate from envy.

[6] A critique that problematizes Rawls' exclusion of envy from the original position in a more intrinsic manner is pre-sented by Tomlin (2008). Tomlin argues that the propensity for envy constitutes a "general fact" that should be acknowledged in the original position and, as such, influences the selection of the two principles of justice.

[7] Žižek further states, "What Rawls proposes is a terrifying social model in which hierarchy is legitimized as a natural characteristic. It lacks the simple lesson contained in the story of a Slovenian peasant, who was told by a benevolent witch: 'I will grant you any wish but be warned that your neighbor will receive twice as much.' The peasant thought for a moment, then gave a cunning smile and said to the witch: 'Take one of my eyes.'" (Žižek 2006, 68-69).

[8] A similar perspective is offered by Dupuy (1993): "From another standpoint, this [Rawlsian] society is one in which inequalities—because they correlate with differences in talent, ability, and inherent qualities—become even more conspicuous. Those at the lower end of the hierarchy cannot attribute their disadvantaged status to others. Moreover, they are, in principle, expected to be grateful that their condition is not even worse and to express gratitude to their more privileged compatriots."

[9] A more internally focused critique of this issue is provided by Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (1992). Drawing on the example of Israeli kibbutzim, Ben-Ze'ev argues that as inequality decreases, envy increases—a phenomenon he terms "neighbor-ly envy" rather than "neighborly love".

[10] This observation I owe to the insights of Keisuke Sakakura of Keio University's Graduate School of Law.

[11] Jeffrey E. Green (2013) argues that reasonable envy plays a crucial role even in the implementation of Rawlsian jus-tice and rightly points out that contemporary liberal political philosophy has failed to adequately address this emo-tion. However, as many scholars have predicted, excessive envy poses a serious threat to the maintenance of demo-cratic society. It is therefore necessary to develop mechanisms to mitigate extreme envy in ways distinct from those proposed by Rawls. For example, Kierkegaard refers to the practice of ostracism in ancient Greece as follows: "In Greece, for example, the form ressentiment took was ostracism, a self-defensive effort, as it were, on the part of the masses to preserve their equilibrium in face of the outstanding qualities of the eminent" (Kierkegaard 1962, 21). Ac-cording to this interpretation, ostracism served as "the negative mark of greatness." At the same time, however, it can also be seen as a mechanism for suppressing the excessive manifestation of envy.