Envy—the good kind
by Stephen Miller

On the virtues of the classic vice.

Good envy? There’s no such thing, according to innumerable writers and theologians. Samuel Johnson calls envy (in Rambler 183) an “unmixed and genuine evil.” Yet in a letter to a friend in 1757, Johnson talks about innocent envy: “I who have no sisters or brothers, look with some degree of innocent envy on those who may be said to be born to friends.” Johnson had a younger brother, Nathaniel, but he had died in 1737 at the age of twenty-five.

One could argue that Johnson’s innocent envy is not real envy, but then why does he—a scrupulous writer—use the word envy? In Rambler 9 Johnson writes, “almost all passions have their good as well as bad effects.” Did he sometimes think envy had good effects?

Innocent envy is the kind of envy that one is willing to acknowledge. Boswell’s friend Lord Hailes says to him: “I envy you the free and undisguised converse with such a man.” He is talking about Boswell’s friendship with Johnson. In Anthony Trollope’s Phineas Finn, a woman expresses innocent envy when she says to Finn, “You are going to the club, now, of course. I envy you men your clubs more than I do the House [a seat in Parliament].”

What is the consequence of innocent envy? Is it emulation—i.e., striving to attain what one envies? Johnson encouraged “honest and useful emulation of diligence” in all walks of life. Praising public monuments for keeping alive the memory of “those who have served their country by great exploits,” he says (in Adventurer 81) that we should revive “the names of those whose extensive abilities have dignified humanity,” adding that “an honest emulation may be alike excited . . . by a catalogue of the works of Boyle and Bacon”—men worthy of emulation because they both furthered scientific and technological progress.
But not all types of emulation are good. In *Idler* 95 Johnson ridicules the son of a businessman who emulates aristocrats. As a result, he “gradually lost all his laudable passions and desires.”

The association of envy with emulation did not begin with Johnson. Hesiod was the first writer to connect the two explicitly. In *Works and Days* he says, “Strife . . . spurs a man who otherwise would shirk,/ Shiftless and lazy, to put his hands to work/ Seeing a rich man plough and plant and labour/ To set up house—then neighbour envies neighbour/ Racing to reach prosperity” (translation by A. E. Stallings). The Greek word for envy in this passage is *zêlos*.

In *Envy and Jealousy in Classical Athens* (2014), Ed Sanders notes that “as the Archaic period progresses, we find that the destructive aspects of *zêlos* disappear, and the emulative come to prevail.” *Zêlos*, he says, should be translated as emulative envy.

*Phthonos*, Sanders writes, is the word the ancient Greeks used to describe the dark kind of envy; “a highly destructive emotion, whose principal action tendency is to destroy or damage either the envied object or the rival.”

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle argues that *zêlos* is a good passion, but *phthonos* is not. “Emulation . . . is virtuous and characteristic of virtuous men, whereas envy is base and characteristic of base men” (translation by John Henry Freese). Aristotle does not say that *zêlos* is a type of envy.

Sanders states that “there is sometimes some level of overlap, or at least some gray area between the two [words].” *Phthonos* occasionally means a jealous concern to protect what one has. *Phthonos* can also mean the indignation one feels when bad people are rewarded in some way, though the usual word for this is *nemesis*. *Phthonos* is a slippery word that has a variety of meanings, but it can never mean emulative envy. *Zêlos* also has a variety of meanings. The Liddell-Scott *Greek–English Lexicon* defines it as “1. eager rivalry, emulation, in good sense, opp. to *phthonos* (envy); 2. any strong passion, esp. jealousy: zeal or emulous desire for a thing.” Is *zêlos* a type of envy or is it a distinct passion? Hard to say.

*Zelos* and *phthonos* are both found in the New Testament. *Zelos* mainly refers to the desire to be a good Christian who promotes the gospel. In 2 Corinthians 9:2, Paul tells the Corinthians that “your zeal [*zelos*] has stirred up most of them” (the translation is the New Revised Standard Version). By “them” Paul means the Macedonians. The Corinthians’ religious zeal has made it more likely that the Macedonians will become Christians. Paul, though, in Romans 10:2 warns that not all religious zeal is good. Those who remain attached to traditional Judaism “have a zeal for God [*zêlon Theou*], but it is not enlightened.”

Additionally, Paul occasionally uses *zelos* to describe a dark passion—translated as either “jealousy” or “envy.” In Romans 13:13, Paul says: “Let us live honorably, as in the day . . . not in quarreling and
jealousy [zēlō].” Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 3:3, warning about the danger of “jealousy [zēlos] and quarreling.” The King James Version translates zēlo and zēlos as “envying.”

In the New Testament, phthonos is always a dark passion. In Romans 1:29, Paul speaks of the ungodly who are “full of envy” (mestous phthonou). In Titus 3:3 he talks about the time when we were passing our days “in malice and envy” (kakia kai phthono). In Mark 15:10, Jesus “realized that it was out of jealousy [dia phthonon] that the chief priests had handed him over.” The King James Version translates this phrase as “for envy.”

In the New Testament, then, phthonos means what it meant in Aristotle’s time: the dark kind of envy. But the meaning of zēlos now refers only to religious emulation; it no longer refers to emulating a wealthy neighbor. Paul hopes to persuade Jews to emulate Christians. “Inasmuch then as I am apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous [parazēlōsai] and thus save some of them” (Romans 11:13–14). The King James Version is: “If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.”

There is another word for envy in the New Testament: ophthalmos. In Mark 7:22, Jesus lists several evil passions—“deceit, licentiousness, envy [ophthalmos], slander, pride, folly.” Ophthalmos means eye, but it also can be translated as evil eye, as it is given in the King James Version.

According to the ancient Greeks, to look at someone with an evil eye is to look at them with envy. The ancient Greek word for evil eye is baskania. It refers, Sanders writes, “to putting the Evil Eye on someone; it frequently implies malice and hence is linked to envy.”

The Romans also associated envy with the evil eye. The Latin word for envy is invidia, which is cognate with the verb invidere: to look upon someone with the evil eye, to envy, to grudge. Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary defines invidia as “envy, grudging, jealousy, ill-will.”

Invidia has a very similar meaning as phthonos, but there is one difference. Phthonos, as we’ve seen, occasionally describes what might be construed as a positive passion—jealousy, moral censure, righteous indignation—whereas invidia is always a dark passion. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses the house of Envy (invidia) is “a squalid den that dripped with gore,” where Envy “never smiles except when some/ sad sight brings her delight” (translation by Allen Mandelbaum).

Zēlos is almost the same word in Latin as it is in Greek: zelus. Zelus usually is a commendable passion—referring to emulation as well as strong feeling, especially religious feeling, but it can also mean jealousy. In Spanish jealousy is celos; in Italian, gelosia. In sum, in ancient Greece envy was both a malign and a benign passion, but in Latin Christendom envy always refers to a malign passion.

Augustine says invidia is a “diabolical sin.” From invidia, he says, “are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity.”
Peter Brown, a biographer of Augustine, notes that envy is “one of the emotions which Augustine understood most deeply. We can appreciate its power among his fellow-Africans through scores of amulets against the evil eye.” Until the mid-seventeenth century *invidia* is a totally negative passion and *zelus* is almost always a positive passion.

In 590 Pope Gregory I made *invidia* one of the seven deadly (or capital) sins. Christian thinkers debated about which sin was the root of other sins. Was it *invidia* or *avaritia* (greed) or *superbia* (pride)? Most Christian thinkers agreed with the medieval theologian Raymond Lull, who said that “envy and greed have destroyed and disorganized the whole world.” Aquinas, who connects envy with the evil eye, says that “envy is bad always.”

Dante agrees with Aquinas. In Canto I of the *Inferno* we learn that the she-wolf, which stands for greed, was sent from hell to Italy by *invidia*—the word is the same in Italian as it is in Latin. The she-wolf “has a nature so vicious and malign that she never sates her greedy appetite” (translation by Charles Singleton). Dante also associates envy with the evil eye. In Canto XIII of the *Purgatorio*, the envious have their eyes sewn shut to purge themselves of envy.

Chaucer’s parson, the last speaker in *The Canterbury Tales*, discusses “the foul sin of Envy.” He calls it “the worst sin . . . . For truly all other sins are sometimes only against one special virtue, but certainly Envy is against all virtues and against all goodness.” The parson stresses that envy is a sin that gives no pleasure: “Hardly is there any sin that has not some delight in itself save only Envy, that ever has in itself anguish and sorrow.”

Two hundred years later Francis Bacon offered a similar view of envy, calling it “the vilest affection, and most depraved; for which cause it is the proper attribute of the devil.” To stress how powerful envy is, Bacon quotes a Latin proverb: “*Invidia festos dies non agit.*” Envy keeps no holidays.

For roughly 1,700 years, envy was reviled as a dark passion and zeal was praised as a commendable one. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, the generally positive view of zeal began to be questioned. An increasing number of writers regarded religious or political zeal as an immoderate and therefore dangerous passion. In his poetry John Dryden often attacks zeal. Writing about radical Presbyterians, Dryden writes in The Hind and the Panther: “Such wars, such waste, such fiery tracks of dearth/ Their zeal has left.” In his Dictionary of the English Language, compiled in 1755, Samuel Johnson defines zeal as “passionate ardour for any person or cause.” Johnson cites several writers who think zeal is dangerous, including Dryden and the Anglican political philosopher Thomas Hooker.

To be sure, some eighteenth-century writers argued that zeal was not always malign, but zeal was attacked more often than it was praised. Writing in the *Spectator* (July 1711) about “the furious Party-spirit” that had infected Britain, Joseph Addison warns, “Zeal for a Publick Cause is apt to breed
Passions in the Hearts of Virtuous Persons, to which the Regard of their own private Interest would never have betrayed them.” Thirty years later, David Hume writes, “I shall always be more fond of promoting moderation than zeal.” Hume criticizes “the zeal of Patriots”—i.e., Britons who thought that the government of Robert Walpole was undermining liberty.

Forty years later, James Madison argued in *Federalist 10* that “a zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points . . . [has], in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.”

How to reduce the danger of religious or political zeal? Promote emulative envy. This was the view of the Dutch-born physician Bernard Mandeville. In 1714 Mandeville published *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. Mandeville, E. J. Hundert writes in *The Enlightenment’s Fable*, argues that in predominantly commercial societies like Britain—often called “polished” societies—“envy would . . . be directed into politically harmless and socially beneficial channels.”

The *Fable* is the annotated version of Mandeville’s doggerel poem “The Grumbling Hive” (1705), and includes a preface, an essay entitled “An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue,” and twenty short essays that gloss on lines in the poem. The essay on envy is based on the following lines in the poem: “Envy it self, and Vanity/ Were Ministers of Industry.”

Though Mandeville begins the essay by calling envy a base passion that people are unwilling to acknowledge, he then argues that some envious people transform their envious feelings into emulation, which makes them industrious and therefore less likely to be tempted by self-destructive passions. “Envy and emulation,” he says, “have kept more men in bounds, and reformed more ill husbands from sloth, from drinking and other evil courses, than all the sermons that have been preached since the time of the Apostles.”

Mandeville sidesteps the question of whether emulation is a type of envy or a consequence of envy, but he usually associates envy with emulation. He exhorts politicians to “teach them [citizens] trade and handicrafts, and you’ll bring envy and emulation among them.”

According to Mandeville, in traditional class-bound societies the opportunities for emulation are limited. By contrast, in modern commercial societies—e.g., eighteenth-century Britain—emulation is possible: “We all look above ourselves, and, as fast as we can, strive to imitate those, that some way or other are superior to us.”

Envy and emulation, Mandeville says, are closely connected to pride, which is “the desire to be thought well of.” Avarice is the third “private vice” that Mandeville thinks has a public benefit. He argues that the desire to make a lot of money often promotes economic growth because the avaricious
take financial risks that other people will not take. Moreover, those who become rich often enjoy spending their money.

Mandeville claims he is breaking new ground by analyzing how the passions govern our lives, but several seventeenth-century French writers—e.g., Descartes and La Rochefoucauld—had already written about the passions. And they too argued that seemingly disinterested acts are based on self-interest or self-love (amour-propre).

What is new in Mandeville is not his focus on the passions, but his defense of three passions that the Catholic Church labeled capital sins: pride (superbia), envy (invidia), and avarice (avaritia). These passions, Mandeville says, fuel economic growth and technological progress; these passions create jobs. Emulation “sets the poor to work, adds spurs to industry, and encourages the skilful artificer to search after further improvements.”

Mandeville likes to shock his readers, so he takes his argument to extremes. In “The Grumbling Hive,” he writes:

The worst of all the Multitude
Did something for the Common Good.

In the preface, Mandeville argues that he is not promoting evil; he is instead saying that certain “vices” have unintended public benefits: “When I assert that vices are inseparable from great and potent societies, and that it is impossible their wealth and grandeur should subsist without, I do not say that the particular members of them who are guilty of any should not be . . . punished for them when they grow into crimes.”

When The Fable was published in 1714, it got little attention, but when an expanded version was published in 1723 it was a succès de scandale. The revised version, which included two new essays, was twice presented by the Grand Jury of Middlesex to the Court of the King’s Bench as a public nuisance, with a recommendation that the publisher be censored. The court took no action, but the attempted prosecution made Mandeville famous—or, rather, infamous—in Britain and colonial America. In 1779 the Virginian Richard Henry Lee accused several politicians of being “Mandevilles . . . who laugh at virtue, and with vain ostentatious display of words will deduce from vice, public good.”

Though Mandeville frequently was attacked, his ideas shaped the thinking of several major writers, including Kant, Voltaire, Hume, Samuel Johnson, and Adam Smith. Kant praised Mandeville for discovering the principles governing the “constitution of society.” Mandeville, Hume says, was “one of the late philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing.” In Hume: An Intellectual Biography (2015), James A. Harris says that Mandeville “had a very powerful hold” upon Hume when he was writing A Treatise of Human Nature.
Hume says envy “has a strong mixture of hatred,” yet in the next sentence he suggests that envy may turn into admiration. “At the very same time . . . we may feel the passion of respect, which is a species of affection or good-will, with a mixture of humility.” Like Mandeville, Hume praises emulation as a spur to industriousness. He also argues that there are many types of emulation, including “noble emulation.”

In his entry for “Envy” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire mentions Hesiod’s praise of envy and then says: “I think Mandeville, the author of the *Fable of the Bees*, is the first writer who has tried to prove that envy is a very good thing, a very useful passion.” Voltaire addresses the question of whether emulation is a type of envy: “Mandeville has assumed that emulation is envy. Perhaps we can say that emulation is a type of envy—the only type of envy that keeps itself within the bounds of decency” (the translation is mine).

Samuel Johnson told Boswell that “Mandeville opened my views to real life very much,” but he questioned Mandeville’s notion that vice is a public benefit: “it may happen that good is produced by vice; but not as vice.” He criticized Mandeville for not clearly defining vices or benefits.

Johnson agreed with Mandeville about the importance of emulation in promoting economic growth. In *Adventurer* 67, Johnson argues that a newcomer to London will be impressed by the “innumerable occupations” of Londoners and also by their industriousness. The newcomer, he says, should emulate these Londoners: “In the midst of this universal hurry, no man ought to be so little influenced by example, or so void of honest emulation, as to stand a lazy spectator of incessant labour.”

Smith was very critical of Mandeville’s notion of vice, yet he said that Mandeville’s “system . . . could never have imposed [itself] upon so great a number of persons . . . had it not in some respects bordered upon the truth.” Smith, though, sees no connection between envy and emulation. Like Aristotle, he views envy as a negative passion and emulation as a positive passion. “Emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally founded in our admiration of the excellence of others.”

Many eighteenth-century writers, however, saw a connection between envy and emulation. In *An Essay on Man* (1734), Alexander Pope says:

*Envy, to which the ignoble mind’s a slave,*

*Is emulation in the learned or brave.*

In his Dictionary Johnson defines emulation as “rivalry; envy; contention.” This definition would suggest that the association of envy with emulation was commonplace.
One hundred years after the Fable was published, Karl Marx said that “Mandeville was of course infinitely more intrepid and honest than the philistine apologists of bourgeois society” because he showed that commerce was based on evil. Marx was obtuse; Mandeville was an apologist for bourgeois society. Mandeville was saying to traditional Christian thinkers: the passion you call a sin—envy—sometimes turns into emulation, which makes people industrious and thereby promotes economic growth.

In The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism (2010), Joyce Appleby remarks that “it can’t be stressed too much that capitalism is as much a cultural as an economic system.” She points out that in eighteenth-century Britain “the ideal of productivity finally became dominant.” Men who in the past would have aspired to be courtiers or clergymen now considered careers in “manufacturing, finance, retailing, and foreign trade.” One could also say that men who in the past would have remained farm laborers now turned their envy into emulation; they flocked to London and other cities to better their condition.

The idea of emulative envy as an important force in predominantly commercial societies gradually became popular in Britain. In 1756 a schoolmaster named William Hazeland wrote a dissertation for Cambridge University entitled “A View of the Manner in Which Trade and Civil Liberty Support Each Other.” Hazeland praises “the active principle of emulation,” which he says is stimulated by trade. When trade slackens, “there will not be kept up that emulous struggle, those perpetual trials of skill among artificers, which are necessary to bring their works to any degree of perfection.” In a footnote, Hazeland writes, “the effect of this generous strife is beautifully described by Hesiod.” He quotes the passage in Works and Days that praises emulative envy.

In his preface to Holt’s Dictionary of Trade and Commerce (1756), Johnson notes this cultural change: “there was never . . . a time in which trade so much engaged the attention of mankind, or commercial gain was sought with such general emulation.”

Johnson approved of the social mobility that greatly increased with the expansion of commerce: “To entail irreversible poverty upon generation after generation, only because the ancestor happened to be poor, is in itself cruel, if not unjust, and is wholly contrary to the maxims of a commercial nation, which . . . offer every individual a chance of mending his condition by his diligence.”

Many British writers not only disapproved of Mandeville’s notion of vice; they disliked economic growth and they also rejected the connection between envy and emulation. In Tobias Smollett’s epistolary novel The Expedition of Humphry Clinker (1771), Matthew Bramble, the main character, comments, “I am inclined to think, no man was ever wholly exempt from envy. . . . I am afraid we sometimes palliate this vice, under the spacious [sic] name of emulation” (emphasis mine).

Bramble not only dislikes the fact that many people connect envy with emulation, he also deplores
emulation. In his view, newly rich men of commerce are undermining the social order because they are emulating their betters. Writing about tourists at Bath, Bramble remarks, “Every upstart of fortune . . . presents himself at Bath . . . usurers, brokers, and jobbers of every kind; men of low birth, and no breeding, have found themselves suddenly translated into a state of affluence, unknown to former ages.”

Smollett, who once said that commerce is “a subject quite foreign to my taste and understanding,” is the anti-Mandeville. In A Complete History of England (1757–58), he attacks the newly rich, not because they are rich, but because they dare to emulate their superiors: “Intoxicated by this flow of wealth, they affected to rival the luxury and magnificence of their superiors.”

In recent years, the notion that envy can lead to honest emulation has become popular. In “Can Envy Be Good for You?” (The New Yorker, August 10, 2015), Maria Konnikova, a psychologist, writes that current research supports the notion that “the right kind of envy . . . spurs competition and improvement.” In “The Upside of Envy” (The New York Times, May 4, 2018), the philosophy professor Gordon Marino quotes Kierkegaard, who said that “envy is secret admiration.” Marino adds: “If we are honest with ourselves, envy can help us identify our vision of excellence and where need be, perhaps reshape it.”

In Life Without Envy (2016), Camille DeAngelis quotes the entrepreneur and business coach Marie Forleo, who said that “envy is often a clue that there’s something latent in you that needs to be expressed.” DeAngelis ends her book by asking the reader: “So the next time you have a jealous [i.e., envious] or self-defeating thought, stop and ask yourself: ‘Is this who I want to be?’ ”

DeAngelis, like so many self-help gurus, likes to praise herself. “I credit going vegan with the remarkable creativity, productivity, and contentment I’ve experienced ever since. Now that I see my life as bigger than me . . . I’m far less likely to waste energy thinking petty, envious thoughts.”

Johnson undoubtedly would ridicule the notion that “going vegan” will make you less envious, but he might agree with the notion that innocent envy is often a spur to honest emulation. In Rambler 9 he writes: “Every man ought to endeavour at eminence, not by pulling others down, but by raising himself.”

Stephen Miller is writing a book entitled The Three Faces of Envy: the Good, the Sad, and the Ugly.

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