

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Review of the book by Aleksander I. Dontsov “Phenomenon of Envy”**

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Considering today's abundance of psychology books, from reprints of timeless classic works through scholarly editions to popular literature, it is hard to expect a new book to become a big event in psychology. However, a book entitled *The Phenomenon of Envy* is hard to overlook: as observed by the author, very few people are unaffected by envy. Besides, the name of the author, Aleksander I. Dontsov, former head of the Faculty of Psychology at Moscow State University and of the Russian Psychological Society, is well known among Russian scholars.

From the start of the book, the author addresses the readers directly, drawing them into a dialogue, creating the feeling of a conversation in which the interlocutor's intonations are easy to perceive. But the seeming simplicity of the narrative is just an illusion: reading the book requires inner concentration and intellectual work in order to meet the standards set by this dialogue.

Dontsov defines his book as “a consistent attempt to implement the new standard under the old title: cultural and historical methodology” (p. 8). If we accept the author's definition, then the new standard involves a conclusive description of symbols, common superstitions, ancient prototypes and archetypes, images, and scientific facts related to the phenomenon of envy, beginning with a thorough analysis of the origins of the word *envy*, its meanings and usage. This list, as well as the table of contents that it is based on, does not reflect the complex structure of the text, with its references to ancient texts, philosophical and theological treatises, works of modern scholars, scientific facts, history, culturology, social studies, and psychology.

The text is incredibly diverse: it spans many fields and moves from the world of ancient philosophers to the works of modern psychologists, while always retaining the encyclopedic accuracy and thoroughness of the narrative. It is so rich that every chapter could be made into a book on its own (just consider some of the chapter titles: “Superstitions: Hex”; “Archetypal Characters: Zeus, Devil, Cain”; “Images: Iconography”!). Amazingly, the text, in all its richness, gives room to breathe and full scope to the imagination.

The readers’ imagination and creativity will be put to work. Dontsov seems to know everything about envy, and he generously shares his own ideas as well as ideas derived from other people’s works. Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the feeling that we are dealing with an elusive phenomenon. Each and every one of us knows what envy is; we all have experienced this feeling. Still, exactly what is it? It is not a product of modernity, which the author proves by referring to ancient texts, classical culture, and history. It is widely reflected in everyday language and in numerous proverbs and superstitions in various cultures. It has its own symbols and archetypes. Envy was portrayed in ancient engravings, and today it is studied by modern scholars.

Like an orchestra conductor who brings all the instruments together in harmony, in the last chapter of the book (I am certain that all readers will not deny themselves the pleasure of reading the whole text, and those who do will want to go back to the beginning after looking through the last chapter), Dontsov combines the topics covered in the previous chapters into a clearly and logically formulated analytical program of describing envy through finding answers to a number of questions: What is envy (what is its original distinguishing feature)? Who is susceptible to envy? Who and what are usually envied? How is envy born? Why does envy emerge? And, finally, “why does envy remain a constant in human relations” (pp. 435–437)? Synthesizing the results of an analysis of how the phenomenon of envy is viewed in various cultures and eras (which takes up over 400 pages) with recent research results leads to rather unexpected conclusions, as well as to new questions.

It is common knowledge that envy is an unpleasant, painful feeling aroused by “the realization that another person (or group) possesses something (an object, social status, qualities or traits, etc.) that the envier lacks and desires” (p. 445). This definition is, however, just the beginning. Envy is, above all, a painful reaction to the success of our fellows. Dontsov quotes remarkable facts. For example, modern neurophysiological research shows that the activation of brain structure that occurs when one comes into contact with someone whose achievements are higher than one’s own proves that the arising negative feelings are a reaction to the other person’s success rather than to one’s own failure (p. 452). In other words, other people’s success is often harder for us to handle than our own failures (for which we can always find excuses).

Another important fact that Dontsov draws our attention to is that success must be distinguished from luck. They may lead to the same result, acquiring certain advantages, but we envy the success of others, not their luck (which, of course, can be envied as well, but not too deeply or for long). Therefore, it is not the result (certain advantages) that is important, there must be something else. Luck is often a coincidence, while success is usually the result of one’s efforts; it must be earned.

Studies in positive psychology prove that positive emotions and pleasure are felt much more strongly and longer if they result from our achievements, from our own efforts: they too must be "earned."

It turns out that the deep meaning of envy is not that someone has something that one does not have: it is that someone is able to accomplish something that one has failed to accomplish. Another person's success becomes a challenge; it evokes painful self-doubts that we try hard to suppress. That is why envy is directed at the person, not at something he/she possesses. That is why we envy our fellows, people just like us, who, being in a similar situation, did something that we could not do. (We wouldn't envy the Queen of England, would we?) Dontsov emphasizes that success means social approval, public recognition and admiration; in other words, it distinguishes one person from others (p. 454–455). Could this specialness of others (why are they better?!) be the cause of envy? After all, people envy things that are unique, not things that can be possessed by everyone. (Similarly, in conflicts, rivalry usually centers around something that is limited or scarce. Things that are accessible and abundant do not cause rivalry). People envy others' wealth, social status, professional achievements, large social circle, and so forth. Interestingly, the author quotes Thomas Aquinas: "for no one envies another the knowledge of truth" (p. 471). Apparently, the philosopher suggests that truth is perceptible by anyone.

Another interesting point in Dontsov's discourse is related to the idea that he identifies as a hypothesis: "The source of envy is not the desire to possess, it is the anguish of loss" (p. 488). In envy, we "appropriate" things possessed by others. Through the paradoxical quality of our mind, we consider them to be things that belong to us by right, things that have been taken away from us. That is what causes the hostility toward their current owner. At the least, the lingering emotions experienced by the envier, as described by the author, are similar to the emotions of grief and loss.

At the end of the book, Dontsov goes back to the issue of the universality of envy. It appears that envy has been common to humankind at all times and in all cultures, that one can envy anyone and anything. Despite its unattractiveness, which makes us feel ashamed of this emotion, envy has proven to be enduring.

K. Horney wrote that we live in the culture of comparison. However, back then comparison was usually limited to the people in our immediate surroundings. For modern youth, it has moved to a new arena—Facebook, the world of carefully designed self-images, myths, and legends. Looking at the beautiful images of how others live and reading the success stories of peers, ex-classmates, and fellow students, young users of social networks start to believe that while others succeed, thrive, and enjoy the prizes of life, they themselves are nothing but losers. Even if they suspect that the stories of others might not be entirely true, the challenges of comparison lead to discomfort and negative emotions.

However, comparison with others is not always a source of envy: sometimes it triggers the impetus to achieve more. Dontsov cites increased motivation to achieve and pursue excellence as a potential constructive outcome of envy. The author does not seek to justify the emotion of envy, but psychologists need to find the answer to this question: If envy is a common and hard-to-overcome human trait, what is to be done with it? Its negative effects on the person overwhelmed by it as well as

on human relations in general are obvious. Can we turn the comparison with others, inherent in our society, into a means for better understanding ourselves, our identity and individuality, our place in the world of humans?

Looking for answers to this and many other questions will be much easier with Dontsov's *Phenomenon of Envy*. Perhaps the methodology of describing and analyzing the phenomenology of everyday life will inspire his colleagues and young scholars to do similar research, and psychologists will begin to see other books about well-known phenomena and common emotions, books that bridge the gap between academic science and the description of everyday problems. Ultimately, the goal of psychology is to make humans and the world in general a little better.

As I finish the book, I am honestly trying to answer the question of whether I envy its author. This book is indisputably a big event in psychology in Russia (and beyond, I believe). Moreover, the process of writing such a book means gaining a unique perspective on a large stretch of human history and culture. It is obvious from the book that working on the text was a great pleasure for the author, although it is also obvious that the amount of effort put into this book was tremendous.

However, that is not the key point. I enjoyed this book as one enjoys a well-played piece of music or a beautiful work of art: they fill your heart with delight, pleasure, and joy that leave no room for other feelings. The intellectual pleasure I derived from Dontsov's *Phenomenon of Envy* is so great that it leaves no room for envy.

## References

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