A Defense of Jealousy

Peter Toohey examines jealousy and argues it can be a beautiful thing.
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Maurice Bendrix, the narrator of Graham Greene’s novel The End of the Affair, acknowledges that he measures love “by the extent of my jealousy.” Throughout his relationship with Sarah, who refused to divorce her husband, Bendrix “was like a police officer gathering evidence of a crime that had not yet been committed.” When the affair ends, he hires a private detective to discern the identity of Sarah’s new lover.

Jealousy may well be intrinsic to human life. It can be an ugly emotion. Nonetheless, Peter Toohey, a professor of Greek and Roman Studies at the University of Calgary, suggests that it sometimes manifests in ways that are not immediately obvious – and that vary over time and from culture to culture.

In Jealousy, Toohey draws on evolutionary biology, psychology, art, literature and anthropology to provide a charming and instructive survey of a much maligned emotion. He gives readers an admittedly “helpful, if not completely convincing,” distinction between jealousy (the fear of losing someone) and envy (the desire to attain something). And he examines jealousy in many of its guises: animal behavior, sexual jealousy, the Oedipus complex, sibling rivalry, and competition at the workplace.

Provocatively, though not always persuasively, Toohey argues that jealousy has not been given “its due.” Like all other emotions, jealousy exists to “stave off danger, take advantage of opportunities, facilitate social relations and flourish in the environment.” It is a warning, and depending on how we respond to the emotion, it “can be a beautiful thing.”

Evolutionary psychologists, Toohey reminds us, speculate that jealousy deters potential or actual threats to sexual infidelity; a mate retention strategy, jealousy contributes to successful genetic replication in the form of children. For children (beginning perhaps in infancy) jealousy enhances the likelihood of survival by providing a means to attract and maintain the attention of the primary caregiver and other loving adults.

In sexual relationships, which are, inevitably, marked by some uncertainty, Toohey insists, jealousy is often practiced, at the very least “in a ritualized manner.” Generating “a painful yet stimulating atmosphere,” jealousy invites “reassuring responses” that can prevent boredom and fortify the marital bond. Toohey admits, of course, that jealousy can also destroy.
trust and, at worst, provoke violence. Othello, he reminds us, ranks highly in The Jealous Top Ten. That said, he attributes extreme responses “to a psychopathological state – to the state of someone’s right frontal lobe, or to deleterious reasoning that butters off itself with jealousy as an explanatory factor,” giving “jealousy a bad name” and a “deadly place in art and literature.”

Although he acknowledges that no concrete scientific evidence supports Freud’s theory, Toohey claims that the Oedipal Complex (sexual desire for the mother and a jealous, murderous wish against the father) has “the truth and appeal of myth and poetry” and “says something important” about intergenerational rebellion as “an essential component of natural selection.” His discussion of emotions in the workplace – as motivating individuals to improve performance – seems at times to conflate jealousy and envy. And he recognizes that, “if left to fester,” competitiveness on the job can decrease collaboration and productivity, sabotage projects, discredit co-workers, and provoke retaliation. Indeed, Toohey cites the internecine warfare in the Gucci family, which resulted in “interminable fallings out and court cases” in the 1980s as an example of jealousy’s toxic impact. And one of many examples of a dangerous tendency of sibling rivalry.

Toohey also invokes jealousy as the operative emotion behind concerns about income inequities, disenfranchisement, social oppression, and injustice. He leaves one wondering, however, whether it is jealousy that prompts resentment of poor people toward those who are more affluent. And whether jealousy is a “selfish but beneficial” tool for social betterment for some, while drawing the attention of others to how much they have to lose.

Although it is a work in progress, Toohey’s case for jealousy as a not so deadly sin is a case worth making. All the more so if we are willing and able to follow his advice: Jealousy, Toohey points out, is baked into our DNA. It is never going to go away: therefore it is essential to realize that “you can’t control an emotion, but you can control how it is acted upon.”