

UNITED WISDOM

Envy and competition between friends

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

> *He’s my one serious friend.*

George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, chapter I; Jasper Milvain speaking about Reardon during breakfast. The character’s words belong alongside his comparison of himself with his friend, rather than serving as the novel’s moral conclusion.

What this article is about

A friend tells you about a new job, and you really understand why they are pleased. Almost at once another thought appears: beside their news, your own life looks smaller. You congratulate them, ask for details, then think of a remark about their lucky circumstances. This imagined scene does not establish anyone’s character. It shows two different movements: an uncomfortable comparison that has already occurred, and a response to the friend that can still be chosen. Friendship becomes especially difficult when the first movement is treated as proof of complete ill will, while the second is excused because the feeling was strong.

This article concerns envy and competition within voluntary adult friendship. We will distinguish a desired good, a limited opportunity, someone else’s success and our own action. Not every disappointment is envy; not every competition is betrayal. Historical philosophical texts and a novel will help frame questions, but cannot establish a friend’s hidden motives. The article offers no diagnosis, treatment or compulsory confession. Sometimes the useful outcome is more honest participation; sometimes it is a limit on working together, without a promise of restoring the former ease of the relationship.

I. Someone else’s news and our own conclusion are different events

Imagine two friends, Nina and Oleg. Both have spent several years trying to find jobs with less travel. Nina has received a suitable offer; Oleg remains in his previous routine. The event itself is definite: the conditions of her work have changed. Oleg’s conclusion that he has fallen permanently behind has a different status. It may be understandable against a background of exhaustion, but it is not contained in Nina’s message. Between the event and his judgment lie his own scale, deadline and sense of fairness. Distinguishing these parts does not require calling his experience absurd or banning comparison. It allows him to avoid presenting the outcome of his own thought as something his friend has done to him.

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Oleg may wish Nina well and painfully notice his own delay at the same time. That combination does not prove the friendship is false. Nor does it make every action that follows harmless. An unsolicited explanation that Nina merely got lucky can diminish the significance of her efforts; telling mutual acquaintances about her personal circumstances touches a separate understanding about trust. Each action needs to be considered in terms of its particular subject. Recognizing only the feeling removes responsibility for the response. Seeing only a bad response can obscure circumstances that the person needs to consider for themselves, without an indictment of their whole personality or a demand that they immediately become generous.

Nina is not obliged to withhold her news to preserve Oleg’s balance, either. She might choose a time to tell him, ask whether he is ready to hear details, or accept a brief congratulations. These are possible forms of consideration, rather than a duty to regulate another person’s feelings continually. Oleg can participate within limits: acknowledge the importance of the event and postpone discussing what it has brought up for him. Such a response does not promise instant happiness. It preserves the distinction between his friend’s present news and the wider question of his own life, for which her celebration may be an unsuitable setting and need not be the only possible occasion.

II. Envy needs a precise object

The word “envy” is sometimes used too broadly. Oleg may want a similar job, recognition of his own efforts, or relief from a demanding schedule. He may also want Nina to lose her advantage and stop reminding him of his situation. These wishes differ, even when they arise together. One is directed toward a good; another toward diminishing someone else’s good. In private reflection, it can be useful to identify precisely what is envied: income, time, recognition, freedom to choose, or the person’s very ability to be pleased. This is a distinction proposed by the article, not a test that can determine moral quality, a diagnosis or the true cause of someone’s experience from a few answers.

The object may become apparent in a small detail. Nina no longer has to explain every weekend to her manager. Oleg envies that freedom rather than her position. Wanting her salary may then describe his own question imprecisely. There may be various ways to reconsider his workload without repeating her entire path; change may also genuinely be unavailable at present. A successful description of a feeling does not create resources by itself. But it helps avoid appointing the friend as the sole obstacle. Nina does not become obliged to solve Oleg’s difficulty because her news made it more visible. Oleg does not have to conceal that difficulty to prove himself worthy of friendship.

There is a limit in the opposite direction, too. We cannot decide for someone else that their complaint about unfair allocation is merely envy. If a friend gained an advantage after breaking

a shared promise, the question concerns a verifiable action. Suppose friends agreed not to use a joint design separately, yet one presented it as their own. An uncomfortable feeling does not cancel the substance of the complaint. The discussion needs facts, the terms of the agreement and possible corrections, rather than an argument about the injured person’s purity of character. A person can both envy another’s success and have a justified objection. Neither part should automatically absorb the other or settle the entire dispute in advance.

III. A novel presents a contradiction rather than a diagnosis

In chapter I of Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, Jasper Milvain discusses the writer Reardon’s difficulties. He acknowledges earlier envy, calls Reardon his serious friend and compares their capacity to succeed. His sisters notice the pleasure with which he speaks of possible failure; Jasper himself explains his tone as clarity of understanding. The scene holds open a discrepancy between self-description and how a response sounds to those nearby. It is a fictional conversation, not an observational study or a basis for assigning a character’s motive to a contemporary person. What matters here is the possibility of asking about an action without being satisfied by calling the relationship a friendship.

A person may sincerely consider themselves caring and still choose words that make a friend seem smaller. In our imagined scene, Oleg tells mutual acquaintances that Nina will not cope with her new responsibilities. He may call this realism. A more specific examination asks what information he has, who needs the assessment, and whether discussing it was agreed. Friendly feeling is not proof that a forecast is accurate. Challenging that forecast does not require exposing Oleg’s entire personality, either. Nina can ask him to stop a particular retelling, correct an inaccurate fact, or limit the personal information she will share with him in future.

At the same time, not every critical thought can be called an attempt to humiliate. A friend may notice a risk that someone enjoying success does not currently want to see. The distinction concerns content and manner: is a particular question identified, are there grounds, can it be clarified, and who is being told about the concern? Oleg can ask whether Nina wants to discuss the terms of her contract separately and accept a refusal. She can accept a useful observation without accepting his overall assessment of her abilities. The novel helps preserve an uncomfortable question: a person may be considerate and competitive simultaneously. Answering it requires present circumstances, rather than sorting acquaintances into literary types in advance.

IV. A friend’s good need not coincide with our advantage

In Book VIII, sections 2–4, of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, relationships for utility, pleasure and the friend’s own sake are distinguished. Wishing another person well is considered beyond what the person wishing will receive. This is a philosophical classification with historical conceptions of virtue, rather than a scale for assessing every contemporary relationship. Its limited question is useful: what place does a friend occupy when their new good reduces our accustomed advantage? Nina now travels less, and Oleg loses a familiar companion on trips. His loss is real, but it does not make the improvement in her conditions a mistake she must correct.

Friendship can include enjoyment and mutual help without automatically becoming calculation. Difficulty arises when a claim on someone else remaining unchanged becomes a hidden condition. Oleg enjoyed the friendship while both complained about their schedules. Nina now speaks about new possibilities, and their familiar conversation has changed. He can mourn the loss of an accustomed form without requiring her to keep living worse for the sake of equality. They can seek another subject for their time together. Their present expectations may also prove incompatible: one wants to discuss a difficulty, the other has tired of that conversation. The name “friendship” supplies no ready-made schedule, but leaves room for an honest proposal and answer.

Conversely, Nina gains no moral superiority merely because her circumstances have improved. She might speak about Oleg as though his delay resulted from laziness, despite not knowing the circumstances. Wishing someone well is insufficient if one’s own scale is declared the only valid one. Oleg need not accept unsolicited instruction in becoming successful. Reciprocity here means that both can remain participants, rather than exchanging compulsory praise. Acknowledging the value of someone else’s decision and objecting to a humiliating manner of discussion are compatible actions. Aristotle’s ideal helps pose a question about a friend’s good, but does not allow examination of a particular response to be dismissed because the speaker intended to help.

V. Real competition has a limited domain

Sometimes friends really are seeking the same opportunity: a project position, a grant or a sporting result. Absence of envy then does not cancel competition, and competition does not make all assistance dishonest. Its domain needs to be identified. If Nina and Oleg submit separate applications for one place, they can discuss general conditions and keep their own proposals private. They need not give a friend all their work to prove friendliness. What matters is not promising an exchange they do not intend to honor, and not using entrusted materials outside the agreed purpose. The precise rules depend on the situation itself. This article does not establish the participants' professional or legal duties.

A harder case arises when Oleg asks Nina to help correct his application while she is also competing. She can state that circumstance and decline to edit; he can seek assistance elsewhere. Such a refusal does not itself establish ill will. But if Nina agreed to help, intentionally left a discovered error and subsequently used it against Oleg, the subject is different. Envy need not first be established before discussing a promise that was made. The distinction protects both sides: a competitor is not assigned an unlimited duty to assist, while the word "competition" does not become an excuse for deception within an already accepted agreement or for disregarding the conditions of a shared undertaking.

After the result, the friends may need different forms of contact. The winner wants to describe the details; the other is currently ready only for a brief congratulations. Temporarily declining to discuss the selection is not the same as demanding that the victory be hidden forever. It helps to describe the available form without assigning a deadline for the feeling to disappear. They can agree on another activity, leave the subject aside for a time or recognize that a joint project does not currently suit them. This does not guarantee that the friendship will survive. A limited domain of competition nevertheless allows one failed application to remain distinct from the outcome of an entire life, and avoids making every subsequent meeting a ceremony in which one must again acknowledge the other's superiority before everyone else.

VI. The cost of someone else's result remains partly unknown

In chapter XXV of *The Enchiridion*, translated by Thomas Higginson, Epictetus compares honors received with the price someone agreed to pay for them. His argument concerns the Stoic attitude toward external goods and preserving one's own choice. It does not explain every contemporary career or assert that a successful person necessarily flattered someone. A narrow question remains for our scene: does Oleg know Nina's entire path, and would he have wanted to take precisely that path? A visible result does not automatically contain all the costs, accidents, refusals and support behind it. Not knowing these does not make the achievement imaginary or unworthy of attention.

Oleg may discover that Nina spent two years seeking the new job, agreed to study in the evenings and gave up another important activity. But that account will not become a complete explanation of her success, either. There is no need to compile hidden burdens to take comfort in the idea that someone else's good must have been paid for with misery. A person can receive something good without a public account of suffering. The question of cost concerns one's own choice first: which actions is Oleg ready to consider, which do not fit his circumstances, and what does he not yet know? Such consideration does not present an available possibility as a guaranteed result or turn a friend into a model that must be repeated.

A significant difference from the Stoic text remains, too. Its strict assessment of external goods does not coincide with contemporary concern about real income, available time and living conditions. Readers are not asked to declare these questions unimportant. Sometimes a person really has few opportunities, and discussion of the right attitude does not correct resource distribution. They can identify a constraint, obtain suitable practical assistance or postpone a decision. Nina is not proof that Oleg would necessarily have achieved the same with sufficient will. Comparison is useful only while it makes choice more precise, rather than replacing circumstances with a moral examination or shaming someone for dependence on a good they need.

VII. Acknowledging a feeling must not become someone else's obligation

Oleg may decide to tell Nina about his envy. Acknowledgment alone does not make a conversation useful; its subject, timing and willingness to listen matter. Describing his experience is one move. Requiring her afterward to mention success less often, apologize for it or prove their former closeness introduces another. Honesty does not confer authority over a friend. A brief account of one's state with a clear limit is possible: discussing details is difficult today, but the event's importance to Nina is understood. There is no requirement to present every thought, including cruel ones, as proof of absolute openness and unlimited mutual access.

Nina may decline that conversation. She may be exhausted, hurt by its content, or prefer to discuss only a particular remark that has already been made. Refusing to hear a complete confession does not prove that she accepts only a convenient Oleg. At the same time, he may want a relationship in which a difficult feeling can be named without immediate punishment. These expectations need consideration through actual responses, without declaring either side right in advance. Voluntary participation does not mean painless agreement. Sometimes the difference remains, and the honest form of contact is narrower than before: what both are ready for now, without a promise of equal emotional openness.

A confession does not replace correction of an action, either. If Oleg repeated personal news against Nina’s request, discussing his envy may explain part of his experience, but does not cancel the breach. Nina can ask him to correct what was said or stop repeating it, while restoring his access to certain information only later. Oleg can acknowledge the particular matter and offer what he can actually do. There is no promise that a sincere acknowledgment will necessarily restore trust. Its recipient need not reward honesty with the former access. A useful limit to openness is accepting that someone has heard an explanation and still chosen distance or a different form of participation, retaining their own right to respond after the conversation.

VIII. Joy for a friend need not be a performance

A considerate action differs from an imitation of enthusiasm. Oleg can congratulate Nina briefly and precisely even if he does not currently feel complete happiness. This is not necessarily hypocrisy: he acknowledges the significance of her event without supplying a false account of his inner state. But if he promises a large celebration he is not ready for, or publicly performs closeness and later retaliates for his own strain, the chosen form becomes a separate question. A feeling does not prescribe one obligatory ritual. Consideration can be expressed without diminishing the person or accepting a promise that will later turn into another complaint against them.

Friends also have different needs. A quiet walk may matter more to Nina than loud congratulations. Perhaps she wants to talk about her success at length and in detail. Clarifying an available form differs from demanding that she first recognize the price of Oleg’s restraint. He can offer a brief meeting; she can decide whether it suits her. Nobody must consider every minimal gesture sufficient for closeness. Yet falling short of desired participation does not automatically turn a gesture into deception. They can recognize the meeting’s limited scope and choose other company for a celebration, without making one person contain all the needs of a new event and the entire history of the friendship simultaneously.

Another difficult case is concealed competition in virtue. Oleg prides himself on supposedly needing no external success and despises Nina’s pleasure. Rejecting a career scale has then created a new scale of superiority: he considers himself spiritually freer. This turn can be noticed without diagnosis. Is his own activity chosen for its meaning or for the opportunity to diminish another’s? The answer may remain incomplete; there is no requirement to correct oneself entirely at once. It is enough to avoid turning reflection on values into public condemnation of a friend. Otherwise competition continues, although its participant now speaks the language of freedom from comparison and proposes that his composure should count as another victory.

IX. Friendship is assessed through conduct, rather than equal achievements

Friends need not move at the same speed. One receives recognition while another changes their field; one starts a family while another does not want that path. Equal dignity does not mean equal results or require every choice to be declared equally successful. It means that assessment of a particular action is not expanded without grounds into authority over someone else’s life. Nina may have useful experience in job seeking. Oleg may not want her advice now. His refusal does not cancel her experience, and her experience does not cancel his authorship of the decision. Different opportunities become an occasion to clarify participation, rather than appoint a permanent winner of the relationship.

Respectful conduct also includes the ability to discuss actual harm, however. If a friend regularly humiliates you in front of others, disrupts agreed undertakings or uses personal information against you, you need not maintain access while they learn to be happy for you. The article does not establish the motive for these actions or choose a final form of separation for the reader. Where there is a threat, direct conversation is not prescribed as a test of friendship. In a less dangerous situation, shared work or personal subjects can still be limited. That is a separate choice about contact, rather than an attempt to punish someone for having an uncomfortable feeling or a duty first to prove that your own feelings have always been flawless.

Sometimes Oleg does nothing humiliating, but every interaction intensifies a painful comparison for him. He can consider a pause without blaming Nina for the existence of her success. She may find the pause painful; her response does not automatically make his decision cruel or useful. What matters is identifying the real available limit without promising a recovery date that nobody knows. Not every distance must become the last word, but it need not end in a meeting, either. Friendship’s quality cannot be confirmed by an external form alone. Sometimes limited contact is more honest than an old schedule both fulfill as a duty, gradually adding unnamed demands to it.

X. Moving forward in our own life is not a counterattack

Return to the initial news. Oleg may want to change his job after talking with Nina. It matters to distinguish a new understanding of what he wants from a promise to overtake his friend. If he seeks less travel, an offer with higher status but the same workload may not answer his question. If he wants to prove superiority, even a good result will make Nina’s next news another examination. This is reasoning about purpose, not a law of human motivation. A choice may have mixed grounds. Their presence does not prohibit action, but allows someone to examine which consequence they actually need and what cost is currently acceptable and understandable to them.

The first move might be modest information gathering: learning the conditions of a different schedule, reconsidering obligations, assessing resources or approaching someone competent in a particular matter. None of these steps guarantees the desired job. Nor must a step be shown to Nina as proof that Oleg has overcome envy. Friendship does not become a panel assessing personal growth. A new decision can be shared if the conversation is wanted; it can remain separate. What matters is not appointing Nina simultaneously as the cause of dissatisfaction, a model of salvation and the judge of every action’s correctness. For her role as a friend, that task may be impossible and has not been agreed.

One person’s success may still hurt another after these distinctions. The article does not promise to remove comparison permanently. A more limited thing changes: a feeling gains no automatic permission to diminish, and congratulations need not prove unconditional happiness. Someone can identify their own desired good, honor an agreement and choose available participation. In that arrangement, a friend remains a separate person to whom good things may happen for reasons unrelated to us. Our own life also stops being a single row in a shared table. Friendship may withstand different results if its participants want this and can reconsider their conduct. Failure to achieve that outcome cannot be declared anyone’s moral defeat or lack of faith in the relationship in advance.

What this means in practice

If you wish, take one recent piece of news about another person that hurt you. In a private note, separate the event from your conclusion about yourself. Then identify the desired good as concretely as possible: time, income, recognition or a particular opportunity. There is no need to seek a hidden cause or show the note to your friend. You may notice that its object is not yet clear. This voluntary practice is not treatment or a tested technique for eliminating envy. Its purpose is limited: to avoid confusing what happened in someone else’s life with a final verdict on your own, constructed after their message and perhaps needing separate consideration in another conversation.

If there is real shared competition, examine one agreement: what you agreed to share, what you keep private and what assistance you cannot currently offer. Reconsidering future participation differs from silently breaking a promise already made. When contact is safe and wanted, a limited conversation about a particular action or available time can be proposed. Do not require acknowledgment of the other person’s envy as a condition of answering, or use your own openness to obtain a concession. Afterward, take account of what they actually agreed to do, rather than a broader promise of friendship you hoped to hear behind their words.

Finally, consider one step toward your desired good that would make sense without comparison with your friend. It might involve gathering information, a different form of participation or declining an unsuitable competition. A pause without a new action is also possible. The result need not confirm that you are now free from envy, and does not guarantee that the relationship will endure. If contact includes a threat, this practice does not prescribe a direct conversation or meeting; suitable separate support depends on the circumstances. An uncomfortable feeling can be acknowledged without surrendering to it. Someone else’s good event can remain good, even while your own question stays open and life supplies no symmetrical answer.

Key quotation

> *It’s true I envied the fellow*

George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, chapter I; the brief opening clause of Jasper’s remark about Reardon, before he explains the object of his envy. This character’s acknowledgment establishes neither the kindness of all his actions nor the reader’s motives.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared question	Significant difference
Gissing and attention to our own response	Does a friendly self-description match an action?	The novel preserves a character's contradiction but does not establish real friends' motives.
Aristotle and someone else's success	Can the friend's own good be wished for?	A philosophical ideal of virtue is not a contemporary scale of someone's fitness for friendship.
Epictetus and the cost of a result	Which path is someone actually ready to choose?	A Stoic assessment of external goods does not cancel present material constraints.
Competition and trust	Where does the subject of competition end?	Keeping one's application private and breaching an agreed exchange are different actions.
Openness and voluntary participation	What does an acknowledgment ask of its listener?	A truthful statement creates no obligation to concede or restore former access.

Sources

1. George Gissing, *New Grub Street*. English novel published in 1891, Project Gutenberg 1709; the whole of chapter I was read, rather than the whole novel. Both short quotations are Jasper Milvain's own speech.

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII. Translation by W. D. Ross; complete sections 2–4 were read. A philosophical classification of friendship, rather than an empirical model.

3. Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, XXV. Translation by Thomas W. Higginson; the complete chapter XXV and title information of this Liberal Arts Press edition were read. Albert Salomon's introduction is not used; a historical argument rather than contemporary career research.

Tags

friendship, envy, competition, another person's success, comparison, desired good, action, dignity, voluntary participation, trust, congratulations, openness, boundaries, promise, assistance, rivalry, joint project, availability, recognition, personal choice, responsibility, material conditions, pause, personal information, self-observation, different goals, Gissing, Aristotle, Epictetus, United Wisdom

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