**Misanthropy, hatred, and humanity**

Central APA, 24/2/21

**1. Misanthropy**

A neglected topic – some argue for good reason (eg Gibson’s ‘impossibility’ criticism).

When philosophers do discuss misanthropy, they usually run with the dictionary definition (‘a hatred of human beings or humankind’) and so condemn it for (a) requiring *hatred* and (b) condoning *violence* (Shklar, Williams).

I want to show that misanthropy need not (a) require hatred or (b) condone violence and in fact (c) admits a diversity of different forms that culminate in (d) a misanthropic predicament.

**2. Philosophical misanthropy**

a. David E. Cooper, *Animals and Misanthropy*, defines M as

1. a critical judgment or verdict
2. directed at human life, human existence, or humankind
3. motivated by a perception of it as suffused with failings and vices that are *ubiquitous*, *entrenched*, and *pronounced*

‘Failings’ can be moral, epistemic, aesthetic, spiritual, etc., and include, but are not limited to, vices (eg eco-misanthropic critiques of human complacency, greediness, wastefulness).

b. M combines *emotions*, *reflections*, and *behaviours*, modulating and shaping one another. As Kant argued, ‘long, sad experiences’ of these failings drives emotional responses that inspire critical reflections that culminate in a misanthropic judgment.

c. A misanthrope is condemning the moral character of humankind *as it has come to be*. Thus the target is not, or need not be:

1. *individuals*: everyone shares in collective failings to some degree, even if some of us are less affected (moral exemplars, perhaps) and even if some are especially symbolic of our failings (Trump)
2. *human nature*: a misanthrope need not have any views on human nature at all (see the classical Chinese misanthropy or Rousseau on ‘natural’ and ‘civilized’ man – concern with human nature is mainly a feature of *Western* philosophical misanthropy).

Our original or underlying nature is a separate issue from appraisal of our moral condition as it has come to be (a point ignored by modern philanthropes – eg Rutger Bregman).

**3. Misanthropic pluralism**

a. There are many ways of being a misanthrope: many ways of trying to live out an internalised misanthropic vision of human life. Call these *misanthropic stances*.

Kant describes three stances, distinguished (he thinks) *affectively* but (I think) *practically*:

1. *the Enemy of Mankind* – marked by enmity (dislike + ill-will) whose ‘purpose is to destroy the welfare of others’ through acts of disruption and violence (presupposed by Shklar and Williams’s criticisms)
2. *the Fugitive from Mankind* – marked by fear of the physical and moral risks incurred by remaining within the corrupting conditions of mainstream human life and therefore ‘flees’ or retreats (eg monastics – or, in an extreme form, Buddhist *moksha*)

Kant also sketches to a third stance that Trullinger dubs the ‘virtuous solitary’.

b. Problems with Kant’s analysis: (a) many affects drive violence/flight and not just enmity/fear and (b) there are other misanthropic stances – other ways of being a philosophical misanthrope. Consider:

1. *the Activist* – focuses on ambitious projects aimed at some large-scale amelioration of our collective moral condition (Kǒngzı – see Olberding’s ‘Confucius’ Complaints’)
2. *the Quietist* – adopts strategies of accommodation - eg quieter, inconspicuous ways of engaging with the human world while avoiding ‘entanglement’ with its more corrupting dimensions (Zhuāngzǐ)

Each of these stances shares a negative, critical appraisal of our collective moral condition, but differ practically – ie disruptive violence, flight, moral activism, quietist accommodation.

c. Note some misanthropes don’t get to *choose* their stance – eg the Buddha’s teachings rule out Enemism and Activism and instead endorse a Quietism-cum-Fugitivism.

**4. The misanthropic predicament**

Given the pluralism, critics are wrong to equate misanthropy with hatred and violence. But an implication of the foregoing account is that *being a philosophical misanthrope* means picking and living out a stance. But that’s wrong.

a. Some misanthropes report a painful oscillation between stances – a difficult existential state I call the *misanthropic predicament*.

Consider two examples:

1. ‘Confucius is determined to do his best to fulfil his mission as the “bell-clapper of Heaven”, calling his fallen contemporaries back to the Way—despite his moments of weakness when he feels like throwing in the towel and going off into exile; despite his occasional doubts that Heaven has abandoned him and that his work is doomed to failure; and despite repeated failures and the mockery of his contemporaries’ (Slingerland’s edition of *Analects* p.167)
2. Kate Norlock: ‘[W]hen it comes to evils caused by human beings, the situation is hopeless […] We are better off with the heavy knowledge that evils recur than we are with idealizations of progress, perfection, and completeness, and if we cultivate an appropriate ethic for living with such heavy knowledge, it should not prevent us from doing our best to resist evils, improve the lives of victims, and enjoy ourselves’ (‘Perpetual Struggle’, 2019, p.6)

b. The real misanthropic predicament is coping with the existentially painful sense of fluxing between the stances – a grim framing of that central ethical issue, ‘How should I live?’

**References**

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Kant’s remarks on misanthropy are in his lectures on ethics, anthropology, and religion, while Schopenhauer’s are in the *Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics.*