**Misanthropy, monasticism, and *mokṣa***

*Global Philosophy of Religion, Nottingham, 8/3/23*

**Claims**: Theravada Buddhism (a) endorses a misanthropic appraisal of the human condition, (b) this explains various features of Buddhist moral praxis, and (c) the Buddhist soteriological aspiration to *mokṣa* should be understood as a radical, specific form of misanthropy.

1. **The conceptual core of misanthropy.**

A negative, critical verdict on the collective moral condition and performance of humankind as it has come to be (Cooper, Kidd).

Comments:

1. a judgment or verdict
2. directed at something collective – humankind, humanity, human forms of life
3. a judgment of human life as suffused with **failings** both **ubiquitous** and **entrenched**

**Failings** are **diverse**, organisable into **clusters**, and their intelligibility and salience depend on the wider commitments of specific misanthropes.

Misanthropy is not a judgment on individuals, nor entails any claims about human nature.

**Misanthropic pluralism**: a verdict can express itself in a range of **stances**, ways of enacting or living out one’s misanthropy. So, ‘hatred of humankind’ – what Kant called being an ‘Enemy of Mankind’ – is the most famous of the stances, but there are others (more on that later).

1. **Buddhist misanthropy.**

Contemporary smiley images of Buddhism reflect a ‘bright-sided’ version stripped of themes and convictions – pessimism, misanthropy – uncongenial to Global North admirers (Cooper).

If one looks to the *suttas* of the Pali Canon, a quite different image emerges.

Consider three kinds of evidence, each neglected in modern accounts of Buddhism:

1. **Buddhist discourses on human failings**: ‘cankers’, ‘taints’, ‘defilements’, consistently ignored or downplayed in the scholarship, despite prominence in the Pali Canon.

Failings cause bad behaviour, impede meditative success, and bind us to *saṃsāra*.

Such failings are integrally related to ‘key’ concepts and concerns of Buddhism (*kamma*, rebirth, attachment, ‘three poisons’, *arhat*-hood etc.)

1. **The moral denunciations of human existence** – the Buddha repeatedly testifies to the inescapably cankered, tainted, defiled realities of individual and collective human life.

- ‘Fire Sermon’: ‘all is burning!’ with the ‘fires’ of lust, hate, delusion (SN 35).

- ‘swirling streams’ of desire and craving, everyone ‘held fast by fetter and by bond’, ‘afflicted with thick ignorance’, ‘possessed by conceit’ (Dhm 24; Ud 3.10).

- humanity ‘overcome with aversion and passion’, ‘cloaked in the mass of darkness’ (SN 6.1)

- the ‘worldly conditions’ that ‘keep the [human] world turning’ feed our failings and are in turn fuelled by them (AN 8.6) – pain/pleasure, gain/loss, praise/blame etc.

1. **The superiority of the monastic life** – a doctrine played down in the West. Buddhist monastic life is ‘noble quest’ (*ariya pariyesana*) and superior to ‘common quest’ of Buddhist laypeople and ‘ignoble quest’ of everyone else (AN I 80).

- monks compared to swans flying high in the sky above the world (SN 221).

- life of ‘uninstructed worldlings’ is a ‘cesspool’, ‘full of impurity’ (Sn 2.6).

- monastic life is superior because, done properly, it is relatively free of the features of everyday life that fuel our failings (SN 274) – cf. the *Pāttimokkha* monastic rules.

Theravada Buddhism is therefore misanthropic: but what *kind* of misanthropy?

Recall idea of **misanthropic stances**: sets of attitudes, convictions, behaviours, that help one to live out one’s misanthropy. Stances are distinguished by their typical behaviours – and here are the four main ones – (a) and (b) named by Kant:

1. **Enemy** - violence - literal or symbolic
2. **Fugitive** - strategies of retreat, temporary or permanent) – self-exile, solitaries
3. **Activist** - strategies of rectification aiming at radical change of our condition
4. **Quietist** - strategies of accommodation to the world
5. **‘Release’.**

The Buddha clearly rejects the hateful, violence Enemy stance. *Contra* the modern ‘engaged’ image, he also rejected the Activist stance (cf. Lele).

Theravada Buddhism two-stage progression through two misanthropic stances:

1. **Quietist-Fugitivism** – shorter-term, ‘mundane’
2. **radical Fugitivism** – longer-term, ‘transmundane’, soteriological

(1) **Quietist Fugitivism**: ‘noble’ life involves retreat from ‘unwholesome’, morally corrupting risks of associations with ‘uninstructed worldlings’ and immersion in their world – the Quietist mode of monastic life of ‘dhamma and discipline’ made possible by the Sangha (SN 56:48).

Buddhist Quietism – ethos of the Eightfold Path:

1. Quietist virtues – humility, modesty, reticence, self-restraint.
2. Quietist aspirations – tranquillity, equanimity, personal self-transformation.
3. Quietist proscription of large-scale, collective, muscular, ‘world-changing’ activism.

(2) **Radical Fugitivism**: our ultimate aspiration must be *mokṣa*, ‘release’ – permanent and final release from *saṃsāra*, the beginningless, endless cycle of rebirth and *kamma*.

*Upaniṣads* understood release on ‘debt’ and ‘prisoner’ models, but the later Indian schools radicalised this into release from *saṃsāric* cycle of rebirth and *kamma* (Olivelle).

Enlightened beings recognise the inherent moral perils and *dukkha* of *saṃsāric* existence as deep facts about life we can neither avoid nor remove nor tolerate (Nyanaponika).

* Buddhism as *pessimistic misanthropy* (Cooper).

‘Release’ not as (i) temporary retreat or (ii) permanent self-exile from human society – not an escape from society in Kant’s sense: when the Buddha refers approvingly to ‘escape from the world’, he means world of *saṃsāra* – of existence conditioned by attachment/craving and so animated by greed, delusion and other failings (AN 3: 10).

For Theravada Buddhism, *mokṣa* is **escape from existence**: **radical Fugitivism**.

*Arahant* therefore someone who has ‘come to the end of the world’ (AN 9: 38).

Radical Fugitivism on *mokṣa* model presupposes metaphysical possibilities and conceptions of the teleology of human existence unavailable to Kant – a culturally and religiously specific kind of misanthropy connected to a powerfully soteriological vision.**Buddhist texts**

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (*Collected Discourses*)

Dhm *Dhammapada*

SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (*Connected Discourses*)

Sn *Sutta Nipata*

Ud *Udāna*

**Others references**

Cooper, David E. *Animals and Misanthropy* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Cooper, David E. Buddhism as Pessimism. *Journal of World Philosophy* 6.2 (2021): 1-16.

Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Ethics*, edited by Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, translated by Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Kidd, Ian James. Misanthropy and the Hatred of Humankind. Noell Birondo (ed.), *The Moral Psychology of Hatred* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 75-98.

Kidd, Ian James. Varieties of Philosophical Misanthropy. *Journal of Philosophical Research* 46 (2021): 27-44.

Lele, Amod. Disengaged Buddhism. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 26 (2019): 240-289.

Nyanaponika Thera, *The Vision of Dhamma* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994).

Olivelle, Patrick. *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Spiro, Melford. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).