**Philosophical Misanthropy**

*Warwick 8/2/23*

**Preliminaries.**

Misanthropy, a neglected topic, has gained interest among philosophers (Cooper) and literary scholars (Gibson, Harris).

Most discussions (a) presuppose misanthropy-as-hatred account, (b) reject misanthropy as a path to violence (Shklar), a fuel of moral vices (Gerber), an ‘impossible doctrine’ (Gibson), or (c) conflate misanthropy with pessimism (Dienstag).

I want to show misanthropy is more complex, interesting, and compelling than this suggests.

**The conceptual core of misanthropy.**

I endorse and expand on Cooper’s account of M: *misanthropy is a negative critical verdict on the collective moral condition and performance of humankind*.

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** of many kinds, organisable into clusters, whose the intelligibility and salience will depend on the wider commitments of specific misanthropes.

Misanthropes might have **misanthropic narratives** about how we came to be like this.

Ubiquity and entrenchment guard a misanthropic verdict against **confinement** **strategies**, which insist human failings are confined to bad people or bad conditions

A misanthrope is condemning humankind as it has come to be:

1. judgment is not directed at **individuals**: some vicious people may be exemplars of our collective failings; virtuous exemplars may invite appreciation because of their relative freedom from the failings of the world.
2. misanthropy need not involve any conception of **human nature** (Augustine; Kant on radical evil; classical Chinese misanthropies). Anyway, our original or underlying moral state is irrelevant to appraisal of our current condition (Rousseau: ‘natural/civilized’).

**Becoming and being a misanthrope.**

Double pluralism: there are many ways to become, and many forms of, misanthropy.

**Aetiology** – ‘long, sad experience’ (Kant), loss of moral trust in people (Socrates), reflection and judgment (Cooper), ‘melancholic moods’ and alienation from others (Schopenhauer).

To become a misanthrope, misanthropic attitudes and convictions must become central to one’s outlook and orientation (Norlock).

**Misanthropic stances**: an organised structure of affects, cognitions, and behaviours through which a person tries to ‘live out’ their misanthropic appraisal of humankind (*contra* Svoboda).

Kant names two stances, distinguished (he thinks) affectively:

1. **The Enemy of Mankind**: characterised affectively by *enmity* (ill-will + dislike), which manifested in desire ‘to destroy the welfare of others’, expressed in violent – thus is ‘contemptible’ (Kant)
2. **The Fugitive from Mankind**: characterised affectively by *fear* – of physical and moral risks of continued immersion in the mainstream human world – manifested in ‘flight’.

‘Flight’ can be **temporary** **respite** (Trullinger on ‘virtuous solitary’), **permanent** **self-exile**, or – in most Indian traditions – the **radical Fugitivism** of the ideal of *mokṣa*).

Problems with Kant’s account: (i) implausible affect-behaviour pairings and (ii) affective homogeneity of stances and (iii) the availability of other misanthropic stances (cf. Harris):

1. **The Activist**: endorses collective actions aimed at **radical rectification** of the collective moral condition of humankind (Kǒngzı).

Distinguish **hopeful** and **defiant** forms (Leopold/Norlock)

Distinguish **humanist** and **radical** forms (transhumanists/Christian eschatologies)

1. **The Quietist**: adoption of **strategies of accommodation**, maintaining modest, discreet engagement with morally tolerable areas of human life, while also avoiding corrupting ‘entanglements’ (Zhuāngzǐ).

Each stance (i) admits of sub-variations and (ii) can be combined in various ways, and (iii) do not presuppose voluntarism about stances (Buddhism as radical-Fugitivism-cum-Quietism).

**The misanthropic predicament.**

Some misanthropes inhabit a single stance (Cooper’s quietism), whereas others seem caught in a painful oscillation between different stances: **the misanthropic predicament**.

Examples:

1. Kǒngzı as the ‘the bell-clapper of Heaven [*Tiān*]
2. Norlock on ‘perpetual struggle’
3. contemporary eco-misanthropies

If this is right, misanthropy is more complex and more interesting than is generally supposed.

Properly rehabilitated, it may also be a stance on humankind many want to take seriously.

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Kant’s remarks on misanthropy are found in his lectures on ethics, anthropology, and religion.