**Transhumanism and misanthropy**

*Transhumanism, Nottingham, 21/9/23*

1. **Preliminaries**.

How does transhumanism relate to misanthropy? Is transhumanism an expression of a misanthropic outlook?

Complicated – many different, often competing accounts of TH.

General definition: TH affirms possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition by means of ‘applied reason’ – nano, genetic etc.

Transhumanist methods: **elimination** of our (physical, cognitive) weaknesses and **enhancement** of strengths (cf. Bostrom) – aiming at **posthuman world**.

Kirsch on ‘revolt against humanity’ – two modern ‘visions of a humanless world’:

1. **Anthropocence antihumanism**: human self-destruction is inevitable, ‘a sentence we have passed on ourselves’, with no serious prospect for ‘meliorism’ (Kirsch).
2. **Transhumanism**: aims at human extinction – ‘possibly a career move for *Homo sapiens*’ (Weisman) – but also at transition to ‘posthumanity’.

So, transhumanism aspires to a ‘humanless’ world, populated by constitutionally superior posthumans. ‘Condemning humanity’, says Rubin, ‘transhumanists would have creating posthumans be our governing priority’.

OK – so what about misanthropy?

1. **Misanthropy**.

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

Sub-claims:

* misanthropy as a **judgment**, not an emotion.
* **collective** – humankind, human forms of life.
* humankind suffused with **failings**, both **ubiquitous** and **entrenched**.

Some misanthropies, but not all, incorporate doctrines of **human nature**, and a **narrative** about the origins and causes of our contemporary condition, some of which encourage kinds of **pessimism**.

So – misanthropy and transhumanism involve a negative critical verdict in our collective moral condition and performance:

1. **moral failings** are rooted in the human condition, therefore ubiquitous and entrenched within, and definitive of, human forms of life:

* **embodiment** – embodied appetites, desires, fears, needs are scaffolds for failings (cowardice, greediness, self-indulgence etc.) – cf. Plotinus.
* **animal inheritance** – tribalism, aggression, gratification-seeking.
* ‘the New Misanthropy’ – humankind as ‘a uniquely unpleasant kind of chimpanzee, slouching toward a wasteland of his own making’ (Harper)

1. **entrenched cognitive limitations** reinforce our failings (knowledge-gaps, defective reasoning, poor decisions, biases and cognitive distortions etc.)

* enhanced longevity a basis for ‘wise decision-making’.

1. **pessimistic conviction** – humanity cannot be rectified – we cannot create a sustainable world within our constitutive constraints (cf. sin resonances).

Obvious criticisms of transhumanist claims: crass conception of goodness; hyper-rationalism and derogation of emotion; occlusion of care-related aspects of moral life; thin conception of humanism; hubristic technophilia – Levin, Rubin etc.

So, transhumanism as **pessimistic misanthropy**:

Humanity’s collective moral condition and performance is, and was always going to be, (i) extremely bad and (ii) this situation cannot be changed.

Transhumanists, note, generally prefer more conciliatory language – ‘early stage of development’, ‘Humanity 1.0’, etc.

OK – if transhumanism incorporates, if implicitly, a misanthropic evaluation of the moral condition and performance of humanity, what *kind* of misanthropy?

1. **“Activist” misanthropy.**

A misanthropic verdict can express itself in many ways, describing in terms of **misanthropic stances**: a structure of attitudes, emotions, behaviours—a way of ‘living out’ a misanthropic vision (Kidd 2021: §§3-5).

Stances distinguished by their characteristic behaviours:

* **Enemy** – violence
* **Fugitive** – ‘flight’, escape
* **Activist** – rectification
* **Quietist** – accommodation

Lighting judgments: (a) transhumanists reject violence (so not Enemies) and (b) obviously not Quietists. More interesting is transhumanist aspirations as kinds of (figurative) ‘escape’ – from death, pain, ‘the finite and mortal constraints that nature has imposed’ (Waters) – ‘an escape from the human condition’ (Hopkins).

Are transhumanists therefore Activist misanthropes, then?

**Activist misanthropes** aspire to substantive, permanent, and comprehensive improvement in our collective moral condition, using **strategies of rectification**, aimed at an ‘enforced reconstruction of our moral condition’ (Cooper).

Rectification as (a) **elimination** or, next best, **management** of contingent features of human life that fuel and facilitate our failings and (b) the simultaneous establishment or **enhancement** of features conducive to moral success.

Resonances in transhumanist rhetoric:

* nanotechnology, genetic engineering, ‘uploading’ consciousness seen as technoscientific strategies of rectification:
* ‘urgent imperative to enhance the moral character of humanity’ (Savulescu)
* ‘create persons who are smarter and more virtuous than we are’ by using technology to ‘enhance our biological capacity for virtuous living’ (Mark Walker)
* ‘vision[s] of a form of human existence in which certain restrictions inherent in the human condition have been removed’ (Birnbacher)

So, are transhumanists a technophilic kind of Activist misanthropy, deploying techno-scientific capacities to usher in a posthuman world, whose inhabitants are ‘smarter and more virtuous’, making misanthropic verdicts a thing of the past?

Not quite.

1. **“Radical” Activism.**

Problem: Activist misanthropes, historically, enacted their rectification projects while honouring the **humanist assumption**: the rectified world one works for will remain a *human* world, populated by creatures recognisable as *humans* – perhaps even ‘fully-realised’ humans (eg Confucius, early Marx).

Suggestion: two kinds of Activist misanthropy abandon humanist assumption:

1. **extinctionism** – aim: human extinction (eg Benatar, antinatalism) and often tied to nihilistic Enemy-style rhetoric (‘omnicide’, MacCormack).
2. **transhumanism** – aim: replace humanity by ‘post-humanity’, 'drawing a line under humanity’ (Gibson).

In these cases, activist work directed to the eradication or ‘transcendence’, not rectification, of humankind – the end of ‘Humanity 1.0’, ‘species upgrade’, etc.

Call this **radical Activist misanthropy**: radical in **aims**, **methods**, and **ethos** (Beck) – radicalisation of Activism due to abandonment of humanist assumption.

Posthumans are envisioned to be, *inter alia*, morally superior – perfect moral decision-making, incapable of enmity or cruelty, impeccable (in theological sense).

On theological themes - salvation, transcendence – cf. Burdett, Leidenhag.

I do not want to evaluate such TH claims, only present them as a radicalised form of Activist misanthropy. But note curious two-sidedness:

1. transhumanism reiterates deep *pessimism* about *humanity*.
2. transhumanism inverts Silenus’ judgment (“better never to have been”) into *optimistic* teleological story (“better to become something *better*”).

1. **Summary.**

I argued misanthropic themes are present in much transhumanism, if implicitly, and disguised by optimistic rhetoric – of ‘overcoming’ death, aging, etc. However, transhumanism, by abandoning the humanist assumption, is a radicalised kind of Activist stance: a development depending on contingent technological and cultural developments, indicating the historical dynamism of M.

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