***Xenia*, hospitality, and misanthropy**

*Ancient Philosophy workshop, Nottingham, 21/4/23*

1. **Preliminaries.**

Proposal: the concept of *xenia* is central to understanding the aetiology and conceptualisation of misanthropy in ancient Greece (a neglected theme among modern misanthropologists).

Misanthropy understood as a negative, critical verdict on the collective moral condition and performance of humankind (cf. Cooper, Kidd).

Ancient Greece provided:

1. the concept of misanthropy (*misanthrōpía* – μῖσος *mîsos* -ἄνθρωπος *ánthrōpos*)
2. the earliest recorded analyses of the aetiology of misanthropy (Socrates in *Phaedo*)
3. prominent misanthropic *exempla* – Timon, Knemon, perhaps Heraclitus

However, it is less clear why the concept emerged, why specific kinds of misanthropy came to dominate the cultural imagination, and how misanthropy related to wider moral and social attitudes and practices. Why, that is, were ancient Greek conceptualisations of misanthropy so different from the ancient Indian and classical Chinese misanthropies?

I propose an answer to these questions: the centrality to ancient Greek life of *xenia*.

1. ***Xenia*.**

*Ritualised friendship*: anthropologically well-established concept, bonds of solidarity between persons involving standardised, norm-based exchanges of good and services.

Archaic Greece criss-crossed with extensive networks of personal alliances, onto which the city framework was superimposed, ultimately laying foundations for Panhellenism (cf. Flores).

*Xenia* typically rendered as ‘guest-friendship’, or ‘foreigner’ or ‘stranger’ – capturing kinds of hierarchical relations – *xenoi* often in positions of vulnerability, that hosts can allay by the provision of goods (food, shelter, protection).

Two aspects of *xenia*:

1. **host-to-guest** – to be hospitable, to provide food, drink, shelter, to offer escort to their next destination etc. – all offered prior to ascertaining name and identity of guest.
2. **guest-to-host**, to be courteous, to share news from abroad, not to be burdensome or dangerous, etc.

Central theme in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: Paris violating *xenia* by abducting Helen from Menelaus; Hephaestus hosting Thetis, Achilles hosting Priam (in role as *hiketês*, ‘supplicant’); Odysseus among Nausicaans; Telemachus hosting disguised Athena; Ctesippus mocking *xenia*; violation of *xenia* by cyclops Polyphemus.

Distinguish three features of *xenia*:

1. **Normative significance**: *xenia* served a crucial moderating role in society emphasising the ‘competitive virtues’ (Adkins) – *aretḗ*, *tîmê*, *kleos* – spectrum of interactions whose poles are *agon* and *xenia* (Wohl) – creating safer conditions for travel and trade.

Theological dimensions: *xenia* approved by Zeus Xenios (*Od* 9.269-271) who is also protector of *xenoi* – practice of *xenoi* connected to religious piety – Odysseus in land of Cyclops (*Od*. 9-175-176)

– concept of *theoxenoi*, invoked by Socrates (*Tht*. 216a-b)

- ‘*xenia* was surrounded by an aura of sacrosanctity’ (Herman)

1. **Assumption of perpetuity**: once rites establishing relationships are completed, those bonds persist in latent form even in absence of any interactions – ‘a guest remembers all his days the man who received him as a host’ (*Od*. 15.55).

- *xenia* bonds (i) can be reactivated after lapsing and (ii) inherited along patrilinear lines: Diomedes and Glaucus (*Od*. 6.119-36) - *patroioi xenioi* (‘ancestral guest-friends’)

1. **Assumption of reciprocity**: acts of *xenoi* are assumed to entail future reciprocity as a means of sustaining bonds, fulfilling one’s obligations, and maintaining the *polis* – cf. Belfiore on *xenia and hiketeía* as hierarchical kinds of *philia*, unlike kin/spousal *philia*.

Aristotle on *xenia* as ‘firmest of all *philia*’ (MM 2.1211a46) and ‘bond of the state’ (NE 8.1.4) – cf. Plato in *Laws* on *xenia* and Panhellenism (cf. Flores)

Hence severe status of

1. **Corruptions of *xenia***: Penelope and suitors in absence of Odysseus (abuses of hospitality, assuming daily management of *oikos*, plot to murder Telemachus)

– other corruptions – Cyclops asking identity of Odysseus, killing his crew

– other examples – Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (Roth)

1. **Wilful non-reciprocity**: ‘tantamount to a declaration of hostility’ (Herman), a tangible expression of (a) indifference to practice of *xenia*, (b) clear contempt for the *xenoi* and (c) impiety.

- Xenocrates refusing gift offered by Antipater (DL 4.8)

- Socrates refusing gifts/invitations of Archalaos of Macedon, Scopas of Cranon, Eurylochus of Larissa (DL 2.25)

Summary: *xenia* as culturally-entrenched practice, charged with moral and religious value, generating enduring obligations of hospitality and support which, if honoured, sustain ways of life where those bound together can expect welcome, support, and protection.

Note many interconnected dimensions of *xenia* – moral, social, political, religious etc

OK – what does **this** have to do with ancient Greek conceptualisations of misanthropy?

1. **Hostility and hospitality.**

*Xenia* encoded normative expectations, duties, and values concerning hospitality, reciprocity, and thickly-textured interpersonal *relations*. But the Greeks also alert to corruptions of *xenia* – a central theme, after all, of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Claim: *misanthropy* can be interpreted within the conceptual space of corruptions of *xenia*, which explains why the Greeks focused on two main manifestations of misanthropy:

***Hostility*** and ***Reclusion*.**

Consider the story of Timon of Athens, ‘the paradigmatic hater of mankind’ (Gibson), ‘enemy to all mankind’ (Montaigne) – enduring, too: from ‘Plutarch’s day until the mid-seventeenth century [Timon] remained Europe’s unchallenged archetype of misanthropy’ (Harris).

First mentioned in classic Attic comedy, late C5th BCE:

1. Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 1546-49:

Prometheus: You know I have always been the Friend of Man,

Pithetaerus: (You gave us wherewithal to fry our fish.)

Prometheus: And enemy, as you know, of all the gods.

Pithetaerus: (Of course, yes; always an ungodly object.)

Prometheus: An absolute Timon!

1. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 808-820:

There was a rough-hewn fellow, Timon, with a face  
That glowered as through a thorn-bush in a wild, bleak place.  
He too decided on flight,  
This very Furies' son,  
All the world's ways to shun  
And hide from everyone,  
Spitting out curses on all knavish men to left and right.  
[and] reared this hate for men

Other mentions – Phrynichus, *Monotropos* (*The Recluse*/*The Solitary*) fr. 19 (Kock).

In these texts, misanthropy behaviourally associated with (a) hostility – being an ‘enemy’ – to humans and (b) reclusion – as ‘flight’ from ‘the world’s ways’.

Compare another Greek misanthrope: Menander’s Knemon, *Dyskolos* (*The* *Grouch* or *The Curmudgeon*), the *ananthropos Anthropos* – who declares:

I live the life of Timon

without a wife, without servants, irascible, without approach,

without laughter, without conversation, peculiar.

Knemon ‘an inhuman human being’, due to his wilful unsocial inhospitality (Hatzilambrou), though the play was known in the Renaissance only by reputation.

1. **From *xenia* to misanthropy.**

Why would hostility to one’s fellow humans and retreat from the human world have become the modes of misanthropy most salient to the Greeks? For Buddhists misanthropes, reclusion/ withdrawal from the world was endorsed, rather than *condemned* (cf. *viveka* tradition).

Suggestion: misanthropy as a profound and wilful corruption of *xenia*:

1. A misanthrope repudiates whatever perpetual bonds they have inherited, even those which connect them to their *patroioi xenioi* (‘ancestral guest-friends’), and so insulting their own ancestors *as well as* contemporaneous *xenoi*.
2. A misanthrope removes themselves from relations of reciprocity that obtain between people – refusing to offer (or receive) help, refusing to give (or receive) gifts – in ways that are also irrational (*qua* contrary to one’s prudential self-interest).
3. A misanthrope places themselves outside the moral spectrum – neither exercising the *xenia*-pole traits (hospitality, cordiality) nor the *agon*-pole traits of (*aretḗ*, *tîmê*, *kleos*).
4. A misanthrope violates the duties of religious piety by refusing and impugning duties, established by Zeus, associated with *xenia* – cf. *theoxenia* – thereby courting *hubris*.

So, a misanthrope refuses to enact hospitality and instead embraces hostility, manifesting indifference to the practice of *xenia*, disrespect for the gods, contempt for others, and maybe also irrationality.

As further support, consider later elaborations of the character of the misanthrope, the most influential being Lucian of Samosata’s *Timon Misanthropos*, C 2nd AD, who adds two very crucial features to the legend of Timon (cf. Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* – see Harris).

1. **An aetiological story** – explaining the *origins* of Timon’s misanthropy – centred on the abuses of Timon’s hospitality by false friends – abuses of gift-giving practices/*xenia*:
2. Timon flees Athens after being bankrupted by parasitical friends
3. his friends (later) refuse to help him in his time of need
4. the gods take pity on Timon and restore his wealth
5. Timon is (again) become besieged by flatterers and parasites

1. **Affective characterisation** of misanthropy – a combining of hostility and reclusion, to ensure that a misanthrope *cannot* return to the world – play concludes with Timon on his new identity:

‘His favourite name shall be “the Misanthrope”, and his characteristic traits shall be testiness, acerbity, rudeness, wrathfulness, and inhumanity […] If I see anyone perishing in a fire and begging to have it put out, I am to put it out with pitch and oil.

It is not enough for the misanthrope to *withdraw* from the world – after all, they may return – they must act so severely that they cannot return, and would not be wanted, even if they did (quite different from *viveka*-style Buddhist misanthropic reclusion).

Suggestion: the Greeks had a profound commitment – moral, cultural, religious – to the ideals expressed in *xenia* – of formable and inheritable bonds that required exercises of hospitality, cordiality, reciprocity – which constituted a dense and extensive web of personal connections, which themselves preceded and undergirded the *polis* system, enacting pious respect for the gods, and which offered a basis for a profound Panhellenic self-identity (or so Plato hoped).

Within this context, the refusal of hospitality, the embrace of hostility, and deliberate acts of withdrawal from the social world were, *inter alia*, morally unacceptable, impious, culturally abhorrent and, in principle, a threat to the very integrity of the Hellenic world.

1. **Coda.**

Roman playwrights, medical writers, philosophers all criticised misanthropical tendencies on several counts in increasingly systematic ways (cf. Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* 4.25, 4.27, Seneca’s *Letters* 18.7, Pliny’s *Natural History* 7.18.80) – very well-discussed by Metzger:

1. as a moral failing
2. as a mental defect – *circa* C1st CE (esp. Galen, Paulus of Aegina, Paulus Nicaeus)
3. as reprehensible and perverse rejection of social life (eg Cicero, *On Duties* 1.29)
4. as contrary to human nature (eg Cicero, *Laelius on Friendship* 23.87)

Interestingly, during these later periods, the focus shifts to the moral and other failings of the misanthrope and away from what should be the core theme of misanthropy: the critical judgment on the moral condition of humankind. As Harris notes, Timon certainly ‘extreme’ in his ‘emotional responses to social vices’, but the plays ‘bear out [his] negative assessments of society and human nature’.

In a sense, the opponents of misanthropy *won* – successfully painting the misanthrope as a morally and mentally compromised character, at best irrational and at worse perverse. One legacy of this is Socrates’ characterisation of misanthropy as the consequence of our investing excessive moral trust in other people – a failure to trust wisely (*Phaedo* 89d-e).

I also note that the cultural and literary influence of Timon – documented by Harris – helps explain why what Kant called the Enemy and Fugitive modes of misanthropy became so deep-rooted in the European tradition – occluding other modes more salient in Indian and Chinese traditions and narrowing our inherited conceptions of the possible forms of misanthropy.

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**CUTS AND BITS**

According to Neanthes of Cyzicus, C4-3 BCE, Timon died by falling from a wild pear tree – a symbol of uncivilized wilderness – refused to see a physician and died of gangrene.

‘The Misanthrope killed by his own misanthropy? Too good a story to be true, but a perfect illustration of the ancient view around the supposed aberrant irrationality of a rejection of society and human company’ (Metzger)

Timon also mentioned in two epigrams of Callimachus (C3rd BCE)

1. **Animosity** – f
2. **Asociality** – f

(spurious) stories of Heraclitus’ withdrawal to the mountains – Greek associations of wilderness with madness, exile, and exclusion.

Since there many ways to be a misanthrope: why did these two dominate the Greek imagination?

Comparative point: early Buddhist and classical Chinese misanthropic discourses seem less concerned with animosity. Asocial withdrawal from the mainstream world endorsed by the Buddha and exemplified by proto-Daoist ‘recluse-sages’ in *Lúnyǔ* Books 15 and 18.

Why was asociality endorsed – not condemned – in those contexts?

Plausibly:

1. entrenched religious tradition of withdrawal (*viveka*) in ancient India
2. moral quietism of Nóngjiā and Zhuangist Daoism (and maybe Yangism, too)

Moreover, the classical Chinese school whose moral-social ethos is most closely aligned to *xenia* is Confucianism, which *also* condemns modes of animosity and asociality.

1. **Conclusions.**
2. the deep cultural entrenchment of *xenia*, and its moral and social norms and practices, helps explain the focus on those modes of misanthropy—and the fascination with the misanthrope as a character-type.

If so, the concept of *xenia* helps explain why the origins, significance, and enduring interest of the concept of misanthropy in ancient Greece (cf. Harris on C17-19 misanthropy).