

ARTICLE

Kant on Hope's Value and Misanthropy

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Abstract

In this article, I develop a neglected aspect of the value of hope in Kant's philosophy. I do so by homing in on Section III of the 1793 essay "On the Common Saying." In my interpretation, Kant argues that if one recognizes obligations to help future generations while also encountering people who violate these obligations, one is more likely to isolate oneself from society—what Kant calls the hatred of humanity or misanthropy. Thus, the article argues that hope is valuable for combating misanthropy, especially in the pursuit of intergenerational moral goals.

Keywords: hope; moral arguments; moral psychology; intergenerational justice; Kant

1. Introduction

Hope is central to Kant's project, evident from one of the famous axial questions at the heart of the Critical philosophy: "What may I hope? [*Was darf ich hoffen?*]" (CPR A805/B833).¹ For him, the question prompts a connection between practical commitments concerning what one *ought* to do, with theoretical commitments about what *is*. Despite the question's prominence, however, Kant's account of hope has received far less scholarly attention when compared to the other two axial questions—"What can I know?" and "What should I do?" (CPR A805/B833)—and their related fields of knowledge, moral obligation, and faith. In this article, I explore Kant's view on the value of hope for moral agents and hope's rationality.

In contemporary literature on hope, a dominant conception of its value is set out in terms of instrumentalism.² Broadly, this states that hope is valuable because it contributes to the increased likelihood of hopeful agents realizing their hoped-for goal. Kantian hope is often associated with a specific version of instrumentalism: what we might call a "moral-instrumentalism." On this view,

¹The following abbreviations will be used: BL (*Blomberg Lectures*); CB (*Conjectural Beginning of Human History*); CF (*Conflict of the Faculties*); CPR (*Critique of Pure Reason*); CPrR (*Critique of Practical Reason*); CJ (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*); G (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*); Rel (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*); TP ("On the Common Saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice"); I ("Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose"); LA (*Lectures on Anthropology*); MM (*The Metaphysics of Morals*). The citations refer to the *Akademieausgabe* of Kant's works by volume and page, except CPR, which follows the A/B pagination: Kant (1900-) *Gesammelte Schriften*. I use the translations found in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (1992-).

²See Jackson (2021), Martin (2013), and Pettit (2004). Several other contemporary accounts of the value of hope have also been proposed, such as Bovens (1999), who claims that hope is intrinsically valuable; Blöser and Stahl (2017), who argue how a hopeful person's hopes contribute to their practical identity; and Kadlac (2015), who argues that hope supports the virtues we cherish, for example, courage. I will assume a degree of value pluralism regarding hope and remain neutral about these proposals.

hope is valuable because it aids in the fulfillment of moral goals—something that is clearest in interpretations of Kant that hinge on the claim that hope’s value lies in defying despair. That is, the hope that an agent’s actions can make a difference serves to strengthen the psychological resolve to continue doing what they ought to do in a moral sense, even if confronted by a seemingly indifferent world.³

In this article, my aim was to extend our understanding of Kant’s moral-instrumental hope beyond its merely *defying despair* value to include its *defying hatred* value. I do so by homing in on Section III of 1793s “On the Common Saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice.” The basic idea involves what I call “hope in humanity,” namely, hope that collectively humans are in a state of continuous intergenerational moral progress.

Commentators on Kant have neglected the distinctive nature of the hatred-defying value of hope.⁴ Such neglect, I will argue, might be due to the fact that it appears alongside the despair-defying account in “On the Common Saying” (TP 8:309). But, as we shall see, these accounts concern different hoped-for propositions and different moral benefits. In my reading, Kant argued that if one recognizes the obligation to help future generations while simultaneously encountering people who violate this obligation, one will likely succumb to misanthropy. I shall argue that, according to Kant’s account, hope is valuable for combating misanthropy.

2. Kantian hope and its despair-defying value

2.1. Kantian hope

It is almost a truism that to analyze the value of an attitude, one must first describe that attitude. Kant, however, does not provide much of a description for us to go by. Thus, a plausible strategy for reconstructing Kant’s conception of hope is to look at its role in his discussions about happiness and the highest good. While for Kant one should be motivated solely out of respect for the moral law rather than happiness, he argued that our ultimate moral goal is to realize the highest good—an ideal state wherein a person’s moral worth is proportionate to their happiness (CPrR 5:110). Hence, if one does what one ought to, one’s hope will be rationally directed at happiness in proportion to one’s moral worth (CPrR 5:129).

When we further unpack Kant’s thinking on hope and its relation to the highest good, we find four other features. First, he refers to life-structuring hopes with propositional content, as opposed to mundane and nonpropositional hopes.⁵ For instance, in the case of the highest good, he aligns the object of hope with the proposition that one will “attain the highest good” (CPrR 5:129), which, as our ultimate moral good, is the expression of a life-structuring hope and not a mundane hope (e.g., the hope that someone will have a nice day).⁶ In what follows, “hope” refers specifically to such propositional, life-structuring hope.

The second feature: if one hopes that proposition *p* is true, then one desires that *p* (or at least has some conative attitude *p* being true)⁷; as Kant puts it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “all hope concerns happiness” (CPR A805/B833) where “[h]appiness is the satisfaction of all of our inclinations” (CPR A806/B834). The highest good is something we are positively inclined toward because it is rational for finite beings like us to be occupied both with moral goodness and obtaining happiness (CPrR 5:121). However, for Kant, the highest good is not merely something we are positively inclined toward but an object of the faculty of desire, namely, the faculty by which we

³See Chignell (2018 and 2020), Ebels-Duggan (2016), Huber (2019), Neiman (1994), and Nussbaum (2018).

⁴For instance, Cureton (2018), Chignell (2018, 2020), Ebels-Duggan (2016), Li (2023), and O’Neill (1996).

⁵See Zuckert (2018, 258) for a non-propositional account. See Stratmann (2023) for a rational inference account, according to which, hoping that *p* requires an agent to make rational inferences about the cause of their desire that *p* and the cause of her belief that *p* is possible.

⁶See Chignell (2014) and Pettit (2004).

⁷See Chignell (2013) and Huber (2019).

represent ourselves as a cause of our goals (CPrR 5:110; cf. MM 6:211). Indeed, for Kant, the ultimate moral goal for us is to realize the highest good. But, beyond these details of Kant's highest good, the central characteristic of hope turns out to be quite uncontroversial, namely, its deep relationship to desire, broadly construed as a conative attitude toward the truth of a proposition (as opposed to Kant's technical use such as the faculty of desire as the faculty of reason).

The third feature: Kant suggests that if one hopes that p , then one has grounds to accept that p is possible. For instance, he claims that "it is equally necessary to accept (*anzunehmen*) in accordance with reason in its theoretical use that everyone has grounds (*Ursache*) to hope" for the highest good (A809/B837). Yet, in hoping for the highest good, one grants the "*possibility* of the highest good" (CPrR 5:145; my italics) but not its probability or actuality.

Kant typically uses acceptance and assent synonymously to refer to our most basic propositional attitude. It is literally "holding" a proposition to be true, which can be on practical or epistemic grounds (A820/B848). Hope, I suggest, involves practical and weak epistemic grounds of assent. The practical grounds will involve the value of hope, which is the central focus of this article, understood as the benefits of hope to moral agents. The weak epistemic grounds are apparent when we see that assent that p is possible requires the implicit admittance that there is some non-zero chance that p . Presumably, this means that p refers to a real possibility, or what we today call a metaphysical possibility.⁸ In "On the Common Saying," Kant explicitly states that one may rationally entertain certain hopes even if "doubts may be raised against [them] from history," so long as these doubts do not attain a certainty, for "[e]mpirical arguments [...] accomplish nothing here" (TP 8:309). As this passage indicates, empirical arguments cannot undercut an agent's grounds for hope because hope concerns a specifically non-empirical possibility, whereas its outcome has to do with a specifically empirical actuality.

However, for Kant, given that hope concerns a non-empirical possibility, we still might say that to hope that p is to assent that p is, at least, metaphysically possible such that one could have some weak epistemic grounds for p 's possibility.⁹ That is a cumbersome construction. In contemporary terms, I will say that to hope that p is to believe that p is possible.¹⁰

The fourth feature is that hope is distinct from expectation.¹¹ If hope involves the belief that p is possible, then it does not require the belief that p is more probable than not. By contrast, if one expects p , one believes p is more probable than not and, as such, assigns a higher chance of p occurring. However, as the passage cited above indicates, hope is consistent with a wide range of non-zero chances, including those that are extremely low. One reason supporting Kant's suggestion here is that one can hope for highly improbable things (e.g., seeing a rare bird) even though they might not actually be expected to occur.

To take stock, while Kant does not provide any direct analysis of the characteristics of hope, his discussion of it in relation to the highest good suggests a working conception: life-structuring propositional hope is a compound attitude involving a desire that p is true, along with belief that it is possible, yet not necessarily more probable than not.

2.2. Despair-defying hope

As noted, engaging in hope can have moral benefits for an agent such that a practical reason for hoping can be posited as far as it is instrumentally valuable for morality. Thus, the moral benefits of

⁸See Chignell (2013, 200–207) on the relation between hope and metaphysical possibility.

⁹The "at least" is important here because, presumably, hope can also concern physical possibilities, for instance, hoping that a friend has a good day (Chignell 2014, 107).

¹⁰See the "lowest common denominator" definition (Pettit 2004). Several hope theorists have noted, however, that these conditions might not distinguish hope from other attitudes, especially despair. Here, I merely provide necessary, not sufficient, conditions for hope.

¹¹Admittedly, Kant is not always faithful to this distinction. E.g., see G 4:363 and CF 7:92. For discussion, see Chignell (2022).

hope simultaneously constitute a sufficient reason to hope, in turn providing practical grounds of assent. But we must ask: what does it mean to say that hope is instrumentally valuable for morality?

Several of Kant's commentators stress the despair-defying value of hope. For instance, Chignell (2018, 2020) claimed that, although one has an obligation to will the highest good motivated by the moral law alone, in the event that one lacks hope that actions have an effect on moral goals, one would succumb to demoralization.¹² Particularly significant here is what Chignell labeled "double demoralization," which results from the perceived inefficacy of our actions when confronted by large-scale evil and injustice: a "general despair" that our efforts will lead to measurable improvements results in a loss of "psychological resolve" to act out of moral duty (Chignell 2018, 296–97). Even though Kant rejects the view that moral actions should be evaluated according to their consequences, Chignell claims that it is psychologically necessary—and thus rational—to hope that good consequences result from our actions. This is because the "prolonged experience of injustice [...] can chip away at our [moral] resolve" (Chignell 2018, 300).

Here, instrumental value is understood as the value that something has as a means to an end. Thus, on the despair-defying reading, an agent's hope is instrumentally valuable for morality as a means to blocking their despair, and in turn ultimately preventing a collapse of their moral resolve. Specifically, agents that hope their actions have an impact on their moral goals gain a significant moral advantage since they are far less likely to succumb to despair when facing the inefficacy of those actions.¹³ (See section 3.1 for discussion of instrumental reason.)

While the moral despair-defying value of hope might serve as a sufficient rational ground for hope toward moral ends, an additional, necessary rational constraint states that an agent must do what they can to actualize those ends. Indeed, the axial question of hope reads: "If I do what I should, what may I then hope?" (CPR A805/B833). The antecedent is important: fully within the context of actions conducted to achieve an end, Kant seeks to determine what is rationally permissible to hope for such that the question is: if I act as I should, then what are the rational limits of my hope? Thus, hoping for an end without acting to achieve it ultimately denotes an irrational hope for that end.

Given that the value of hope for Kant rests on the specific contexts in which one acts to achieve specific ends, to fully understand it we must look more closely at these contexts. Several studies have explicated the despair-defying value of hope in the pursuit of the highest good.¹⁴ In the following, I focus on a neglected context, namely, morally good agents who face repugnant actors. From this perspective, hope is valuable for avoiding a hatred of humanity (misanthropy), which can arise when moral obligations are recognized but one witnesses others violating them.

¹²Chignell (2018, 2020) argues that, within the parameters of Kant's corpus, demoralization marks a shift from conceptual to psychological reasons for maintaining moral faith in God's existence. Although his interpretation remains controversial, what is important for my account is the claim that hope can be beneficial to our moral psychologies. For discussion, see Wood (2020, 41) and Tizzard (2020).

¹³Note that some authors—for instance, Zuckert (2018)—resist the thought that Kantian hope is rationalized instrumentally via its benefits for moral agents and instead claim that reason *only* clarifies what the rationally permitted objects of hope are in terms of rational ends. There are two reasons to question this reading. First, Kant links hope to subjective states such as "moral resolve" (Rel 6:5) and "comfort" (Rel 6:76) suggesting that hope causes a positive, affective state (which fits well with the instrumental reading). Zuckert would object that hope *is*, rather than *causes*, a positive, affective state, claiming that it is a "feeling" or a non-propositional, tentative positive expectation about things beyond our control going well (2018, 258). However, the textual support for this reading is quite sparse; I am aware of only one passage where Kant speaks of the "feeling" of hopelessness (R 6:71) and one in which he refers more ambiguously to hope "as an affect" (AA 7:255). By contrast, Kant explicitly holds that hope causes a positive, affective state in that it "cheers up the mind" (TP 8:309). He also speaks of "comforting hope" (CPrR 5:124n) and hope's "consoling prospects" (I 8:30). Furthermore, readings that reject instrumental reason for hope in favor of a purely rational account will struggle to explain Kant's suggestion that hope "meets our natural need" (Rel 6.5), which is an empirical need.

¹⁴See footnote 3.

3. Theory and practice: the neglected case of hope's despair-defying value

3.1. Stepwise argument in "On the Common Saying"

"On the Common Saying" contains three essays that aim to dispel the objection that Kant's Critical philosophy harbors a gap between theory and practice. In each essay, the supposed gap is situated between the Critical philosophy's abstract, general principles, and the "observance" of these principles by individuals (TP 8:275). In light of the inability to observe these abstract principles, the normative basis of Kant's view would appear to comprise nothing more than a fantasy, inapplicable to real-world agents.

In Section III, Kant focuses on Mendelssohn's claim that the moral progress of humanity is one such fantasy. Kant asks whether humanity is an object of vexation of which one "must never expect [*erwarten*]" moral goodness, or whether it has the status of an object "to be loved" (TP 8:307). For Kant, answering this question requires a response to Mendelssohn's view that humanity "as a whole make[s] small oscillations" but is ultimately incapable of long-term moral progress (TP 8:307). Mendelssohn argues that history shows that humanity "vacillates between fixed limits [...] maintain[ing] in all periods of time roughly the same level of morality" (TP 8:307). Thus, if Mendelssohn is correct that humanity is incapable of ultimate moral progression, Kant suggests that the only rational standpoint one could take is to "hate [it] or despise it" (TP 8:307).¹⁵

Section III contains an additional worry. At an empirical level, sovereign states are continuously at war (or at least preparing for it) in a way that undermines overarching moral progress (TP 8:310). That is, experience tells us that moral practice operates under quite particular empirical constraints—specifically, the constraints of international politics, embodied in war—which are at odds with morality itself. Far from denying this empirical element, however, Kant characterizes war itself as capable (and even necessary) for bringing humanity closer to lasting peace precisely by showing nations the costly and self-destructive outcomes of war. For Kant, then, we have rational grounds to maintain the *political* hope for intergenerational progress toward the eradication of all wars (which is the same as saying "perpetual peace" in Kant's parlance). It is this perpetual peace that is required for *moral* progress (TP 8:310) and that serves to warrant a political hope that we are progressing to perpetual peace.¹⁶

By connecting moral and political hope, this argument presents a number of complexities. Thus, my aim is not to reconstruct its details, but instead to highlight the specifically moral benefits of hope in humanity.¹⁷ Returning to Kant's response to Mendelssohn, he states that even if we cannot rationally *expect* humanity to be in continuous moral progression, we can at least rationally *hope* (*Vernunftthoffnung*) for such progress, or what Kant calls, "hope for better times" (TP 8:309).¹⁸

I shall therefore be allowed to assume [*annehmen dürfen*] that [...] [humanity is] to be conceived as progressing toward what is better with respect to the moral end of its existence, and that this will indeed be interrupted from time to time but will never be broken. (TP 8:308–09).

¹⁵Kant's response is to claim that humanity's moral progression is a real (i.e., not merely logical) possibility. See Guyer (2020, 335–37).

¹⁶For discussion, see Flikschuh (2007). Thanks to an anonymous referee.

¹⁷The underlining reason for my focus in this connection is the neglect that Kant's first claim has faced in the literature. Moreover, any attempt to situate a precise connection between the two claims primarily calls for a detailed grasp of the first claim.

¹⁸Here, I focus on one of Kant's responses to Mendelssohn. Kant also appeals to common sense: for it is a "sight most unworthy" of common sense to view individual progress as not contributing toward overall progress. He appeals to the apparent empirical "ample evidence" of human moral progress (TP 8:309). Kant claims that progress is inevitable given that individual progress *ipso facto* contributes to species-wide progress (TP 8:308). For more on this, see Goldman (2012), Flikschuh (2007, 228), and Brandt (2003, 95–102).

In the Introduction, I called this “hope in humanity” to denote a hope that humanity is in a state of continuous intergenerational moral progress, despite apparent interruptions.¹⁹ Such a hope entails a non-linear view of humanity’s moral progress spanning many generations, as opposed to a restricted view of the individual’s—that is, a single generation’s—moral progress.²⁰ For Kant, the rational basis for such a hope rests on the moral duty “to influence posterity” such that “it becomes always [morally] better” (TP 8:309). Moreover, because Kant also contends that a requirement to make someone else’s duty my duty is “self-contradictory” (MM 6:386), his main claim in “On the Common Saying” seems to be that we ought to promote the conditions supportive of the moral development of future generations, as opposed to improve the moral character of future persons as such. He argues that we may reasonably “hope for better times” with regard of humanity’s capacity for morality because, faced with the moral wrongs that people inflict on one another, the “mind is nevertheless cheered up” by the prospect of humanity’s future, moral progress (TP 8:309).²¹ Taking a step back from the specificities of Kant’s argument, we can reduce it to the following essential moments:

P1. *Independent moral claim*: Morality demands that one recognizes an obligation to try and improve future human generations (TP 8:309).

P2. *Empirical claim*: One witnesses people repeatedly violating their moral obligations (including the one in P1) (TP 8:307, 309).

P3. *Empirical psychological claim*: Without hope that humanity is morally progressing (TP 8:309), if one recognizes moral obligations and witnesses people repeatedly violating them, one will likely succumb to a hatred of humanity (i.e., misanthropy: isolating oneself from society) (TP 8:307).

P4. *Unstated moral vice claim*: Hatred of humanity (misanthropy) is morally wrong.

C1. Thus, hope that humanity is morally progressing is valuable for avoiding misanthropy, which is morally wrong. (P2, P3, P4).

P5. *Conceptual claim*: If hoping that p is instrumentally valuable for morality, one has a reason to hope that p (TP 8:309).

C2. Therefore, if one recognizes certain legitimate moral obligations and encounters people repeatedly violating them (including the one in P1), then one has a reason to hope that humanity is morally progressing. (P1, C1, P5).

In “On the Common Saying”, Kant claims that P1 is grounded in the view that one has an “inborn duty” to work toward benefiting and improving future generations (TP 8:309). That claim is illustrative of the Critical philosophy more generally, and rests upon elements of the “Idea for a Universal History” in particular. Whereas the Stoics conceived of all contemporary human beings (citizens of the world) as the proper domain of moral obligation, Kant widens this, claiming that the proper domain is in fact all past, present, and future human beings, understood “as a system” rather than as “a planless aggregate” (I 8:28). Thus, contemporary individuals are members of—as well as a

¹⁹Recently, Vatansever (2023) has argued that that the subject of hope for Kant is the *human species* (rather than *individuals*) and the appropriate objects of hope are the *attainment* of goals instead of the *progression* toward that attainment. In terms of “On a Common Saying” my view that individuals are the main vectors of hope fits well with Kant’s reference to an individual’s assent, i.e., “I shall [...]” Second, Kant’s target here is Mendelssohn’s claim that we are incapable of intergenerational moral progress, such that the relevant object of hope is intergenerational moral progress. For this reason, I refer to hope in humanity as shorthand for hope in humanity’s intergenerational moral progress. Thanks to an anonymous referee.

²⁰For Kant, moral progress denotes a move toward the moral wholeness of humanity in which all people together act according to “determinate practical principles” (I 8:21). Such moral progress is universal because it requires a complete, and not merely partial, ordering of affairs. For discussion, see Kleingeld (1999).

²¹For an alternative view of these passages, see Wood (2016, 604).

means to—future humanity, such that “only the latest [generations] should have the good fortune to dwell in the building on which a long series of their ancestors [...] had laboured” (I 8:29).²² Thus, human beings have obligations to further the ends of—by working to improve the conditions of—future humans insofar as rational morality delivers obligations to humanity in general (I 8:29; MM 6:541). While this is a complex view and would take us into the sinews of Kant’s views on history, for our purposes it suffices to extract the notion that human beings have obligations toward future generations.²³

P2 seems undeniable, especially in light of the horrific immorality of the twentieth century (wars, the mass extermination of human beings, refusal to act on climate change, regression of equality). Kant is also very much aware of humanity’s ever-present dark side. For instance, he speaks of the “deliberate mutual violation” (TP 8:307) of human rights, as well as the unspeakable evils humans “inflict upon one another” (TP 8:309).

P5 also appears to be beyond dispute, unless one entertains a denial of a broader claim on instrumental rationality. For if an agent finds value in doing or thinking something, then they have a reason to do so. The suggestion is not that instrumental rationality gives one *decisive* reasons to act or think something. All sorts of epistemic and moral reasons might intervene on our instrumental reasons. For instance, Kant claims that an agent’s hope that *p* is rational only if they lack certainty that not-*p* (TP 8:309). It is irrational to hope to see a four-sided triangle because one can be certain that such an object will not exist given it is a logical impossibility. However, an instrumental reason is a reason all the same.

Some clarifications are required here about what role possessing a *reason to hope* plays in P5 and C2. An attentive reader will have noticed that possessing a reason to hope is distinct from the rational permissibility of hope as indicated in the phrase “allowed to assume” [*annehmen dürfen*] in the above argument and “may” in the axial question on hope, “what may I hope?” Something is rationally permissible just in case there is no rational obligation to avoid it. Thus, if my hope is rationally permissible, then it does not entail, or even imply, that I have reason to hope such that I *should* hope—only that I have no rational obligation to avoid hoping. However, in P3, Kant gives such a reason: that without hope, one will likely succumb to misanthropy, which I have reconstructed as an instrumental reason.

While Kant does not clearly distinguish between rational permissibility and reasons for hoping, he does present several reasons for agents to be hopeful quite apart from hope’s rationally permissible constraints. As we shall see, in “On a Common Saying” he explicitly holds that hope “cheers up the mind” (TP 8:309). Elsewhere, Kant refers to “comforting hope” (CPrR 5:124n) and hope’s “consoling prospects” (I 8:30). Tellingly, in *Religion*, he suggests that hope “meets our natural need[s]” (Rel 6.5), namely, resistance to moral despair. Thus, on Kant’s account, if hope can satisfy an agent’s empirical needs to be cheered up, comforted, consoled and resist moral despair, then this fact can count as a reason for an agent to hope, irrespective of rational permissibility.

The suggestion, then, is that it is rationally permissible for agents to hope on the condition they do what they can do to actualize their goals, but this does not *require* them to be hopeful. Further, what rationalizes hope, in the sense of giving agents a reason to hope, is not an end or need of reason but rather the empirical, contingent, pathological needs of agents. Thus, in this case, agent who possess such reasons ought to be hopeful absent countervailing considerations.²⁴

Given the above, then, I think that Kant’s argument turns on the remaining premises: if misanthropy is morally impermissible (as appears in P4) and if one is likely to succumb to misanthropy (as appears in P3), hope in humanity would, in this scenario, be instrumentally valuable for morality and therefore rational. I now turn to these premises.

²²See Brandt (2003, 98).

²³For a contemporary overview of these themes, see Campos (2018).

²⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee.

3.2. Misanthropy

To understand hope's value in the above argument, we must understand misanthropy and, in particular, why it must be viewed as morally wrong. As his readers know, Kant often eschews the most important definitions, relying on the reader to get the gist of it themselves, and such is also the case with misanthropy in "On the Common Saying." We are therefore pushed to look for a definition elsewhere.

Kant uses "misanthropy" in the third *Critique*, to denote a "tendency to withdraw from society" (CJ 5:276). He distinguishes between misanthropy as an emotional state involving a deep feeling of hostility toward human beings, and as an action involving a retreat from society (CJ 5:276; MM 6:402; LA 25:553).²⁵ Kant's primary concern with misanthropy is tied to the action of retreating from society, although this act may well be prompted by the emotional state.²⁶ He characterizes the misanthrope as someone with "the fantastic wish for an isolated country seat, or [...] the dream of happiness in being able to pass [one's] life on an island unknown to the rest of the world with a small family" (CJ 5:276; Rel 6:34; MM 4:450).

Kant claims that the misanthrope's withdrawal from society is prompted by moral disappointment in others.²⁷ As he puts it, one falls into misanthropy because of the "[f]alsehood, ingratitude, injustice" in other people, in their "childishness in ends," which causes them to "do every conceivable evil to each other" (CJ 5:276). Likewise, in his *Lectures on Anthropology*, he says, "someone becomes a misanthrope due to the sensation of virtue [...] because he does not find them to be how he wants them to be" (LA 25:553). Therefore, if one is confronted with morally repugnant people, the tendency will be to withdraw from society as a form of protection, or, at least, to lessen the blows of further moral disappointment.

Kant's animating worry at the beginning of Section III of "On the Common Saying" is this type of misanthropy that arises from moral disappointment. In a passage I partially quoted above, Kant says,

However, one may try to exact love from oneself, one cannot avoid hating what is and remains evil, especially in deliberate mutual violation of the most sacred human rights not exactly so as to inflict troubles upon him but *still so as to have as little as possible to do with him*. (TP 8:307; my italics).

Kant's worry is that if one witnessed someone deliberately violating the moral law, one would find it difficult *not* to withdraw from that person as well as wider society. This worry speaks to the overarching concern of the essay: Kantian morality may be sound in theory, but in practice, such as when morally good agents encounter morally repugnant actions, it suggests a tendency to become isolated from society. It is sound in theory but not in practice.

Misanthropy, however, remains a kind of blameworthy moral vice for Kant, as can be seen at one point in the third *Critique*: "to flee from human beings out of misanthropy [...] is in part hateful and in part *contemptible*" (CJ 5: 275–6; my italics). Likewise, he explicitly calls misanthropy a "vice" (Rel 8:34) in *Religion*. Moreover, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that the intentional defamation of others is a moral vice by suggesting that it prompts a further vice, insofar as exposing others' faults "diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of

²⁵See Timmons (2021) for discussion.

²⁶In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that term "misanthrope" covers a wide range of meanings, such as the practical misanthrope (one who is happy only in so far as things go badly for others); the selfish misanthrope (one who is indifferent to others so long as things go well for themselves); and the separatist misanthrope (one who retreats from others altogether) (MM 6:450; 402). When I use the term, I mostly have the separatist misanthrope in mind, although my discussion tries to take all forms of misanthropy into account.

²⁷See Callanan (2019, 12–4).

worthlessness over our species [*Gattung*] itself, making misanthropy (shying away from men)” (MM 6:466, translation modified).

For Kant, vices are modes of thought or action that consist of “intentional transgression[s]” of the moral law (MM 6:390; 466) as opposed to mere divergences from a virtuous mean, as in Aristotle’s theory of virtue and vice (MM 5:404; 405; 432). Thus, for Kant, misanthropy is morally vicious because it is premised on principles that violate moral duties, and not simply because it leads to isolating oneself from society out of wariness of others.

Indeed, misanthropy appears to transgress several of Kant’s imperfect duties concerning beneficence, sympathy, and contempt. Unlike perfect duties that specify what one always ought or ought not to do, imperfect duties, while pointing to the same, require an agent’s judgment to determine how, when, and to what degree these duties are satisfied.

First, there is the duty of beneficence, which obliges one “to promote according to one’s means the happiness of others in need,” but which does not require “moral feelings” (*moralischen Gefühlen*) of beneficence or love for humanity (MM 6:453).²⁸ Rather, it requires the promotion of others’ ends as though they were one’s own. According to Kant, the beneficent agent acts on the following maxim, when I am doing well and others are in need, I will help them to satisfy their needs to the degree that I am able, without expecting something in return (MM 6:453). The duty of beneficence is a “universal duty” because others are “fellow human beings, i.e., rational beings with needs, united by Nature in one dwelling place for assisting one another” (MM 6:453). That is, our duty to promote others’ ends rests on the fact that we are interdependent beings. Even those who aim at self-sufficiency will need assistance from others at some stage. By contrast, the misanthrope, even “without active hostility” to others, bars themselves from fulfilling their duties to promote the ends of others (MM 6:402). This is because, ultimately, by isolating themselves to avoid moral disappointment, the misanthrope implicitly acts on a maxim of non-beneficence—“I will not help others in need.”²⁹

Second, there is the duty of sympathy, which obliges an active interest in other people’s lives (MM 6:457),³⁰ but does not require that one has a particular feeling—sympathy—for others. Instead, one is required to resist the temptation to isolate from others, so as not to make an active interest in their lives impossible. For instance, if I meet someone who dreams of becoming a baker, I fulfil my duty of sympathy by choosing to physically and emotionally engage with them by visiting their new bakery. The misanthrope, on the other hand, *ipso facto* fails to enact the duty of sympathy by not being able to resist the temptation to isolate themselves from others.³¹

Third, there is the duty to avoid contempt of others, which obliges one always to acknowledge that fellow agents are capable of moral reasoning. Contempt equates to acting on the supposition

²⁸See Timmons (2021, 213–20).

²⁹One could object here that misanthropy is not contrary to duty for Kant, as my claim above suggests, because we have the duty of beneficence to others regardless of whether we hate them or not. Thus, one could well argue that the duty of beneficence is not contrary to misanthropy, but compatible with it. Kant also seems to affirm this: “to hate vice in men is neither a duty nor contrary to duty” (MM 6:402). There are two points to draw out in response to this objection. First, in this passage Kant understands hate narrowly as a “mere feeling of aversion” (MM 6:402). Because feelings are not controlled by the will, Kant rules out the applicability of duties to feelings. However, this does not automatically rule out the moral impermissibility of misanthropic maxims. After all, Kant claims that there are moral vices of the hatred of individuals (as opposed to humanity) including envy, ingratitude, defamation, and malice (MM 6:458–61). There is, then, room in Kant’s practical philosophy for moral vices of hate, which are characterized as impermissible maxims of action and not of feelings. Second, as we have seen, across numerous works Kant repeatedly associates misanthropy with vice. And while he is not explicit about the impermissible maxim tied up with misanthropy, my aim here is merely to sketch three possible readings. If one maintains that the positive duties of beneficence and sympathy are compatible with permissible misanthropic maxims, my response is that misanthropes act on *impermissible* maxims of contempt because misanthropy lacks universality for Kant. Thanks to the anonymous referee for prompting this engagement.

³⁰See Fahmy (2009).

³¹See Moran (2023).

that someone “could never be [morally] improved,” which is inconsistent with “the idea of a human being, who as such (as a moral being) can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good” (MM 6:463) even where the most morally repugnant agents are concerned. For Kant, then, when one encounters even the deepest moral failings of others, it is morally impermissible to act according to maxims that deny them the capacity for the morally good, or to deny them the capacity to engage in moral reasoning entirely. While it is true that the misanthrope does not act according to maxims which deny such a capacity, in effect, the misanthrope chooses to deny the moral reasoning of others by retreating from them.

In sum, one of the overarching worries of “On the Common Saying” is that morally good people might succumb to misanthropy, brought on by encounters with the moral failings of others. And yet, misanthropy remains morally wrong for Kant in at least three ways, through failing to fulfill: (1) the duty of promoting the ends of others, (2) the duty of taking an active interest in other people’s lives, and (3) the duty to treat fellow agents as equally capable of moral reasoning.

3.3. *The psychological value of hope with respect to hatred*

In “On the Common Saying,” Kant discusses hope’s value in the following two passages:

This hope for better times [that humanity will progress], without which an earnest desire to do something profitable for the general well-being *would never have warmed the human heart*, has moreover always influenced the work of well-disposed people. (TP 8:309).

Here, then, we see Kant’s commitment to the despair-defying value of hope. That is, without hope that one’s actions will have “profitable” consequences, one is more likely to abandon any commitment to specific goals, including those that are moral. Kant continues:

Confronted by the sorry sight [...] of those that [human beings] themselves inflict upon one another, *the mind is nevertheless cheered up by the prospect* that matters could become better in the future, and indeed with unselfish benevolence. (TP 8:309; my italics).

Here, Kant lays out his commitment to the hatred-defying value of hope in response to the central animating worry of this section that, when facing the evils humans inflict on one another, the tendency to avoid others will prevail. That is, an agent’s hope in the moral progression of humanity (a progression toward a future state of affairs) proves valuable for staving off misanthropy. Although Kant suggests that there is “a good deal of evidence [*Beweise*]” for humanity’s moral progress, he does not attempt to make any predictive or particular rational claims about moral progress (TP 8:308). Instead, one is rationally permitted to hope for this progression in light of its psychological benefits because it promotes a positive state of mind. Thus, those who have hope may hope rationally to ward off misanthropy.³²

Those who read Kant’s position from a despair-defying perspective emphasize his claim that hope in our action making a difference “meets our natural need,” which would otherwise be a “hindrance to moral resolve” (Rel 6.5). Thus, hope satisfies empirical, contingent, psychological needs (specifically, the need to avoid moral despair in terms of the efficacy of one’s actions) such that hope does not satisfy a universal end of reason. However, in the passage quoted from “On the Common Saying” above, the hoped-for state is the future moral improvement of humanity, and not

³²While I limit the discussion to the value of hope here, two further issues warrant investigation, namely, Kant remains mute on (i) whether we can *make* ourselves hope, and (ii) whether evidence that not-*p* renders agents *psychologically more resistant* toward hoping for *p*.

the efficacy of an individual's actions. The corresponding empirical need consists of a positive affective state or "cheer" toward humanity.³³

But Kant does not rationalize hope in humanity only because it produces cheer as an antidote to misanthropy. Such a view would equate to emotional bootstrapping: faced by a disappointment in humanity we could cultivate our emotions by feigning cheer with the expectation that it will someday become genuine to accrue the benefit of cheer, namely, avoidance of misanthropy. Contrary to this, Kant's argument begins with the moral premise that one of our duties is to actively pursue intergenerational moral progress. Thus, his view presupposes one's attempt to act morally. He acknowledges that by pursuing this duty one might encounter morally repugnant people and that this risks a fall into misanthropy. In this context, Kant highlights how hope has psychological benefits, one of which is the avoidance of misanthropy. This reading fits nicely with Kant's statement: "I rest my case [about hope in humanity] on my innate duty" (consisting of the pursuit of intergenerational moral progress) (MM 8:309) and his explicitly stated worry that "one must prefer to avert one's eyes from [humanity]" because it performs evils (MM 8:307).³⁴

Indeed, those of us lacking hatred-defying hope are still obliged to do what is morally right, namely, eschewing misanthropy. Hatred-defying hope merely makes fulfilling that obligation easier. As such, Kant is attending to the supposed gap between abstract, general principles (theory) and the observance of these principles by real-world agents (practice). At the level of abstract moral law, we know that we ought to contribute to the improvement of future human generations and avoid misanthropy. And yet at the level of practical observation of the moral law, we nonetheless encounter people violating their moral obligations, such that we become disposed to the moral disappointment in humanity and would thereby be inclined to retreat from society. However, given the universal nature of moral law, we "cannot exchange [our] duty for a rule of expediency which says that [we] ought not to attempt the impractical" (TP 8:309). We must therefore persist in doing what we know we ought to do, and to do so without succumbing to moral vices, the most salient of which here is misanthropy.³⁵

Consequently, I argue that with regards to Kant's view of hope in humanity's moral progress, the following analysis holds: if one encounters people violating one's own moral commitments, a hope for humanity's continual moral progress works as a defense against misanthropy by inducing a positive affective state—namely, cheer—toward humanity. Thus, if one maintains decisive reasons to eschew misanthropy, these reasons serve to rationalize such hopes.

If the above analysis is correct, Kant is returning to the theme of moral disappointment raised in 1786's "Conjectural Beginning of Human History." He claims that rational beings will feel "sorrow" or apathy about humanity when they see the moral ills that oppress humankind (CB 8:120). Such sorrow can become a "moral corruption" insofar as we "lose sight of our own responsibility" because we view our world as inhospitable to morality (CB 8:120). Moreover, in works from 1790 onward, Kant emphasizes how moral disappointment can lead to the "vice" of

³³An important concern arising here is how we might characterize the relation between the hatred-defying and despair-defying accounts. First, one may have become misanthropic owing to the perception of malicious actors who frustrate attempts to do good in the world (which in this connection equates to having the flow of good consequences of one's actions blocked). In this sense, the psychological mechanism outlined in the hatred-defying account is a special case of that which is at stake in the despair-defying account. Second, it might be a fact of empirical psychology that moral despair and misanthropy are deeply linked, such that those who undergo moral despair are probably also misanthropic. While unpacking the details of this issue goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless prompted by one of my central motivations here because the risk of morally good people becoming misanthropic has been largely ignored in Kant scholarship as well as in moral psychology more generally. Hence, my intention is to prompt further inquiry into the connection between moral action, the risk of misanthropy, and hope. Thanks to an anonymous referee.

³⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.

³⁵While Kant develops his investigation concerning hope's hatred-defying value within the context of the moral duty to future generations, this context is only a particularly pernicious one in which we are vulnerable to misanthropy; hope can have value for morality in all cases wherein pursuing one's duties risks misanthropy.

misanthropy (Rel 6:34; CF 7:83; 94; MM 4:450). But it is in “On the Common Saying” that we find Kant’s ameliorative strategy against this vice.

An example serves to clarify this view. Imagine being invited to a job dinner, at which one encounters several people espousing racist views. One judges that these views are deeply immoral, which causes a moral disappointment. If one holds the hope that humanity is in continual moral progression (e.g., holding the desire for it to be true and the belief that it is possible), then one will lean more strongly toward maintaining a positive affective state toward the transgressors and so engage them in moral reasoning: engaging in dialogue with the other diners, attempting to educate them, and reform their racist views. Alternatively, if one lacks this hope, a tendency to avoid the other diners will take hold—in the future one will “steer clear of them,” so to speak—so as to defend against further moral disappointment. But this also has far wider consequences, such as the tendency to avoid potential instances of transgression in general; for example, one might end up avoiding one’s co-workers altogether, and this may lead to avoiding other people in general.

In the remit of this example, we should note that hope (rendered as a component attitude) tends to cause a positive affective state instead of a belief in or desire for isolation. That is, a hope—involving a belief and a desire—causes the relevant emotional response. Indeed, we might imagine cases where a mere belief in the possibility that X does not result in any positive affective states concerning X itself. To return to the example, believing in the possibility that a particular person could be at the dinner results in a merely neutral affective state about the dinner itself. Likewise, if I desire that this particular person attend, this also does not result in a positive affective state about the dinner. Rather, it is my desire *coupled with* the belief in the person’s actual attendance (or their possible attendance, phrased in terms of hope) that elicits a positive affective response.

Kant’s characterization of hope in humanity as a stance that “cheers up” the mind suggests an empirical claim about moral psychology: without hope in humanity, most will find it difficult not to succumb to misanthropy when confronted by the moral failings of others. This means that some agents may not find Kant’s hope valuable, such as those whose moral psychologies are resistant to disappointment or not prone to it in the first place.³⁶ Moral saints, divine beings (should any exist), and agents who are lucky never to encounter human evil, come to mind. Unfortunately, most of us are not moral saints, divine beings, or so lucky. Further, on my reading, hope merely *tends* to cause a positive affective state. Thus, it seems plausible for two subjects to believe and desire that human moral progress is possible, and yet one despairs about it and the other hopes for it.³⁷

It is an open empirical question whether Kant is correct to claim that hope in humanity’s moral progress tends to help us eschew misanthropy.³⁸ To answer it, one would need to unfold the relations between the varying uses of the terms “belief,” “desire,” and “hope” in philosophy and psychology, which is beyond the remit of this paper. However, I suspect this is not a straightforward matter. For instance, in the psychological literature, a wide-spread conception of hope defines it as the “perception of successful agency related to goals” coupled with the “perceived availability of successful pathways related to goals” (Snyder 1991, 570). As we have seen, Kant does think that, with the faculty of desire, we represent ourselves as a cause of our goals, and yet he is silent on pathways that may lead toward these goals. Despite such difficulties, I welcome empirical research into a positive correlation between hope in humanity and the eschewal of misanthropy as an exciting research program.

In sum, for Kant, agents who hold hope in humanity are more resistant to misanthropy than those who do not. As discussed above, when confronted by morally repugnant agents, those who have hope will likely maintain a positive affective state with respect to humanity. Consequently, this

³⁶See Adams (1998) and Chignell (2020).

³⁷See Martin (2013) for a contemporary discussion.

³⁸Cohen (2009, 135) claims that for Kant one’s hope in humanity’s moral progress is insufficient for psychologically sustaining one’s duty if evidence of actual progress remains absent. She claims that such evidence could be gleaned from history in an indirect manner. While plausibly true, this is still an empirical claim requiring empirical investigation.

helps hopeful agents resist isolating themselves from others in order to avoid moral disappointment. And so, it can be claimed that insofar as misanthropy is morally impermissible, hope in humanity is instrumentally valuable for morality.

4. Wishful thinking

Now, one might think that hoping for the continual moral progression of humanity is just wishful thinking. After all, Mendelssohn's initial point is that we have empirical evidence that suggests humanity is not morally progressing; morally beneficial wishful thinking is after all still wishful thinking.

A focus on the expectation-versus-hope distinction helps explicate why hope in humanity is not wishful thinking for Kant. At the beginning of "On the Common Saying," Kant asks whether we can "expect" (*erwarten*) moral progression from humanity (TP 8:307), answering that we may only "hope" (*hoffnung*) for such progression (TP 8:309).³⁹ Wishful thinking involves an expectation in which one artificially raises one's confidence to a heightened level, while hope does not. In this sense, wishful thinking is an expectation that goes beyond what the evidence supports about a particular proposition; it is an overestimation of the proper probabilities. Hope, on the other hand, involves the belief that *p* is possible, but necessarily more probable than not (e.g., "we may escape planetary ruin; it's possible"), and a desire that *p* is true. In this latter view, probabilities are not being estimated and judgments are not premised upon them, and hope is rationally permissible only if *p* is not a metaphysical impossibility. As we saw above, Kant insists that our hope in humanity cannot be undermined by empirical evidence from the history of past human evils, so long as they do not "rise to certainty" (TP 8:309).

However, the wishful-thinking objection could go further: an agent's hope that *p* could lead to biased evidence gathering. If one hopes that *p*, then, the likelihood that one will focus only on evidence for *p* while ignoring counterevidence is great. By contrast, an agent without hope will not tend to gather evidence for *p* in such a biased way because they have no stance on whether *p* is the case.

In response, it is important to emphasize that Kant never recommends that one deceive oneself into thinking there are evidential grounds for propositions when there are actually none. Indeed, Kant's Critical philosophy is about trying to boil such deceptions down to their root to dispense with them. However, we must admit that there is ample empirical evidence of morally repugnant actors in the world. In this context, it is valuable for agents to hope for humanity's moral progress, but with a clear vision of their epistemic responsibilities, which includes gathering evidence in a critical, un-biased manner.

5. Implications

I have been emphasizing a neglected aspect of Kant's account of hope, according to which hope that humanity is morally progressing plays a valuable role in defending against a fall into misanthropy. To conclude, I will highlight two implications of the value of hope in Kant's philosophy: one concerning the generality of Kant's argument and a second about moral psychology.

Now, the generality of Kant's argument for the value of hope for combating the threat of misanthropy relies on having *some* reasons to avoid it initially. The main line of argument is that (1) morally good agents tend to fall into misanthropy owing to disappointment in others; (2) there are reasons to avoid misanthropy; and (3) hope in humanity is valuable in staving off misanthropy. Note, however, that (2) only requires that we have reasons—and not even moral reasons in Kant's sense—to avoid misanthropy. Indeed, Kant sometimes gestures toward non-moral, epistemic

³⁹See Chignell (2022).

reasons to avoid misanthropy. In the *Blomberg Lectures*, for example, he gives epistemic reasons justifying why misanthropy is wrong. There, Kant claims that misanthropes deprive themselves of the social discourse required to think clearly——“to bring [their] thoughts to light”——and so lack the means to “distinguish the true from the false” where humanity’s evils are concerned (BL 24:150). Furthermore, one could presumably construct coherent utilitarian moral and reliabilist epistemic reasons to avoid misanthropy. While Kant would most likely disagree that these reasons give us an account of fundamental moral or epistemic justifications, his own account is compatible with these reasons, nonetheless.

I have proposed a novel reading of Kant’s account of the value of hope in a way that helps open an under-studied element in the contemporary theory of intergenerational justice, namely, moral psychology. Many actors in intergenerational justice initiatives will come up against opponents who intentionally sabotage their initiatives in morally repugnant ways. Many activists are committed to tackling climate change for the sake of future generations, for example, but they encounter a vast array of individuals who both ignore and actively undermine the evidence for climate change, as well as abandon policies designed to slow it down, and actively seek to expand industries that exacerbate the problem. However, in climate change (as well as in many other cases) the demands of intergenerational justice are morally justified. Given such justification, we should pursue intergenerational justice by appealing to a variety of approaches: Kantian, communitarian, contractarian, Marxist, and theories based on reciprocity with future generations.⁴⁰ But it should be noted that this pursuit has particular effects on our moral psychologies, which calls for the development of rational strategies for ameliorating these effects. One such effect is that a committed climate activist, when confronted with morally repugnant actors, may eventually be inclined to retreat from society altogether instead of risking further moral disappointment, thus falling into Kant’s definition of misanthropy as I have explored it above. I suspect that, in the event that a climate activist had no hope in humanity, they would likely succumb to a misanthropic perspective. It is, then, evident that Kant’s diagnosis is one that we still face in the contemporary world.

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⁴⁰See Gosseries and Meyer (2009).

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