**Misanthropy and the Hatred of Humanity**

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**1. Introduction**

Hatred is often discussed in terms of to *doctrines of hatred*, those expressing and endorsing attitudes or feelings of hatred against specific groups. Typical examples include misogyny, racism, anti-Semitism, and other invidious ‘phobias’. Such doctrines have shared features: they target specific social, ethnic, or religious groups, for instance, and their wrongness is generally articulated in terms of discrimination, fairness, and other moral concepts central to modern liberal ethical and political theory. More obviously, those doctrines of hate are also clearly atrocious and indefensible.

Given these features, one could conclude *all* doctrines of hate would be ruled out of consideration as philosophically serious doctrines. In this Chapter, I want to argue this is too quick: there may be some doctrines of hatred, albeit of broader scope, regardable as worthy of serious philosophical consideration. Specifically, some doctrines of *misanthropy* might be promising candidate doctrines of hate with the requisite wider scope – namely, directed at humanity or human existence, rather than specific groups of humans. After all, ‘hatred of humankind’ is a standard definition of that term, which is usually taken to involve attitudes of hate, contempt, and scornful condemnation directed at humanity at large. But, as we will see, this is not the only reasonable definition of ‘misanthropy’.

Many literary misanthropes conform to this characterisation. Consider Alceste, the title character of Molière’s 1666 play, *La misanthrope*, here in conversation with his friend—if that’s the right term—Philinte:

PHILINTE: You say you loathe us all, without exception, and

There’s not a single human being you can stand?

Can’t you imagine any situation where—

ALCESTE: No. My disgust is general. I hate all men –

Hate some of them because they are an evil crew,

And others for condoning what the villains do,

Instead of treating them with loathing and contempt,

As they deserve

(Act I, Scene I, line 115-122)

Alceste expresses his hateful scorn for ‘all men’, which arises from a morally charged disgust at their commission or condonation of systematic acts of wickedness. Moreover, the hatred is universal and uncompromising: everyone appears to him as either ‘villain’ or morally complicit coward. Obviously, Alceste excludes himself, since no-one could accuse *him* of any cowardice, given the ardent, public, performative character of his misanthropy. Indeed, by the end of the play, the personal cost to him of enacting a misanthropic vision of life are made clear.

Actually, an often-overlooked feature of Molière’s play is that its *dramatis personae* includes *two* misanthropes. The obvious one is Alceste, vocal and vociferous in his hate and contempt for his peers, and clearly the central character. The other misanthrope is the cool, quiescent Philinte—he, too, agrees that ‘all humanity is a disgrace’, plagued with ‘vile corruption’ and inveterate ‘wickedness’ (Act V, Scene I, lines 1547-1550). What distinguishes Alceste and Philinte are their distinct ways of enacting their misanthropy. Philinte’s quiescence lets him combine moral disdain for others with limited but satisfying forms of sociality, while Alceste’s fractious discontent causes him nothing but frustration, scorn, and, eventually, self-exile. If there are different ways to be a misanthrope, then hate might not be inevitable.

In this Chapter, I argue we should resist claims about hate as an essential component of misanthropy. Instead, the truer picture is that there are a variety of misanthropic stances, only some of which are fairly characterizable as doctrines of hatred.

**2. Misanthropy, Hate, and Violence**

The claim that there can be many ways to be a misanthrope creates a clear role for moral philosophy: to provide guidance for those either developing misanthropic convictions or working out the proper ways to express them. Regrettably, there is little work on misanthropy by philosophers. A rare exception is the first chapter of Judith Shklar’s book, *Ordinary Vices*. She distinguishes several kinds of misanthrope, including the ‘calm misanthrope’, who sees us as inveterately awful, but nonetheless develops styles of guarded accommodation, such as Philinte or Michel de Montaigne. By contrast, a ‘violent misanthrope’ is angry, hateful, and violent, like Alceste or Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens. Shklar argues this is the ‘most extreme’, ‘most dramatic’ form of misanthropy – one which, left unchecked, mutates until it ‘envelops all mankind and even oneself’ (Shklar 1984: 193, 194).

When not a merely inchoate attitude of derision, hateful misanthropy, as I will call it, tends to arise from profound frustration about the moral condition and conduct of human beings. This analysis of misanthropy owes to Socrates, who argues in *Phaedo* (89d3-e2) that it arises from consistently disappointed trust in the truthfulness and reliability of others. But Socrates adds that the misanthrope errs, by failing to recognise that ‘extremely good and bad people are both very few and [that] the majority lie in between’ (*Phaedo* 89e7-90a2; see Jacquette 2014). This is a mistake because a misanthrope’s condemnation is directed not at individuals, but humanity or human existence as it has come to be. Shklar affirms this by noting the global character of philosophical misanthropy, as when she dramatically declares that ‘[m]ost moral psychology of any worth is a scream of disgust’ (Shklar 1984: 193).

Shklar focuses on the extreme forms of hateful misanthropy and three aspects of her analysis stand out when thinking about the connections between hate and misanthropy. To start with, we must clarify the *target of the hatred*. At its broadest, this can be human vices and failings *tout court*, although usually misanthropes are motivated by specific vices, those judged most reprehensible. Shklar notes that Shakespeare’s Timon began his movement to misanthropy with ‘a hatred of vice; to be exact, of one vice – cruelty’, the worst of them all (Shklar 1984: 217). Other misanthropes may focus on specific clusters of vices as manifested in certain broad areas of collective human life, like our systematically atrocious treatment of animals (see Cooper 2018).

Second, specify the *scope of hatred*. A misanthrope could hate all humanity as an ‘evil crew’, or be more circumspect, like Timon, who ‘hate[d] only his contemporaries and his own immediate world’ (Shklar 1984: 194). Some misanthropy is historically situated, for good epistemic reasons. I may feel immense hatred for all humanity, even if my experience only reaches certain aspects of it. In other cases, the misanthrope may have a sense of the atrociousness of our *current* moral condition. Perhaps I think humans are awful compared to what they once were, perhaps in some prior state of moral excellence – as Christians might look back to our innocent state in the Garden of Eden, or as the classical Chinese looked back to our consummate moral performance during the dynasties of the ancient Sage Kings. Such retrospective misanthropes differ from the prospective misanthropes, who judge our current condition negatively in contrast to what we will or may become in some imagined or anticipated future, transformed state.

The final feature of Shklar’s analysis is the insistence on its epistemic value of hateful misanthropy. What the misanthrope says about humanity may not be cheerful or flattering, but that is no sign of its falsity. Shklar argues that misanthropy ‘often impels one to reveal much that would otherwise remain hidden’, manifesting a ‘passionate honesty’ (Shklar 1984: 194, 203). This alethic argument for misanthropy adds depth to what might otherwise seem a gloomy counsel of despair or a perverse exultation in our entrenched moral crapulence.

Shklar’s account of hateful misanthropy is importantly different from the doctrines of hate central to modern moral discourse, such as misogyny. The title of her book, *Ordinary Vices*, makes clear her use of the framework of what we might call *vice ethics*. This is a style of character ethics which frontloads our vices and failings, rather than our excellences and virtues. Historically, character ethics has been reduced to virtue ethics, to the point of presenting virtue ethics as the sole dimension of the ethics of character. Indeed, neglect of misanthropy is surely of a piece with the wider neglect of philosophical reflection on our vices and failings, not to mention related concepts like corruption and wickedness (some honourable exceptions include Midgley 1984 and Taylor 2006).

Hateful misanthropy is problematic, argues Shklar, on three related counts. First, it is liable to mutate into ‘an unlimited hatred’, quickly developing from some specific legitimate frustration with this or that person or group into an indiscriminate ‘diffuse contempt’ (Shklar 1984: 217). Second, hateful misanthropy exacts severe emotional, psychological, or existential costs, corrupting our comportment towards other people and the wider social world. Shklar warns it tends to ‘make us miserable and friendless, reduce us to spiritual nausea, and deprive us of all pleasures except invective’ (Shklar 1984: 192). It can reflect and reinforce a certain vicious pleasure – a sort of *Schadenfreude* – where one experiences ‘a certain satisfaction in the unending spectacle of human depravity’ (Shklar 1984: 212). The allure of a misanthropic vision of human life is very hard to articulate, but surely includes the morally murky pleasures some gain from provocation, perversity, and hate.

Shklar’s final worry plays on the connections she sees between hate, misanthropy, and violence. Adoption of a hateful stance on humanity, if fuelled rather than tempered, tends to ‘inspire and justify active violence against a detestable and corrupt humanity’, even to the point of motivating large-scale ‘projects of violence’ (Shklar 1984: 217). Hatred of the current forms of human existence is initially emotionally and morally self-destructive, then ultimately a source of acts of violence. Indeed, an irony of hateful misanthropy is that one comes to be what one hates. Bernard Williams warned that what starts as a morally sincere hatred of human failings mutates into a ‘desolating misanthropy which can itself be a source of cruelty’, a dark stance on our moral condition which has the power to ‘destroy almost any virtue’ (Williams 1985: 6). Hateful misanthropy puts one at risk of becoming an exemplar of the vices and failings which they hate, unless they maintain those calmer, cooler forms of misanthropy modelled for us by Montaigne and Philinte.

This potentially self-condemnatory tendency of hateful misanthropy exposes the error of Andrew Gibson’s bold claim that misanthropy is an ‘impossible doctrine’, since in practice it entails a ‘profound self-hatred’. His argument that the misanthropes, haters of humanity, are themselves a member of humanity, and therefore must hate themselves, too – something he claims ‘impossible’, even a ‘fundamental contradiction’ (Gibson 2012: 2-3). Unfortunately, there is nothing ‘impossible’ or ‘contradictory’ about self-hatred. It’s not only possible in principle, but very common in practice. By denying this, Gibson occludes the self-condemnatory tendencies that are integral to the moral psychology of hateful misanthropy.

It is sensible and proper, of course, to worry about the bad effects of internalisation of hateful misanthropy. Among other dangers, it can create or intensify one’s vulnerability to the corrupting and self-destructive tendencies that worry Shklar, Williams, and others. It is also right to worry that misanthropy could feed social isolation, dispositions to violence, and other worrisome attitudes. But the movement from misanthropy to hate to violence focused on by Shklar and Williams is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Consider, first, the fact that, if misanthropy is an attitude towards something collective – humanity or human forms of life – then it does not distribute over individuals. Therefore, acts of violence directed against individuals would not be justified by a misanthropic vision. Jonathan Swift declared that, ‘principally, I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth’, since ‘all my love is toward individuals’ (1843: ii. 579). If so, there is no automatic grounds for translating a general condemnatory attitude towards humanity into a practical policy of violence aimed at individuals.

Second, misanthropy does not automatically connect to hate and violence because an individual misanthropy may have other commitments that act to block or moderate a drift into hateful, self-loathing misanthropy. Since Philinte did not share Alceste’s fate, there was clearly something in place that helped ensure the cooler character of his misanthropy. Such moderating influences may include ethical and religious convictions – a sense of the dignity of the person, say, or an undimmable religious confidence in the moral rectifiability of humankind. Other causes may be more prosaic – Philinte’s gentle misanthropy seems to be a product of hedonism and pragmatism: if people are awful, then try to avoid the worst of us, as much and as far as possible, and try to keep careful company with the rest. Presumably this is why Shklar speaks of degrees of more or less ‘dramatic’, ‘extreme’ misanthropy and distinguishes its cooler forms from those which are hotter and more hateful.

A third reason the connections between misanthropy, hate, and violence are more complex and contingent is that misanthropy is rarely, if ever, rooted in some single feeling or emotion, such as contempt or hatred. It has many sources – a whole dynamic assemblage of moods, feelings, emotions, experiences, reflections, structures of expectations and worries, background cultural and contextual sensibilities, and so on. Wittgenstein once said that ‘Life can educate you into “believing in God”’, that certain experiences, thoughts, and ‘sufferings of various sorts’ can ‘force this concept’ onto us (1998: 97). I think something like this is also true of misanthropy. It is not some set of propositions, coldly accepted, but a charged way of apprehending and responding to the particular ways that human existence has come to be. If so, we should adopt a pluralist and dynamic conception of misanthropy as a broad, negative appraisal of humankind that can be articulated and expressed through a variety of stances. Only some are fed and driven by hatred and related negative affects and liable to manifest in enthusiasm for ‘projects of violence’. To develop this claim, we need a systematic account of misanthropy, for which we can turn to Kant and Schopenhauer.

**3. Kant and Schopenhauer**

Kant noted a double connection between misanthropy and hatred: a misanthropic vision of human life can arise from an increasing hatred of our atrocious moral conduct, which in turn can inspire potent attitudes of hatred towards humanity and its ways of living. This denies or ignores the importance of *humanitas* – ‘the cultivation of *humanity* as such’, ‘the first duty of man towards himself’ (LE 27: 671) – which for Kant makes misanthropy ‘a hateful thing’ (LE 27:672).[[1]](#footnote-1) This concern echoes throughout his remarks on misanthropy, scattered throughout his lectures on ethics and anthropology, as recorded by his students, and his writings on the theme of religion, especially *Religion Beyond the Limits of Reason*.

Kant’s interest in misanthropy is part of a wider moral pessimism about humanity, the conviction that human beings are ‘not particularly loveable’, owing to our propensities to self-love and an inextirpable ‘radical evil’. Patrick Frierson is right that ‘Kant’s view of the human species is not particularly happy’, even if it ‘orients us to real moral threats and thereby makes both moral philosophy and moral reform more relevant to actual conditions of human life’ (Frierson 2010: 55). He criticises misanthropy, though, arguing that ‘what is worthy of respect is *not* perfect virtue, but the *capacity* for virtue’, which even the worst of us possess (Frierson 2010: 53). Granted, ‘respect’, here, has the specific sense of the respect appropriate to any rational being, endowed with moral capacities. But, again, those capacities must be exercised, rather than merely possessed. A mere capacity for virtue is insufficient, in itself. What is really needed for genuine respect is a further set of attainments, such as a *desire* to develop the capacity for virtue, a *determination* to do so despite the difficulties, and so on. Kant makes it clear the arduousness of the moral life, described as a ‘conversion’, ‘the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new’ (R 6: 74). In a nice phrase, pursuit of the moral life means we must become ‘*other* people and not merely better people’ (SF 7: 54). Such conversion and transformation is difficult, prolonged, and painful—a point exploited by the misanthrope as a confirmation of their claim that goodness and virtue are not possible for creatures constituted as we are. To escape our moral awfulness, we must become something very different. This is a pessimism also expressed in Kant’s anthropological writings, such as his talk of the ‘crooked timber of mankind’, of which, according to his famous line, nothing can be made straight.

An obvious influence for Kant’s pessimistic misanthropy is Rousseau’s vivid critique of the morally corrupting effects of the institutions and imperatives of ‘civilized’ life, such as private property, which scaffolds vices such as jealousy, greed, and our fundamental source of wickedness, *amour-propre*. ‘Everything degenerates in the hands of man’, as the Savoyard Vicar gloomily lamented in *Emile*, while ‘Man’s breath is deadly to his kind’ (1969: 322, 277). Whatever the original moral constitution of ‘natural man’, the complexity and artificiality of the contemporary forms of life constitutive of ‘civilized man’ afford means and motives for vicious, wicked conduct on the large scale. As Ernest Cassirer argued, a legacy of Rousseau to Kant was a conviction that certain invidious forms of evil tend to arise uniquely within forms of ‘civilized’ human life, especially vices of duplicity, falseness, and self-regard (Cassirer 1945).

Kant’s conception of misanthropy is not systematically stated, but its general form is clear enough from the lectures on ethics and anthropology. Misanthropy involves a complex of feelings and judgments, inspired by prolonged experience of the abundant moral failings of human beings. In his lectures on ethics, Kant offers a two-stage account of misanthropy. First, one becomes aware of the ‘long, sad experience’ of human vices and failings, such as ingratitude, injustice’, ‘disloyalty [and] misuse of integrity’ (LE 27: 671-2ff). Elsewhere, the indicative charge list of human failings is extended—‘jealousy, mistrust, violence’, and ‘propensity for enmity against those outside the family’ (LA-Friedlander 25: 679) to the ‘long melancholy litany of charges against humankind’ offered in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Religion* – the ‘secret falsity even in the most intimate friendships ... a propensity to hate him to whom we are indebted ... a hearty goodwill that nonetheless admits the remark that “in the misfortunes of our best friends there is something that does not altogether displease us”’ (R 6: 33, the latter remark quoting the Duc de La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims and Reflections*, I.99).

Such catalogues of human failings do not, by themselves, establish a misanthropic verdict. Someone with a rosier vision of humanity can agree on the reality of our vices, but deny they are pervasive or characteristic of human life in the way which would then justify condemnation of *humankind*, rather than just particular individuals and groups. A sanguine moral optimist could insist our moral failings are genuine, but still only occasional, irregular blemishes on the otherwise attractive moral character of humanity.

Anticipating this objection, the second stage of Kant’s account of misanthropy is the insistence that our failings must be *ubiquitous*, *entrenched*, and *pronounced* features of human life. Consistent with their condemnation of humanity, the misanthrope sees our vices and failings as deeply built into the structures of human life as it has come to be – not as localised, superficial, or recessive aspects that occasionally come into view. Indeed, a misanthrope will maintain that our vices and failings are so entrenched within the projects and projects of human life, that they are distinctive and constitutive of human life as it has come to be (see Cooper 2018: ch.1). As Kant’s observes, we do not need to look hard or look long to find examples of human vice: even cursory reflection on our life reveals ‘the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human deedsparades before us’ (R 6: 32–3). Across all the different departments of human life, ‘envy, tyranny, greed, and the malignant inclinations surround’ us, openly displayed, often proudly and publicly (R 6: 93-94). Some vices are hidden or camouflaged, whether out of shame, guilt, or self-interest. Others, though, are openly displayed as objects of acclaim. One mark of a corrupted society is a culture of tolerance for blatant, unabashed displays of one’s vices and failings – of naked self-interest, say, or brazen acts of duplicity.

Misanthropy emerges, from Kant’s writings, as systematic, negative moral evaluation of humankind. Affectively charged awareness of our failings starts processes of reflection that, over time, reveals to us the facts of their ubiquity and entrenchment, something we may previously have ignored or denied. So far, though, none of this automatically connects misanthropy with hatred and other ‘hot’ affects, such as contempt. After all, Kant mentions ‘woe’, a ‘cold’ affect related more to anguish and sadness (R 6: 32), which points to a style of mournful misanthropy modelled by Heraclitus, the ‘weeping philosopher’. Moreover, many of the examples offered by Kant, such as disloyalty, can evoke a range of affective responses – bitterness and disappointment, say, rather than anger or hatred. If so, misanthropy needs more before it takes the form of a hatred of humankind.

The connection of misanthropy to hatred for humankind becomes stronger in writings by Schopenhauer, whose philosophy manifests ‘a decidedly negative attitude toward life’, for which Fredrick Beiser claims we have ‘no other word … than “pessimism”’ (2016: 46). But there is another word – *misanthropy* – which in Schopenhauer scholarship is frequently conflated with pessimism (see, for instance, Dienstag 2009: 83 and C. Taylor 1992: 442). The relationship of the two concepts is explained by David E. Cooper:

‘[The pessimist and the misanthrope agree on] negative assessment of the human condition, but their respective emphases are different. The pessimist’s focus is on aspects of this condition – suffering, frustration, absurdity – that are destructive of the possibility of happiness. The misanthrope’s concern, by contrast, is with human failings, ingredients of life for which humankind is answerable and rightly held to account’ (Cooper, 2018: 4-5).

Schopenhauer is a philosophical pessimist and a misanthrope, attuned to the negative existential and moral character of our existence. He argues an acute perception of humanity as ‘a den of thieves’ creates ‘a melancholy mood’. If that mood is stirred by new experiences and reflections, and so ‘persists, then misanthropy arises’ (TFP 205).[[2]](#footnote-2) Consistent with Kant, the misanthrope sees our failings as constitutive of our current forms of existence, but there are two novel components added by Schopenhauer. First, the range of kinds of human failings is considerably expanded – ‘vices, failings, weaknesses, foolishness, shortcomings, and imperfections of all sorts’ (TFP 205). Although the moral vices, such as cruelty, may seem primary, there is a whole array of aesthetic, affective, epistemic, psychological, and interpersonal failings to which a misanthrope ought to be alert. Schopenhauer mentions ‘frequent and relentlessly evil gossip’, ‘outbreaks of anger’, deep-seated grudges and coils of resentment, ‘compressed as hate long-preserved through inner brooding’, and ‘inevitable collisions of egoism’ (TFP 205).

A second novel feature of Schopenhauer’s account of misanthropy is emphasis on what we can call *auxiliary aspects* of our vices and failings. These are specific aspects of our failings, attention to which amplifies and protects the critical condemnation issued by the misanthrope. Consider, for instance, our systematic tendencies to conceal or deny certain of our vices and failings – the ways, says Schopenhauer, that ‘prudence and patience … do not allow us to see how universal is [this] mutual ill-will’ (TFP 204-205). Our perspective on our collective moral character is self-servingly distorting, in all sorts of ways. For instance, some vices are self-concealing, like arrogance, while awareness of others is suppressed for the sake of our daily business. Schopenhauer could have added that the very fact that occlusion of our failings is ‘prudent’ attests to the awfulness of our condition—the truth about us is too awful to confront, as, perhaps, is the deeper truth of our world, the product of an inexorable cosmic will (see, for instance, WWR 4: §57).

A second auxiliary aspect of many of our vices is variations in their frequency, which Schopenhauer invokes when referring to ‘the boundless egoism of everyone, the malice of most, the cruelty of many’ (TFP 200). Some of our failings are universal, while others are more characteristic of certain groups or individuals, perhaps those especially susceptible to certain temptations and corrupting conditions. By emphasising the variegated patterns in our failings, Schopenhauer guards against a tendency to presuppose their relative rarity. Some may think that cruelty, for instance, is confined only to extreme people or conditions – psychopaths or moral monsters or those living under conditions of violence. Schopenhauer therefore directs our attention to more continuous patterns of subtler forms of human failing, alongside the more overt sorts exposed by Kant’s emphasis on the ‘woeful examples’ that ‘parade’ before us.

Schopenhauer’s exposure of active efforts by people to self-servingly ignore or occlude their vices and failings offers an argument for hateful misanthropy, although not one which to my knowledge is made explicit in his writings. Humanity is characterised by a whole tangled array of vices and failings that are ‘frequent’, ‘relentless’, and ‘universal’ – so far, the same as Kant. Yet few people are trying to overcome these failings. Quite the contrary, those self-serving patterns of denial, concealment, and occlusion are constantly active, thereby propagating the awfulness of our condition. Writing in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer remarks that a ’genius’ faces a painful choice – ‘recognising truth but then of pleasing no one’, or, instead, ‘teaching the false with encouragement and approbation’ (PP 1: 135-136). Choosing the ardent affirmation of truth, on this view, incurs serious costs – one will be ‘secluded’, ‘killed by silence’ – but achieves a certain existential nobility. By tolerating our awfulness and turning away from the truth, we make ourselves legitimate objects of hate. It is not as if we are bad but trying to get better by ardently working to identify and overcome our failings—quite the opposite.

Kant and Schopenhauer offer a useful framework for conceptualising misanthropy as a negative critical verdict of humanity or human existence, motivated by reflective awareness that it is suffused with a variety of failings that are ubiquitous, entrenched, and pronounced. Clearly, though, misanthropy thus construed can be expressed in many different ways, not all of which rely on hateful feelings or moods. Granted, there can be hateful misanthropes, enraged at their entrapment within a ‘den of thieves’, of vicious people self-deceiving about their awfulness. But other, gentler possibilities are available. By considering some of them, a properly pluralistic sense of misanthropy comes into view.

**4. Enemies and Fugitives**

Kant recognised that only some forms of misanthropy are built on hatred. He distinguishes two main forms of *misanthropic stances*, ways of living out an internalised misanthropic vision of human life, an integrated set of affective, evaluative, and practical components. A stance consists of a structure of emotions, moods, feelings coupled to cognitive components likeappraisals, judgements, and patterns of argument and thinking. All these come together in styles of comportment, expressing those dynamically related affective and cognitive components. Hatred can drive violence, for instance, while colder affects, such as sadness or resignation, may lead to determined self-seclusion. For that reason alone, Shklar and Williams are wrong to think misanthropy inevitably leads to violence: the variety of possible stances, differing according to their components, ensure only some point in the direction of hate, rage, and violence.

Kant’s lectures on ethics describe two stances, the ‘enemy of mankind’, also called the ‘positive misanthrope’, and the ‘fugitive from mankind’, or ‘negative misanthrope’. The Enemy is characterised by enmity, a combination of dislike and ill-will; their affective profile is dominated by hatred – not localised, like Timon’s, but universal, aimed at the entirety of humankind (LE 26: 432). Kant describes them as having ‘the purpose and will to destroy the welfare of others’, something he judges ‘hateful’, since it involves ‘a declared disposition to do something harmful to the other’ (LE 27:672, 431). The Fugitive stance differs affectively and practically. The fugitive misanthrope is ‘a recluse, who distances himself from all men’ – he or she ‘apprehends harm from everyone’, meaning they are governed by anxiety, fear, and uncertainty (LE 27:672). In practice, a Fugitive may literally flee from society, retreating to some isolated place – an uninhabited island or lonely region – although usually their flight is primarily psychological and existential, a structured disengagement from the human world.

What distinguishes the Fugitive from the ‘virtuous solitary’, described at the end of §29 of the third *Critique*, is their stance of ‘principled solitude’, or what Joseph Trullinger calls ‘a kind of salutary self-isolation’, anchored in a ‘philanthropic spirit’ (Trullinger 2015: 68). This spirit is lacking in the Fugitive misanthrope, who apprehends others with fear, lacking philanthropic trust in the goodness of others; they see humanity as inveterately vicious and with little serious prospect of reform. Arguably, the Fugitive’s is a double fear – of the viciousness and failings of human beings, individually and collectively, and the corrupting effect of the social world, which act upon them, too. Crucially, though, there is no hatred or desire for violence, for the Fugitive, says Kant, ‘does not hate them [people], and wishes some of them well, but simply does not like them’ (LE 27: 432).

The Enemy and Fugitive stances are obviously of special concern to Kant. It would be an interesting project to work out why, something that would take us deep into his religious and ethical views and his philosophical anthropology. Kant scholars disagree on his account of the sources of our propensities to wickedness and ‘radical evil’. Frierson (2010) and Wilson (2014) favour social accounts, many owing to Rousseau, while Grenberg (2005) and Israelson (2019) explore the dominant influence of Christian theology. I set aside these exegetically complex issues: my immediate task is to indicate other types of misanthropic stance, alongside the hateful Enemy and the fearful Fugitive.

In *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant actually endorses a form of misanthropy, albeit one lacking the enmity and fear he regards as hateful and contemptible, respectively. Although the stance is not named, it is affectively characterised by ‘sorrow’, and ‘grounded in moral ideas’, ultimately, perhaps, an enduring, if frustrated love of humanity (CPJ 5: 276). Its practical manifestations are close to those of the Fugitive, involving desires to pull away from the social world, even to the point of entertaining some romantic dreams of escaping to distant lands. Without giving a fuller sketch, Kant says this:

‘Nevertheless there is a kind of misanthropy (very improperly so called) the predisposition to which is often found in the mind of many well-thinking people as they get older, which is certainly philanthropic enough as far as their benevolence is concerned, but is because of long, sad experience far removed from any pleasure in human beings’ (CPJ 5: 276)

Inclusion of this third stance – one of sorrowful misanthropy, perhaps – is useful because it underscores the plurality of ways of enacting a misanthropic vision of the world. Kant, after all, was clearly congratulating the misanthrope on their perception of the dark sides of humanity. His worry is not epistemic in character, but ethical, for what he fears are those attitudes of hatefulness and fearfulness that are incompatible with a sense of *humanitas* – which is why, for him, there can be such a thing as a virtuous solitary, who retreats from humanity only to restore their moral energies prior to throwing themselves back into the fray of an often difficult, dispiriting world.

Still, the stances sketched out by Kant are not the whole story. Confronted with the unending ‘parade’ of vices and failings constitutive of human life, one might respond with anger, bitterness, disappointment, frustration, or sadness. In turn, the practical responses are similarly diverse – acquiescence, determined reformism pragmatic tolerance, localised mitigation, and so on. Consider, then, two other broad types of misanthropic stance. An Activist responds to our entrenched moral awfulness by attempting, however tentatively, efforts aimed at our rectification – political activism, religious preaching, moral teaching or whatever. Seeing our awfulness, they endeavour to improve things through large-scale, ambitious projects. The scope and ambition of their reformative efforts depend on their wider commitments, of course, such as what trust they have in tradition, science and technology, social movements, Fate, or the gods. A Quietist misanthrope, by contrast, is chary about the prospects for success of any attempted enforced reconstruction of our moral condition. They fear such efforts tend either to fail or to backfire, exacerbating our problems, perhaps by giving new scope to such vices as egotism and hubris. Their quietist strategy is to accommodate, as best they can, to the entrenched failings of human society, perhaps by adopting unobtrusive ways of living that minimise their entanglement with the corruptions of the wider world – the sort of misanthropy seen in Montaigne or members of closed religious orders, perhaps. Confronted with our vastly entrenched failings, the Activist attempts amelioration, while the Quietist opts for accommodation.

Clearly there are complex psychological and contextual stories to tell about the ways that particular individuals come to accept specific misanthropic stances. I say ‘accept’, since it isn’t clear that those stances are *chosen* in any voluntary sense. Many misanthropes seem to feel irresistibly compelled to adopt certain stances as a consequence of their internalised vision of our condition. The misanthropic predicament may fundamentally concern how one lives out that vision of human existence, given the variety of possible stances and their costs. Rather than launch in those deep waters, I want to return to Kant’s account of the Enemy and relate it to Shklar and Williams’ worries about hateful misanthropy encouraging ‘cruelty’ and ‘projects of violence’. Several questions arise—what sorts of features must a misanthropic stance incorporate to make it a real source of cruel, violent destructiveness? What kinds of experiences, actions, or reflections could lead one to adopt a stance towards human life characterised by a desire ‘to destroy the welfare of others’? Under what sorts of conditions could the Enemy stance become intelligible or compelling or even attractive? Does anyone actually subscribe to some form of the Enemy stance in practice?

In a sense, the last question is decisive. If there have never actually been ‘Enemies of mankind’, outside of Kant’s writings and imagination, then the others are moot. Gibson, after all, argued that hateful misanthropy is ‘impossible’, even though his arguments for that are not compelling. Certainly, some criticisms of the possibility of misanthropy miss the mark. It is possible to be misanthropic about humankind while still liking individual humans, some of whom could be judged to be morally exemplary.

Still, there are complicated questions about the lived experience of misanthropy posed by those sceptical of the possibility of misanthropy. In what follows, I consider a recent group of candidate hateful misanthropes. I want to show that there *are* hateful misanthropes, then explore some of the personal and social conditions that made that stance compelling. In the process, I describe a specific form of ‘eco-misanthropy’, where a deep love of nature informs and inflects a profound hatred of humanity.

**Humanity, Nature, and Misanthropy**

Environmental ethics is a rare site of philosophical discussion of misanthropy. Sober reflection on our systematic exploitation and destruction of natural places and creatures encourages an acutely critical appraisal of humanity, often articulated in an explicit language of misanthropy, characterised in terms of hatred. The environmental ethicist, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, defines misanthropy as ‘deliberately inhumane, hateful of people’ (Bendik-Keymer 2006: 85), while Lisa Gerber describes it more broadly as ‘mistrust, hatred, and disgust of humankind’ (Gerber 2002: 41). Similar sentiments can be found throughout academic and popular environmentalist discourse, where even gentle, avuncular nature writers and broadcasters, like Sir David Attenborough, speak of humanity as a ‘plague’.

Sincere concern for the natural world can inspire misanthropy, but so, too, can certain specific environmental ethical doctrines. Bendik-Keymer, for one, argues that deep ecology, in many of its forms, incorporates a significant strain of ‘conceptual misanthropy’ (Bendik-Keymer 2006:86). The core of deep ecology is ‘biospheric egalitarianism’, which affirms the intrinsic value of all living things, independently of their instrumental value to human beings. If this conviction comes to dominate one’s stance in the world, then a path is laid out to denunciations of a variety of instrumentalising human practices and ambitions. An early instance of the misanthropic articulation of that tendency was Tom Regan’s warning, during the 1980s, that at least some forms of ‘holistic’, ‘biocentric’ doctrines fuel ‘eco-fascist’ tendencies (see Regan 1983: 362; cf. Salwén 2014). Some environmental activists really did propose ‘exterminat[ing] excess people’, and declare that ‘massive human diebacks would be good’ (cited in Callicott 1999: 70). Employing an epidemiological metaphor popular among eco-misanthropes, the landscape architect, Ian McHarg, gave a much-reprinted lecture, titled *Man: The Planetary Disease*. Whatever their sincerity, such remarks were sufficiently frequent for J. Baird Callicott at one point to remark that the ‘extent of misanthropy in modern environmentalism may be taken to the degree to which it is biocentric’ (Callicott 1980: 326) – a claim from which he later retreated, after embracing an expanded ‘communitarian’ theory of value that weighed familial, civic, and biotic communities (eg Callicott 1998).

Certainly, the charges of misanthropy apply to certain forms of deep ecology, at least as they were developing at certain points in their history, even if the provocative language of ‘eco-fascism’ or ‘eco-terrorism’ was preferred. But it would be a mistake to suppose that they are confined to biocentric, holistic, and related environmental doctrines, even if they may be more liable to encourage them. It is useful to distinguish, albeit loosely, three broad ways that environmental doctrines could be described as misanthropic.

Consider, first, that environmental doctrines can encourage and affirm global moral condemnation of humankind or human civilisation, typically by calling attention to the wrongful destruction and defacement of natural places and creatures. Such condemnation could be rooted in terms of different normative theories, and be ethical, aesthetic, or existential in character. Morally, the charge-list is familiar – the suffering and death of billions of animals, deforestation, carbon emissions, pollution of air, water, and soil, and other staples of green discourse. Aesthetically, there is profound dismay at the loss of natural beauties, whether due to the encroaching ‘blandscapes’ of modern industrial agriculture, disgust at landfills and trash piles, or the consequent vast, imposed ugliness that contrasts, for one environmental ethicist, with a deep-rooted human ‘longing for purity and cleanliness’ (James 2014). Existentially, a misanthrope may resent the erosion of nature’s meanings – a hollowing out of our experiences of forests, rivers, landscapes that were once charged with meaning and significance, the loss of which is a source of profound alienation and disenchantment (James 2013). Such moral, aesthetic, and existential deficiencies are all mutually inflecting, even if the former dominate modern ‘green’ discourses. The collective result are negative attitudes towards humankind, the source of the awfulness, ugliness, and emptiness caused by systematic destruction of nature.

Second, environmental doctrines can employ and endorse misanthropic attitudes and convictions, augmenting the condemnation of humanity with specific sorts of emotional and evaluative responses. Contrasts between humanity and animals or nature, for instance, often serve to underscore our distinctive moral deficiencies, often by exploiting dualisms between what is natural and what is human, artificial, or civilized. Within North American environmental ethics, this is clear in deployments of a wilderness ideal and the associated ‘cultural ideology of the idea of wilderness’ (Cronon 1998). A misanthrope could use the wilderness literally, as an attractive natural place to escape the corrupting artificialities of a civilized world – like Kant’s Fugitive or Rousseau’s ‘solitary’. But there are subtler misanthropic aspects of the wilderness ideal. One is the assumption that humans ‘taint’ the wilderness, something Arne Naess noted among those deep ecologists who ‘talk as if they look upon humans as intruders in wonderful nature’ (quoted in Bookchin and Foreman 1991: 32). Another is the assumption that humans can *only* relate to nature in harmful, destructive ways, an acute cynicism fuelling the distrust of humanity that is a characteristic of misanthropy (Gerber 2002: 53).

A third way for environmental doctrines to be misanthropic is to incorporate or endorse radical practical proposals, expressive of misanthropic attitudes or convictions. The typical examples from recent eco-misanthropes include dismantling the social and material infrastructure of modern human life, to dramatic proposals to dramatically reduce the human population to the point of human extinction, to those grotesque plans to bring about ‘massive human diebacks’. Sometimes, the proposals are clear in their aims, if not their detail, as with Paul Taylor’s argument that ‘the total final extermination of our species’ would result in improvements for the earth’s ‘community of life’ (P. Taylor 1992: 108). In other cases, the details are blunter, such as a bumper sticker, seen in the United States, bearing the curt instruction, ‘Save the Planet, Kill Yourself’ (quoted in Gerber 2002: 41).

An environmental doctrine can therefore be misanthropic due to its condemnations, attitudes, and practical implications, whether those are stated or left implicit. This means that there are many potential forms and degrees of eco-misanthropy. Gerber wisely advises us to judge environmental ethical doctrines as differentially receptive to misanthropy, ‘not to say that a particular ethic is linked to misanthropy, but rather that we need to be careful about how misanthropy creeps into our life’ (Gerber 2002: 44). ‘Creeps’, though, may be the wrong term. Some environmentalist doctrines may *actively* promote a more starkly misanthropic stance, perhaps encouraging those marked by contempt, hate, and violence. One can imagine a Fugitive eco-misanthrope who quietly lives ‘off the grid’, minimising their participation in the carbon-intensive rapacity of modern human life, enacting what the environmental historian, Roderick Nash, called the ‘garden vision’ of our relation to nature (Nash 1982: 379-388).

When assessing the misanthropic character of an environmental doctrine, attention should turn to its whole complex of attitudes, starting points, and values and the question of whether they are liable to push it in the direction of hateful eco-misanthropy. We can see this more clearly with a case study.

**‘Unmaking of Civilization’**

One group of hateful eco-misanthropes were certain members of the American radical environmental activism organisation, Earth First! Founded in 1980 by the environmental activists Dave Foreman, Mike Roselle, Howie Wolke, Bart Koehler, and Ron Kezar, several of its members began to voice increasingly severe misanthropic attitudes and proposals into the mid-80s. The organisation attracted many leftists, anarchists, and counterculturalists and was very effective in developing and implementing new forms of activism – the now widely adopted practice of ‘tree-sitting’, for instance, and the happily less widely adopted practice of ‘puke-ins’ at shopping mall (an excellent study of the organisation’s history is Lee 1995).

Among their inspirations was the activist and anarchist, Edward Abbey, who was deeply esteemed by the founding members. A prolific author, his writings are filled with misanthropic pronouncements – ‘I'd rather kill a man than a snake’ (Abbey 1988: 18) – often expressed in striking aphorisms: ‘The industrial way of life leads to the industrial way of death’ (Abbey 1990: 100). Abbey introduced the term ‘monkey-wrenching’, methods for disrupting the offending forms of human activity, from dam-building to deforestation. What drove his activism and writing was a powerful conviction that humanity, at least in modern industrialised forms, is ‘a scourge … a pestilence upon the Earth, a threat to all life’ *(*quoted in Gerber 2002: 42).

During the mid-1980s, the Earth First! members began to interact with the emerging philosophical doctrines of ‘deep ecology’, a family of environmental philosophies inspired by the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess (1973). Unlike ‘shallow’ theories, focused on specific issues like pollution, the self-described ‘deep’ ecologies called attention to the metaphysical visions responsible for our estrangement from nature. As a corrective measure, they also encouraged a sense of the intrinsic value of nature enjoyed by all living things – what they called ‘biospheric egalitarianism’, which valued all living creatures. The deep ecologists thus also perceived humanity as increasingly dominated by anthropocentric vices, like greed and hubris. So entrenched were those vices that a sense of the intrinsic value of living creatures was increasingly difficult for many people to take seriously, let alone cultivate and take up into their lives. Unsurprisingly, the infusion of deep ecology began to amplify the existing misanthropic mood began to characterise Earth First!

At the organisations meetings, some members started to chant, ‘Down with human beings!’ and exaggerate their rhetoric of tearing down the engines of violence needed for the operation of the ‘industrial way of death’. More moderate members protested that this performative ‘misanthropic anti-humanism’ was at real risk of mutating into a dogmatically ‘anti-scientific, anti-technology’ stance (McIsaac, Foreman, Brookchin 1991: 60, 61). Most of the members, though, reasoned that if nature enjoys intrinsic value, then there could be no acceptance of its destruction by the ever-accelerating ‘industrial way of death’. Moreover, given the vast scale of that ‘way’, nor could one rely on small-scale ‘monkey-wrenching’. At the most extreme was a proposal by one activist, Christopher Manes, for nothing less than the ‘unmaking of civilization’, the subtitle of his book, *Green Rage* (Manes 1991). Amid such energising calls for radical action to stop radical crises, the soberer voices were drowned out – like those urging gentler conceptions of deep ecology as ‘a recommendation about how humans should live’, a striving to ‘identify with all life’ (McLaughlin 1995: 262).

The most acute expressions of eco-misanthropy within Earth First! came with a trio of articles in the March and May 1987 issues of its eponymous journal, authored by Manes under the pseudonym ‘Miss Ann Thropy’ (see Lee 1995: 101). Blandly titled ‘Technology and Mortality’, ‘Overpopulation and Industrialism’, and ‘Population and AIDS’, they welcomed HIV/AIDS, mass nutritional crises in Africa, and the prospect of a global nuclear war and urged the dismantling of healthcare infrastructure, including for epidemic diseases. ‘Radical action’ of this sort would reduce the human population and collapse its existing ways of life.

Here one sees extreme misanthropy, a realisation of Kant’s worries about ‘declared dispositions to harm others’ and the ‘projects of violence’ anticipated by Shklar. Manes was forthright and unapologetic, declaring that, if offered a cure for AIDS in exchange for the loss of technology, he would choose the latter (quoted in Lee 1995: 110). Although aware of the deeply controversial character of his proposals, he professed confidence that others in Earth First! shared his views. Presumably Manes was exaggerating, since he also added that moral rectitude does not matter in the urgent context of the global ecological crisis. ‘What matters’, he declared, was ‘wilderness … not the prestige of spiritual beautification’ (quoted in Lee 1995: 110).

Such active hateful eco-misanthropy immediately met with criticism from Earth First! members. Murray Bookchin described Manes and his followers as ‘barely disguised racists, survivalists’, ‘outright social reactionaries’, and champions of ‘a kind of crude eco-brutalism’ (quoted in Levine, Bookchin, Foreman 1991: 11). The defence of nature should neither come at the cost of urging deliberate immiseration and death of human beings, nor be allowed to conceal morally invidious doctrines. By 1987, two factions had emerged, divided on the issue of misanthropy. The first group maintained that preservation of wilderness was the sole measure of action and they often brought with them apocalyptic visions. Abbey envisioned a ‘higher civilization’ of scattered human groups, modest in number and lifestyle, pursuing the simple agrarian life and assembling annually in ‘the ruins of abandoned cities’ for ‘festivals of moral, spiritual, artistic, and intellectual renewal’ (quoted in Lee 1995: 99). Since they judged humanity to be irredeemable, they urged a ‘return to the Neanderthal’, although, in practice, this would only be possible for an ecological elite: those not possessed of the vital ‘wilderness gene’ would not survive (quoted in Doherty 2005: 158). Sometimes, these apocalyptic eco-misanthropes appealed to a Protestant vision of this deep ecological elite as the ‘chosen people’, uniquely possessed of the discipline, skills, and courage needed to survive the impending civilizational collapse and then create a new, perfect, ecologically sustainable world (quoted in Lee 1995:83).

The second group urged a more positive, optimistic vision of humanity as capable of achieving a moral and practical balance between the needs of human culture and nature. The excesses of unfettered biocentrism were mitigated by moral and social concerns for humanity and a recognition, voiced by the environmental ethicist Warwick Fox, that ‘being opposed to human-centredness is logically distinct from being opposed to humans’, a subtlety lost to the misanthropists (quoted in Curry 2006:45; see Lee 1995: ch.6). Further criticisms came from Judi Bari – feminist, anarchist, and Earth First! activist – who argued that the problem is not *humans*, but ‘the way certain humans live, that is destroying the earth’, specifically ‘industrial-technocratic societies’ (Bari 1991: 25). As Vandana Shiva put it, ‘blaming the entire human species for the crime of white, technocratic men … avoids any real analysis of who is responsible for the death of the planet’ (quoted in Bari 1991: 25). Although this second group was not homogenous, the common themes were a combination of philanthropic sentiment, philosophical self-reflectiveness, and aversion to an exultant anticipation of the ‘unmaking of civilization’. Luckily, by the early 1990s, the second group had won out (see the exchange between Foreman, Abbey, and Eugene Hargrove, in Keller 2010: chs. 40-44).

The case of Earth First! offers a rich case study in the formation of full-blown forms of hateful eco-misanthropy. Without aiming to be comprehensive, consider four features of the movement that pushed its condemnations of humanity in hateful, violent directions. First, the presence of negative affects among the original motivations for the movement. Abbey, for instance, said of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* that ‘my original motive was, I guess, anger. Trying to get some sort of revenge for the destruction I had witnessed in the American Southwest’ (quoted in Trimble 1995: 28). Such initial motivations can shape the developmental trajectory of misanthropy by pointing it in the direction of stances of hatred, contempt, and loathing.

Second, the movement developed under the influence of a variety of ‘anti-humanist’ attitudes and convictions. For Earth First!, these included, *inter alia*, the wilderness ideal, a postlapsarian vision of humans as irreparably corrupted, and identifications of nature with culturally resonant values – authenticity, genuineness, original purity, innocence, wholeness and wholesomeness. If humans are false and corrupt, and nature authentic and pure, then a clear course is set to a misanthropic derogation of humanity and all its associated cultures and forms of life. The third and fourth components are enthusiasm for radicalism and the presence of other background doctrines of hate. The radicalism is reflected in the zeal for ‘monkey-wrenching’ and infrastructural sabotage up to and including the engineered eradication of whole groups, such as targeted genocide and the ‘unmaking of civilization’. The supporting doctrines of hate, evident in ‘Miss Ann Thropy’s’ articles, are racism and homophobia—recall that their targets were specifically sections of the African and gay populations, rather than humanity as such. It might be true that the radical eco-misanthropes wanted to direct violence at humanity at large, but their initial targets were specific, vulnerable groups.

I suggest that many environmental doctrines may contain latent tendencies that could be called ‘conceptual misanthropy’, although if and how they are activated and expressed will depend on a wider structure of personal experiences and motivations interacting with social, historical, cultural, and ideological conditions. A misanthrope stance emerges from a complex and dynamic context. This introduces variations which will shape if and how it develops in more hateful, violent directions. In some cases, a misanthrope might have values that proscribe hatred – something like Kant’s *humanitas*, say, or some religious teaching of love and compassion. Other misanthropes may operate the ‘garden vision’ of our relations to nature, rather than a wilderness ideal which encourages hostility to human ‘artifice’. Granted, environmental ethical doctrines shaped by such moderating influences lack the drama and provocative energy of a radical eco-misanthropy marked by a ‘green rage’. But the love of nature would be corrupted if it transmuted into malevolent hatred of humanity which acted to give new energy and expression to an array of human vices and failings – callousness, enmity, recklessness, self-righteousness, and vengefulness.

**Conclusion**

All forms of misanthropy involve critical and negative appraisal of humankind, especially if rooted in an acute apprehension of the entrenchment and ubiquity of vices and failings in our forms of life. A misanthropic vision can be expressed in many ways, only some of which are characterised by feelings of hatred and dispositions to violence. Alongside Kant’s Enemy and Fugitive, there can be more activist and quietist ways of enacting misanthropy that have little, if any, role for hate and violence. Much more has to be in place for misanthropy to take those darker forms, something that’s clear in the case of the radical eco-misanthropy of Earth First! Misanthropy takes a plurality of culturally specific forms, depending on its particular aetiology. Although it can take the form of an inchoate ‘hatred of humanity’, it can take other forms, too – less hateful, and more sophisticated – even if embracing a critically charged stance on humankind can increase our susceptibility to indiscriminate feelings of hatred. The worry of Shklar and Williams that misanthropy leads to hatred therefore ignores the complex varieties of misanthropy and the various moderating commitments and conditions that may be at work.

Since moral dogmatism and obdurate zeal are dangers built into many evaluative stances, the sensible thing for a philosophical misanthrope is to strive to be self-critically alert. Someone shifting into a misanthropic vision of humanity should be actively cautious about the temptations to be provocative, radical, and self-righteously assured of one’s status as a member of the uniquely courageous moral elect. Hatred can be powerful and intoxicating – but, without due care, it may well energise our vices and failings. If this is right, then what’s crucial is appreciation that misanthropy brings its own vices and failings, and that recognising and navigating them is central to the misanthropic predicament.

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2. References to Schopenhauer are to *Parerga and Paralipomena* (PP), *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics* (TFP), and *The World as Will and Representation* (WWR). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)