**Philosophical Misanthropy**

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Condemnation of humankind is very topical these days. Given the global environmental crisis, the rise of far-right ideologies, destabilising social and economic equality, and other evils, many people seem prone to issue moral denunciations of the state of humanity. Sometimes, the moral talk is just that – *talk*, expressions of frustration at collective moral failings. Sometimes, though, there is a more practical spirit. At the more extreme end are those who urge and await the end of our species, like anti-natalists and the Voluntary Human Extinction movement. Other positions involve calls for a radical transformation of humankind, perhaps in the direction of smaller, simpler ways of life. The collapse of our industrial, consumerist form of life may be succeeded by one with a different, hopefully better character – a hope offered by philosopher and Green activist, Rupert Read, in his recent book, *Civilization is Finished*.

An appropriate term for these exercises in moral condemnation of humanity as such is *misanthropy*. In its everyday sense, a misanthrope is someone who hates, dislikes, and feels disgust at human beings or humanity and tries to avoid them. The title character of Molière’s 1666 play, *The Misanthrope*, declares that he ‘hate[s] all men’, some ‘villainous’ and others complicit in their ‘evil’. By the end of the play, the misanthrope, Alceste, declares his desire to flee his corrupt and corrupting society.

Although the term has fallen into disuse, it still has this sense: to be misanthropic is to hate humanity and want to escape from it, or perhaps to do violence to it. The philosopher, Judith Shklar, warns that misanthropy is dangerous – it has the power to ‘make us miserable and friendless, reduce us to spiritual nausea, and deprive us of all pleasures except invective’. Hatred and violence, she rightly warns, are a poor basis for a good life. If this is right, then misanthropy ought to be avoided. Fortunately, it isn’t right.

Defining misanthropy as hatred or dislike of human beings or humankind is much too narrow. There are *many* forms of misanthropy, only some of which involve hatred. Actually, some philosophical misanthropes explicitly reject hatred as a response to our collective moral failings. Confronted with our moral failings, we can feel anger – or bitterness, disappointment, poignant resignation, or, more cheerfully, a resolute hopefulness about our improvability. An upshot of this ‘pluralism’ is that we can honour the sense of the moral awfulness of humanity without drifting into the tendencies to hatred, violence, and despair. To do that, though, we need a better understanding of misanthropy.

**Defining misanthropy**

Oddly, there’s not much philosophical writing on misanthropy. It’s not a concept that’s really used among moral philosophers. Sometimes, it’s connected to pessimism or nihilism, each of these expressing bleak visions of human existence. Schopenhauer, for instance, was perhaps the philosophical pessimist *par excellence* and also deeply misanthropic. But these aren’t the same: a philosophical pessimist thinks there are deep features of the world that make human happiness or flourishing impossible – absurdity, meaninglessness, suffering. The philosophical misanthrope, by contrast, focuses on our vices and failings. Granted, they are closely related, but not the same. I could, for instance, think that human existence is cosmically meaningless, without also regarding it as morally atrocious. We could be meaningless but, broadly, morally admirable.

A recent defence of a philosophical doctrine of misanthropy is David E. Cooper’s book, *Animals and Misanthropy*. As the title suggests, his argument is that honest appraisal of our treatment of animals justifies a misanthropic verdict on humankind, as it has come to be. The plight of hundreds of billions of non-human animals shows a whole array of vices and failings – arrogance, brutality, callousness, greed, hubris, mindlessness, wilful ignorance, vanity … the list is long and depressing. Cooper focuses on animals, although we can look at other areas of human life, too.

What we find, argues the philosophical misanthrope, is that human existence is saturated with *failings and vices* – arrogance, cold-heartedness, dogmatism, greediness, hypocrisy, insensitivity to beauty, myopia, moral laziness, selfishness, shoulder-shrugging indifference to the suffering of others, violence, wastefulness … and, doubtless, many others for which we don’t have names. Given all this, it’s easy to understand the critical character of misanthropy.

A catalogue of human failings isn’t enough, though, to secure a charge of misanthropy. Imagine a critic who accepts that we have failings, but insists they are relatively superficial, occasional, and localised. They’ll argue that our vices are confined to extreme situations, like war or political displacement: conditions that force us to become selfish and violent, against our better nature. They’ll also argue that these vices are confined to extreme people, like psychopaths or ‘moral monsters’, who are hardly morally representative of humanity.

It’s this sort of moral facelift that is rejected by a misanthrope. They think there’s nothing unusual or occasional about our failings – they’re spread throughout and built-into our entire way of life. We don’t need to look long or hard to find instances of human vices and failings. Sometimes, all that’s needed is to look at the news, or out of the window, or in the mirror. Granted, most of our vicious behaviour may be fairly low-key – small acts of cruelty, a steady stream of little untruths. Montaigne called these ‘ordinary vices’, since they’re woven into our ordinary and everyday habits, activities, and ways of talking. Indeed, if we think that our vices only ‘really’ count in their extreme forms, then we’re self-servingly undercounting.

A philosophical misanthrope therefore insists that our vices and failings have special features that help to guard their claims against the critic. Three of these features are that our failings are *entrenched*, *pronounced*, *ubiquitous* – they are deeply built into our activities and projects and institutionalised ways of life; they are often pronounced and obvious, as when we talk about ‘naked cruelty’ or ‘blatant selfishness’; they are also spread throughout our world, except perhaps for a few secluded spaces. The misanthrope needs to make these three points. Otherwise, they fall short of moral condemnation of *humanity*.

A good example of this strategy in practice are those modern radical ‘eco-misanthropes’ who regard destructiveness, indifference to nature, and wastefulness as utterly built into the foundations of our ways of life. Another example are feminist arguments that dogmatism, injustice, and exploitativeness are deeply baked into systems of patriarchy. If you remove those vices, the system collapses.

Clearly, we’re seeing that there are many forms of philosophical misanthropy. The real core is the moral condemnation of humankind, but that can be motivated by different sorts of concern – for the plight of animals, the destruction of nature, the oppression of women. A further sort of variety is the different attitudes one can take. Hateful anger, hopeful activism, even despairing surrender … all depending on the specific target. It should be clear, too, that the target isn’t *individual people.* The verdict is aimed at something *collective* – humanity, human civilization, human ways of life. A misanthrope can like, admire, and even love some individual people, most obviously the rare few who’re relatively free of our collective failings. That said, a misanthrope will regard some individuals as especially exemplary of our collective failings. Donald Trump, for instance, is often described as a symbol of all that’s wrong with us as a species – a living manifestation of such vices as greed, hubris, and vanity in their fullest forms.

For those attracted to misanthropy, it’s probably encouraging to learn that they’re not doomed to a hateful stance on the world. But my pluralism about misanthropy poses a tricky set of moral and practical issues that come together in a complicated question: how should a person live, once they deeply internalise a misanthropic vision of human life? Clearly, a critical vision of the awful moral condition of humanity isn’t some cold, abstract doctrine, without implications for our conduct and life. Accepting that vision means changing how you live, feel, and think. Everyone who writes about misanthropy explores this question, which is, after all, a dramatic theme for philosophers, playwrights, and others, too.

Within the history of philosophy, Eastern and Western, I think we can discern at least four main *misanthropic stances*. A stance, here, consists of a dominant emotion and a range of activities or commitments. It’s a way of both making sense of the world and trying as best one can to navigate it – a way of living out one’s misanthropy, as it were. Doubtless there are other ways to be a misanthrope, too. But these stances are the most common. Let’s start with the two stances described by one of the most influential of the Western moral philosophers, Immanuel Kant.

**The Enemy and the Fugitive**

Among the few philosophers who devoted attention specifically to misanthropy, Immanuel Kant is perhaps the most eminent, at least within the Western tradition. He distinguishes at least two problematic misanthropic stances. ‘The Enemy of Mankind’, dominated by hatred and disgust at humankind’s failings, feels driven to acts of violence. Sometimes this might be literal acts of physical violence – the sorts that aim at disrupting social life, maybe, or which inflict harm onto others. In other cases, the violence is more symbolic, such as controversial challenges to cherish ideals. Some eco-misanthropes fit the profile – the ones who want to ‘unmake civilization’, ‘tear it all down’, or anticipate the extinction of humankind with quiet satisfaction.

A second misanthropic stance is what Kant calls ‘the Fugitive from Mankind’. They’re dominated by *fear* – of what we are, the harm we do, and of the morally corrupting effects of being among us. Unlike criminal fugitives, they flee out of fear, not guilt. Doubtless many Fugitive misanthropes will have their share of failings. But they seek to avoid further moral corruption by escaping. Perhaps literally, escaping to a desert island, or going ‘off the grid’, or for many earlier generations, retreating into secluded religious communities or other spaces that are relatively insulated from the entrenched failings of the wider world. When the Buddha declares the superiority of the monastic life, his reason is that it’s free of those corrupting influences which feed our vices – materialistic desire, say, or sensual temptation.

Kant rejects both these stances. Hatefulness is rejected, though not because it will make us ‘miserable and friendless’. Ultimately, we ought to respect the moral dignity of our fellows, even when they consistently fail. Hatred is not only incompatible with that respect; it destroys it, which is why Kant judges the Enemy stance ‘contemptible’. Similarly, Fugitive misanthropy is rejected. Granted, there’s no hatred, nor the impulses to violence. But there cannot be genuine human goodness without a human community. Despite his reputation as an austere moral philosopher, Kant affirms that we’re deeply social creatures. A Fugitive cannot flourish precisely because they flee from others. Perhaps they can live – isolated and secluded – but they cannot live *well*.

The Enemy and Fugitive stances existed before Kant. If we push back to antiquity, we can find those who reported an abiding hatred and fear of humanity. Plutarch declared that ‘he who hates vices, hates humanity’, pretty much the motto of the Enemy. Heraclitus of Ephesus, the ‘weeping philosopher’, lamented the vices and folly of his peers, eventually – so legend tells – fleeing to live in the mountains. Probably that’s exaggerated, although it illustrates an understandable desire to abandon the human world. But hatred and fear can be difficult to sustain. Perhaps misanthropy is more bearable if rooted in other emotions or feelings. We can find these other misanthropic stances by looking East.

**The Activist and the Quietist**

Within the Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions, the project of systematic appraisal of our moral condition and potential was deeply rooted from its earliest known stages. Looking at the Indian schools, the picture is bleak—human beings are trapped in cycles of *dukkha* (‘suffering’, ‘dis-ease’) and rebirth, a ‘wheel of suffering’ driven by powerful vices and deep failings, especially what Buddhists call the three ‘unwholesome roots’ – ‘hate’, ‘delusion’, and ‘greed’. All of the classical Chinese schools, too, share a grim picture of the state of humanity. They saw a world dominated by cruelty, greed, mendaciousness, selfishness, instability, wastage of talents, treacherousness, relentless violence. For the Confucians, the ‘rites’ and the teachings of the Sage Kings are forgotten. For the Daoists, human beings no longer ‘follow the Way of Heaven’. For the Mohists and Legalists, only austere moral self-discipline and strict systems of penalty and punishment could change our condition for the better. Granted, the Indian and Chinese schools emphasise many good things – virtues, wisdom, compassion, mindfulness, ritual conduct, enlightenment, the Way. But the very fact they *must* teach and preach about them is itself a sign of disorder. When the world is in good moral order, warned Laozi, there is no need for sages, rituals, and talk of virtue. A need for ethics is itself a sign of decay, of a world gone wrong.

The Indian and Chinese schools generally rejected hatefulness as an attitude towards humanity. Buddhists regard hate as a vice, while Confucians and Daoists agree that the sage is neither hateful nor violent, even if they disagreed on much else. The case is less clear-cut with the fearful Fugitive. The Buddha taught the superiority of the secluded monastic life. Daoists were suspicious of the corruptions of the ‘artifice’ of mainstream life. Although they share in the Fugitive spirit, other Chinese schools reject it. Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism wanted to reform the social world, not abandon it. Confucius sometimes declares his frustration and announces a desire to sail away to some faraway land, but then calms down and reaffirms his reformative mission. If so, these Indian and Chinese traditions offer us at least two other misanthropic stances.

We might call the first of these the Activist. This misanthrope is motivated by hope. They see the entrenched moral failings of the world and respond with determined commitment. A sense of hope shows itself in ambitious large-scale efforts aimed at reconstruction of our collective condition. This may include moral teaching, religious preaching, or socio-political activism – or some combination of these. Confucius is a good example of Activist. Within his difficult life, there were many activist strategies. Form a community of disciples. Spread the word. Perform good works. Consult with rulers, if they will listen. Act as vivid models of the virtues to inspire others. Restore the rites and a respect for tradition and thereby repair the moral infrastructure so badly needed.

The hopeful Activist will be a more attractive figure to modern sensibilities. Certainly, to generations inspired by social justice movements, climate activism, and determined efforts to ‘save the planet’. But caution is needed. Other misanthropes were more reticent about enthusiastic world-changing activism. The Buddha, for instance, was averse to ambitious activist projects. For one thing, the deep causes of our moral awfulness are entrenched features of reality – ‘dukkha’ and the transience of all ‘conditioned’ beings. Such causes are coped with through personal ethical and spiritual practice, and cannot be changed by social and political actions. For another thing, muscular activism is inconsistent with exercising the Buddhist virtues of modesty, quietude, restraint, and equanimity. This is why we need a further stance.

The fourth main misanthropic stance is Quietism. Like all philosophical misanthropies, it reflects a negative, critical appraisal of the moral condition of humanity. What distinguishes a Quietist is their spirit of resignation. Confronted with our ubiquitous, entrenched failings, they judge that little, if anything, can be done, safely and reliably, to transform humanity for the better. Perhaps the Quietist judges that the immensity of our failings is beyond repair. Perhaps they fear that any grand transformative efforts run the risk of backfiring, maybe by giving powerful new scope to our grandiosity, hubris, and capacities for self-delusion. Better to respond in quieter, more modest ways. Quietist misanthropes therefore find ways of accommodating to our collective failings. They avoid entanglement in the more corrupting areas of human life, where the temptations of ambition and power are strongest. They seek out simpler, inconspicuous ways of living away from the busyness and haste of mainstream life. They strive to cultivate virtues like detachment and diffidence, keeping their head down and remaining safely distant from the fray.

A good example is the Daoist, Zhuangzi. Among modern Western audiences, he’s celebrated as a mellow, romantic, even anarchist figure – a cheerful, long-haired, barefoot iconoclast, cocking a snook at pompous sages and eschewing the stiff formalities of Confucian ritualism. Actually, things are more complex. His vision of human life was bleak. Most people are alienated and confused, painfully fluxing from ‘worried’ to sad’, as their life ‘rushes on like a galloping horse’, having forgotten the Way. Zhuangzi’s own life was one of modest accommodation to that world. *The* *Book of Zhuangzi* shows him eschewing political office, avoiding the controversies of disputatious scholars, ‘stilling the heart-mind’, keeping company only with a few trusted friends, and cultivating spontaneous affection for birds and beasts. Such modest strategies enabled him to life within the human world, but avoid or cope with its corruptions and temptations.

**The misanthropic predicament**

Across the world’s philosophical traditions, these four misanthropic stances recur again and again. A long list could be given of Enemies, Fugitives, Activists, and Quietists. Each shows us a particular way of trying to live out a misanthropic vision of human life. Granted, we’d need to do more to spell out their details in light of interesting questions I’ve not discussed. What is the relation of misanthropy to religion? Is it sensible or fair to condemn *humanity*, rather than specific groups of humans? What if the misanthropic verdict is exaggerated? Or, if it is true, should we broadcast the bad news about humanity?

These are important questions—but we’re only likely to explore them if we’re already persuaded of the philosophical seriousness of misanthropy. This means rejecting the dictionary definition of it as hatred of humanity. There are *many* ways to be a philosophical misanthrope, only one of which is characterised by hatred. In fact, it may be that a misanthrope doesn’t settle into a single stance. Looking at the writings of many misanthropes, one more often sees a painful oscillation between different stances—moments of angry hatred followed by resigned calm that rise up into optimistic hope and back again. Confucius often wanted to give up, but was always pulled back by his hope for humanity. Into his later years, however, his Activism gave way to a resigned Quietism.

What this suggests is that the real philosophical task isn’t about living out a single misanthropic stance. It’s coping with the emotionally and morally difficult oscillation between stances. Such coping is at the heart of the misanthropic predicament.

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