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From Vices to Corruption to Misanthropy

IAN JAMES KIDD
University of Nottingham
ian.kidd@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract: The main part of the paper describes the deep connections between the concepts of vices, corruption, and misanthropy. I argue that the full significance of the concept of human vices or failings is only fully appreciated when it is connected to an account of the ways that our social practices and institutions are corrupting, in the sense of facilitating or encouraging the development and exercise of those failings. Moreover, reflection on failings and corruption can lead us to misanthropy, defined in a revisionary sense as a negative, critical verdict on the collective moral character and performance of humankind as it has come to be. At the end of the paper, I tentatively ask if there can be forms of Christian misanthropy.

Keywords: Christianity, Corruption, Misanthropy, Sin, Vices

Introduction

Critical moral appraisal can be directed at individual people as well as human culture or 'forms of life'. I propose one way that appraisal of individuals for their failings could be connected to a more systematic appraisal of human life or humankind. The connection uses the concepts of *failings*, *corruption*, and *misanthropy*. By the latter, I mean negative critical judgement on the collective moral character and performance of humankind as it has come to be. I defend this revisionary conception of misanthropy after the prior tasks of explaining the concepts of *failings* and *corruption*. It emerges that misanthropy involves experiencing the human world as vicious and corrupting. At the end of the paper, I tentatively ask if there can be forms of Christian misanthropy and tentatively suggest an answer in the affirmative.

1. Failings

I use the term *failings* to include vices in the traditional sense of failings of character and also a much wider array of bad or problematic features of humankind. On my view, lack of necessary skills, culpable ignorance, and narrowness of experience are all failings. There are connections between

traditional vices and these failings. Certain kinds of ignorance can be caused or sustained at least in part by epistemic vices such as arrogance and dogmatism as well as by social conditions and patterns of consistent bad luck. I prefer the term *failings* for its scope but also because 'vice' tends to connote (a) broadly moral failings understood in (b) a broadly Aristotelian sense (Cooper 2018, ch. 4). Without doubting the importance of Aristotle's character ethics, there are reasons to prefer a broader term that is more neutral with respect to specific moral theories.

One reason is that a vice theorist may not want to endorse all of Aristotle's claims about character failings—for instance, his conviction that a single virtue is always accompanied by no more than two vices, one each of deficiency and excess. It may be true this 'two vices' model applies to some virtues, but no reason to think that it applies to all. Some virtues could have several vices orbiting them (see, e.g., Tanesini 2021, chs. 5–6). Other virtues could have more vices on the excess side than the deficiency side—or *vice versa*. If we cling to the Aristotelian account, we may find ourselves at risk of failing to identify the fuller range of vices because we stopped counting at two.

A second reason to prefer the more theory-neutral term 'failing' is that it makes it easier for us to include and draw upon other philosophical traditions. The early Buddhist tradition, for instance, offers extensive catalogues and analyses of our 'cankers', 'taints', and 'defilements', a variety of failings which have conceptual and psychological distinctiveness that is not well accommodated in the terms of Aristotelian virtue theory (cf. *Samyutta Nikāya* SN 3: 76–77 and 5: 51). The Christian moral tradition also offers its own ways of conceptualising human failings, such as the 'venial', 'mortal' or 'deadly' sins and 'capital vices' (cf. DeYoung 2020, ch. 2, Taylor 2006, chs. 2 and 7). Such differences are not merely terminological: they register radically different accounts of the human condition and the nature of reality—whole 'cosmic outlooks' in which particular ethical visions are embedded (McPherson 2020, 115ff).

Outside of these major traditions, there is also the wonderful profusion of terms and discourses for describing our failings. We speak of vices, sins, defects, shortcomings, and foibles. Depending on preference and circumstance, we draw liberally on medical metaphors ('diseases of the mind') and aesthetic concepts ('moral ugliness'). We also innovate and extemporise using any available rhetorical tropes, moral values, cultural norms, and other resources ('assholes', 'jerks').

Philosophical accounts of human failings should address ontological and normative questions about the nature, origins and badness of those failings. This often extends to issues in moral and empirical psychology and the ways that our failings relate to social roles and practices. It has also at times been popular to

relate our failings to more substantive accounts of human nature—of, for instance, our *telos* or our status as God's creation or our evolved evolutionary nature. At this point, accounts of human failings often invoke worldviews or metaphysical visions: the more-or-less systematic accounts of the nature of reality relative to which certain attitudes or dispositions can appear as failings (think of such spiritual failings as impiety or hubris, defined as failures to show proper respect for God). Not all reflections on our failings need to broach these deep anthropological and metaphysical issues. A lot of work can be done at a more local level and, anyway, not everyone is sympathetic to 'big-picture' styles of philosophising about human moral life. In any case, in this paper, I only need to emphasise some very general features of our failings.

Consider, first, the *diversity* of human failings. In some earlier moral and spiritual traditions there was a practice of taxonomising the varieties of human vices and failings. The Christian and Buddhist traditions, with their concepts of 'sin' and 'defilements', are perhaps the most complex, but they are not the only examples. We could distinguish *moral* failings, *epistemic* failings, *aesthetic* failings, *political* failings, and *spiritual* failings. Specific moral traditions might add their own candidates. Confucians recognise various *ritual failings*, for instance, and environmentalists might want to nominate set of ecological vices and failings.

The diversity of our failings has its roots in at least two things: one is the natural diversity of human attitudes, habits and dispositions and cognitive and practical behaviours that can invite critical attention. Another is the conceptual and social resources available for making sense of those various aspects of human conduct. Certain kinds of behaviour could consistently invite anger or frustration even if one lacks the concepts to *name* that behaviour as, say, *arrogant* or *insouciant*. In some cultures, the available concepts and terms might be generally fit for purpose, insofar as most of its people find themselves able to name and understand bad qualities of themselves or others. But not always: there are many gaps in our inherited resources for naming and theorising failings (cf. Kidd 2018, 52). The Christian tradition has focused on vices associated with pride and humility and so we have relatively rich resources for describing those. In contrast we have a relatively poorer vocabulary for failings associated with curiosity.

To see this, we need only consult studies in the history of vice and virtue. What we find are *promiscuous concepts*: vice-concepts that persist over time by altering their forms to better fit changing moral and cultural conditions, a good example being dogmatism (see, e.g., Schep and Paul 2022 and van Dongen and Paul 2017). There are also *transient concepts*: vice-concepts which owed their intelligibility and salience to specific cultural conditions which subsequently ceased to be. To take one example, some of the failings that worried people

during Baroque European culture are no longer intelligible today, except perhaps as issues of etiquette: the social and cultural contexts that gave them identity and salience no longer obtain (Kivisto 2014). Likewise, newer kinds of failings subsequently came into view—inauthenticity, racist prejudice, and environmental unsustainability, say.

Consider two brief examples of failings that owe their intelligibility and salience to specific 'cosmic outlooks':

(A) The 'deadly sins' described in the early Christian vice tradition, such as enviousness and wrath, have obvious bad effects for oneself and others. At a deeper level, however, they involve distortions of our willingness and ability to cultivate an authentic relationship with God. In effect, they jeopardise the soteriological prospects of their bearers (DeYoung 2020, chs. 4–9 and Taylor 2006, chs. 3–5).

(B) The variety of 'taints' and 'defilements' described in the Buddhist *suttas* include moral-epistemic failings such as *rāga* ('greed') and *moha* ('delusion'). These feed forms of 'unwholesome' (*akuśala*) conduct but also undermine our ability to engage in effective meditative practice and to attain 'right view' of our condition as 'suffering' beings entrapped in the *saṃsāric* cycle of *rebirth* and *kamma* (Bodhi 2012, 41–44 and Harvey 2011).

In these cases, a set of failings owe their intelligibility and salience to 'cosmic visions' of the human condition—as beings trapped in a perpetual *saṃsāric* cycle, or as creatures painfully alienated from God's love. One can decouple them from their associated visions, but only at the cost of either distorting abstraction or conceptual banalisation (these tendencies are very robustly criticised by Burley 2016 and McPherson 2020, chs. 4–5).

I emphasised (a) the diversity of our failings and (b) the fact that the intelligibility and salience of at least some failings will be dependent on certain background conditions. But we should be sensitive as well to the idea of *collective failings*. The term 'vices' tends to understood to mean the failings of character of individual agents. Granted, modern vice theorists argue there are (a) vices that can take collective as well as individual forms and (b) vices that are exclusively collective (Byerly and Byerly 2016). We also often attribute vices to things other than individual agents: we talk naturally enough of *dogmatic* committees, *greedy* institutions, and even vicious abstracta, like *cruel* policies or *heartless* practices. Some think such uses are rhetorical, not attributional, and much depends on our views on the ontology of vices. Moreover, not all vice terms apply naturally to collectives: for this reason, I prefer the term *failing*. A bank is *greedy*, the university is *inefficient*, and industrialised animal agriculture is *cruel*.

Why, though, explore the relationships between individual and collective failings? One reason is that it matters to those interested in the *aetiology* of individual failings: to our efforts to understand the origins or causes of failings of character. After all, we should not conceive of our characters as fixed dispositions which unfold over time in some autonomous way. Our characters are to a degree plastic and can change, or be changed, over time through a variety of indirect and direct influences. Our characters can improve or can deteriorate, and character theorists tend to be interested in finding effective ways to improve our characters and to prevent or repair damage. Understanding the aetiology of failings requires a critical sensitivity to the wider failings of the social world. We must think in terms of the dynamic relations between individual and collective agents and the wider institutions and cultures of which they are a part. Of course, this makes vice theorising much more work, but that is an unavoidable consequence of taking seriously the realities of our moral formation and practice.

One vital concept for understanding the interaction of individual and collective failings is *corruption*.

2. Corruption

The term *corruption* is used in social and political discourse and recently became an object of vigorous scholarly interest (Rothstein and Varraich 2017). I focus on a specific morally-toned sense of the term, inspired by a use of the term 'corruption' popular among vice and virtue theorists. Gabriele Taylor says that 'the vices corrupt and destroy' our good character traits (Taylor 2006, 126). Judith Shklar proposes that vices tend to 'dominate and corrupt' our moral character (Shklar 1984, 200). They define corruption as something that affects the character of individual agents for the worse. Other philosophers speak of the corruption of institutions. Alasdair MacIntyre warns that 'the corruption of institutions is always in part at least an effect of the vices' (McIntyre 2013, 227). Robin Dillon's 'critical character theory' starts from a recognition that 'domination and oppression inflict moral damage on the characters of those who live within them' by subjecting people to 'social forces that work to diminish or corrupt our selves and lives' (Dillon 2012, 85, 92).

Clearly there are different senses of *corruption* and the following account is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. At best it is one *kind* of corruption, one strongly connected to vices and failings that has become popular in social epistemology (cf. Kidd 2022). Miranda Fricker, for one, argues that subjection to sexist and racist conditions tends to 'inhibit' or 'thwart' our cultivation of ethical and epistemic virtues and in that sense 'corrupts' (Fricker 2007, 92, 131, 138). José Medina defines epistemic vices as 'corrupted attitudes and dispositions'

which must be understood aetiologically in terms of their 'socio-genesis' (Medina 2012, 29, 72). Such corrupting and character-deforming effects are more generally described with a variety of metaphors—'toxic', 'polluted', 'poisonous'—which connote things which are damaging if one is exposed to them for too long (cf. Tyrell 2017). The Buddha used similar rhetorics of corruption: the mainstream social world is 'burning' with the unquenchable 'fires' of delusion, hatred or aversion, and greed (SN 35.28)

What these instances of the term *corruption* capture is a destructive process whereby exposure to certain kinds of processes or conditions tends to cause what Claudia Card calls 'moral damage' (Card 1996). Our character can be morally damaged in two related ways: our existing virtues and excellences can be eroded or extripated (call this *passive corruption*) or vices and failings can be introduced or strengthened (call this *active corruption*). For Lisa Tessman, exposure to 'the ordinary vices of domination', such as cruelty and arrogance, can causes our characters to become 'degraded', 'twisted' (Tessman 2005, 53). Moreover, the self under oppression is 'morally damaged, prevented from developing or exercising some of the virtues' (Tessman 2005, 4).

It is this sense of corruption I want to develop, before I go onto its connection to misanthropy. Here is a general definition:

> Something is *corrupting* if exposure or subjection to it tends to weaken or erode excellences or virtues (*passive form*) and/or facilitate the development and exercise of failings or vices (*active form*).

Corruptors could be social conditions, processes, actions, norms or values, experiences or interactions. An environment can be corrupting due to its pressures, temptations, values, incentives, or its 'atmosphere'. Certain individuals can be corruptors, too, as can internal features of moral agents, such as our personal moral weaknesses and anxieties. Whatever their specific features, exposure to and interaction with corruptors will tend to damage our moral and epistemic character. Some people, of course, seem to be able to resist or mitigate those corrupting influences and there also seem to be subjective degrees of susceptibility to corruption (think of people of great moral integrity or those capable of moral self-control).

Corruption is therefore a *dynamic* phenomenon that unfolds over time that will often involves prolonged, painful moral and psychological struggle. Unless one is very unlucky, one's social world will contain at least some positive influences, such as the presence of inspirational moral heroes, say, and opportunities for corrective self-reflection. Corruption is also a sustained *process*. Some people may be deeply corrupted by a single catastrophic event, such as cases of 'disorientation' where we lose our moral bearings (Harbin 2016). In

most cases, though, we are forced to do the constant effort of working hard to protect our moral character and integrity despite the constant corrupting forces working on us during our everyday lives.

The concept of corruption can help us to understand how individual failings can relate to the wider failings of the social world. A social world can be filled with all kinds of corruptors facilitating different failings in different ways, not to mention the self-corruptive effects of our own vices (Taylor 2006, ch. 7). It is certainly common to describe the social world as corrupting, even if we also judge that its corrupting powers vary in scope, strength, and intensity. It's also very common for moral criticism to use narratives of decline from an actual or imagined earlier period of moral excellence. Confucius experienced his world as undergoing a painful 'change of condition' from the brilliance of earlier dynasties to the newer period of violence, instability, and loss of moral direction into which he was born (Ing 2012 and Olberding 2013).

I said subjection to corrupting conditions 'facilitate' the development and exercise of failings and vices. To cash this out we can distinguish several *modes* of corruption—general ways that conditions could damage our characters:

- *Acquisition*: a corruptor can facilitate the acquisition of new failings, not previously a feature of one's character.

- *Activation*: a corruptor activates dormant failings, which were already present, but latent or inactive.

The next three modes are different in kind: they involve alterations to failings already present or active in one's character:

- *Propagation*: a corruptor can increase the *scope* of some failing, the extent to which it affects the whole range of the subject's outlook or behaviour. A failing *propagates* when it starts to 'infect [our] whole character' (Baier, 1995, 274).

- *Stabilisation*: a corruptor can increase the *stability* of a failings, the extent to which it can resist efforts to control or disrupt it. An unstable failing can flicker 'on and off' but a stabilised vice is like a constantly blaring light.

- *Intensification*: a corruptor can increase the *strength* of a failings—if, for instance, our once-weak form of arrogance intensifies into raging megalomania.

There five modes of corruption are not exhaustive. There may be other modes, each with their own sub-modes, all of which can interrelate in various ways. We can develop this further by noting general kinds of *corrupting conditions*—features of a social environment or culture that tend, in their own ways, to facilitate our failings or to erode our excellences:

- *The absence of exemplars of virtue*—of persons able to model the virtues, offer practical guidance and, perhaps, theoretical insight (cf. Croce and Vaccarezza 2017).

- *The derogation of exemplars of virtue*—virtuous exemplars mqy be subject to scorn, ridicule, violence, or a pervasive cynicism that erodes the *very idea* that a person could *be* good in those ways (cf. Zagzebski 2017, 45).

- *The valorisation of vicious conduct and exemplars*—viciousness, whether in the form of acts or persons, can be praised, promoted, rewarded, a route to status or glory, and so on (think of those philosophers who valorise aggressive, 'take-no-prisoners' styles of debate—cf. Rooney 2010).

- *The rebranding of vices as virtues*—the status of certain attitudes and dispositions *as* vices could be disguised by presenting them as virtues, thereby thwarting our moral self-monitoring (cf. Dillon 2012, 99).

- *Increasing the exercise costs of virtue*—exercises of virtues often require expenditure of energy, courage, or willpower that places demands on the agent. A social environment could be arranged so that virtuous actions 'cost' more—cf. Cooper 2008).

- *Increasing the rewards of viciousness*—a culture can encourage reward viciousness by ensuring it is a reliable route to desirable goods (ego-reinforcement, wealth, power, sexual gratification, and so on).

These are only some of the generic corruptors that could be a part of a social environment. Doubtless, others could be described. Social corruptors can be norms, operating ideals, guidelines, practices of praise, incentive systems, and really anything that creates pressures, temptations, and incentives that affect our moral conduct and development. Studying these corruptors will require conceptual and empirical work and should be part of a philosophical character theory.

I hope this account of corruption is detailed enough to persuade you that it tracks a genuine phenomenon. Awareness of the variety of corruptors built into our world is central to our study of the aetiology of human failings. Moreover, we see concerns about corrupting social environments in historical and contemporary character ethicists from Confucius and the Buddha through to present-day virtue theorists and social epistemologists.

I now show how this account of corruption brings us to *misanthropy*.

3. Misanthropy

According to what we can call the standard account, misanthropy is the hatred or dislike of human beings or humankind (Gerber 2002). Misanthropy is defined in terms of one or more negative affects, which often extend to contempt and disgust, and so misanthropes are often referred to as 'haters of humankind'. Of course, everyone agrees that there are affective and emotional components to misanthropy, even if others emphasise other aspects as being its ore. Toby Svoboda, for one, distinguishes affective kinds of misanthropy, such as *disliking* humankind, from what he calls 'cognitive misanthropy' (Svoboda 2022). However, what is historically dominant are characterisations of misanthropy in terms of negative affects with hatred being top of the list.

I think attempts to partition misanthropy into affective and cognitive forms and then nominate one of them as 'central' or 'core' are uncompelling. In practice our emotions, feelings, and moods are in constant intimate relations with our evaluations, thoughts, and judgements. The earliest Greek discussions of misanthropy recognised that it has affective as well as cognitive dimensions, and others too, including what Socrates called a loss of trust in humankind. Kant and Schopenhauer, too, characterise misanthropy in terms of experiences, reflections, emotions, and moods. Of course, it can be analytically useful to distinguish the 'affective' and 'cognitive' aspects of misanthropy, but on the understanding that this is not taken as a sign of any genuine partitioning (cf. Cooper 2018, 3ff). Moreover, a focus on the cognitive and affective aspects should not obscure the behavioural or practical dimensions of misanthropy. In practice, misanthropy is never simply a set of negative affects *or* certain cognitive states *or* some combination of these. It also manifests in actions, behaviours, kinds of comportment towards others and the world, even a certain misanthropic way of life. No single aspect should be elevated over the others. All exist in a complex and dynamic interplay. Emotional experiences of anger, bitterness, and sadness can provoke changes in our attentional and reflective habits that in turn issue in evaluations and understanding which in term shape our emotional profile and interpersonal habits.

This more complex characterisation of misanthropy has been developed in the recent work of David E. Cooper, which I have endorsed and elaborated elsewhere (Cooper 2018, Kidd 2021). To distinguish it from the standard account, let me call Cooper's own position a *revisionary* account. It is not a perfect term. For one thing, it begs the question in favour of the primacy of the standard account, of misanthropy-as-hatred, which is mainly defended by Lisa Gerber (Gerber 2021, §2). My judgment is that the revisionary account actually better conforms to the actual positions of the majority of philosophical misanthropes across history (cf. Kidd 2021, §§3–5). Historical misanthropes did not always fixate on hatred and many of them in fact rejected hatred, meaning that hatred is neither necessary nor sufficient for misanthropy. For present purposes, though, the term *revisionary misanthropy* will suffice.

The central claim of the revisionary account is that misanthropy is dark, negative critical appraisal of, or verdict on, the collective character and performance of humankind as it has come to be (cf. Cooper 2018, ch. 1, Kidd, 2021, §2). A misanthropic verdict could be inspired by a wide range of experiences and reflections and judgments. It can also express itself in a range of moods and feelings—from bitterness to despair to sadness to resignation. Moreover, the target of the verdict is not individual human beings but something much more abstract and collective—humanity, humankind, human forms of life, the human condition. In the Western tradition, it has also been popular to root misanthropy in conceptions of human nature. But appeals to human nature are not a necessary feature of misanthropy in the revisionary sense. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was right that critical appraisal is directed at 'civilized man'—on human life as it has come to be in the complex forms into which have been thrown. We are not also directing judgment to 'natural man', to our life and nature as it was in some earlier state of original innocence (Rousseau 1994, 94–97). Indeed, our original or underlying moral condition—as it was in the deep past or as it might be under the brittle veneer of civilized existence—is actually irrelevant to that appraisal (Kidd 2020). A misanthrope need not say we are fundamentally flawed, only that we are—and continue to be—contingently corrupted by the current conditions of our world. Of course, there are also pessimistic misanthropes who maintain that we were doomed to turn out badly, but that sort of claim is not integral to the revisionary account of misanthropy.

A main virtue of the revisionary account of misanthropy is that it is triply pluralistic. First a critical verdict on humanity can and will almost certainly involve many *affects* which can sometimes include positive affects, since all but the bleakest misanthropes recognise that certain people and experiences can be positive. Second, a misanthropic verdict on the baleful moral condition of humankind can have diverse *content*, meaning there are different sorts of

misanthropic verdict. Cooper, for instance, focuses on our dreadful treatment of non-human animals. Different misanthropes focus on different concepts, concerns, and aspects of human life. Third, a misanthropic verdict can manifest in different behaviours, habits, and ways of living; there are many ways to 'be' a misanthrope and to enact a misanthropic vision of the world. In effect, then, revisionary misanthropy endorses *misanthropic pluralism*: there are many *misanthropic stances* (cf. Kidd 2021, §§ 3–5). For all their differences, these stances all express a dark, critical appraisal of humankind as it has come to be.

All of these points were realised by Immanuel Kant in his remarks on misanthropy in his lectures on religion, ethics, and anthropology. What initiates misanthropy, for Kant, is a 'long, sad experience' of the failings consistently manifest in human life, such as ingratitude, selfishness, and cruelty (Kant 1997, 27: 671–672). Such experiences provoke processes of reflection and deliberation which can begin to change our feelings and moods. In a similar account, Arthur Schopenhauer argued that misanthropic feelings and thoughts can lead to a 'melancholy mood'—unless something intervenes to block it—and warned that, if this mood 'persists, then misanthropy arises' (Schopenhauer 2010, 205). Emotions, feelings, thoughts, and preoccupations are all integral to the psychology of misanthropy. Kathryn Norlock also adds the useful point that such misanthropic affects and thoughts must not simply be *there* in one's mind. Many people have misanthropic thoughts and sentiments, but resist and dismiss them or find them overmastered by other convictions and attitudes. To be a misanthrope, one must have these thoughts, moods, and feelings *and* have them become central to—definitive of—one's overall outlook and stance on life (Norlock 2021a, 53ff). Norlock emphasises that

> a critical negative judgment doesn't get one all the way to misanthropy. For a person [. . .] to be misanthropic [. . .] the critical negative judgment has to rise to a governing principle, a justification for further views and practices. (Norlock 2021b, 15)

Cooper, Norlock, and other advocates of the revisionary account agree (a) misanthropy should not be reduced to its cognitive or affective components, that (b) there are complex processes of conversion or self-transformation, and there are (c) many different misanthropic stances, understood as a fairly systematic way of living out a critically negative moral vision of humankind. Kant—a rich theorist of misanthropy—names two misanthropic stances. The 'Enemy of Mankind' feels 'enmity' for humankind, a combination of 'dislike' and 'ill-will', which manifests in dispositions to violence. The most extreme Enemy misanthrope comes to be dominated by 'the purpose and will to destroy the welfare of others' (Kant 1997, 27: 672). The 'Fugitive from Mankind', by contrast,

is animated by profound fear of the moral and physical risks of remaining within the human world. The Fugitive misanthrope comes to 'apprehend harm from everyone' and responds by escaping or fleeing the mainstream social world—to some refuge that offers a prospect of moral and physical safety and a space which can accommodate a sustainably kind of life (Kant 1997, 27: 672).

Kant's account of misanthropic stances is attractive, but requires some amendments. First, the tight pairing of affects—like enmity-violence and fear-flight—is much too tidy and obviously false. If I hate something, I might want to be violence to it or stay well away from it. If I fear someone, I might want to flee from them or do them violence. The connections of affects and practical behaviours needs to be much more complex. It is better to distinguish the misanthropy stances *practically* rather than affectively. Second, Kant defines stances by a single negative affect, like enmity or fear, in a way that obscures the complex emotional dynamics of misanthropy. A moral evaluation of humankind is far too big a thing to ever find its cause or characterisation in a single affect, even in a powerful one like hatred or fear. Kant obscures the emotional and psychological complexities of misanthropy; what we really need is a way of accommodating the interplay of anger, disappointment, fear, hatred, hope, sadness, and other emotions, feelings, and moods reported by misanthropes. Granted, some of them tend to gravitate towards certain emotions while others may not experience certain kinds of affect at all. But all this testifies to the complexity and diversity of the misanthropic stances.

A third amendment to Kant's account is the addition of other stances beyond Enemy and Fugitive types. Granted, he did not claim to be comprehensive and he actually briefly mentions another stance, perhaps a variant of Fugitivism, that has been labelled the 'virtuous solitary' (see Trullinger 2015). But the history of philosophy, eastern and western, offers at least two other general kinds of misanthropic stance. *Activists* attempt large-scale action that aims at a transformation of the collective character of humankind. Their radical projects may include moral teaching, religious preaching, social activism or technological enhancement of human beings. Activist misanthropes aspire to radical rectification of the human condition. By contrast, *Quietists* see our collective failings are incorrigible and incapable of any serious rectification (Cooper 2018, 118ff). Quietists focus on accommodating to the failings of their world and at avoiding or managing its corrupting potentialities. Quietist misanthropes accept that certain desirable human goods are only available within the human world, like family or fellowship, and so remain carefully engaged with the world while striving to avoid morally compromising entanglements (on these four stances, see Kidd 2021, §§3–5).

How does misanthropy, so defined, relate to failings and corruption? Simply stated, a misanthrope has come to experience the human world as vicious and

corrupting, as suffused with a variety of failings. Which failings appear salient will depend on the particular values, concerns, and moral commitments of the misanthrope in question. Cooper's doctrine of misanthropy, for instance, focuses on clusters of failings which manifest in our dreadful collective treatment of animals and are illustrated with a depressingly detailed 'charge list' (cf. Cooper 2018, chs. 4 and 6). Other misanthropes recognise different clusters of failings, such as the Christian and Buddhist catalogues of our failings. Others are less systematic, too. Schopenhauer lists "vices, failings, weaknesses [. . .] and imperfections of all sorts", and notes that some more common than the others, like 'the boundless egoism of almost everyone, the malice of most, the cruelty of many' (Schopenhauer 2010, 200, 205).

For a misanthrope, such failings must be *ubiquitous* and *entrenched*, meaning they are spread widely throughout the world and deeply built into its structures (Cooper 2018, 54ff). As well as reflecting a depressing fact about the world, these two features play an important strategic role in the misanthrope's argument. A critic may accept the reality of our failings but insist they are confined to (i) extreme individuals or groups—psychopaths, say—or (ii) extreme conditions, like poverty or social turmoil, which give otherwise unusual power to our selfishness and violence. Such *confinement strategies* can be resisted by emphasising the ubiquity and entrenchment of our failings. Even if we are *worse* under such conditions, our failings are in fact all too 'distinctive of—typical of and integral to' our human forms of life (Cooper 2018, 63). The abuse and exploitation of non-human animals, for instance, and the unsustainable destruction of the natural world are not rare, occasional features of modern forms of life: they are utterly integral to its practices, projects, and normal functioning.

A misanthrope experiences the human world as shot through with failings and also as deeply corrupting. This explains common misanthropic rhetoric—in talk of human existence as 'poisonous', 'toxic', or 'rotten' or in talk of humanity as a 'plague' or 'cancer'. This sense of the world as vicious and corrupting is clear in Schopenhauer's account of his deeply misanthropic vision of the human world:

> [W]e see come to the fore insatiable greed, vile greed for money, deeply disguised duplicity, insidious malice of humans, we often recoil in horror and let loose an outcry [Human beings are like] so many tigers and wolves whose jaws are powerfully muzzled. (Schopenhauer 2010, 200)

Being corrupted is one of the moral harms that concerns the Fugitive misanthrope. Some misanthropes therefore describe their actual or hoped-for refuges as places where they can shelter from the moral hazards of mainstream

life (Cooper 2021). Many eco-misanthropes, for instance, often describe nature—'wild' nature, at least—in moral as well as aesthetic terms as 'perfectly clean and pure' (Muir 2007, 114). Chinese misanthropes historically use the metaphor of the world as 'dusty' and 'grimy' and described their refuges as 'clean' and 'pure'. In the Buddhist tradition, the monastic community, the *saṅgha*, is one of the three 'refuges'—alongside the Buddha and the Dhamma, his teachings—and monastic life is characterised by physical and moral cleanliness and 'wholesomeness' (Harvey 2000, ch.8). Central to a misanthropic vision is a palpable sense of human life as corrupting in ways that demand practical response—whether the violence of the Enemy of the flight of the Fugitive or Activist radical reformism or Quietist strategies of accommodation.

I hope this brief account makes clear the connection between failings, corruption, and the critical appraisal of the moral condition of humanity at the core of misanthropy. I think a misanthrope—of the revisionary sort at least—thinks we only fully appreciate the vices and failings of our corrupting world when they are connected to a more systematic critical vision of human life as it has come to be. For Giacomo Leopardi, the Italian poet, what we come to realise is the truth that 'the world is the enemy of the good' (Leopardi 2002, 85). This is not a welcome truth and need not be taken as an inevitable fact of human history. But it is a truth nonetheless.

I now turn—in a more tentative tone—to the question of whether there could be forms of Christian misanthropy.

4. Sin and Soteriology

I described conceptual connections between failings, corruption and misanthropic critique of human life as it has come to be. With the revisionary account of misanthropy in place, we can ask if there could be specifically Christian forms of misanthropy. A good place to start, when considering that question, are doctrines of sin. However, this approach instantly runs into two problems. First, the historical and doctrinal variety of hamartiologies means that 'any talk of *the* Christian view of sin is questionable from the start' (Moser 2010, 136–137, my italics). Second, conceptions of sin are situated in a wider structure of concepts—grace, redemption, and salvation—which are, in turn, integrated into wider doctrinal and narrative structures. A postlapsarian conception of human beings as 'fallen' beings deeply corrupted by original sin is one example (cf. Hart 1997). Moreover, our fallenness can be articulated in different ways—as, for instance, a relatively minimal disturbance to our spiritual abilities or as a catastrophic destruction of our very essence. Such complexities set strict limits on what we could say in general about Christian conceptions of sin as a route into a form of Christian misanthropy.

A difficult sort of obstacle is the relative absence of the concept of misanthropy from Christian discourses. It is rarely invoked by Christian theologians and, where it is used, the aim is generally to reject it. Søren Kierkegaard doubtless spoke for many when he judged that misanthropy is 'far removed from Christianity', which is a 'gentle teaching' founded on love. He defines misanthropy in terms of the standard account as *odium totis generis humani*—hatred of the human race—and thinks misanthropes inevitably become 'mute and sallow hermits', alienated from themselves, Christian fellowship, and from God (Kierkegaard 2015, 118–119ff).

Kierkegaard seems to understand misanthropy as an interesting fusion of Enemy affects and Fugitive behaviours. This is likely due to the influence of Rousseau and Kant (Cassirer 1945). Kierkegaard's understanding of misanthrope obviously has roots in his own Christian sensibilities as well, as do other aspects of his thought—his concept of *dread* was worked out in reference to a postlapsarian vision of the human condition (Mulhall 2005, 49ff). But it is a mistake to suppose misanthropy *must* include hateful affects and reclusive behaviours of the sort that alarmed Kierkegaard. In effect, what he has in mind are specific forms which misanthropy could take, and he fails to recognise the diversity of other possible forms.

The revisionary account of misanthropy as a critical verdict on the moral condition of humankind surely resonates with themes within the Christian tradition. If misanthropy calls our critical attention to something substantially *wrong* with the human condition, it naturally connects to the soteriological aspirations that have been central to Christian practice:

> The notion of redemption or salvation is a basic constituent in the plot of the story which Christian faith tells about human existence in God's world. The characteristic designation of this story as 'gospel', good news, already bears within it the assumption of a human race in some serious need or lack or crisis, whether it is aware of it or not. (Hart 1997, 189)

A sense of the human condition as being problematic in deep, severe, and systematic ways can and has been articulated in various ways. About the 4th century, the Fall of Man came to be understood as *depravatio*, as perverse corruption, rather than, as before, *deprivatio*, the loss of something good (Hick 1985, 213). A sense of the loss of personal and collective goodness can point towards a misanthropic vision, but emphasising the deep corruption of individuals and their world take one several steps closer to a misanthropic verdict. This slow movement towards that verdict can be encouraged by other doctrines and attitudes. The classical theme of *contemptus mundi* led to Renaissance Christian moralists 'wallowing in vivid depictions of the degraded

state of human beings here on earth' (Frede 2013, 131). But misanthropy need not involve 'wallowing' in our collective crapulence or trading in 'vivid depictions' of our degradation. Later Christian writers offer more sombre accounts of our condition. The Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr saw evil and sin as 'a corruption which has a universal dominion over all men' (Niebuhr 1949, 122). 'Universal dominion' conveys the sense of the ubiquity and entrenchment of our failings central to misanthropy.

At least some Christian theologians engage in the project of critical appraisal of the human condition. The vocabulary and doctrinal content of those appraisals vary—we can be depraved, 'fallen', corrupted by original sin, standing in need of redemption or sanctifying grace, alienated from God—to name but a few. What we find in these Christian resources are rich possibilities for a critical appraisal of our collective condition:

> [S]ome human communities find it easier to identify with a particular element of the human plight as described by scripture—guilt, alienation, impurity, mortality, ignorance, oppression or whatever—than others, and therefore find it easier to own [certain] metaphor[s] of salvation—acquittal, forgiveness, sanctification, bestowal of new life, illumination, liberation, etc. (Hart 1997, 190)

I think the possibility of authentically Christian forms of misanthropy should be explored. It is a way of enriching our thinking about misanthropy. It might also reveal Christian themes and concerns in a new light. Alongside some of the great Christian theologians, other good candidates might be Tolstoy, Evelyn Waugh, and T.S. Eliot. We should not prejudge the results of these explorations. Some kinds of misanthropy may be ruled out by arrangements of Christian spiritual teachings. It's hard to imagine anyone who lives by the teachings of Jesus ratifying hateful violence against the human world. When Kant judged the Enemy stance to be 'contemptible', he was invoking his Christian convictions about the importance of cultivating 'love for others' and 'for the entire human race' (Kant 1997, 27: 673).

To encourage explorations of Christian possibilities, it is useful to reiterate the revised account of misanthropy, inspired by Cooper, which I endorse:

> Misanthropy is a critical appraisal or verdict on the collective character and performance of humankind or human life as it has come to be.
> Human life is characterised by a variety of *failings* that are both *ubiquitous* and *entrenched*—and not in practice confined to extreme people or conditions.
> A misanthrope therefore experiences humanity or human forms of life as both vicious and *corrupting*.

The account is flexible in several respects. It does not build into misanthropy any specific set of affects or behaviours. It does not privilege a particular stance as the authentic expression of a misanthropic verdict. It does not stipulate how we select, define, or order our failings. It is neutral with respect to aetiological explanations about our condition. It does not require any account of human nature. It could also be rooted in different metaphysical worldviews; scientific naturalists can be misanthropes as well as theists or ineffabilists.

A rare example of a self-identified Christian misanthrope was the English writer and reformer, Sir Perceival Stockdale, author of a 1783 *Essay on Misanthropy*. Stockdale rejects hateful misanthropy but insisted there was a different, defensible sort which is acceptable to those, like himself, of Christians sentiment:

> [T]here is a Misanthrope, who is as acute, and severe in his observations, as he is gentle, and placid in his conduct. He cannot but be convinced, that the great majority of mankind are under the fatal dominion of vice [. . .] While the history of the human race, and his own acute observations, are continually confirming his Misanthropy, are convincing him afresh, that mankind, in the aggregate, are extremely wicked; the same extensive, and complete view of human agents, and of the objects that surround them, equally inspire him with an amiable toleration, and indulgence towards the species. (Stockdale 1783, 9, 12)

Stockdale endorses something like the revisionary account of misanthropy. He also thinks it can and should reconciled with the virtues and attitudes required of a Christian.

A good starting point for those who want to explore misanthropy and Christianity are the studies of the Christian vices tradition by historian and theologian Rebecca DeYoung. In her book *Glittering Vices*, she defined vices as 'disordered desires' for worldly goods such as 'pleasures, security, comfort, control, wealth, status, approval, success, reputation' (DeYoung 2020, 219). Our disordered desires are the substratum of our vices, the basis for 'corrupting and destructive habits' which, if not checked, lead us onto 'paths of self-damage and self-destruction' (DeYoung 2020, 8, 197). Such disordered desires reflect deep general features of human nature—our sensuality, say—but are also shaped and animated by social, economic, and cultural values and imperatives. Consumerist or hedonistic cultures make us 'default to the deformities of wrath' and greed and other vices, for instance, with the upshot that serious vice theorising must be sensitive to 'the dynamics of sin and the deep network of its combined forces' in those forms of life we have inherited (DeYoung 2020, 149, 239).

Misanthropes without Christian convictions can recognise and accept all these details. We have failings that are entrenched and ubiquitous features of the human condition as we have inherited it—all the core elements of

misanthropy. To this general account, DeYoung adds specifically Christian themes. What unifies our vices is the inveterate human drive to 'pursu[e] finite, created things in place of the goodness of God' (DeYoung 2020, 37). Our diverse vices all reflect, in their own ways, this fundamental disordering of desires. Such inner disorder becomes inscribed into our habits, outlooks and relationships with others. Our vices in turn corrupt other people, becoming concretised in social practices and institutions. In a worst-case scenario, a whole form of life becomes animated by corrupted values, like a 'narrowly self-serving, flesh-aimed vision of the good' that feeds greediness, lasciviousness, and other all-too-human failings (DeYoung 2020, 210).

DeYoung does not use the term *misanthropy* and I suspect she would not endorse it as a description of her position. If humans are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), that might seem to rule out any misanthropic verdict on humankind. But matters are more complicated. Since the *imago Dei* doctrine has different forms and interpretations, there is no automatic movement from it to a rejection of misanthropy. If it means we are incapable of significant moral failure, it is clearly wrong. If it means we are *capable* of moral or spiritual excellence, it is consistent with all but the most extremely pessimistic forms of misanthropy.

We can use DeYoung's discussion of the Christian vices tradition as a starting point for exploring kinds of Christian misanthropy. Her book analyses failings, articulated in terms of vices and sins, and describes ways we can cluster them. She also describes corrupting forces that a misanthrope also sees at work in the world (cf. Daly 2021). I read her as offering a critical verdict on a world animated by 'disordered desires' whose entrenched structures and pressures make us 'default' to 'deformities' of thought, feeling, and action, ones we cannot fully resist without divine support. Other Christian theologies agree with this account of our being sinful sins in a sinful world. For one contemporary theologian, sin is 'the broad view that human beings are born into a condition of fundamentally disordered willing from which they cannot extricate themselves by their own powers' (Zahl 2020, 158).

A misanthrope without specifically Christian commitments can agree with all this, and be inspired by DeYoung's proposals for coping with a world experienced as systematically morally disordered. An example is her historical emphasis on those intellectual or cultural tendencies which 'radically marginalised the vices' and her accounts of 'graced' penitential and confessional practices and affirmations of Christian spiritual and vocational ideals that 'teach us both resistance to sin and receptivity to Spirit' (DeYoung 2020, 29, 92, 221).

Conclusions

Careful historical and philosophical engagement with Christian doctrines and practices offers rich work for those interested in misanthropy. I have only a briefly sketched some of the possibilities. I hope to have allayed Kierkegaard's and Kant's worries about intractable incompatibilities between Christian faith and misanthropic visions. Misanthropy can be consistent with pained love of humankind, injunctions to compassion, and soteriological aspirations. One can imagine very dark, pessimistic forms of misanthropy that *are* hostile to those claims, but those would be very specific and extreme forms of misanthropy.

In practice we should investigate further ways of relating misanthropy to the beliefs, doctrines, ideals, outlooks, and soteriologies in Christian and other religious traditions. Such comparative work was initiated by Schopenhauer, who commended as 'wise' the 'New Testament and the Indian traditions, 'Brahmanism' and Buddhism, for their appreciation of the 'misery', 'wretchedness', and 'obvious [moral] imperfection' of human beings (Schopenhauer 1974, 301–3033ff). Engagements with these religions and theologies will also correct an irksome tendency in philosophical theorising on misanthropy to impugn the value of theology. In her book on vices, which includes a chapter on misanthropy, Judith Shklar briskly dismisses the value of theology:

> One might suggest that the works of theologians could prove useful, but their range is somewhat limited. Offences against the divine order—sin, to be exact—must be their chief concern [. . .] It is only if we step outside the divinely ruled moral universe than we can really put our minds to the common ills we inflict upon one another every day. (Shklar 1984, 1)

Shklar's denial is unpersuasive. She does not detail her understanding of sin or its relations to wider Christian thought. 'Sin' is a rich concept with mutable meanings and real purchase on the everyday business of human life. She does not defend her judgement that 'common ills' can *only* be explored by setting aside theistic perspectives. Nor does she explore in any detail the resources offered by theistic religions and their theological traditions. Of course, theistic and Christian conceptions of the human condition are not compelling for everyone. But that is no reason to exclude them from any serious moral reckoning with humankind of the sort attempted by a misanthrope.[1]

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Religion be Misanthropic (and Why Would That Matter)?' Many of the ideas in this paper were also worked out in conversation with the students in my misanthropy lectures in 2021 and 2022.

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