**Misanthropy and misology in ancient Greek philosophy**

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**Preliminaries**

*Misanthropy* a neglected theme with several connections to ancient Greek philosophy:

1. the origin of the concept – *misanthrōpía* from μῖσος (*mîsos*, ‘hatred’) and ἄνθρωπος

(*ánthrōpos*, ‘human’)

1. exemplar misanthropes – two main types being (i) reclusive ‘Fugitive’ (eg Heraclitus, a proto-misanthrope) and (ii) antagonistic ‘Enemy’ (eg Timon – ‘the paradigmatic hater of mankind’ (Gibson) – the ‘enemy to all mankind’ (Montaigne)).

Menander’s Knemon (inspiration for Moliere’s Alceste) – *ananthropos Anthropos*, ‘an inhuman human being’ – due to his wilful unsocial inhospitality (cf. Hatzilambrou).

- the origin, surely, of Kant’s account of ‘Enemy’ and ‘Fugitive’ misanthropies.

1. analyses of misanthropy – especially Socrates’ analogy between *misology* (*qua* hatred of *logoi* – reason, argument) and *misanthropy* (*qua* hatred of human beings)

I want to critically assess the misology/misanthropy analogy.

**Misology**

Main discussions: *Phaedo* 88c-91c – also *Republic* 411c4–e3 and *Laches* 188c.

*Phaedo*’s arguments for/against immortality of the soul, prompting a sort of crisis - 88c-d:

Phaedo: As we heard them speaking, we all had an unpleasant feeling, as we later said to one another. We had been greatly persuaded (σφόδρα πεπεισμένους) by the earlier *logos*, but now they seemed to stir us up and throw us back down into mistrust (εἰς ἀπιστίαν), not only with regard to the earlier *logoi*, but also about whatever was later going to be said, in case we were worthless as judges or even the things themselves (τὰ πράγματα αὐτά) were not to be trusted (ἄπιστα).

Echecrates: By the gods, Phaedo, I can pardon you for that. In fact I was saying something like that to myself just now as I was listening to you. ‘What *logos* shall we still trust (πιστεύσομεν)? The *logos* of Socrates was greatly persuasive (σφόδρα πιθανός), but now has fallen down into mistrust.’

A ‘psychological crisis’ – ‘mistrust’ of *logoi* (reasons, argument) – of radical sort: ‘no mere state of *aporia* about whether the soul is immortal; rather, they face the prospect of losing the ability to feel conviction about *any* opinion at all’ (Miller). Radical, global epistemic anxiety!

Socrates offers a warning – 90c-d:

Socrates: Wouldn’t it be a pitiable experience, Phaedo, if—there being in fact some true and stable *logos* and it being possible to comprehend it—on account of coming upon some *logoi* that were such as to sometimes seem to the same people to be true and sometimes not, someone did not blame himself and his own lack of art (ἀτεχνίαν), but ended up, on account of the pain, pushing off the blame from himself onto the *logoi* and spent the rest of his life hating and reviling them, and was deprived of truth and knowledge of the things that are?

A misologist is ‘confusing an operator error with a system error’ (Callanan).

Socrates: a radical mistrust of *logoi* can lead one to *misology* – there is ‘no greater evil than one can experience’ (89d).

Is this in tension with *Ph* 83c – ‘the greatest and most extreme of all evils’ for human soul is to consider the visible world to be ‘most manifest and most true’ when it isn’t?

No – attack on misology continuous with *Phaedo*’s attack on overinvestment in sensory world (Gallop).

What is bad about misology – why ‘pitiable’?

1. epistemic anxieties, ‘cognitively tossed about on the tide of arguments’ (Jacquette) – and, worse, loss of trust in *logoi* ‘reduces the power of *logos* to benefit us’ (Miller).
2. susceptibility to misology reveals one is ‘not yet in a healthy condition’ (90d-91a), one lacks a fundamental precondition for epistemic ‘health’ – ie healthy trust in *logoi*

- cf. health involving ‘bodily trust’ (Carel).

- Socrates ‘greedy’ desire to regain his ‘health’ – cf. 63e-68e characterisation of philosophy as ‘purification’.

1. misology jeopardises our ability to comport ourselves as agents whose nature defined by reason/virtue/wisdom.

Misology *qua* hatred of reason which is a/the definitive aspect of human beings

- ‘misology is a kind of self-destruction in which what is destroyed is that aspect of the self represented by active reason’ (White)

Reason and *logoi* are vital to cultivation of virtue and wisdom – to ‘care of the self’

Misology means we ‘cut ourselves off’ from vital means of ‘attaining the kind of philosophical truth that is vital to the soul’s welfare’ – ‘care of our souls’ (Jacquette)

OK – is this account correct?

**Trust and defect**

Consider the general structure of the argument:

1. P has excessive trust in Q which lead to exaggerated expectations about Q.
2. Ps exaggerated expectations of Q are almost certainly likely to be disappointed.
3. If P experiences constant disappointments about Q, they will come to ‘hate / revile’ Q.

Several *non sequiturs* – as all commentators emphasise – but here are two deeper concerns.

1. *Trust*

Strong claim: *loss of excessive trust in Q* must (inevitably?) lead to *hatred of Q*.

Gonzalez: ‘misology … has its origin in *excessive trust*, which, given the imperfect natures of … arguments, will [a] invariably be disappointed and [b] thereby become its opposite: absolute distrust’.

ditto Lampert: ‘an unskilled love of the *logos* turns to a hatred of the *logos*’ – but he adds conditional ‘can’ later on.

I agree with [a] but not [b] – (i) trust comes in *degrees*, (ii) polar shift from absolute trust to absolute distrust is an extreme possibility – a spectrum of intermediate options.

More interesting objection: *loss of trust* can take a range of forms, including but hardly limited to ‘absolute distrust’ – ie *loss of trust* is not a unitary phenomenon.

If I had excessive trust in *Q* then lose it, several possible outcomes:

1. I distrust *Q*.
2. I have *less trust* in *Q*.
3. I lose certain *kinds of trust* in *Q*.
4. I retain trust in *Q* but this trust is now experienced as far more *fragile*.
5. I achieve a properly *moderated trust* in *Q* – I appropriately trust *Q*.

Practical implications: *P* could adopt new *policies of trusting* – or enhance their ‘art’ – or seek advice on *trusting well* – or adopt a more collaborative *practice of trusting*.

1. *Defects*

Socrates subscribes to an *individualist* *defect theory* of misology.

Misology is *pathological* – arises from personal-level failings: something must be *wrong* with me *qua* rational agent – cf. one is not in ‘a healthy condition’ (90d-91a).

Distinguish *first-order* and *second-order* failings:

1. failings to trust well
2. failures to notice its insufficiency of their ‘art’ or acquire sufficient forms
3. failures to defect false beliefs about *Q*
4. failures to admit one’s excessive expectations of, & false beliefs about, *Q*.
5. failures to learn from experience and adjust their expectations accordingly
6. failures to adjust one’s expectations – eg pride, arrogance, dogmatism

Ahrendorf – a misologist is ‘so attached to belief in own perfect wisdom they would rather believe there is nothing true/sound than admit they cannot attain true wisdom’.

Perhaps some misology *does* arise *exclusively* from individual-level defects: but we should also admit other possibilities.

Perhaps my excessive trust in *Q* is due to, *inter alia*,

1. my own personal defects (‘*my* fault’)
2. your bad influence (‘*your* fault’)
3. problematical interpersonal interactions (‘*our* fault’)
4. problematical features of social world not reasonably assignable to any specific individual or group – eg Plato suggesting misology due to inadequacies in one’s education, the fault for which is not the students’ (*Rep* 411c4–e3).

We should admit a broader range of aetiological explanations of misology: it’s can be due to individual-level quasi-pathological defects – but not always: there can be a more social or interpersonal story to tell about how and why some people become misological.

Socrates’ account therefore

1. *dogmatic* – *a* way to misology is presented as *the* way
2. *myopic* – occludes diversity of ways one can ‘lose trust’ in *logoi*
3. *pathologizes* misology – as reflecting personal-level failings/defects/vices.

I now want to suggest that these errors got transposed onto misanthropy, but they do point to something important to do with *trust*.

**Misanthropy**

Standard account: misanthropy as hatred or distrust of human beings (cf. Gerber, Norlock).

Oddly, modern commentators on misanthropy ignore Socrates’ misology discussion.

Socrates proposes that misology and misanthropy have a common aetiology – *Phaedo* 89d-e:

Socrates: Misology and misanthropy come about in the same way. Misanthropy creeps in from having greatly trusted in someone (σφόδρα τινὶ πιστεῦσαι), but without art (ἄνευ τέχνης), and having thought that the person is entirely true and healthy and trusty (παντάπασι ἀληθῆ καὶ ὑγιῆ καὶ πιστόν), but then a little later finding out that he is bad and not to be trusted (πονηρόν τε καὶ ἄπιστον), and then the same thing with someone else. And when someone has experienced this many times, especially at the hands of those whom he considered his closest comrades (οἰκειοτάτους τε καὶ ἑταιροτάτους), then finally, having often been mistaken, he hates everyone and thinks that there is nothing healthy in anyone at all.

Same reasoning: *P* is the *misanthrope* and *Q* is *human beings*:

1. P has excessive trust in Q which lead to exaggerated expectations about Q.
2. Ps exaggerated expectations of Q are almost certainly likely to be disappointed.
3. If P experiences constant disappointments about Q, they will come to ‘hate / revile’ Q.

Big problem: misanthropy appears as *pathological* – reflects personal-level defects/failings – thus ruling out alternative account of misanthropy as *appraisal* of our moral condition (Cooper, Kidd).

Ahrensdorf – Socrates guilty of a ‘a marked extremism in longing for a companion … a human companion who is not only truthful, sound, and trustworthy but rather one who is “altogether” (*pantapasin*) (89d4-7)’ – ‘a human companion who not only has many good qualities but who is good in every respect or perfectly good’ (135).

A ‘trusty comrade’ (πιστὸς ἑταῖρος) as (i) morally excellent and (ii) immortal (*Ph* 63a4-9, 78a1-2) – but this is a *god*, not a *human being*

- cf. Ahrendorf p139 explicitly makes ‘cognitive error’ objection to misanthropy.

Such ‘extremism’ paints misanthropy as rooted in absurd expectations about human beings

- Montaigne: Timon *qua* misanthrope ‘an enemy to all mankind … proceeding from wicked and depraved natures’ – cf. C18 ‘Timonism’ (popularised by Melville)

- Kant: a Fugitive misanthrope ‘shuns people … because he can nowhere find such people the way he would like them’ – ie ‘benevolent toward the whole human race’ (*LA* 25:530).

So, Socrates is wrong to insist there is something *necessarily* pathological about misanthropy.

Misanthropy *can*, but *need not*, reflect pathological personal-level failings.

*Question*: what is this ‘trust’ that’s lost when one becomes a misanthrope?

Socrates does not say, but he is right that (lost) trust is *important* to misanthropy – a point neglected among modern misanthropologists.

*Proposed answer*: certain misanthropes lose their *basic moral trust* in human beings.

*Trust* - distinguish:

1. 3-place trust – *A* trusts *B* to *C*
2. 2-place trust – *A* trusts *B*
3. 1-place trust – *A* trusts

One-place trust – *having trust* (analogy: *having hope*) – is fundamental: one must *have trust* in order to *trust B to C* or to *trust B*.

Call it *basic trust* – hard to describe – ‘basal security’ (Jones), ‘basic trust’ – integral to a sense of ‘safety in the world’ (Herman) – a background sense of security/confidence etc.

Often visible when *lost* –

1. Améry – ‘trust in the world’, destroyed by torture, related to ‘entire field’ of related terms – ‘loyal, familiar, confidence, to trust, to entrust’
2. ‘the entire world of people becomes suspect’ (Janoff-Bulman)
3. some experiences can ‘shatter’ a once-taken-for-granted way of experiencing the world – ‘our sense that the world (including people) basically supports human life’ (Greening)

I think *becoming misanthropic* can involve the loss of a tacit *moral trust* in human beings, a ‘basic trust’ we didn’t even know we had until it was eroded/shattered/lost.

cf. Kant on ‘long, sad experience’ of entrenched moral failings – cf. Schopenhauer on sad ‘feelings of melancholy’ induced by misanthropic feelings/reflections.

- ‘Lack of trust is indicative of misanthropy’ (Gerber) – but no elaboration ☹

Example: loss of moral trust occasioned by acute realisation of scale and severity of human killing and mistreatment of animals – cf. J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*:

“I no longer seem to know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses they have bought for money […] Am I dreaming?”

Such things are not aberrations: humans *do* these things – this is a world where these things are not only *possible* but *pervasive*.

Many questions arising: what is this basic moral trust? how does it function? how do we lose it? what forms can its loss take?

**Summary**

If something like this is right, Socrates (a) did us a disservice by introducing attitude that being misanthropical is pathological – unwarranted, excessive, irrational – but, on plus side, also (b) offered rich insight that misanthropy involves *loss of a basic trust in human beings*.

Indeed, misanthropy cannot be explained-away as pathological if it involves a loss of moral trust in human beings can be a rational response to evidence of our appalling collective conduct.

If so, *some* forms of misanthropy may be reasonable *qua* rational appraisals of our collective moral condition (cf. Cooper, Kidd).

IJK

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