

# A Philosophical Defense of Misanthropy

This book argues that it can be both reasonable and appropriate to adopt a certain kind of misanthropy. The author defends a cognitivist version of misanthropy, an attitude whose central feature is the judgment that humanity is morally bad.

Misanthropy is often dismissed on moral grounds. Many people hold that malice toward human persons is problematic and vulnerable to moral objections. In this book, the author advocates for cognitivist misanthropy. He defends an Asymmetry Thesis, according to which a morally bad deed carries more weight than a morally good deed, even if the harm of the former is exactly equal to the benefit of the latter. He makes the case that being misanthropic in the cognitivist sense is morally permissible and compatible with a broad range of moral reasons for action. He also considers the role of misanthropy in environmental thought, arguing that charges of misanthropy against certain “non-anthropocentric” views do not have the force they are typically thought to carry. Finally, the author investigates the practical implications of adopting cognitivist misanthropy, asking what living with such an attitude would involve.

*A Philosophical Defense of Misanthropy* will appeal to researchers and advanced students working in ethics and the philosophy of human nature.

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# A Philosophical Defense of Misanthropy

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022  
by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158, USA

and by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN, UK

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,  
an informa business.*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-032-02998-6 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-032-03860-5 (pbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-003-18939-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398

Typeset in Sabon  
by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

To Annabell, the dog



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# Acknowledgements

I thank Kate Woodford and two anonymous reviewers for feedback on the manuscript.



# 1 Introducing Misanthropy

## Evaluating a Species

Imagine that an orbital probe discovers life on a distant planet and commences observation of that world, transmitting information back to earth. After years of study, it becomes clear that the planet, though rich in biodiversity, is dominated by a single species. As it happens, that species is unquestionably causing a mass extinction event through its activities, and numerous species are dying off with every revolution of that planet around its star. During further study, it becomes clear that the species poses a very high risk of ecological catastrophe that would undermine conditions for complex life on the planet, including that species' own members.

Let us stop there for a moment and ask how we would judge this situation. I am not asking whether knowledge of mass extinction and ecological catastrophe on a distant planet would sadden us personally. For many, it would no doubt matter very much to their personal lives. Rather, the question is how we would regard this situation if asked to make an honest value judgment about it. After centuries of hoping to discover life elsewhere in the universe, we are immediately faced with its imminent self-destruction. Would we not find this scenario to be unfortunate, regrettable, bad, tragic, or something of the sort? Would we hesitate to identify this species as malignant, much as we regard an invasive species on earth that threatens native species?

Now suppose that we discover the dominant species to be highly intelligent. It is capable of complex decision-making, learning from the past and planning for the future. This is not, say, some animal species that lives moment to moment, constantly searching for food and other means of survival, lacking the cognitive means to think about the distant future. Consequently, the species is aware that it is causing mass extinction and threatening the survival of complex life on the planet. Moreover, thanks to our effective probe, we learn that the species not only is aware of these problems but also understands their causes and has identified effective measures of greatly reducing the risks in the future. However, we observe

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-1

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that the species largely declines to pursue these measures, aside from small gestures here and there.

Let us stop again to assess the situation. The natural question, of course, is why the dominant species would decline to address an existential risk to itself and complex life on its planet. We have a species that is in the process of likely destroying itself and the rest of complex life on its planet. That might be deemed tragic. But then we discover that this same species could likely avert the catastrophe but chooses not to do so. That is puzzling. We would look for possible explanations. Perhaps the species is deeply irrational. Perhaps the only solutions carry unbearable costs, although it is difficult to imagine what those might be in comparison with the extinction of complex life. Perhaps the species has, from our point of view, a very odd biology that prevents it from acting in rational ways. Undoubtedly, we would want to know the answer and so further study is warranted, as they say.

After receiving and analyzing even more data, we have a fuller picture of the planet's dominant species. As it turns out, the costs of averting catastrophe, though substantial, are rather manageable, and the necessary technology either is already available or likely would be after a serious investment in research. Why then does the species choose not to act? Fortunately, by intercepting various communication signals, our probe allows us to piece together both the history of this species and its current political arrangements. As for the former, we discover that aggression has been common; war and domination drive almost all of the major events of the recorded history of the species. As for the latter, we find that this aggression has not abated, even if the forms it takes have changed to some degree. Specifically, the threat of environmental catastrophe remains unaddressed simply because those with the means to do so prefer not to pay the substantial but manageable costs that are required, prioritizing short-term benefits to themselves over the long-term survival of complex life on the planet. Some members of the species protest, insisting that serious action ought to be taken, but they are dismissed as kooks or smeared as liars. As for the rest, the majority of the species, they simply do not care (very much) about the approaching catastrophe.

How would we regard this species after learning all this? Again, we should do our best to judge honestly, ignoring for now the obvious analogy that I will draw momentarily. It seems clear to me that we would judge the species very harshly. How else to assess the prioritization of short-term enrichment for some at the expense of widespread death, destruction, and extinction? In our speculative example, there is nothing that provides a plausible excuse for the species' indifference to planet-wide extinction. The costs of action are not prohibitive. The relevant risks and how to reduce them are well understood. Any necessary technology is (or soon could be made) available. There is no strange aspect of the species' biology that prevents its ability to act. Instead, we have a case in which an intelligent species has chosen to prioritize short-term benefits

over the survival of itself and other species, condemning future generations to the ravages of the catastrophe in question. It is hard to conceive of a reasonable defense for this behavior.

Initially, we might think that the species is simply irrational. Even from a purely selfish point of view, the long-term benefits of a decent survival for the species surely outweigh the short-term costs of averting the catastrophe. Although that is probably true from a collective point of view, decisions and cost–benefit analyses are made by individual members of the species—assuming, as we are entitled to do in this fictional case, that this species is composed of discretely conscious individuals. If the goal is to maximize one’s own well-being, then it is not instrumentally irrational for such an individual to prioritize short-term benefits for itself at the cost of catastrophe for others. In ignoring the impending crisis, these individuals are doing what is best for themselves, at least in a narrow economic sense. If this case is objectionable, that is not due to straightforward irrationality.

Our objection to this species would likely be moral in nature. The threat of catastrophe it poses is not only a bad thing: that threat is also morally bad. This is plausible because, given its intelligence, the species is perfectly capable of averting catastrophe. It has all the required knowledge, technology, and wealth, yet it chooses largely to ignore the threat. The reason it makes this choice is that it values short-term benefits for some of its own members over the survival of complex life on the planet. It is difficult to imagine a more obvious case of greed, selfishness, and injustice. Matters would be otherwise if the dangerous species turned out to be one limited in its intelligence or capacity to respond to risks. If something resembling earth’s rodents overpopulated the planet and led to the collapse of the biosphere, we would judge that to be deeply unfortunate and possibly tragic, but we would not *blame* the rodent-like species for this terrible outcome. Members of such a species are not plausible candidates for moral agents, for they would lack the intelligence needed to understand the risks and the flexibility needed to alter the behavior. In the case I have imagined, however, the dominant species has no such excuse. It knows perfectly well that it risks destroying complex life on its own planet and that the termination of complex life will be preceded by unimaginable harm. It has the capacity to avert that outcome, but it simply shrugs off any serious concern over the matter. Surely this counts as morally reprehensible and perhaps simply evil.

Of course, the parallel here is with our own species. This is not an exaggeration. *Homo sapiens* is unquestionably an extremely destructive force on earth. It is responsible for an ongoing mass extinction event, causing enormous losses to non-human life. It is altering the climate to an extent and at a rate not seen for millions of years. Anthropogenic climate change poses a genuine risk of ecological catastrophe. Even if we turn out to be very lucky, averting the worst outcomes, there is no question that climate change will bring substantial harm to both human

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and non-human life. It is already doing so, having created a more dangerous world of rising seas, novel and more frequent extreme weather events, and the like. We may add to this other types of ecological damage for which humanity is responsible, such as ocean acidification, deadly air pollution, and poisoned waterways. Again, all of these cause substantial harm to both human and non-human life. Moreover, on any plausible conception of justice, these ecological harms are obviously unjust to human beings, disproportionately affecting the poor and future generations.

There is hope. These problems are fairly well understood. For example, there is no mystery as to the cause of climate change despite a long campaign of lies from some parties. Likewise, it is fairly clear what must be done in order to avert climatic catastrophe. As always, there are various geophysical, social, and economic uncertainties, but it is nonetheless evident that reducing the risk would involve substantially cutting greenhouse gas emissions, investing in alternative sources of energy, adopting laws and social policies to discourage damaging behavior, and the like. Unfortunately, time is very short, so serious action needs to be taken immediately. How has the species responded so far? Mostly with indifference. To be sure, there are honorable exceptions; some individuals and groups are making the case that the general population and governments should take our ecological crises seriously. Although there have been some relatively modest measures, these fall far short of what is needed. In short, we are aware of the devastation we are causing, and we know how to arrest it, but for the most part we choose not to do so. We are not like the rodent species that can neither understand risks nor change its behavior. Rather, we are like the intelligent species in my imagined case.

This inaction might appear puzzling at first to non-terrestrial observers who are unacquainted with *Homo sapiens*, but we know the reasons for it perfectly well. Human beings, especially those with the most power and thus the greatest capacity for action, have a very strong preference for short-term benefits to themselves, even if that means risking the destruction of the earth's biosphere. This might sound like an outlandish claim but it is true. For many years now, politicians have told us with a straight face that serious action on climate change is infeasible because it would hurt something called "the economy." Given that climate change threatens far-reaching economic damages in the future, this can only refer to the short-term economic interests of some, such as fossil fuel companies worried about quarterly profits or upper middle-class citizens irritated by the prospect of a carbon tax. Other aspects of our ecological crisis, such as mass extinction, barely register on the political scene. Some might say that all this is merely politics, the implication being that we should not bring moral judgments to bear upon political matters. I agree with the first claim, but politics is the venue in which humanity has committed many of its gravest crimes. If anything warrants moral condemnation,

it is the march of war, slavery, genocide, and the like that constitutes so much of our political history. Of course, power-seeking political figures would prefer that we not moralize regarding their own corruption and the harm they cause, but I am aware of no reason to grant their wish.

So how should we regard our own species from a moral point of view? It seems to me that our assessment of humanity should be very similar to our assessment of the non-terrestrial species in my imagined case. Because that other species would deserve moral condemnation for its indifference to the catastrophe it causes, our species deserves much the same. Now this is merely an analogy, but at the very least it is enough to ground the reasonableness and plausibility of the misanthropic view that I will develop and defend in the coming chapters.

From a moral point of view, human history has been a great catastrophe. This is rarely acknowledged, but it seems obvious when we attend to the events that historians consider important to the course of civilization. The student of history becomes acquainted with every manner of violence and oppression: war, slavery, genocide, bloody revolution, and the like. These events are often presented via sanitized or exculpatory descriptions, as with the Europeans who “explored” the Americas, but the underlying realities are horrific. To be sure, some historical events do not fit this ugly trend but these are exceptional. Moreover, such events are often mere ameliorations of existing moral ills, as when some case of oppression is reduced or, in rare cases, removed. When we consider current affairs, there is little reason to expect this trend to change. We shall look more closely at these matters in subsequent chapters.

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant famously identifies a “radical evil” in human nature but this is not as exciting as it sounds. Roughly, Kant means by this a propensity in human beings to prioritize their own self-interest over the moral law. Roughly, human beings are naturally inclined to grant more importance to their own gratification than to conducting themselves in a moral fashion. This radical evil does not entail that human beings must be immoral, of course. First, sometimes self-interest and morality are perfectly compatible, such that being a moral person involves no cost. This is common. Most of us abstain from punching strangers in the face, and this is easy to do given that we usually have nothing to gain from assaulting strangers. Second, even when self-interest and morality come into conflict, Kant thinks it is always possible to do the right thing. Or, to be more precise, he thinks that, as a matter of practical reason, we must postulate that we have the freedom that is required to act out of duty rather than inclination. A person who acts in conformity with the moral law, despite her inclination to the contrary, is not free of radical evil in Kant’s sense, for that evil just is the tendency to prioritize self-interest. A being free of radical evil is difficult to imagine. To us it is an alien nature. But such a being would not feel the temptation to deviate from the moral law when doing so is beneficial to itself.

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Not unrelated to radical evil is Kant's distinction between acting *from* duty and acting merely in accordance with duty. As we have seen, it is often very easy to act in accordance with the moral law, simply because we have no reason to do otherwise. On a normal day, each of us could perform thousands of wrongful actions if we chose, but in many cases there is no benefit to oneself in being unkind, dishonest, unjust, abusive, and so on. But our motivation for according with morality in this way might be merely some non-moral consideration: a wish to get along with others, a desire to be trusted, or something of the sort. The real test comes when being moral bears a cost, for that gives some indication of whether or not the true motive of our typically duty-according actions is esteem for morality itself. Giving into the radical evil of one's nature is compatible with frequently acting in accordance with one's duties. For Kant, the genuinely moral action is one that not only accords with the moral law but also proceeds from the right kind of motivation, namely one that involves respect for the moral law itself. We might suspect that, on Kant's standard, genuinely moral actions would be very rare in our world. Although I will not defend a specifically Kantian view of normative ethics or moral psychology in this book, the idea that genuine morality is rare strikes me as plausible.

### Disambiguating “Misanthropy”

Misanthropy gets a bad rap. The term “misanthropy” has various senses. Literally, of course, it means hatred of humanity but that definition is itself ambiguous and does not capture many of the ways in which the term is used. Before considering the case for misanthropy, then, we need to engage in some disambiguation. We shall then be in a position to describe several different views that plausibly count as misanthropic. In later chapters, I will reject some of these, such as those involving genuine hatred, but argue that other misanthropic views are both reasonable and worthy of serious consideration. Let us begin by isolating misanthropy into two components: *misos* and *anthropos*. The latter refers to the target of *misos*, which can be individual humans or humanity in general. I shall have more to say about this throughout this book, especially when it comes to distinguishing between *misos* for humans in an individual sense versus a collective sense. It will be useful to say something now regarding the nature of *misos*.

Sometimes a person who merely dislikes other human beings is described as misanthropic. Call this misanthropy as disliking. Such misanthropes harbor a distaste for others, an attitude which may or may not be evident to those others. To count as misanthropy, this disliking cannot be directed solely toward specific persons. One might dislike another for certain idiosyncrasies that one finds grating but this is not sufficient to make one a misanthrope in the present sense—if it were, then virtually everyone would

be misanthropic. Aside from simply having an attitude of disliking toward some other persons, genuine misanthropy as disliking seems to require a more general attitude of dislike toward human beings. This type of misanthrope will generally dislike other human beings rather than merely dislike some individuals for their (possibly uncommon) traits or actions. This is perhaps easiest to see in cases in which someone dislikes features that one takes to be common among humans. Our misanthrope here carries a distaste for humans in general because of (allegedly) common features, and although this is compatible with her disliking specific individuals who display those features, the general attitude does not depend on just those individuals. Suppose one dislikes humans in general because he finds them excessively prideful. Naturally, he is liable to dislike specific persons he encounters who seem to him excessively prideful. Imagine, however, that this person discovers that he had misjudged some individual as having this flaw and that his previous dislike toward that person is dissolved. If he is a genuine misanthrope, his dislike of other human beings will remain, for he will have discovered only that some individual does not possess the flaw he still believes to be present in other persons.

A second type of misanthropy is genuine hatred of humans or humanity. Our conception of this type of misanthropy will depend in part on what is meant by hatred. For instance, we might take hatred to be a rather intense form of disliking, such that a misanthrope would be someone who intensely dislikes humans or humanity. But we might instead view hatred as more than intense disliking. Perhaps it involves a voluntary component, such that the misanthrope is someone who wishes ill upon other humans, possibly in addition to (strongly) disliking them. We sometimes use the term “hatred” in this way, as when referring to someone who bears an ill will toward others. Throughout the remainder of this book, I shall understand hatred of humanity in this voluntary sense of wishing ill upon others. I acknowledge that the term “hatred” is sometimes used in the sense of intense disliking but that attitude is covered by the first type of misanthropy noted above. As with that first type of misanthropy, misanthropy as hatred must be a generalized attitude. Bearing an ill will toward some individual, say on account of specific traits or actions of that individual, will not count as genuine misanthropy and for the same reasons that disliking some individual for specific traits or actions will not count as genuine misanthropy. Moreover, the generalized target of one’s misanthropic ill will cannot be merely some specific group of humans. Misogynists and racists harbor general ill will toward certain groups of people, but they are not thereby misanthropes. As with misanthropy as disliking, the target of misanthropy as hatred must be humans in general.

Third, we have contempt for humans or humanity, which differs from hatred thereof in some important ways. Schopenhauer, to whom we shall return, claims, “*Hatred* is a thing of the heart, *contempt* a thing of the head.”

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The latter is “the obverse of true, genuine pride,” consisting of “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another”.<sup>1</sup> The implication here is that contempt is—or involves—a belief, namely that some other person is of little or no value. Conversely, Schopenhauer implies that hatred is—or involves—a non-cognitive attitude, such as an emotion or desire. Now Schopenhauer probably goes too far in defining contempt as a conviction regarding the “worthlessness” of another. It is obviously possible to judge that someone has some value while nonetheless looking down upon that person as inferior to oneself, and it would not be odd to describe this stance as contemptuous. A natural accompaniment to such contempt, already indicated by Schopenhauer’s appeal to pride, is the belief that one is superior to those one holds in contempt. Following other remarks Schopenhauer makes in the same passage, we learn that the contemptuous person does not bear ill will toward others. Unlike the hateful person, who may wish harm to come to those he hates, such as by lashing out at them, the contemptuous person is perfectly satisfied to keep her conviction private. She feels no need to communicate her belief to those she holds in contempt. Adapting this notion of contempt to the case at hand, we may say that misanthropy as contempt involves the belief that humans in general are of little value in comparison with oneself. The contemptuous misanthrope looks down upon (most or many) other humans as inferior. Because this is a private conviction or belief and because the contemptuous feel no need to display their contempt, it presumably would be difficult to identify which individuals (if any) qualify as such misanthropes.

Finally, we may understand misanthropy as a kind of viewpoint that includes the judgment that humanity is bad. There are various senses of “bad” one might use here, but I focus on moral badness, a concept that I shall explicate below. This viewpoint is distinct from the other types of misanthropy just noted, although it may be compatible with some of them. Someone who sincerely judges that humans are bad, and views them accordingly, need not dislike, hate, or despise humanity. Like misanthropy as contempt, this type essentially involves a belief rather than a non-cognitive attitude, such as disliking or hatred. However, unlike contempt, misanthropy as the judgment that humans are bad does not essentially involve the judgment that others are inferior to oneself. Although it seems possible for one to judge that humans are bad and to hold the rest of humanity in contempt, this requires only that we acknowledge that one might be two types of misanthrope at once. Solely in virtue of judging humanity to be bad, one will not *thereby* be contemptuous toward others. This opens an important possibility for our final type of misanthropy, namely that one can include oneself among those judged to be bad. Contempt seems unavoidably elitist, as it involves looking down upon other persons. This distinguishes misanthropy as contempt from misanthropy as the judgment that humanity is bad and in a striking way.



It might be objected that the judgment that humanity is morally bad is not misanthropic in any standard sense. Perhaps to designate such a judgment as “misanthropy” is a misnomer. One might think that genuine misanthropy requires some negative mental state toward other humans, such as hate or dislike, and I have already allowed that this last type of misanthrope might lack such mental states. However, I do not think it idiosyncratic to identify this stance as misanthropic. As we shall see, it can underlie and justify the view that the disappearance of humanity would count as a moral improvement in the universe. This is not a favorable view of the species. More to the point, this type of misanthrope does in fact harbor a negative mental state toward humans. This mental state is cognitive in nature. It is perhaps true that standard conceptions of misanthropy involve non-cognitive attitudes, but I see no reason to deny the possibility of cognitivist misanthropes.

It is this last type of misanthropy that is of most interest to me, for two reasons. First, as we shall see momentarily, misanthropy as the judgment that humans are bad is not (necessarily) problematic in a moral sense, unlike some of the other types. Second, because this last type of misanthropy involves a judgment or belief, we can investigate whether it is true or warranted in light of the evidence. It is not clear that we can do so in the case of non-cognitive misanthropic attitudes, such as hate or disliking. A standard view, which I find plausible, is that such attitudes are not truth-apt. Because we cannot evaluate such attitudes as being either true or false, it is unclear that one could conduct a philosophically interesting defense or critique of such attitudes, aside from considering whether they are pragmatically consistent with someone’s actions and other attitudes or arguing about their moral appropriateness (to which I turn below). At any rate, on the assumption that such attitudes are not truth-apt, it will not be fruitful to ask whether those attitudes are true or justified. However, we can ask this question with regard to those types of misanthropy that involve commitments of belief.

## **Human Exceptionalism**

Not surprisingly, humanity takes itself to be exceptional. The usual accounts of human exceptionalism hold that our species is superior to the millions of others that have existed on this planet. Historically, this alleged superiority has been taken to warrant humanity’s domination and destruction of these other species. My view is that humanity is indeed exceptional but not in the manner that most assume. However, before turning to that issue, let us examine the case for human superiority.

Some accounts of human superiority are religious in nature. For example, it is claimed that humanity was created in the image of an omnipotent deity who takes a special interest in the species and who expressly commanded us to subdue and dominate the earth. Of course, there is

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little reason to believe such accounts, as they are grounded in appeals to myth or faith. Moreover, there is sometimes good reason to reject such accounts, as they are typically outlandish and often incompatible with well-supported theories in biology, geology, or other sciences. I am also reminded of Bertrand Russell's remarks on the argument from design for the existence of God:

Apart from logical cogency, there is to me something a little odd about the ethical valuations of those who think that an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent Deity, after preparing the ground by many millions of years of lifeless nebulae, would consider Himself adequately rewarded by the final emergence of Hitler and Stalin and the H-bomb.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that humanity is the favored species of God, granted a divine right to dominate the rest of nature, is not only free of any evidence, it is also implausible and many versions of this account (e.g., that God created the universe several thousand years ago) are not consistent with well-established facts. Of course, the believer might insist simply on the basis of faith that some such account is true, but once again there is no reason for anyone to assent to this.

Other accounts of human superiority are philosophical in nature, for they purport to offer good reasons for believing that humans are indeed superior to other species. Unlike religious accounts, these are, at least in principle, susceptible to rational evaluation. We can examine whether the arguments in their favor are any good. Descartes offers one of the best-known and most notorious examples of such an account. Because they are purely material beings, non-human entities are devoid of consciousness. They are nothing more than natural automata, lacking the mental substance (mind) necessary for thought. We shall return to Descartes's view in Chapter 6.

To be fair, these accounts of human exceptionalism are probably nothing more than *post hoc* rationalizations. There is a misguided tendency among some ecologically minded writers to attribute a great deal of power to philosophical and religious ideas. It is claimed, for example, that anthropocentrism in our worldviews is a major cause of our environmental crises.<sup>3</sup> The notion behind such claims is that certain ideas, once incorporated into a society's structure of beliefs and values, drive the behavior of that society in particular directions. To take a simplified example, on this approach one might claim that our domination of non-human species is driven by our belief that we have a God-given right, perhaps even an obligation, to engage in such domination. This affords the hope that, if we could dislodge this idea and replace it with something better, the society in question will cease its domination of non-human species and convert to some more sustainable way of life.

For better or worse, I doubt that religious and philosophical ideas have this degree of causal power, at least for most people. I suspect that the true drivers of our domination and destruction of the rest of nature are much more mundane: desires for wealth, power, and convenience, perhaps aided by a general indifference to problems that are not immediately before us. On this view, our species is hurtling toward catastrophe not because it falsely believes that God commanded us to subject nature but rather because human beings want the perceived benefits that come from the relevant activities: astonishing profits and political power, for example. Religious and philosophical stories about human superiority provide little else than useful pseudo-justifications for those who want them. This is why I suspect such accounts to be *post hoc* rationalizations. We do what we wish and look for some justification later. To be clear, I do not deny that some people genuinely believe some of these accounts of human superiority. What I doubt is that such beliefs play a significant causal role in humanity's destructive activities. If this is right, then we should not fool ourselves into thinking that a critique of ideology will assuage the ecological horrors that we are causing.

What, then, is the point of critiquing accounts of human exceptionalism? Although I do not think that such accounts are causally responsible for the nightmare in which we live, I do think they are false. This is a work of philosophy, so it is appropriate to critique false views, even if those views are not dangerous. Furthermore, though causally powerless (or near enough), accounts of human exceptionalism are unseemly, for they provide ideological cover for activities that are, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, morally repugnant. This provides another reason to critique them.

### A Note on My Own Perspective

I would rather not address this, but I suspect it will be useful. Much of what I say in this book is critical. The object of that criticism is humanity in general. When drawing on real-world examples, I will utilize cases of powerful public figures, such as politicians. I have no interest in attacking those with little power or whose malfeasance occurs in what we might call private matters. To be sure, there is a great deal of moral ill in the way we treat one another in our private lives, but it strikes me as unseemly to single out such persons, especially because the greatest ills are no doubt caused and enabled by those with much power: dictators, the ultra-rich, and political figures, for example. When discussing malfeasance that occurs among those with little power in the world or in private affairs, I will rely on fictional or anonymous examples, but of types that will be familiar to anyone who has interacted with human beings, such as betrayal, dishonesty, unfairness, and lying.

Furthermore, although this book is in a certain sense very judgmental of humanity, I make no claim to be an exception. I wish to argue that

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humanity in general is morally bad, and although there are exceptional individuals, I do not assert myself to be among them. I hope to say nothing that implies otherwise. In short, this work is not an exercise in grandstanding, whereby one strives to present oneself to some audience as morally virtuous, often by means of attacking individuals who are accused of some moral failing. Although grandstanding is a relatively minor moral ill compared with humanity's worst crimes, it is nonetheless distasteful and to be avoided. Grave moral failings are very common among humanity but that judgment does not proceed from some morally secure vantage point. Like anyone else, I am probably among the many morally suspect individuals who populate this strange species. In almost every case of trenchant moral criticism of which I am aware, the target is some select individual or group, the implication or outright assertion being that some individuals or groups (likely including those offering the criticism) are morally superior. The assertion of such superiority is typically false, of course, given the vast reserves of hypocrisy and bad faith that humanity has at its disposal. I shall try to avoid making this mistake myself, and the reader can judge whether that is successful.

### Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I consider the example of Schopenhauer, perhaps the only major philosopher in Western traditions to accept a kind of misanthropy. In many ways, Schopenhauer's misanthropy is complementary to his general pessimism, another manner in which he is unusual. I argue that Schopenhauer's philosophy offers a helpful counterpoint to the moral optimism one generally finds, both in the judgments of ordinary persons and in those of strange theorists, such as philosophers. Such optimism is usually assumed without argument, but Schopenhauer's remarks remind us that, at the very least, some defense of optimism is required.

In Chapter 3, I address ethical concerns about misanthropy. For many, misanthropy will seem not merely false but morally objectionable, perhaps even repugnant. They may wonder why we should even consider the potential merits of misanthropy, given its alleged ethical problems. I have chosen to address this early in the book for two reasons. First, by showing that there is at least one form of misanthropy that is not subject to the standard ethical concerns, I hope to show early on that my view is a reasonable one that is worth considering. Second, this allows me to identify the type of misanthropy I will be defending, distinguishing it from other forms that are indeed morally problematic. Briefly put, the cognitivist misanthropy I support is constituted by the belief that humanity in general is morally bad. I do not support, say, sentiments of hate or a desire to harm other persons.

Chapter 4 provides my central argument for cognitivist misanthropy. This argument is inductive in nature. Its premises consist of the many moral ills attributable to humanity, including our many atrocities, both historical and ongoing. Importantly, this argument is descriptive rather than causal. I am not seeking to diagnose the causes of humanity's brutal behavior. As far as I can tell, that is not a task for philosophy. Rather, I argue that humanity is best described as morally bad, given the vast array of evidence. In Chapter 4, I also defend the Asymmetry Thesis, which holds that moral badness is of greater significance than moral goodness. In a sense that I will seek to clarify, the fact that our species has committed various genocides counts for more than the fact that our species has on various occasions engaged in philanthropic causes. This might sound surprising at first, but I make the case that it is merely a piece of moral common sense. We employ something close to the Asymmetry Thesis when we condemn a philanthropist who saved hundreds of lives but also committed a few murders along the way.

In Chapter 5, I address objections to cognitivist misanthropy. These include the following: it is not humanity that is morally objectionable but something else (e.g., capitalism); humans are not bad but rather a "mix" of both good and bad; humans are not morally responsible for the ills I have recounted; the common-sense morality on which my argument depends should be rejected; misanthropy is too dangerous to countenance; morality is irrelevant to human affairs; and others. I attempt to answer these objections and show that cognitivist misanthropy survives them. When responding to potential objections, the author always runs the risk of overlooking some incisive objection or presenting it in a weaker light in order to handle it with more ease. It is surely better to respond to actual objections offered by real critics, but because my view has not been defended in the past, this is not an option. Accordingly, I have done my best to anticipate likely objections and to present them in their strongest light.

Chapter 6 addresses the matter of non-human nature. I dedicate an entire chapter to this subject for two reasons. First, humanity's treatment of non-human nature is a major piece of evidence in favor of cognitivist misanthropy. Our species is in the process of decimating nature. We are responsible for an ongoing mass extinction event, and very few members of our species care in the slightest. Second, environmental activists and environmental philosophers have been regularly accused of misanthropy in some pejorative sense. For this reason, environmental philosophy is one of the few sectors of philosophy in which the issue has been discussed. Here I argue that the charge of misanthropy often misses the mark when directed against environmentalists. To the extent that they are misanthropic, it is not in a morally objectionable fashion. To the extent that their proposed policies are morally objectionable, it is not in virtue

## 14 *Introducing Misanthropy*

of their alleged misanthropy. This chapter also allows me to address the question of the value of non-human nature and whether humanity's disappearance would constitute an axiological improvement for the world, which I answer in the affirmative.

Chapter 7 addresses the implications of cognitivist misanthropy, specifically what living as a misanthropist would involve. I begin with some reasons for hope. Although the moral ills of humanity are certainly great, there is cause for comfort and even hope. As far as we know, moral catastrophes are very rare, in both time and space. It is fortunate that, as far as we can tell, the universe is not filled with species like our own, and it is reasonable to hope that humanity will soon come to an end, at least from the perspective of astronomical time. When it comes to conducting her life, the misanthropist will be a moral pessimist, not expecting much genuine virtue from other persons. Nonetheless, given the assumption that moral common sense is more or less correct, she will adopt a melioristic stance toward the world. Given the way that we are, it is not feasible to achieve justice in this world, but we can work to avoid some of the worst outcomes and to improve at least somewhat on the poor conditions we have created. This is what our moral obligations amount to in a broken world. Furthermore, the misanthropist will be an anti-natalist, given that procreation is likely to bring about both agents and subjects of additional moral ill. Finally, I argue that the misanthropist is most likely to find comfort and a suitable means of expression in comedy. The comedic artist is afforded great latitude when it comes to honest criticism, even of sacred precepts, although there are limits. Perhaps the appropriate response to the moral monstrosity of humanity is laughter.

### Notes

- 1 Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Psychology," in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1970), 170.
- 2 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), vi.
- 3 See, for example, Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

## 2 The Example of Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer, the “greatest, the most influential misanthrope of the nineteenth century,” offers an instructive case.<sup>1</sup> He was gifted when it came to pointing out and describing the extent of human injustice. “Man is at bottom a dreadful wild animal,” he claims:

A weighty contemporary example is provided by the reply received by the British Anti-Slavery Society from the American Anti-Slavery Society in answer to its inquiries about the treatment of slaves in the slave-owning states of the North American Union: *Slavery and the Internal Slave-Trade in the United States of North America*. This book constitutes one of the heaviest of all indictments against mankind. No one can read it without horror, and few will not be reduced to tears: for whatever the reader of it may have heard or imagined or dreamed of the unhappy condition of the slaves, indeed of human harshness and cruelty in general, will fade into insignificance when he reads how these devils in human form, these bigoted, church-going, Sabbath-keeping scoundrels, especially the Anglican parsons among them, treat their innocent black brothers whom force and injustice have delivered into their devilish clutches. This book, which consists of dry but authentic and documented reports, rouses one’s human feelings to such a degree of indignation that one could preach a crusade for the subjugation and punishment of the slave-owning states of North America. They are a blot on mankind.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the behavior of the Anglican parsons is not anomalous among human beings, for it springs from “the inner and inborn nature of man, in which the first and foremost quality is a colossal egoism ready and eager to overstep the bounds of justice.”<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, I am less sure that the source of humanity’s injustice and other misdeeds lies in its nature but this provides little comfort.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-2

## 16 *The Example of Schopenhauer*

Schopenhauer's diagnosis of human wickedness is, of course, tied to his metaphysics, which few will find themselves able to accept. On his view, the Kantian thing-in-itself is the will, an endless striving that objectifies itself in various ways—for instance, as inanimate objects in motion, plants seeking to grow, animals seeking to satisfy desire, and human beings pursuing their ends. Hence the “colossal egoism” of human beings, which is just another manifestation of the insatiable will. The details and arguments for this metaphysics need not detain us, for the misanthropic point of view in which I am interested does not depend on any particular metaphysical commitments. Nonetheless, I will argue that we can learn much from Schopenhauer's misanthropy because something close to it is separable from his metaphysical arguments. This will require us to pay more attention to his essays rather than his *World as Will and Representation*.

History provides a long list of human-induced suffering and injustice: genocides, wars of aggression, slavery, and many forms of oppression. Such ills have been common. Indeed, they seem to constitute much of the content of historical surveys in schools, although the fact of injustice may be de-emphasized, as in the cause of the expeditions of European “explorers” to the Americas. Setting aside history, we can look to our own day to motivate an outlook like that of Schopenhauer. The “Anglican parsons” are still with us, of course, although they now might espouse different religious outlooks and seek to justify forms of oppression other than chattel slavery. Obviously, there are many current and recent atrocities in the world, although which ones seem obvious will probably depend on one's location and political commitments. Human beings seem to be quite skilled at noticing the misdeeds of others but excusing their own (e.g., as well-intentioned mistakes), often with excuses that they would not take seriously if offered by one's enemies. Fortunately for my view, those who share a misanthropic outlook need not agree on precisely what human activities or traits make that an appropriate attitude. They need only agree that humans are bad, a view that can be motivated and justified by a variety of different appeals.

It would be difficult to deny the many atrocities, current and historical, perpetrated by human beings. But why think this reflects on humanity in general? After all, decisions to go to war or expel a religious minority are typically made by relatively few persons. One might think that this reflects on the character of those individuals but not on humanity at large. Schopenhauer has an answer to this. Were we able to pierce “the veil of pretence, falsity, hypocrisy, lies and deception,” he claims, we would see “how little true honesty there is in the world and how often, even where one least suspects it, all the virtuous outworks merely conceal the fact that, secretly and in the innermost recess, dishonesty sits at the helm.” He continues: “One man puts on the mask of justice better to attack his fellows; another, with the same object in view, chooses that of public good and patriotism; a third that of religion and purity of faith.”<sup>4</sup> Is this



a reasonable view? He is surely correct that both great and minor ills have been (and continue to be) brought about under the banners of justice, patriotism, and religion. If Schopenhauer is also correct that the “dishonesty” he describes is common and widespread, that would weaken the argument that most humans are not bad, despite the atrocities committed by some individuals.

We can return to the example of slavery in the United States. It was not only the case that Christian leaders rationalized the practice, but many white citizens accepted it. Indeed, it was claimed to be perfectly in line with justice, patriotism, and proper religion.<sup>5</sup> Often, slavery and similar institutional injustices are sustained not merely by relatively few, powerful individuals but also by greater social acceptance by “normal” people. This is especially true in countries that have some measure of democracy. Unfortunately for those who wish to resist the misanthropic outlook, we cannot absolve everyday individuals of the ills in question when they consent to or sustain those ills. To be sure, some individuals neither consent to nor enable (some of) the injustices of their time, as with those who worked to abolish slavery in the United States. As we have just seen, however, Schopenhauer suspects such individuals of dishonesty, putting on the armor of justice (for example) in order to satisfy immoral impulses, such as a desire to harm through punishment. Unfortunately, Schopenhauer does not offer much of an argument for this claim, and it seems too cynical to accept in the absence of such an argument. It certainly seems that, at least on occasion, some human beings genuinely wish to do good and that they sometimes succeed in doing so. I shall assume that this is the case. In Chapter 4, I will argue that owing to an important asymmetry between moral good and ill, this fact does not threaten to undermine the case for misanthropy, but for now I return to Schopenhauer.

So far, we have been reviewing humanity’s role in grave injustices, such as slavery and genocide, but we should not overlook our more banal flaws and misdeeds—that “man is a beast of prey which will pounce upon a weaker neighbour,” a fact “confirmed every day in ordinary life.” It is not controversial to note that we routinely observe vices in ourselves and others: envy, hatred, *Schadenfreude* (“the worst trait in human nature”), greed, unfairness, and the like.<sup>6</sup> These vices are frequently at play in workplaces and other social settings. Often, they do not lead to great harm, but even when they cause no harm whatsoever, the presence of such vices speaks ill of us. Of course, humans (some more than others) also seem to possess a number of genuine virtues, an apparent fact that cannot be ignored. Once again, there is an important asymmetry between virtue and vice, a matter to which I will return. For now, it should be noted that, in justifying the misanthropic outlook, I will appeal not only to the far-reaching atrocities committed, accepted, and sustained by human beings but also to the everyday, *relatively* minor vices and misdeeds that seem so common among us.

Perhaps we should not limit our consideration to the *moral* vices of humankind. In a rather cantankerous essay, “On Noise and Sounds,” Schopenhauer devotes some pages to denouncing “the truly infernal whip-cracking in the echoing streets of the cities, which robs life of all peace and all pensiveness,” a practice that supposedly provides a clear indication of “the obtuseness and thoughtlessness of mankind.”<sup>7</sup> Although later generations have been spared such whip-cracking, one doubts that Schopenhauer would find our own time to be any less obtuse and thoughtless than his own: “The universal toleration of unnecessary noise, for instance of the extremely ill-mannered and vulgar slamming of doors, is nothing short of a sign of the general obtuseness and thought vacuum of their minds.”<sup>8</sup> Schopenhauer here disdains not just the noise-making of some individuals but also the allegedly “universal toleration” of the practice. Presumably, this is not a moral condemnation but rather a critique of certain non-moral flaws in many of us. If we humans are generally thoughtless and obtuse, that is a mark against us. We might think of such traits as intellectual vices. Now the complaints in this essay are no doubt elitist and trivial, and we might dismiss it accordingly. However, Schopenhauer is surely right that humanity displays various non-moral flaws. Although my focus in this book is on the moral failings of humanity, it is reasonable to ask whether humanity’s other failings might (also) provide a reasonable basis for a misanthropic point of view.

### A Note on Pessimism

It is true that Schopenhauer’s misanthropy is tied to his pessimism and that the latter is grounded in his metaphysics of the will. The nature of the will is such that (lasting) fulfillment can never be attained, whether in human beings or other parts of nature. Consider an instance of the will’s striving, namely a human being attempting to satisfy a desire for some particular end. Suppose that the desire is satisfied, at which point there are two possibilities: a momentary absence of desire or a new desire for some other end. The former is only momentary because, owing to boredom, there will arise a new desire for some end. Suppose instead that the initial desire is not satisfied, at which point there are three possibilities: the desire for the same end continues to operate; it is replaced by a new desire for some other end; or there is a momentary absence of desire, which is soon enough filled by some new desire.<sup>9</sup> According to Schopenhauer, this cycle leaves no room for the will to be satisfied—and therefore no room for human beings to be content, satisfied, or happy in any stable and lasting sense. Suffering is ubiquitous and unavoidable because of this cycle. We cannot escape the pain of desiring, of frustrated desires, or of boredom.

Importantly for Schopenhauer, all particular instances of such suffering are only manifestations of the underlying will. Coupled with his misanthropy, this allows him to identify a kind of cosmic justice in the world:

Now if, having taken stock of human *wickedness* as we have just done, you feel a sense of horror at it, you should straightaway turn your eyes to the *misery* of human existence. (And if you are shocked at its misery you should turn your eyes to its wickedness.) Then you will see that they balance one another; you will become aware of the existence of an eternal justice, that the world itself is its own universal Last Judgement, and you will begin to understand why everything that lives must atone for its existence, first by living and then by dying.<sup>10</sup>

We might object to this by noting that, although there is much suffering in the world, it seems not to be evenly distributed across persons and (more importantly) it seems that such suffering often fails to correspond to desert. An obvious example is that of children suffering due to the unjust activities of others (e.g., ethnic cleansing). It would be outrageously implausible to claim that an eternal justice is at work here. But for Schopenhauer, the deeds and volitions of each individual person are ultimately manifestations of the will as thing-in-itself. We represent this activity of the will as a diverse set of actions performed by discrete individuals but in a certain sense that is an illusion. At bottom, all this is the work of the will,

which shows its different sides in the qualities, passions, errors, and excellences of the human race, in selfishness, hatred, fear, boldness, frivolity, stupidity, slyness, wit, genius, and so on. All of these, running and congealing together into a thousand different forms and shapes (individuals), continually produce the history of the great and the small worlds, where in itself it is immaterial whether they are set in motion by nuts or by crowns.<sup>11</sup>

Because it is the same will that gives rise to what we call human wickedness and human suffering, we supposedly have a kind of justice. In a sense, the will suffers on account of its own wickedness. Extending this view, we might say that, although humans are bad, they get what they deserve in the suffering that, according to Schopenhauer, is an inescapable feature of human life.

Like most people, I do not believe in Schopenhauer's will, so I cannot accept his claim of eternal justice. In one way, then, my view is grimmer than his. While I agree that human suffering is widespread, I cannot agree that there is justice in that suffering, except perhaps by occasional accident.

I am afraid that much human suffering is gratuitous, meaningless, and utterly unjust. This might seem rather pessimistic. However, my stance does leave room for hope. Unlike Schopenhauer, I do not think that human wickedness and suffering are inevitable outcomes of the will, but merely the result of human choices and actions, at least in many cases. This makes it at least possible to hope (perhaps naively) that we can change for the better and escape the misery that many of us impose on one another. I shall return to this idea near the end of the book.

### Moral Dishonesty

Oh for an Asmodeus of morals who would let his minions see not only through roofs and walls but also through the veil of pretence, falsity, hypocrisy, lies and deception which extends over everything, so that they would know how little true honesty there is in the world and how often, even where one least suspects it, all the virtuous outworks merely conceal the fact that, secretly and in the innermost recess, dishonesty sits at the helm. For our civilized world is nothing but a great masquerade. You encounters knights, parsons, soldiers, doctors, lawyers, priests, philosophers and a thousand more: but they are not what they appear—they are merely masks behind which as a rule money-grubbers are hiding. One man puts on the mask of justice the better to attack his fellows; another, with the same object in view, chooses that of public good and patriotism; a third that of religion and purity of faith. [...] Then there are universal masks without any special character, as it were dominoes, which are therefore to be met with everywhere: among these are strict honesty, politeness, sincere sympathy and grinning affability. [...] In this respect, the only honest class is that of the tradesmen, since they alone give themselves out for what they are: they go about without any mask on, and thus they stand low in the social order.<sup>12</sup>

I confess that I believe Schopenhauer to be nearly entirely correct in these claims. If we observe the behavior of individuals and organizations within the “professional” classes, we find countless examples of insincerity, posturing, and other types of deception. This is obvious in politics, public relations, and advertising, of course. How else to convince voters to support the candidate who is committed to undermining their well-being? How else to motivate consumers to purchase another poorly made vehicle they cannot afford? In those cases, telling the truth is not a winning strategy. But rampant dishonesty is not limited to those professions in which deception is itself the product. Anyone who teaches at a university must be aware of the frequent deceptions of administrators: obfuscation regarding why some academic program was shut down, painting an unjustifiably dire picture of the institution’s finances in order to defend

staff layoffs, praising every new hire in the provost's office as the absolute pinnacle of excellence, and so on. To take more examples, we find pretense among those angling for a promotion by flattering their supervisors, fabrication in the self-presentation of acquaintances on social media who wish to appear happy and successful, and exaggeration (at best) in the "grinning affability" of coworkers.

To be clear, I do not think that dishonesty is *universally* present. Obviously, sometimes people are honest and genuine. Nor do I think that all such dishonesty is harmful, though some of it clearly is. A lone person grandstanding on social media, while perhaps distasteful, is not likely to do any damage—unlike a fossil fuel company lying about climate change. The point, rather, is that dishonesty is ubiquitous. Someone might ask, "Did you expect anything different?" No, of course not. Human beings are evidently very comfortable with both deceiving and being deceived. It is normal. We are uncomfortable with unpleasant truths and even with pedestrian truths that are not delivered according to the acceptable norms (e.g., of politeness). Something called "professionalism" is held in very high esteem, even when abiding by it carries pernicious effects. My aim here is not to judge the individuals who engage in this routine dishonesty. Indeed, participation in it is expected and rewarded while deviation from it is punished. I have observed that when a university administrator lies to the faculty, it will not do to point out that this person has lied. That would be scandalous, impolite, and unprofessional, especially if the charge of lying is clearly accurate. Rather, one is permitted to make this point, if at all, only indirectly and through innuendo. I suspect that this is a common occurrence in professional settings. This indicates something about the relative value we afford to honesty.

Schopenhauer's claim about "the tradesmen" is especially interesting. The phenomenon is well illustrated by certain supporters of Donald Trump, especially some of those belonging to the so-called "white working class." It is very easy to criticize people who are overt in their racism, who actively favor setting up concentration camps, or who threaten violence against journalists and political opponents. What is unusual about such people, however, is not the repugnance of their politics but rather their honesty—or, perhaps more accurately, their transparency. Racism, violence, and persecution are all standard features of the United States' history, but most supporters and enablers of such things are clever enough to hide behind layers of pretense and false rhetoric, putting on the mask of justice or religion in order to sanitize the injustice, hate, greed, and other vices that accompany their policy preferences. Of course, criticism in the one case is easy not because of the intrinsic badness of what Trump supporters advocate but rather because they advocate for those bad things in such an obvious fashion. But if we judge such people more harshly than (say) the dishonest

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politicians who work to bring about just as much harm while wearing one of the many masks of patriotism or religion, we are effectively punishing the former group for their honesty.

The lesson to take from this is not that we should be less harsh in our judgment of Trump supporters. They are adults who are responsible for their actions, many of which very obviously deserve condemnation. Rather, we should be much harsher in our judgment of those whose repugnance is not immediately transparent, whose contemptible actions are glossed with dishonest rhetoric and gestures. In short, Trump supporters are, of course, morally repugnant, but no more so (and probably less so) than establishment figures who deliver death and poverty under the guise of uplifting rhetoric and sanitized gestures toward freedom, security, or some other lie. Schopenhauer is indeed correct that the maskless “stand low in the social order” but that fact has little or nothing to do with the harm and injustice the maskless promote and enable. Rather, Trump supporters are held in contempt by much of the professional class because the former have the audacity to drop the personas that are expected of members of our society. We observed this in the 2020 presidential election, in which a good number of suburban, professional, white voters split their tickets, rejecting Trump and his ugly theatrics while endorsing candidates who are happy to do just as much harm to the vulnerable, in both domestic and international matters. That many of us have no problem with unjust policies, provided that they are pursued with inoffensive trappings, says something about how unserious we are as moral beings.

Are those who advocate for war of aggression on the basis of bringing “freedom” to some population any worse than those who advocate for the same war on xenophobic grounds? Supposing the outcome to be the same—bombed-out cities, dead civilians, a mass refugee crisis—we should see clearly that both types of war apologist deserve moral condemnation. If anything, the group that pretends to care about freedom deserves greater condemnation because they add dishonesty to their brutality. The xenophobic group is at least honest. Yet it is evident that, when it comes to commentary in the media and intellectual circles, the transparent xenophobes would receive far more criticism than the dishonest “advocates” of freedom. This is partly for the simple practical reason that honest malfeasance is an easier target than dishonest malfeasance. It is more difficult to criticize those who are happy to wear whatever mask happens to be convenient at the time. If one attempts to point out that some war apologist is not sincere in his professed love of freedom, the apologist can easily feign shock: “How dare you question my love of freedom!” At that point, much of the “debate” turns to the appropriateness of questioning an opponent’s motives, even if the bad faith of the apologist is obvious to anyone who reflects for a moment. Conversely, consider someone who has no interest in hiding behind false rhetoric and simply admits that she wishes to invade

another country because she takes its inhabitants to be uncivilized barbarians. Because she is not even a pretender to decency, critics of the prospective war will have an easy time here, and properly educated commentators in the media will be aghast at such brazen xenophobia. This is one reason why such honesty is so rare. It is far more effective to dissemble and distract if one wishes to avoid criticism of pernicious activities. At the very least, this approach provides obfuscation that makes it difficult to bring direct criticism to bear.

Much of this dishonesty takes the form of bullshit, in the sense analyzed by Harry Frankfurt in his well-known article/book.<sup>13</sup> The bullshitter has no respect for the truth. To engage in bullshit is a form of dishonesty, but it is importantly different from lying. When one lies, the aim is to deceive another into believing something that the speaker takes to be false. When one bullshits, the aim is to persuade another without regard for what is true. The liar must care about the truth, because it is precisely that which she is trying to prevent the target of her deception from believing. The bullshitter does not care about the truth either way, because his purpose is to convince his target of something, whether it be true or false. Accordingly, he will say whatever he supposes will aid in this endeavor. Most of what he says will be false, of course, but his bullshit might sometimes contain true propositions, if merely by accident. When a university's administration announces that it is absolutely thrilled to have hired yet another superlative mid-level administrator, this is bullshit not because the announcement contains false statements (although it probably does). It is bullshit because the announcement would contain those same statements regardless of whether they happened to be true. Perhaps this one time the new hire truly is of superlative quality, or perhaps he was the only acceptable choice in a mediocre pool. It matters not for the enterprise of bullshitting.

The point of this is not to criticize university administrations—that is just a side benefit. As with dishonesty in general, bullshit is something that we have come to expect, although we are not explicit about this to ourselves or one another. Practically speaking, many of us have no viable choice but to engage in it. Imagine that, in our previous example, the administration decided to be honest, alerting the community that it was satisfied to announce the hire of a mediocre associate dean, who might be able to discharge his duties in a minimally acceptable fashion. Or, if that is too forthright, imagine that the administration simply foregoes the bullshit, providing a terse communication that it has filled some position with some named individual. In both cases, assuming it notices, the university community will find this odd, impolite, discomforting, or something of the sort. We expect and want the bullshit. Engaging in it is just good manners, we might say. Indeed, the community is very unlikely to take the administration's sudden conversion to honesty at face value. Instead, it will be assumed that there is some hidden and difficult-to-decipher purpose.

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It is clear that bullshit surrounds us. It is the essence of advertising, public relations, political campaigning, customer service, and every department of human resources. But it is not limited to those venues. We bullshit when we respond to an acquaintance's query regarding our well-being, stating that we are well regardless of the truth. For most of us, I suspect, pursuing our daily lives without engaging in bullshit is untenable.

Now it might be asked whether there is any harm in all this dishonesty, whether in the form of bullshit, insincerity, posturing, hypocrisy, or standard lying. Of course, we tell acquaintances we are well even when that is false. Is that not just politeness? It is dishonest, but why does that matter, especially when the dishonesty brings no harm? There are two responses to questions like these. First, the fact that this dishonesty is widespread provides another reason to agree with Schopenhauer that human beings, as a rule, are prone to hiding behind various masks. Whether that dishonesty is harmful or otherwise objectionable—and to what degree—is a further question. It may well be that much dishonesty is relatively harmless but its ubiquity would remain an interesting fact about us.

Second, it is clear that some instances of dishonesty are exceptionally harmful or rather give cover to exceptionally harmful practices. Consider the slogan "Support the troops," which was expressed by many bumper stickers in the United States in the early 2000s. Although some who displayed that sticker were no doubt genuine, it is difficult to believe that its general usage was sincere. Indeed, putting soldiers at high risk of physical injury, psychological trauma, and death by sending them to war would be an odd kind of support. This is especially so if the war is a case of unjust aggression, for it adds a risk of moral injury to these others. The real function of the slogan, of course, was to short-circuit criticism of the United States' offensive wars, especially against Iraq. "Supporting the troops" effectively meant supporting the war effort in a political sense, even though there is a distinction in principle between the two. It is precisely that distinction which allows this insincere ploy to work. Political and media figures call upon citizens to support the troops. Much of the public is happy to oblige. Who could be against supporting service members, even if one disagrees with the decision to start the war? Yet those same political and media figures work hard to associate "supporting the troops" with supporting the war and any atrocities it might contain. Those who question the morality or wisdom of combat, who express sympathy for the victims of aggression, or who suggest that war crimes are bad even if committed by one's own country are accused, either explicitly or implicitly, of failing to support the troops. Here dishonesty in the form of insincerity is used to enable great harm, primarily to the civilians of Iraq who suffered death, injury, displacement, and insecurity but also to the very people who were the ostensible targets of support.



While on the topic, we may acknowledge that the Iraq War was “justified” on the basis of a more straightforward type of dishonesty, namely the lie that the Bush administration had access to overwhelming evidence that Iraq possessed so-called weapons of mass destruction. We were told: “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.”<sup>14</sup> In reality, there was much doubt about all this, and the claims turned out to be entirely false. The cost to Iraq, a consideration largely ignored in the United States, was devastating. The United States also paid a heavy price—though of a far lesser magnitude—economically, diplomatically, and in military casualties. It is safe to say that these lies were extremely harmful. Now perhaps those pushing for war genuinely believed that such dangerous weapons would be discovered in Iraq, in which case they did not lie in claiming that those weapons existed. Yet their faith in that prospect does not excuse lying about the evidence—for instance, by falsely claiming that “there is no doubt” on the matter. It is instructive that the purveyors of these harmful lies suffered virtually no political consequence, much less any legal one. Even today, although it is difficult to find anyone who thinks invading Iraq was a wise decision, the matter is viewed as an unfortunate blunder or is simply ignored. This is exactly what we should expect in a world of rampant dishonesty. The fact that politicians lie is unremarkable, even when it is clear that their lies have caused massive harm to the innocent. Many of us simply shrug and move along. After all, the rest of us are mostly experienced liars, hypocrites, and bullshitters ourselves. We hardly expect honesty from others.

The ubiquitous dishonesty in human affairs matters for the misanthropist because it is constitutively and instrumentally immoral. It is constitutively immoral because, presuming common sense has the right of it, dishonesty is inherently wrong. Of course, common-sense morality allows for exceptions to this rule, but it is a truism that lying, insincerity, pretense, and the like are usually wrong, dishonorable, or something of the sort. It is instrumentally immoral for the reasons just discussed, enabling and rationalizing unjust and harmful actions such as wars of aggression. In both senses, particular cases of dishonesty vary greatly in how bad they are. In the constitutive sense, a student lying to her professor about having prepared for class is less bad than falsely accusing an innocent person of a serious crime. In the instrumental sense, the lying student causes little if any harm whereas the false accuser may ruin the life of the accused. This variance holds not just for dishonesty. Virtually every type of wrongdoing can vary greatly in the magnitude or intensity of its badness, both constitutively and instrumentally. Again, this accords with common sense. It is obvious to everyone that some moral ills are minor but that others are substantial. In making the case for misanthropy in subsequent chapters, I will (for obvious reasons) focus mostly on the

substantial ills enacted by humanity. But even the minor ills are of interest here, given how widespread and common they are. If human beings genuinely cared about being honest persons, one would expect dishonesty to be exceptional, rare, and untolerated. We find the opposite and that reveals something about us, even in those minor cases. Indeed, the various forms of dishonesty we have surveyed are so standard that they barely register in our daily lives.

Schopenhauer's misanthropic honesty is useful here, not primarily because I think it is correct but more importantly because it is exceptional. The unfounded moral optimism of many persons, including philosophers, deserves to be challenged. It is commonly said that most people are good and that this or that person means well. We often seek to excuse wrongful actions by appealing to extraneous factors that might explain those actions, such as someone's psychological state or economic conditions. Is this optimism justified? Perhaps there is a good argument to that effect, but I have not encountered it. Instead, moral optimism seems to be a default assumption of many, a position that is held without justification. Is it true that, in general, human beings tend to be morally good and that our vices and misdeeds are exceptions to the rule? When I look to the atrocities of history, the injustices of the present, and the indifference of most persons to all of these, I find the opposite view to be more plausible. Perhaps I am mistaken, and a more optimistic view is the better one, but this requires a serious justification. As Schopenhauer indicates, there is a strong *prima facie* case to be made for a kind of moral pessimism, so we cannot simply dismiss that possibility. Because more optimistic views are typically adopted without any argument, I cannot proceed by attempting to refute arguments of that nature—for the most part, they do not exist. Instead, I will make the case for what I call cognitivist misanthropy, first by offering an inductive argument in its favor and then by defending that view against likely objections.

### What We Can Learn from Schopenhauer

Nietzsche esteemed Schopenhauer for his honesty as a writer, placing above him in that respect only Montaigne.<sup>15</sup> Schopenhauer is nowhere more honest than in his misanthropic remarks, freely and explicitly endorsing views that some of us will be tempted to skirt. Indeed, many simply dismiss misanthropy as an unreasonable point of view, but they rarely provide reasons as to why this dismissal is justified. The case of Schopenhauer rather forcefully demands such justification, given that he provides reasons for thinking that misanthropy might be reasonable, such as the long list of major atrocities and everyday misdeeds wrought by human beings. This honest misanthropy provides a useful check on the quick dismissal of misanthropy noted above. Of course, to say that Schopenhauer was honest is not to claim that he was correct.

He may well have been mistaken in judging humanity to be wicked, as I assume he was mistaken in his metaphysics.

Schopenhauer's honesty is especially valuable as an antidote to special pleading and unwarranted optimism, both of which are commonplace. As we know from experience, it is standard to assert that most people are good or that the world is improving in a moral sense. Often these assertions are presented as self-evident, but sometimes they are supported with a one-sided bank of evidence. One sees both of these tendencies, optimism and special pleading, in the recent work of Steven Pinker, for example.<sup>16</sup> His argument that the world is improving in a moral sense relies on extensive data presented in various graphs, but his presentation greatly discounts or entirely overlooks realities that call the broader thesis into question. As one reviewer of his *Enlightenment Now* puts it:

Then there are the graphs that do *not* appear in the book: graphs showing rising sea levels, rising temperatures, the resulting natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires, mass shootings, and the list could go on. Indeed, it should set off alarm bells that every single graph in the book points in the same direction: every day in every way, better and better. My point is not that things are getting worse rather than better, but that history is not a straight line up or down, and that presenting "data" as though it produces and speaks for itself is worse than useless: it is profoundly dishonest.<sup>17</sup>

It is true enough that some people are good in various respects and that human societies are improving in some ways. But we cannot ignore the horrors that remain in our world, nor those that are imminent. There is a tendency in these analyses to focus on the beneficial side of things: economic growth, declining war casualties, increased literacy, reduced poverty, and so on. But how much credit do we deserve for such improvements when we are also hurtling toward devastating climate change, overseeing a mass extinction event, exacerbating economic inequality, still allowing many needless deaths due to poverty, and aiming world-destroying weapons at one another? If it does not grapple with this latter category, any pronouncement that humanity is morally good, even accompanied by examples of goodness, must remain empty. To ignore the substantial harm and injustice that are clearly with us is a rather obscene case of special pleading. Of course, the misanthropist must avoid engaging in special pleading in the opposite direction. The mere fact that human beings do some very bad things is not, by itself, proof that the species is morally bad on the whole. In subsequent chapters, I will press this argument while endeavoring not to discount the admirable qualities in human beings and their actions. Obviously, the reader must judge whether I am successful in avoiding special pleading of my own.

Moreover, even if we grant that humanity is improving in a moral sense, that by no means would refute the charge that we are morally bad. The team with the worst season record in baseball might improve the following season but that does not necessarily make it a good team. To say that we are better (or less bad) than we were is obviously compatible with our remaining bad, even monstrous. To be fair, Pinker's claims mostly pertain to improvements in morality and well-being, so I am not alleging that he in particular makes the mistake of thinking that our alleged moral improvement entails that we are morally good in some absolute sense. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing that such an inference would be a non sequitur, as I think that mistake is easily made. Something like Schopenhauer's honesty is valuable here.

## Notes

- 1 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 442.
- 2 Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Ethics," in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1970), 138.
- 3 Schopenhauer, "On Ethics," 139.
- 4 Schopenhauer, "On Ethics," 137.
- 5 See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
- 6 Schopenhauer, "On Ethics," 139.
- 7 Schopenhauer, "On Noise and Sounds," in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays, Volume 2*, trans. and ed. Adrian Del Caro and Christopher Janaway (New York: Cambridge, 2015), 576.
- 8 Schopenhauer, "On Noise and Sounds," 578.
- 9 For a helpful account, see Christopher Janaway, "Schopenhauer's Pessimism," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 44 (1999): 47–63.
- 10 Schopenhauer, "On Ethics," 140.
- 11 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume 1*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 183.
- 12 Schopenhauer, "On Ethics," 137.
- 13 Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 14 "Full Text of Dick Cheney's Speech," *The Guardian*, 27 August 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/aug/27/usa.iraq>.
- 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 16 Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018).
- 17 Jessica Riskin, "Pinker's Pollyannish Philosophy and Perfidious Politics," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 15 December 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/pinkers-pollyannish-philosophy-and-its-perfidious-politics/>.

## 3 The Ethics of Misanthropy

### Is Misanthropy Morally Problematic?

My position is that, of the types of misanthropy we have noted, some are morally problematic while others are not so.

Merely disliking humans or humanity does not appear morally questionable, for that attitude is compatible with fulfilling all our moral obligations to other humans. Kant's "cold-hearted benefactor" is a good example of this. One might dislike other human persons and yet reliably treat them as is morally required.<sup>1</sup> Just what is morally required differs across competing normative theories, of course, but can plausibly include respecting other humans, promoting their well-being, keeping promises to them, and so on. It is possible to do all these things while disliking the persons involved. This should be a familiar thought for anyone who has experienced doing right by someone one personally dislikes. In the current sense, the misanthrope is simply someone who feels this way about humans or humanity in general and so a moral misanthrope seems feasible.

This would not be so if there were an *obligation* to like humans or humanity, for he who dislikes humans or humanity would be ipso facto in violation of that obligation. But that we are morally required to like humans or humanity seems very implausible, and I am aware of no normative theory that recognizes such an obligation. At issue is the question of whether we can be morally assessed for having (or not having) certain non-cognitive attitudes. Taking a broadly Kantian line, we might answer this question in the negative, arguing that we are not morally responsible for such attitudes, as these are largely non-voluntary. If so, then we cannot be praised or blamed in a moral sense for these attitudes that happen to reside in us. Instead, we might argue, we are morally responsible for matters under our own control, such as actions and (perhaps) certain judgments. On this approach, if someone harbors hatred for humans or humanity, they are not properly held to be blameworthy.

More plausibly, we might think that liking humans is morally valuable but not required and that disliking humans is morally disvaluable

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-3

but not prohibited. To make this work, we would need some argument for why merely disliking humans is *morally* bad, and it is not clear that a plausible argument for this is available. For instance, such an argument would need to show not just that misanthropy as disliking is socially undesirable but that it is morally bad in its own right. Once again, I am aware of no moral theory that recognizes *moral* value in the attitude of liking others. Accordingly, although we might not care for the misanthrope who dislikes humans, it is difficult to see that there is anything morally problematic with that figure as such.

Hatred of humans or humanity is more plausibly viewed as morally problematic, but there is room for disagreement on this point. The voluntary notion of hatred makes the second type of misanthropy a more plausible target for moral critique than misanthropy as mere disliking. We might think that we are morally responsible for our voluntary attitudes but not for “brute” attitudes that we merely find ourselves having (say, that of disliking other humans). Accordingly, we might think that the hateful misanthrope is morally blameworthy for his misanthropy because it was in his power *not* to wish ill on other humans and yet he voluntarily harbors such hatred. This figure is distinct from Kant’s cold-hearted benefactor insofar as the latter merely finds himself with a cold heart whereas the former *wishes* ill to others. At the same time, like the cold-hearted benefactor, the hateful misanthrope need not actually *harm* humans. It is evidently possible for such a person to fulfill her obligations to others, even if her ill will toward them makes that difficult by motivating her to do otherwise. So whether we judge misanthropy as hatred to be morally *impermissible* may depend partly on whether we think it can be blameworthy simply to harbor certain types of (voluntary) attitudes, regardless of their impact on action.

Of course, even if hatred of humans or humanity is not morally impermissible, it might nonetheless be morally problematic in some way. Virtue-oriented ethical theories might be particularly unfavorable toward this type of misanthropy, especially if we deem hatred to be a moral vice. For instance, we might think that misanthropy as hatred is (or otherwise involves) a moral vice. So the *prima facie* moral case against misanthropy as hatred is stronger than the moral case against misanthropy as disliking.

The moral case against contempt for humanity seems stronger still. On the rather hyperbolic definition offered by Schopenhauer—“the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another”—contempt involves a deep disrespect for some person.<sup>2</sup> This will be objectionable on a wide array of moral theories. Most obviously, Kantians might object that such contempt violates one’s obligation to respect the “humanity” in another person, a failure to recognize the dignity inherent in an autonomous end-in-itself, because (presumably) to believe that some other person is worthless is incompatible with such respect. One need not be a Kantian to hold something similar, however. Moral egalitarians of various types

might object to the elitism displayed by contempt. As Schopenhauer describes it, to hold someone in contempt implies one's own superiority to that person. One might object to this inegalitarian standpoint in its own right. The reasons given for why this inegalitarianism is objectionable would, of course, depend on the egalitarian theory to which one is committed. The same holds for whether such a standpoint is morally impermissible or merely morally problematic. Nonetheless, these observations are sufficient to motivate egalitarian concerns about misanthropy as contempt. Finally, even pure consequentialists are likely to find contempt objectionable if not impermissible. John Stuart Mill famously claims that the rightness of an action depends solely on its consequences, making the motivations and attitudes of the agent irrelevant to the question of moral permissibility.<sup>3</sup> However, the agent's motivations and attitudes are relevant to other issues of moral interest, such as the virtue or vice of that agent. Consequentialists can recognize genuine virtues and vices, although these will play different roles in their normative theories than they play in virtue-oriented theories. Mill implies that certain attitudes can be vicious even if they do not (necessarily) lead to impermissible actions. This opens the way for a Millian consequentialist to find contempt for humanity morally problematic, although such a misanthrope might do no harm to others. This is plausible, given that believing in the "worthlessness" of others seems to be in tension with promoting the well-being of others, something that will be of central moral value in virtually any consequentialist theory.

Suppose, however, that we are dealing with a non-hyperbolic despiser of humanity, not someone who believes that others are worthless but who does look down upon them by holding the belief that others are inferior in some respect but not in others. This surely involves a kind of elitism, but it is not obvious that this type of contempt must be morally troublesome. Imagine someone who holds in contempt an incompetent, foolish, and morally vicious person. Is it morally problematic to despise such a person on account of these flaws? It seems possible to do so without harboring the disrespect in the previous sort of case, for one might treat the incompetent, foolish, and vicious person as an autonomous end-in-himself, respecting his rights and satisfying one's obligations to that person. This opens up the possibility of holding someone in contempt while maintaining the minimum respect that (Kantian) morality demands. For instance, we might despise someone insofar as she is incompetent, foolish, and vicious but succeed in viewing and treating her as having moral standing equal to that of anyone else. This is not an outlandish position. It is rather like judging someone to be a bad person in some respect but nonetheless respecting that person's moral rights.

But why not think that morality requires us to abstain from contempt even in this narrower sense? Perhaps simply because such contempt does not fall within the purview of morality. Indeed, insofar as we are dealing

with a belief, the relevant standards would seem to be epistemic ones. On this approach, merely to hold the belief that someone is inferior in some respect is not necessarily morally problematic. That belief might be mistaken or it might be held for poor reasons, but these are epistemic problems rather than moral ones. As we have seen, this belief is compatible with fulfilling one's obligations to the person held in contempt. Because of this, perhaps we cannot reject this type of contempt on moral grounds. If it is to be rejected, it requires an epistemic critique, such as by showing that the view is mistaken or poorly justified. It is for this reason that the elitism of contempt might not be morally problematic. Suppose that one judges accurately that she is better than someone else in some respect. Because this judgment is true, it is difficult to see that there is anything morally questionable about it.

Now it might be wrong to display one's contempt for the other person or to treat that person poorly but these are different matters. Because contempt is merely a type of mental state, it is compatible with many different courses of action. For instance, the contemptuous person might treat the object of her contempt with fairness and courtesy. There is no need for her to reveal her contempt. Indeed, if Schopenhauer is right, then she will have no desire to do so, because that revelation would undermine the superior stance that is essential to true contempt (as opposed to hatred). Nor is there any need for the contemptuous person to grant a lesser degree of moral consideration to the object of her contempt than she grants to others. Accordingly, although exhibiting contempt and using one's contempt as an excuse to treat someone poorly are both morally problematic, this fact does not speak against contempt as such. Instead, these are simply problematic modes of behavior that are distinct from and, at most, only contingently connected to the mental state of contempt. If we wish to claim that this mental state is morally problematic, we must look elsewhere to explain why.

Let us return to misanthropy as the judgment that humanity is bad in a moral sense. This type of misanthropy does not consist of a non-cognitive attitude (cf. misanthropy as dislike), nor does it consist of a voluntary attitude (cf. misanthropy as hatred). This type of misanthrope *believes* that humans are morally bad in general, meaning that she is committed to the truth of the proposition that humans are morally bad in general. Like other beliefs, this belief might be true or false, justified or unjustified, reached via careful deliberation or arbitrarily hit upon, and so on. Although this belief is compatible with disliking, hating, or despising humans, the belief does not require any of these other mental states. Indeed, a misanthrope of the present type might actually like other human beings, maintain respect for them, and wish them well yet honestly think that human beings are nonetheless bad.

It is difficult to see how this type of misanthropy could be morally problematic. The belief in question is either true or false. Suppose it is true.



It would be very odd to think that merely holding this true belief could be morally problematic, although it may be inappropriate to share that belief in certain contexts. To take an example, it seems untenable to hold the following: although it is true that  $p$ , you ought not to believe that  $p$ . Presumably, the truth of the proposition in question makes it appropriate to hold the relevant belief, at least privately. Of course, someone might hold an unjustified belief that happens to be true. We might say that this is problematic, but the problem seems to be epistemic rather than moral. Without some justification for the view that humans are morally bad, one will lack epistemic reasons for adopting that view. To hold the view despite lack of justification would be epistemically irresponsible, but it is unclear that doing so would be morally problematic. Indeed, the objection here is not to the belief *per se* but rather to the fact that the belief lacks support.

It is more plausible to think that holding an unjustified, false belief can be morally problematic. For instance, it can be morally wrong merely to hold a private racist belief, even if that belief somehow has no impact on one's treatment of others. But if this private belief is morally problematic, there is no doubt that it is also epistemically problematic. We have good epistemic reasons for rejecting racist beliefs. It is reasonable to suspect that averting such epistemically problematic beliefs will also avert the moral problems accompanying unjustified, false beliefs. Importantly, I am not claiming here that avoiding racist beliefs (for example) is sufficient to solve the problems of racism. The point at issue is whether *merely* holding some false belief, irrespective of its consequences, can itself be morally problematic. My claim is that, however one answers this question, it is not seriously disputable that we have epistemic grounds for rejecting false beliefs. Obviously, misanthropy as the judgment that humans are morally bad should not attract us if it cannot be given some justification. If that belief is false, then we should not accept it. In subsequent chapters, I will argue that this misanthropy is not only reasonable but also very well supported by the evidence.

Finally, unlike misanthropy as contempt, this last type of misanthropy need not be elitist. A necessary component of contempt is looking down upon others. It involves a kind of assumed superiority. It is at least reasonable to find such an elitist stance to be morally questionable. Conversely, to judge humans in general to be morally bad is not (necessarily) elitist. This is because the person making this judgment can include himself among the targets of that judgment. This is to say that someone can be a misanthrope who thinks himself no exception to the general rule. Whatever else may be wrong with that stance, it is clearly not elitist. It is no doubt possible for someone to think that he is an exception to this general rule but this judgment would be separate from the misanthropic judgment. If we object to this person's view that he is not morally bad, we do not *thereby* object to his view that humans in general are morally bad.

In other words, a misanthrope in this current sense might be an elitist, but unlike the contemptuous misanthrope he will not be an elitist in virtue of his misanthropy.

### Morality in the Anthropological Sense

For the most part, this book deals with morality in what we may call the *normative* sense, which is to be distinguished from morality in the anthropological sense. Normative morality covers what is genuinely right or wrong, obligatory or permissible, virtuous or vicious, and the like. The aim of speaking about morality in the normative sense is to make judgments that are actually appropriate. On most metaethical theories, this is to say that such judgments aim to be true, usually by attempting to fit with relevant moral facts that are alleged to hold.<sup>4</sup> Of course, a moral judgment can fail to be true. As with any domain involving belief, it is possible to make judgments that are false or judgments that fail to accord with the facts. Like scientific judgments or everyday judgments about the external world, the assumption here is that there is some fact of the matter that is distinct from the judgments themselves. One might mistakenly believe that some action is wrong. Such mistakes occur when the judgment in question fails to fit with the relevant facts. This raises many questions, both epistemological and metaphysical, but there is no need for us to engage the various controversies in metaethics. Virtually every theory recognizes a distinction between what is normatively appropriate and what some person *takes* to be morally appropriate. I will rely on that distinction in what follows, and I will avoid making more controversial assumptions.

In contrast to normative morality, we have morality in the anthropological sense, which includes the *actual* moral judgment, practices, and discourse of human beings. Anthropological morality is factual rather than normative. Professional anthropologists interested in morality aim to report and understand the moral practices, symbols, histories, and value systems of various human societies. Anthropologists are well known for trying to avoid judging the subjects of their study. This is entirely reasonable, given the nature of their work, although they sometimes stray into making unwarranted claims, such as embracing a kind of normative relativism and denying that there are universal moral facts. This normative move appears to be prompted by the observation that human societies are committed to different and sometimes incompatible values and practices. Of course, from the anthropological fact that different societies are committed to some incompatible moral values, it does not follow that normative relativism is true. As noted above, it seems possible for some society to be committed to a false set of beliefs. This mistake—i.e., failing to honor the distinction between anthropological and normative morality—gives rise to many problems, but let us set them

aside for now. When properly adhered to, anthropological morality attempts to describe the views, practices, and so on that human beings actually hold and engage in, regardless of whether those views and practices are normatively respectable.

Interest in anthropological morality is not limited to professional anthropologists. There is a long history of philosophers writing about anthropological morality; Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* is a prominent example. Less studied is Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, one of his most racist works, in which he "shows" that the different races of humankind have varying moral and aesthetic capacities. Of course, one can find anthropological remarks in much earlier philosophers, such as the Epicureans, who claim that commonly held desires, such as those for wealth and fame, are instilled by society rather than nature. They go on to make the normative claim that these values are bad and ought to be replaced by supposedly natural desires for certain kinds of pleasure. One can evaluate the anthropological claim independently of the normative one, even though the two are connected in the Epicureans' arguments. In fact, one finds anthropological claims of all sorts, including those of a moral nature, in most philosophers, certainly including Plato, Aristotle, and Hume, for example.

I will mention Foucault as another example, even if he might not have used "anthropological" in exactly the same way I am using it here. First-time readers of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* might expect him to denounce the brutal practices he describes. They might also expect Foucault to acknowledge that some progress has been made in the treatment of criminals. He does neither. Infamously, Foucault sought to let the phenomena he studied speak for themselves, and he attempted to avoid inserting his own normative judgments into his work. Incidentally, given this approach, it is very odd that Foucault is sometimes accused of inspiring agenda-driven, activist scholarship. Whatever one thinks of his methodology, one will not find Foucault endorsing and rejecting attitudes or practices with respect to punishment, madness, or sexuality. Like a kind of anthropologist, he aims to describe, organize, and understand the structures behind such attitudes and practices. Of course, this approach is compatible with holding certain normative judgments as well. There is nothing to stop us from agreeing (or disagreeing) with some analysis of Foucault's while condemning the practice under consideration. Obviously, public displays of torture were repugnant, and one might plausibly think that their recession is a bit of progress. However, Foucault's non-normative approach to the matter is useful, because it might make us more alert to the realities of our own time, perhaps saving us from a smug, too-easily-held belief in progress. Consider mass incarceration in the United States. If one honestly looks into the matter, it is far from clear that there has been any moral progress relative to the days of public torture. In fact, the reverse may be the case.

Throughout the remainder of this book, I will make moral claims in both the anthropological and normative senses. When it is not obvious, I will indicate which sense is relevant. Unlike Foucault, I am happy to make normative judgments, although I will try to limit myself to judgments that are plausible from the perspective of common sense. In order to avoid various types of confusion, it is extremely important to maintain a distinction between these two senses of morality. At the same time, the two are not to be entirely separated. Specifically, I will make the argument that the practice of morality is in many ways an obscene joke. This might sound absurd, as if I were making the claim that morality is immoral. But the claim is perfectly reasonable if we remember the anthropological–normative distinction. When it comes to the anthropology of morality, we can observe a great deal of hypocrisy, bad faith, laziness, selective vision, and the like. From a plausible normative point of view, these features are bad. Accordingly, we can make the normative judgment that, in many cases, human beings make use of moral discourse and practice in ways that are themselves immoral, often in deeply disturbing fashion.

To engage in anecdote for a moment, over the years many students have told me that they would gladly cheat in order to receive higher grades than they otherwise would, provided that they could be certain of getting away with the misdeed. When asked why, they gave a simple justification. If cheating is beneficial and carries no risk, there is little or no reason not to engage in it. The fact that doing so would be wrong, which they typically do not deny, is of little concern. Far more important are the pragmatic considerations of whether cheating is worth the risk. Often, these students do not take the risk, but that apparently is not attributable to virtue, a good will, or some other feature esteemed by moral philosophers. The point of this story is not to impugn these students. In practice, they seem like decent individuals, but by their own account this is due to considerations that are evidently non-moral.

These issues often arise when discussing Plato's *Republic*, specifically the account of justice presented, but not endorsed, by Glaucon in Book II. On this account, most human beings wish not to be just but only to seem just to others. This is due to the detrimental consequences of being found out in one's injustice, especially having a reputation for injustice. Once acquired, such a reputation will normally result in a loss of various benefits, such as the trust of others. Without such trust, it will be difficult to maintain personal and professional relationships, putting at risk the many benefits to the individual that come with such relationships. Conversely, maintaining a reputation for justice allows one to retain those benefits. But on Glaucon's account, actually being just carries significant burdens. One has to limit the pursuit of self-interest when that comes into conflict with acting according to justice. Ideally, then, one would maintain a reputation for justice without actually being just.

On this account, most people would greatly prefer this scenario, for they would receive the benefits accorded to a person thought to be just without having to carry the burdens of actually being just. In practice, of course, this is very difficult to do. One can attempt to deceive others, but every act of injustice carries a risk of discovery. Far easier simply to be just, or just enough. Though not a guarantee, this is likely to secure a reputation for justice and hence freedom from the sanctions that society might otherwise impose. One can enjoy the benefits of seeming to be just without needing to worry that others will uncover the ruse. By far the worst scenario is to carry a reputation for injustice while actually being just. In that case, one carries the burdens of acting justly while receiving none of the benefits of a just reputation. As a sort of compromise, then, individuals put up with acting in accordance with justice, or close enough, because it is a reliable means to maintain a reputation for justice and thus is in one's self-interest. This is merely pragmatic, however. Such persons do not act justly because they wish to be virtuous or because they esteem the moral law. Were it possible, they would gladly ditch justice altogether, provided that they could deceive others into believing them just. It just happens to be the case that, for most of us most of the time, that is not a realistic option. Glaucon illustrates this via the story of the ring of Gyges, a device that allows a shepherd to become invisible and go undetected while performing every manner of injustice, including regicide. This allows the shepherd to benefit from theft, murder, and the rest without suffering the ill consequences and poor reputation that would normally come with such actions.

Whether or not Glaucon's account is correct in the details, it does seem to be an anthropological fact that human beings often act in accordance with justice, or morality in general, for pragmatic and self-serving reasons. This need not take the form of a grand, cynical, long-term plan to appear just in order to maximize benefits for oneself. Sometimes we live in accordance with what is morally required simply out of convenience, because we have no reason to do otherwise, or because our personalities are such that we prefer doing so in certain cases. Most days, the majority of us abstain from physically assaulting strangers, but it is doubtful that we deserve any commendation for this abstinence. Rather, under normal conditions, there is simply no question of committing assault against strangers, because there is nothing to be gained from doing so. Some people do not enjoy conflict, and a desire to avoid it might explain their general affability. Because of cases like this, most people act in accordance with morality most of the time but that does not provide an indication of virtue or strength of will, at least not on any plausible definition of those terms. If it is the case that we do not behave in a monstrous fashion on a daily basis, that by itself is no reason to think that we are morally decent as opposed to merely pragmatic in some narrow way. It should go without saying that I am here using the term "pragmatic" in

the ordinary sense, covering what is useful, expedient, practical, and so on. Of course, there are approaches to ethical theory that are pragmatic in the philosophical sense, such as those that draw upon the work of Peirce, James, or Dewey.<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to imply that such approaches fail to concern genuine morality. When I distinguish between being genuinely moral and being moral for merely pragmatic reasons, I have in mind only the ordinary, non-philosophical sense of “pragmatic.”

There is nothing necessarily wrong with acting from narrowly pragmatic reasons, but if that is the only motivation behind one’s “moral” actions, it is hard to see how this person is serious about being a moral agent. Kant’s distinction between acting from duty versus acting merely in accordance with duty is relevant here.<sup>6</sup> There is a difference, for example, between doing the right thing because one judges it to be obligatory and doing the right thing in order to avoid censure from others. As Kant allows, one might have multiple motivations for a single action. Perhaps it is the case that I wish to do the right thing because it is obligatory *and* because I have a desire to avoid censure. The presence of the latter, pragmatic desire need not corrupt my genuinely moral motivation. Even Kant admits this, as actions can be over-determined by two or more motivations. Provided that I would have done the right thing even in the absence of pragmatic desire, my action still has moral worth. Alternatively, if I would have failed to do the right thing in the absence of pragmatic desire, that shows that my action lacks moral worth, as I am performing it only for non-moral reasons. One need not be a Kantian to recognize a similar distinction between genuinely moral action and action that merely accords with morality. We need something like this distinction to make sense of individuals in Glaucon’s account of justice. Such persons act in accordance with justice, but they do not act from the “motive” of justice, so to speak.

It seems to me that, for many people in many cases, there is little to no interest in being genuinely moral but much interest in acting in accordance with morality. To return to my anecdotal case, the students who tell me they would gladly cheat if they were certain to remain undetected do not seem to hold academic honesty in very high regard. In practice, although some do cheat, I am pretty sure that most do not, even if we are considering only those who admit they would under the right circumstances. Such persons are acting in accordance with the standards of academic integrity despite not valuing those standards for their own sake. The explanation for why is obvious: they wish to avoid the negative consequences of being caught. So, like individuals in Glaucon’s account, they put up with the prohibition against cheating, for pragmatic, self-interested reasons. This is probably a rational calculation. The possible benefits of cheating (e.g., a slightly higher grade on a paper) are just not worth the risk of being found out and receiving an F on that paper. Although this is rational and there is nothing necessarily wrong about

pursuing one's own self-interest, we cannot plausibly describe this calculation as morally meritorious.

When discussing Glaucon's account in class, I always ask my students what they would do if they acquired the ring of Gyges. Written answers are provided anonymously, shuffled, and then shared with the class. Many say they would use the ring to commit various types of theft. Another common answer is to use the ring for deception, such as spying on friends or acquaintances. So far, no one has said they would commit murder, but one wonders how long it would take for this temptation to arise in a consequence-free environment. Likewise, no one has ever said they would refuse using the ring out of moral principle. Virtually all students say they would engage in theft or deceit, although there is a wide range in the severity of that theft or deceit. If the foregoing anecdotes provide any evidence to support my claim, it is admittedly weak evidence. These are just stories pulled from my personal and possibly idiosyncratic experience. Yet if we look to the wider world, it is easy to find many examples in which human beings do not really respect moral standards but go to great lengths to appear morally upright.

## Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Karen Stohr, "Virtue Ethics and Kant's Cold-Hearted Benefactor," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2002): 187–204.
- 2 Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Psychology," in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1970), 170.
- 3 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001).
- 4 The main exceptions to this are certain non-cognitivist theories in metaethics, which deny that moral judgments are truth-apt, such as A. J. Ayer's emotivism. See Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).
- 5 See Toby Svoboda, "The Role of Reasoning in Pragmatic Morality," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 18, no. 1 (2021): 1–17.
- 6 Kant, *Groundwork*.

## 4 Arguing for Cognitivist Misanthropy

### The Nature of the Argument

This may be obvious, but I should state from the beginning that cognitivist misanthropy is not the sort of view that is susceptible to proof. The question at issue is how best to describe humanity in a moral sense. I am aware of no scientific way of settling that question. Indeed, we should be suspicious of any technical procedure for doing so, as any attempt to quantify, measure, and weigh moral phenomena is likely to miss much and distort more. We can only consider which of the candidate descriptions is most plausible. Admittedly, this is a matter of judgment, but some judgments are more plausible than others. We should base our judgment on the relevant evidence, most importantly the events of human history. I shall not rely upon controversial views in ethical theory as a standard of judgment. I shall depend instead on relatively uncontroversial and widely shared principles and values—for example, that murder is wrong, that we ought to apply the same standards to ourselves as we apply to others, that breaking promises without good reason is normally wrong, and that benefiting others is praiseworthy. For short, I will refer to this as common-sense morality. With this standard in mind, we may survey human history and form a reasonable judgment. In brief, my argument is that humanity has been (and remains) deeply and obviously immoral. This provides strong evidence in favor of the view that humanity is morally bad, and cognitivist misanthropy is the attitude that fits best with this fact. However, before proceeding to the details of the actual argument, I need to say more about the structure of this kind of argument.

I rely on common-sense moral commitments for two reasons. First, depending upon normative ethical theory would greatly limit the appeal of any argument I might make. If I were to take this route, it would be necessary to select some particular ethical theory and stick to it throughout the book. Obviously, one cannot pick and choose bits of different ethical theories when convenient, being an act utilitarian when that is useful for a point one wishes to make and switching to some version of Kantianism when that is more suitable. This opportunistic, ad hoc

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-4



approach would be unprincipled and rightly criticized. But any particular theory in normative ethics is bound to be controversial and subject to dispute, both from the vantage of other normative ethical theories and from that of common-sense morality. A responsible use of any such theory therefore requires careful and sustained argument. One would need to provide compelling reasons for why others should accept the judgments of the particular theory that gets selected. But this book is not about normative ethical theory, so I will not pursue that here. Even if I were able to do so and, as is in fact unlikely, managed to provide brilliant reasons in favor of some theory, surely many readers would remain (reasonably) unconvinced. Taken together, all of this provides a methodological reason to avoid the entanglements of ethical theory.

Second, common-sense morality provides the backdrop for any reasonable ethical theory. By this I mean that normative theories will concur with a great deal of common-sense morality. To my knowledge, there is no theory that radically rejects the commitments of common sense. Kantians, contractarians, care ethicists, virtue ethicists, and utilitarians of various types will all agree that killing the innocent is normally wrong and not to be done. Some of these theories allow that such killing might be permissible under special circumstances but these are unlikely to be met with very often in the real world. These theories differ markedly when it comes to their general architecture and to their accounting of *why* killing the innocent is normally wrong, but it is remarkable how frequently they converge on practical matters. Indeed, if some ethical theory entailed that we ought to be killing the innocent on a regular basis, that theory would not be taken seriously by anyone. What explains this? I suspect that ethical theorists typically begin from common-sense moral commitments, viewing them as reasonable unless there is good cause for doubting them. In effect, common-sense morality serves as a constraint on normative theorizing. If that is the case, then we might as well proceed from the basis of common-sense morality. After all, any particular ethical theory will by and large accept the same content. Together with the first, methodological reason, this explains why I have opted to rely upon common-sense morality.

Next, I note that the argument for the claim that humanity is morally bad is inductive in nature. This is in keeping with the assumption that one cannot provide a proof for claims of this sort, an assumption that I expect to be fairly uncontroversial. The argument I offer is inductive in the sense that it merely provides evidence in support for its conclusion, namely that it is very likely that humanity is morally bad. I think the support is strong, but readers will judge for themselves. Even if the supporting premises are true, however, it is possible that my conclusion is false. At the risk of stating the obvious, my argument will not be valid, but as an inductive argument it is not meant to be valid. I will argue that humanity is very likely morally bad, given the supporting evidence.

Finally, let me note that this argument is not an inference to the best explanation. Once again, my central thesis is descriptive in nature. I am aiming not to explain anything but merely to state what is likely true. Explaining why human beings do the things that are in fact morally bad is, I assume, a task for certain empirical sciences. I have no idea why humans are so bad. I do not claim to have any explanation for it.

### The Horrors of History

It should not be controversial to observe that history is full of atrocities. Holding this view does not require one to agree with my assessment that certain, particular events count as atrocities. I suspect that, on any honest accounting, it will be obvious that history contains many morally bad things. Different accounts will not provide identical catalogues of these atrocities. Owing to various biases, incomplete information, and divergent purposes, they will differ in which ills they acknowledge and which they overlook. But it would strain plausibility to deny that history contains many horrors for those who wish to look. Some accounts might focus on persecution of religious minorities, others on the ravages of racism, still others on economic exploitation, to name just a few possibilities. There is no question, however, that human beings have frequently engaged in obviously immoral deeds in the course of history. This often comes as a result of pursuing perceived self-interest, whether of a personal or collective variety. Furthermore, at all times, obviously immoral deeds are rationalized by means of some mythical account, say the divine right of kings or special dispensation from God. We are right not to take history's self-serving myths seriously. Typically, we are only fooled by those myths that happen to be operative in our own time. No one in the United States would think that occupying another country is justified on account of the head of state's birthright, but many of us will buy the story that such occupation is justified as a means to bring democracy to the barbarians. Presumably that particular rationalization will fall away soon enough and be replaced by something else.

Before proceeding to some examples, I wish to make two points. Sometimes discussion on this matter focuses on whose atrocities have been the worst. We can be assured that, at this very moment, two individuals are arguing on the internet as to whether capitalist or communist regimes have produced more corpses. We need not address that question here. Whatever the correct answer, it is clear that both types of regime have produced a great number of corpses. Humanity has shown itself to be very flexible when it comes to carrying out repugnant acts, committing such in the name of religion, freedom, patriotism, self-defense, and honor. Perhaps some political or economic arrangements have tended to produce worse atrocities than others. I do not know, but it does not matter for present purposes. The fact that one empire was less rapacious than

another when it came to plundering its neighbors is no vindication of the former. Similarly, there is often quibbling about the severity of some atrocity, especially on the part of those who have an interest in the matter. For instance, it may be that more than 100 million Amerindians were killed as a result of the European colonization of the Americas. This occurred over several centuries because of massacre, war, enslavement, disease, and other factors.<sup>1</sup> Someone might rush to insist that the true number is far less, perhaps “only” 50 million. Even if we accept the lowest plausible estimates, however, it is very clear that the treatment of native Americans was brutally unjust and involved a great magnitude of suffering on the part of many innocent persons. We should keep both these points in mind as we consider the following cases: for the defender of cognitivist misanthropy, we need not rank the moral ills of history, nor do we need to measure exactly the scope of those atrocities.

However one counts, there is no doubt that our species has killed many millions of innocent persons, often as a matter of deliberate policy. We may begin with genocide. The Holocaust and Amerindian genocides are obvious cases, but there have been many others, including those in Cambodia, Rwanda, and East Timor, to name a few. Humanity has also engaged in other forms of mass killing. Consider the war crimes of the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s, particularly against the Chinese, who were subjected to massacres, torture, starvation, and rape.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in the deaths of millions, including many non-combatants (i.e., innocent persons on any reasonable standard). Add to this the mass killings perpetrated by monsters like Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, assisted by many collaborators and enablers, and it should be obvious already that humanity’s history is a morally ugly one. There is much more, unfortunately.

Two of the most morally repugnant acts in history are no doubt the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. This is politically controversial to point out, but it follows from a straightforward application of common-sense moral principles. It is a truism that terrorism is morally wrong. A standard and uncontroversial definition of terrorism is the following: the use of violence against random innocent persons in order to achieve some political goal.<sup>3</sup> The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki both easily fit the definition of terrorism. Obviously, the bombings employed massive violence, together killing well over 100,000 people and possibly more than 200,000.<sup>4</sup> Clearly the recipients of this violence, as opposed to targeted killing, were random. Their identities did not matter from an operational perspective. A different set of Japanese citizens would have suited the operation just as well. Furthermore, the vast majority of those killed were innocent, being non-combatant civilians, including many children. Of course, the sites chosen for evisceration were population centers, not military installations. If anyone counts as an innocent person, it is a non-combatant civilian. If it is denied that such

persons are innocent, then the concept of an innocent person loses all content, and virtually nothing will count as terrorism. Finally, the bombings were undertaken in order to achieve a political goal, namely the unconditional surrender of Japan. It is very difficult to see how these two acts of violence would not count as terrorism. We clearly have the use of violence against random innocent people in order to achieve a political goal. As a widely held matter of moral common sense, terrorism is unconditionally wrong. It simply follows that the atomic bombings were moral ills. Given the magnitude of the violence and destruction, they are among the gravest moral ills humanity has ever enacted.

The response in the United States to the bombings, both at the time and more recently, is of interest here. Noam Chomsky, who was a child at the time, recounts feeling horrified by the mass incineration of civilians, but those around him showed little sign of caring:

On August 6, 1945, I was at a summer camp for children when the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was announced over the public address system. Everyone listened, and then at once went on to their next activity: baseball, swimming, et cetera. Not a comment. I was practically speechless with shock, both at the horrifying events and at the null reaction. So what? More Japs incinerated. And since we have the bomb and no one else does, great; we can rule the world and everyone will be happy.<sup>5</sup>

The relevant question at this point is not whether one finds certain military actions to be strategically or tactically wise, nor whether one agrees with my assessment above that the bombings were morally atrocious. Rather, the question concerns the morality of how we respond to such actions. One can disagree with my assessment of the bombings themselves, but surely it is unseemly to express joy with regard to them. We can imagine a person who genuinely believes, though mistakenly in my view, that the bombings were morally justified but also recognizes their immense toll, including many thousands of living persons destroyed within moments. They might regret that such a dire course of action was allegedly necessary, but they certainly would not cheer these events.

Even many decades later, it seems that very few in the United States have any interest in owning up to the horrific reality. In seventh grade, I was taught that the atomic bombings were unquestionably a good thing because they spared American lives that otherwise would have been lost in an invasion of Japan. This was presented as a simple historical fact. There was no suggestion that Japanese civilian lives might matter, even to a slight degree, when it came to this calculus. This is worrying not simply because I think the teacher offered a mistaken judgment but rather because it was presented so easily, as if it were an incontrovertible point. It was not that the teacher made an argument that Japanese civilians did

not deserve moral consideration. That possibility simply did not occur to the teacher, nor to any of the students, as far as I am aware. As we will see later in this chapter, cases like this raise uncomfortable questions about how serious we are when it comes to living as moral beings.

Many of the foregoing examples come from relatively recent history. This is unsurprising. First, the historical record of recent times will be less fragmented than that of earlier times, so we will have access to more information regarding the former. Second, humanity's technological capacity for inflicting death, suffering, and various forms of oppression is much greater now than it once was. We might congratulate ourselves on being able to extinguish most life on earth within a few hours, a power that was unavailable to our ancestors. But it is easy enough to find examples of monstrous misdeeds throughout all of human history. There is the matter of slavery, both the chattel slavery practiced by Europeans in the Americas and other varieties practiced around the world at different times, the murderous conquests of Genghis Khan, the forced labor and other atrocities of Leopold II against inhabitants of the Congo Free State, the Thirty Years War in Europe, the Spanish conquest of Peru, the Albigensian Crusade, mass starvation in India caused or allowed by the British Empire's agricultural and economic policies, and many other cases. Again, the reader need not agree with me on every case. Perhaps one's partisan preferences do not allow one to recognize some of these events as moral atrocities. Very well. Remove them from the list, and one will still have plenty of examples to support my claim: it is obvious that human history is replete with morally horrifying events.

### **The Horrors of the Present**

Our atrocities are not limited to the past. We continue to supply them, often in familiar forms but sometimes in new ones. Within the familiar class, we find war, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, racism, government oppression, and many others. We can look to the United States' illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, mass incarceration of the poor in the United States, China's oppression of the Uyghurs, widespread indifference to the suffering of refugees fleeing political oppression, massive inequality between rich and poor when it comes to resources necessary for a decent life, and so on. Benatar provides more examples, including the use of child soldiers, brutal torture and disfigurement of enemies, lynching, and shoppers engaging in physical violence over limited toy supplies at stores.<sup>6</sup> Our history has been a morally ugly one but the same is true of our present.

One atrocity that is relatively new for our time, monstrous in its scope but barely acknowledged, is the immense suffering and death we bring upon domesticated animals, such as cows, pigs, and chickens. Every year, billions of these creatures are slaughtered for human consumption. Before meeting their end, often in the terrifying fashion of being marched

*en masse* down the killing line, these animals are subjected to misery. This comes in many varieties: overcrowding, isolation, confinement, debeaking, disease, and much else. It is very obvious to anyone who looks into the matter that many domesticated animals, especially in so-called factory farms, suffer a great deal of pain. It would not be difficult to alleviate some of this pain, but providing more space or more sanitary conditions for livestock costs money. This would require that consumers pay higher prices for meat and other animal products or that shareholders accept reduced profits (or both). Either of these is practically unthinkable in our current climate. In effect, we are perfectly happy to bring massive suffering to animals, provided that it allows us the cheap consumption of food that we like or larger profits for shareholders. I suggest that this treatment of animals reveals something very dark and horrifying about our species.

Now it might be objected that I have violated my own methodological approach here. I stated at the outset of this book that I would rely on common-sense moral values, principles, prohibitions, and so on. Instead of defending some controversial ethical theory, I wish to utilize moral commitments upon which we widely agree. Yet it is surely controversial to treat non-human animals as part of the moral community. Indeed, most people seem to exclude non-humans from that community, viewing only other human persons as the appropriate recipients of moral concern. Most people might be mistaken in holding this, of course, but I cannot simply assume that. So, on this objection, the complaint would be that, unless I am willing to deviate from my stated methodology and provide a defense of some ethical theory that includes moral concern for animals, the example of domesticated animal suffering is not a useful one for indicating the moral badness of humanity.

In response, I note that nothing I have said requires any controversial assumption in the domain of animal ethics. I agree that it would be inappropriate, given my approach, to assume the existence of robust animal rights, for example. Although that position is reasonable and perhaps even true, it is not one that is widely shared as a matter of common sense. But to think that the suffering of non-human animals can be morally bad does not require belief in animal rights. Indeed, most people will regard the gratuitous suffering of a non-human animal as a bad thing, for instance by feeling sympathy for a bird with a broken wing or a frog being consumed by a snake. Perhaps most obviously, people care about their pets, regarding their injuries and diseases as deeply unfortunate. These cases involve value judgments but not necessarily moral judgments. For a clear case of the latter, consider a person who physically abuses his own pet. Virtually no one hesitates to disapprove of this, even those who would reject the idea that animals have rights or that they are equal to human beings in any sense. It is a matter of moral common sense to think it morally bad to cause needless suffering to non-human animals.

If this is correct, it is difficult to see how the massive suffering of animals in factory farms would not be a severe moral ill, given the extent and intensity of that suffering. If it is morally bad in some sense—wrong or vicious, for example—for someone to cause physical harm to a single pet, then surely it is far worse for us to cause such harm at a scale of a billion-fold. We do not need the help of ethical theory to see this. It is simply obvious, just as it is obvious that it is bad to cause gratuitous suffering to humans. Indeed, when supplying clear examples of wrongdoing, moral philosophers often rely on cases involving animals. With the possible exception of Descartes, everyone agrees that it is morally bad to torture an animal for amusement. As to the question of why it is bad to do so, I suspect that most people have no view. Those odd individuals who look into the matter—moral philosophers, for example—have provided various, conflicting answers. There are various theoretical accounts of why animal suffering can be morally salient as well as how that fact fits together with our obligations to human persons.

Even Kant, who denies that we have direct duties to “non-rational” beings like the other animals, allows that the suffering of non-humans can matter in a moral sense. He writes in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

With regard to the animate but nonrational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being’s duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other people. [...] Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs *indirectly* to a human being’s duty *with regard to* these animals; considered as a *direct* duty, however, it is always only a duty of the human being to himself.<sup>7</sup>

Although he denies that non-human animals are owed direct duties, Kant nonetheless thinks that our treatment of them is relevant to our own moral status, to the point that animal cruelty is “intimately opposed” to what morality requires of us. I happen to think that Kant’s account of indirect duties regarding animals is rather robust and interesting because our interactions with animals are closely tied to the virtues and vices that constitute what Kant calls our “moral perfection.”<sup>8</sup> At the very least, cruelty to animals indicates something morally questionable about one’s character, such as a disposition toward malice or insensitivity to suffering. As I have said, recognizing that cruelty to animals is a moral ill does not require any theoretical commitments, but the underlying theories are available for those who would like them.

In various ways, one might try to excuse using animals for food: killing and eating animals are permissible for humans because (some) animals

kill and eat other animals, eating meat is natural, consuming meat or animal products is nutritionally necessary, and so on. I have taught animal ethics for many years, and in nearly every class that covers the subject, students raise most of these objections to views like that of Singer. I find these objections to be weak, but at any rate they are irrelevant to questions regarding the moral qualities of factory farming. If we assume that there is nothing morally questionable about consuming meat or animal products, the fact remains that our contemporary means of producing the objects of such consumption involves death and suffering on a scale that is difficult to imagine. We have perfected these macabre mechanisms for the sake of trivial self-gratification. It is hard to hold the species responsible for all this in high esteem.

We could list many additional moral ills that are relatively new in our time, most notably the massive environmental damage wrought by our species, but I will save that for a subsequent chapter. For now, it should be sufficiently clear that the moral misdeeds of humanity are not confined to the past.

### **Moral Ills Not Limited to a Few Bad Actors**

We have already considered the thought that most of us are decent people, which comes as a sort of easy, conventional wisdom. It is rarely questioned or defended. Once we pay some attention to the actual behavior of ordinary people, however, it is difficult to see how this conventional wisdom can survive. Most of us are nice people, we might say. In an essay entitled “Nice People,” Russell says:

The day of nice people, I fear, is nearly over; two things are killing it. The first is the belief that there is no harm in being happy, provided no one else is the worse for it; the second is a dislike of humbug, a dislike which is quite as much aesthetic as moral. Both these revolts were encouraged by the War, when nice people in all countries were securely in control, and in the name of the highest morality induced the young people to slaughter one another. When it was all over the survivors began to wonder whether lies and misery inspired by hatred constituted the highest virtue. I am afraid it may be some time before they can again be induced to accept this fundamental doctrine of every really lofty ethic.<sup>9</sup>

Russell wrote this in 1931. One wishes that his last sentence had turned out to be true. It is true that most of us do not engage in regular acts of physical violence, for example, but there are other ways in which many of us reliably fail to meet minimal moral standards. In rich countries, nearly all of us happily feast upon the flesh of creatures that have been subjected to extreme suffering. These creatures have been subjected to



this suffering precisely for the sake of providing a cheap source of pleasure to a sea of consumers and, more importantly, profits to a few. The immense cruelty and abuse that constitute standard practice in factory farms cannot be described with any adequacy. The reader should consult the ample video evidence available online for a glimpse of the reality in question. These vast cathedrals to death and suffering operate with great efficiency when it comes to satisfying the gustatory desires of the public. It is true that we could meet all our nutritional needs and many of our desires with some other system of food production, one involving substantially less suffering on the part of non-human animals, but this would bring a bit less pleasure to consumers and thus is a non-starter. Even though it is not honestly defended as an explicit principle, this is the stance of most ordinary people: immense suffering for other creatures is preferable to a slight decrease in pleasure for me.

Next, we might look to the fact that ordinary people often support political regimes and policies that carry out great injustices, sometimes precisely because they like those injustices. Consider the crowds at political rallies who loudly cheer the idea of sending refugees to destitution or death, persecuting their opponents, or separating children from their families through deportation. These are ordinary people, most of whom presumably seem nice enough if encountered in other contexts. In the United States in recent years, much of this depravity has been embraced and exploited by the right. A few years ago, I encountered someone who remarked that these individuals (Trump supporters) are our friends, neighbors, and relatives. This is true, of course. The implication was supposed to be that we should not condemn such people or judge them harshly. After all, aren't most of our friends, neighbors, and relatives decent people? This seems to me an odd maneuver. We might instead take a different lesson from this, namely that such hateful behavior shows us something morally frightening about our friends, neighbors, and relatives—and ourselves, in the rare case of honest self-scrutiny. If one wishes, there are many more cases that we can cite: strong popular support for the likes of segregation, persecution of minority groups, war of aggression, and genocide, to take a few examples.

This may lead us to wonder why there exists this piece of conventional wisdom, so casually and easily deployed, that most people are morally decent. I do not know, but some plausible conjectures present themselves. Perhaps our moral judgments are usually comparative, such that ordinary people seem decent compared with the worst offenders humanity has produced. It is certainly comforting to believe that most of us are not monsters, and even considering the converse is not pleasant. It may simply be that most of us have not given any thought to the matter. That most ordinary people are morally decent is just taken as something “everyone knows,” and no further consideration is thought necessary.

Whatever the best explanation for the widespread acceptance of this conventional wisdom, I do not see a credible defense for it once we consider it in a serious fashion. The truth is that ordinary people are, in general, morally bad. To see this, we need only look at what we do and what we allow. Michael Huemer puts the point well:

Other times, though, I think people are basically horrifyingly immoral. Most people you interact with seem like nice, decent people—they won't steal, they won't deliberately injure anyone, they don't condone violence except in politics. But that's only because you interact with them in very narrow, favorable circumstances, and you only look at how they treat *you* and people like you in those circumstances. Beneath the surface, they're potential murderers. If circumstances should change so that it becomes socially acceptable and profitable to murder you, they will murder you. No moral test is too easy for the average person to fail it. No moral reason is too weighty, no personal discomfort too trivial, for them to put the latter ahead of the former. [...] It's not only that most human beings *would* participate in a holocaust given the opportunity. Most already *are* participating in a holocaust-like evil every day, with little to no compunction. They know that other animals feel pain, yet they are completely untroubled by the idea of other sentient beings being tortured, killed, and cut into pieces so that humans can have the sensory pleasure of munching on their flesh. If told about this, *nearly everyone*—probably over 95%—will either (a) refuse to listen, (b) make a series of absurd, obvious rationalizations, or (c) admit that it's wrong and then just keep doing it. It's like pulling teeth to get a person to accept the most basic, obvious points, if they're inconvenient to the person. [...] This is true even about groups of people you'd think would care about morality. It's true about smart intellectuals, it's true about professional ethicists who spend their careers talking about right and wrong, it's true of ideologues who go on all day about the importance of combating prejudice and challenging the dominant paradigm. In any of those groups, no more than 10% can actually be persuaded to accept the tiniest personal inconvenience for moral reasons, if the cause isn't trendy in their social group.<sup>10</sup>

This point is important because, if it is correct, the moral ills of humanity cannot be blamed solely on a few bad actors. Rather, many human beings have taken part, both directly perpetrating and indirectly enabling the moral ills of our history and present. One wishes that the general population were morally good, that humanity's atrocities could be attributed to a small number of powerful individuals and small groups, but it does not appear to be so. Often enough, the general population reminds us that it is vicious, unjust, hateful, and indifferent.

## **Anthropological Morality is Unserious**

When we survey moral discourse and practice from an anthropological perspective, it is difficult to hold the institution of morality in high regard. One frequently finds cases of intense hypocrisy, for example. Many of those who most vociferously employ moral rhetoric are themselves guilty of serious moral ills, according to both the standards of common sense and the standards that they themselves purport to hold. Recall Schopenhauer's "bigoted, church-going, Sabbath-keeping scoundrels, especially the Anglican parsons among them," who happily defended the enslavement of human beings while purporting to follow a gospel of love. The dynamic is still with us, of course, although the defense of slavery has been replaced with other forms of hate and bigotry, such as demonization of refugees fleeing violence. One must change with the times. What has not changed is the hypocritical indifference of some individuals to the suffering and injustice experienced by others, even though the religious and moral principles to which such individuals allegedly adhere would seem to require the reverse. One can imagine that, were these individuals themselves the refugees fleeing violence, they might notice that an important figure in their theology said some things about aiding the poor and feeding the hungry. But that is just a counterfactual and so of no concern to those who prefer that the actual refugees be cast back whence they came. Amazingly, none of this stops those individuals from trumpeting their own virtue while denouncing the irreligious and those who think it bad to condemn refugees to destitution and death.

Hypocrisy is a common occurrence, and it is universally held to be a bad thing when observed in others. To be clear, I am not criticizing those who struggle with weakness of will. There is something honorable in making a serious attempt at acting well, even if one fails repeatedly at the task. For instance, one might believe that aiding refugees is the right thing to do but find that she simply cannot bring herself to follow through for whatever reason—say, out of fear of being ostracized. Nor am I criticizing individuals who happen to hold false moral views. Again, there is something honorable in attempting to ascertain the right course of action, even if one fails at this. For instance, perhaps someone genuinely believed that the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq was morally justified, a conclusion that they reached after careful thought and struggling with various considerations, including moral worries about the potential injustice of such an invasion. This person would have reached the wrong conclusion, of course, but he could not be accused of the blatant hypocrisy of Schopenhauer's parsons or our contemporary bigots. Rather, I am criticizing those who do not take morality seriously for themselves but gladly employ moral rhetoric and condemnation against others. The extent to which individuals are hypocritical, of course, varies, but we

cannot plausibly deny it as an anthropological fact, even if we might disagree about how widespread the phenomenon is.

So far, I have noted hypocrisy that takes the form of claiming to be righteous while declining to take actions demanded by the moral standards to which one is allegedly committed. Another form of hypocrisy is the following. We tend to be very good at noticing and condemning the crimes of others, especially official enemies. Citizens and media commentators in the United States had no difficulty in recognizing the wickedness of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but when the United States became the invader the cause of invasion appeared to them virtuous. We are well practiced in excoriating adversaries for their genocides, acts of aggression, and domestic oppression. For some reason, we are not great at caring about or even noticing similar wrongdoing to which we are causally connected. To be sure, some individuals do care about the moral ills of their own communities. It is instructive to observe how their fellow citizens treat them. It is standard for such critics to be, if not ignored altogether, accused of being unpatriotic, self-loathing, irreligious, immoral, and the like. In repressive societies, they may be prosecuted, jailed, tortured, or killed. Evidently, many of us, especially those in authority, do not want to hear about the possibility that our histories and current practices include some morally questionable features. Sometimes a degree of self-criticism is socially permitted, usually when there is little or no cost to doing so. For example, one might admit that slavery in the United States was bad but maintain that racism against Black persons is no longer an issue. Indeed, many white persons claim to believe that it is *they themselves* who now are discriminated against on racial grounds.<sup>11</sup> If one tries to criticize her own community's racism in stronger terms, the response is often vicious.

This kind of behavior is the exact opposite of what is to be expected of morally serious beings, and it indicates why moral hypocrisy is not merely a minor imperfection. If we genuinely cared about being morally decent persons, then we would apply the same standards to ourselves that we apply to others, we would be open to criticism of our own communities' histories and current practices, and we would seek to redress moral ills for which we bear responsibility. This is not to say that a morally serious person must agree with every criticism that he encounters, of course. Critics can be mistaken. Nor must a serious moral person be infallible. What is required, however, is that one make a genuine attempt to adhere to moral standards and to assess honestly her success in this venture. It seems to me that human beings often fail to meet this minimal requirement. To be clear, it is not just that we fail to be free of all hypocrisy but rather that many of us barely even try. We might ask what image better represents most people: that of the individual who tries her best to eradicate hypocrisy but falls short or that of the individual who just does not care very much about the whole thing.

Hypocrisy is not the only phenomenon that leads one to suspect that many human beings are unserious about being moral. Moral discourse is sometimes used as a weapon for attacking others, as a false guise for hiding one's true character, as an opportunity for grandstanding, or for some other less-than-noble purpose. All of these may be described as types of bad faith because in each of them some bit of moral rhetoric or practice is used as a pretense in order to achieve some other goal—hurting others, for example. This is not universal, of course, but it would be difficult to deny that such bad faith is fairly common.

We observe these bad-faith practices in various settings, probably the most obvious being politics, a rather distasteful variety of theater in which individuals sacrifice every shred of dignity in order to pretend to have this or that “virtue.” The virtue in question changes, often dramatically and sometimes quickly, but many politicians are happy to alter their pretenses in accordance with the moment. So the senator who has served the interests of corporations for decades now pretends to be a champion of the working class while continuing to support policies that harm workers, the representative who was once “tough on crime” now plays the part of an anti-racist, and so on. Unfortunately, unlike actors in actual theater, the performers in this case are not honest, for they hope that the audience mistakes their current fiction for reality. It is true that their dishonesty is very obvious if we stop to consider their performances for a few moments but that does not stop them from often being successful in the venture. This success itself says something about how serious the audience (e.g., the voting public) is when it comes to having genuine respect for moral principles. It is not plausible to think that we are genuinely stupid enough to be fooled by these acts. After all, most of us are able to avoid the standard dangers of life and to avoid most scams. That we go in for these performances suggests that we care more about the performance than we do about the actual moral commitments in question.

Politicians are easy—and deserving—targets, of course, but the phenomenon of moral bad faith is not limited to politics. We find it in other settings, such as in the public relations efforts of powerful organizations. The CIA brags about its commitment to “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in its hiring practices.<sup>12</sup> Fossil fuel companies and financial institutions do much the same, often with melodramatic advertisements designed to cast the organization in a wholesome light, say by drawing attention to charitable work of some kind. Now if we reflect for a moment, these situations are clearly absurd. The CIA has a long history of supporting violent and authoritarian rulers, overthrowing democratic regimes, and engaging in extrajudicial torture. Are we really supposed to take its diversity initiatives to be anything other than cynical? To be sure, there may be individuals within the human resources department at the CIA who genuinely care about promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion as moral goods, but

that the CIA as an institution genuinely cares about these things is laughable. Likewise, fossil fuel companies are engaged in activities that are poisoning the planet and threatening our prospects for a decent survival. For decades, these companies lied about the connection between fossil fuels and climate change, even disseminating disinformation about climate change. There is no question that their lies have led to much avoidable death and damage, though just how much is unclear. Similarly, many financial institutions engage in irresponsible, high-risk activities that prey upon the public. We saw this in the financial disaster of 2008 but that is just the most obvious recent example. Are we expected to be impressed by the tax-deductible contributions that fossil fuel companies and financial institutions make to carefully chosen, uncontroversial charities? To be frank, I feel foolish pointing any of this out, because the cynicism seems so obvious. Surely everyone knows that the purported moral commitments just mentioned are made in bad faith. In fact, one might expect the public to feel insulted. How stupid do these organizations think we are? Fairly stupid, it would appear, and the public offers every reassurance that these companies are making wise investments.

It is presumably unnecessary to argue that moral bad faith occurs in ordinary life. No doubt, everyone is acquainted with cases of morally questionable behavior on the part of individuals who present themselves as being morally upright: the manager who stresses the importance of teamwork in meetings yet abuses staff regularly, the faculty member who sexually harasses graduate students while publicly denouncing sexism in academia, or the acquaintance who uses guilt to extract favors but is uninterested in offering any assistance himself. These cases range from relatively minor vices to very significant harms, but I suspect that everyone is well acquainted with them. Indeed, the phenomenon of moral bad faith is so common that its occurrence is usually unremarkable, even to be expected.

Perhaps the prevalence of moral bad faith accounts for why some people think it so distasteful to engage in “moralizing,” a phenomenon that is rarely defined but often criticized. In many cases, it is at least reasonable to wonder whether someone who is denouncing some ill or endorsing some good is operating in good faith. One may become particularly suspicious if the activity allows the speaker to embarrass enemies or enhance his own reputation. At some point, the speaker will be accused of moralizing, although no one will bother to specify what is meant by this. It cannot be the case that any instance of moral expression counts as moralizing in this pejorative sense unless one thinks that all moral expression is distasteful. I take it that moralizing involves bad faith in one of the ways just discussed. There is no question that the charge of moralizing is itself sometimes used in bad faith, often in an attempt to neutralize charges that one dislikes. For example, if someone does not want to consider the possibility that there is racism built into some aspect of society,

it is convenient to dismiss persons who advance claims of racism as mere moralizers. In practice, unless we know the speaker in question, it will often be difficult to distinguish genuine expressions of moral judgment from bad-faith varieties. Both surely exist. I only note here that the prevalence of the latter may explain why the charge of moralizing is deployed with some success.

It is not easy to overstate just how unserious we are when it comes to living as moral beings. One way this shows itself is in our disproportionate responses to different types of moral ills. If it is noticed, an insensitive remark on social media might receive a great deal of condemnation, whereas genuine war crimes are usually given little attention unless they happen to be committed by official enemies. To punish others for such insensitive comments, some people will go to great effort, including calls for boycotting, deplatforming, or firing the guilty party. I express no opinion here regarding the morality or wisdom of such an approach, as those issues are beside the point. Rather, I am interested in what this shows us about our priorities. Can those who dedicate themselves to punishing offensive remarks but who remain silent about unjust war be counted as morally serious? “No” is a plausible answer. Now it might be objected that there is no requirement always to dedicate ourselves to injustices that are of the greatest magnitude. One can focus on comparatively minor ills, such as offensive speech, without being morally unserious. Yet if we look to the behavior of such persons, often displayed on social media, it is at least reasonable to wonder how serious they are about the moral enterprise. Arguably, in a community that was serious about trying to live as moral persons, one would expect to see many more of us working to right the enormous injustices of our world. Of course, such admirable persons do exist, but they are very few.

Again, to the extent that we were serious about being moral beings, one might expect us to be especially concerned with our own misdeeds but that is rarely the case, especially when it comes to misdeeds performed at a collective rather than an individual level. In the United States, we barely acknowledge the brutal and genocidal treatment of native Americans over the past few centuries. If we confine ourselves to events that are not in dispute among historians and if we apply common-sense moral principles, it is undeniable that the government and people of the United States committed grave and reprehensible crimes against the native populations. We do not hear much about this for some reason. However, we do hear about the brutal Armenian genocide carried out in the Ottoman Empire. In Turkey, the situation is reversed: the government denies that the Armenian genocide occurred but condemns the United States for its genocidal treatment of native Americans. Obviously, both of these atrocities deserve full acknowledgment and harsh condemnation but that certainly does not happen. We observe this not only in political rhetoric but also in education, media commentary, and public discourse generally.

In my experience, many people are willing to countenance the moral misdeeds of adversaries or strangers but are loath to acknowledge those of themselves or their own communities. If one critiques the United States' use of torture or warfare, for example, it is immediately claimed that other countries are worse when it comes to human rights abuses. This is a very odd response. It is as if a murderer were to defend himself in court by pointing out that serial killers have existed. Once, when I was teaching just war theory and leading a discussion on the Vietnam War, a student acknowledged that the United States may be guilty of some misdeeds here and there but remarked, "At least we aren't as bad as the Nazis." I assume this to be true, but it sets the moral bar a bit low, in my opinion.

One common response to the observation that humans tend to downplay their own moral misdeeds while magnifying those of others is to shift discussion to expectations. Hence one might ask: "Do you expect the president of the United States to recognize the native American genocide, apologize for it, and support the payment of reparations?" Of course, I expect no such thing. That would require a degree of honesty and integrity that we clearly do not possess. But expectations are irrelevant here. My claim is that serious moral agents and communities would genuinely desire to identify and rectify their own misdeeds. They would not ignore the misdeeds of others, but they would be more interested in taking responsibility for their own moral lives as well as in rectifying moral ills for which they are responsible. History shows that it would be unrealistic to expect human beings to meet even these minimal moral standards but that provides no excuse for our failure to meet them. We must distinguish between explanation and justification. Perhaps our moral unseriousness can be explained in some cases via political considerations. A party that ran for an election on a platform of redressing a community's past wrongs would be destroyed at the polls, especially if such redress involved substantial costs. This says something about voters, of course. In short, I agree that it would be foolish to expect the United States to seriously acknowledge or seek reparative justice with regard to the country's treatment of native Americans. At the same time, it is fairly obvious that the country ought to do something along those lines. The fact that this will never happen is simply irrelevant to the normative claim I am making. Few political leaders have any interest in doing what is right, in some cases partly because their voters would punish them for it. This does not stop either politicians or the general public from employing moral rhetoric in shallow, self-serving ways, of course. It is hard to think that such beings are serious about the enterprise of morality. Some might shrug and observe that this is just the way humans are. I concur with the observation but not with the shrug.

A good example is provided by the withdrawal of the United States' armed forces from Afghanistan in 2021. The media, politicians, and



foreign policy experts expressed much displeasure at the embarrassment of admitting defeat in a 20-year conflict. Much of the blame was directed at the current U.S. president who oversaw the withdrawal, although some commentators tried to shift blame to his predecessors. It is instructive to consider the issues that were not discussed: the mere *possibility* that invading Afghanistan in the first place was unjust or the question of whether the U.S. has any right to maintain occupying forces around the world. Among nearly all commentators within the U.S., it is simply assumed that the general cause served by military intervention is a righteous one. The nature of this cause shifts as convenient: the provision of democracy, fighting terrorism, countering communism, and so on. Self-criticism is reserved for alleged mistakes in strategy and tactics, almost never for moral matters. This does not hold when it comes to criticism of enemies, who are routinely denounced as immoral savages.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, the pressing matter in such commentary is determining who deserves the blame for this embarrassing defeat.

For obvious reasons, we can hardly take such commentary to be morally serious. If this is doubted, consider how we would react if the roles were reversed. Suppose that one's own country is invaded by another power in a straightforward violation of international law. The occupation lasts for twenty years and includes repeated air strikes, civilian casualties, and the accidental bombing of a wedding here and there. When the occupier finally withdraws, it admits that there were some mistakes in the execution of the war. More could have been done, for instance, to decimate the terrorists/resistance, to install a friendly government, or to extend the occupation. The embarrassed power now occupies itself with the question of who is to blame for these mistakes in execution, but it takes for granted the "obvious" fact that its cause was just. As inhabitants of a country suffering the consequences of both the occupation and the withdrawal, would we concur with this? This is separate from the question of where our political sympathies lie. Perhaps some would find the occupying power preferable to the previous and subsequent rulers of the country. That is not the issue here. The question, rather, is this: Would we find the *moral* assurances of this power to be at all credible?

Another point to notice is that we often try to justify our morally questionable behavior by pointing out the immoral behavior of others. It is thought permissible to torture a suspected terrorist because he might have information about a "ticking time bomb," or a war of aggression is rationalized on the grounds that the target might in the future develop dangerous weapons. Let us put aside the fact that these justifications are often purely theoretical, implausible, or cynically employed. Suppose for a moment that the suspected terrorist really does have information about the ticking time bomb or that a certain dictator truly is developing weapons intended for malicious use. Apologists for torture or aggression will claim that this justifies their actions, perhaps even in a moral sense. That is far

from clear, but let us grant the claim. What does this reveal about our world? In a morally decent world, there would be no reasonable cause for concern about ticking time bombs and the like. Peace could be safely presumed, as there would be no interest in aggression nor any grounds to fear it. Obviously that is not the world we inhabit. Perhaps violence is sometimes justified in the actual world but that is so only because of the malfeasance of others, at least in the sort of case currently under consideration.

Consider just war theory. When it comes to the question of whether engaging in some war is just (*jus ad bellum*), it is usually allowed that military defense against unprovoked aggression is permissible but that aggression itself is considered impermissible. Here the defenders are just but only because there is some other party that is acting unjustly. If there were no aggressor, then the same actions (e.g., shooting bullets into the bodies of other human beings) would not be considered just. Typically, to be a just participant in some war requires that there be at least one other party that is an unjust participant, usually an aggressor of some kind. Given the commonness of war throughout human history, we may reasonably venture that there have been many unjust participants in war. Now we can imagine cases in which both sides in some war are just participants but this requires specific circumstances that are unlikely to hold in reality. For example, perhaps owing to simultaneous malfunctions in their technology, each side has the justified but false belief that its territory has been invaded, responding in a manner that it takes to be defensive but that justifiably alarms the other side. This could escalate further, through a series of unlucky events, possibly leading to a situation in which each side justifiably but mistakenly takes itself to be the victim of aggression and engages in war. One might argue that neither side acts unjustly in this case. Perhaps that is so, but real cases of war will almost never resemble such scenarios. In practice, it is virtually always the case that, for each war, there is at least one party that acts unjustly when it comes to engaging in war.

Cases like this indicate that, even if it is true that war is sometimes morally justified, this fits perfectly well with my general claim that humanity is morally bad. Indeed, that claim can help explain why torture or war might sometimes be justified, assuming that to be the case. In a world of morally decent beings, there would be no unjust aggression that could justifiably be met with self-defense. If we charitably assume that most appeals to self-defense are justified, this suggests that unjust aggression and the like are fairly common, both historically and at present. That itself provides evidence for the claim that, in general, humanity is morally bad.

This leaves aside the question of justice in the way that war is conducted (*jus in bello*). A review of that history should fill us with horror. Even if engagement in some war is justified as a matter of self-defense, the defending party can still commit atrocities of its own. For instance, many seem to accept that the United States' engagement in World War II was

just, but it is easy to point to examples of violations of *jus in bello*, including the indiscriminate bombing of population centers in Germany or the atomic bombings in Japan. Typically, theories of *jus in bello* include a requirement to use only proportional force and to avoid or at least minimize non-combatant casualties. It is hard to reconcile the aforementioned actions with these widely accepted principles, despite heroic efforts to do so. If we survey the history of warfare, we find that parties who may satisfy the requirements of *jus ad bellum* often fail to satisfy those of *jus in bello*. We find that lethal force is used against civilians, sometimes intentionally and sometimes from negligence. Likewise, we observe disproportionate uses of force, as when one party responds to a small-scale attack by decimating the other party's country.

What can we take away from these brief thoughts on just and unjust war? Warfare is obviously a common occurrence in human history. Unsurprisingly, almost any participant in war will claim that its cause is just. This is either true or not true. If the former, it is almost always because there is at least one other participant that is guilty of some injustice, usually aggression. If the latter, then we may add dishonesty or delusion to the list of the participant's misdeeds. Either way, for any war, there will almost always be at least one party whose participation in that war is unjust. Even when some party's participation in war is just, it is often the case that such a party will violate *jus in bello*, although the degree of that violation varies considerably across cases. Add to this any violations of *jus in bello* committed by unjust participants. Taken together, we can say with confidence that there has been a lot of unjust war in human history. This claim does not require us to identify particular perpetrators. That is useful for my argument because identifying specific cases of injustice is often treated as controversial, especially by the unjust parties themselves or by beneficiaries of past injustice. Whether or not we think that some particular party's military actions are just or unjust, it is clear that those actions fit into a larger mosaic of injustice. We need not agree on precisely which pieces are cases of injustice in order to agree that the mosaic as a whole is a grim one.

## Issues in Ethical Theory

Given this pessimistic view of human morality, it is reasonable to question whether there is any point in proceeding with a moral assessment of humanity. If human morality is merely an obscene joke, then perhaps it is better to give up moral assessment entirely. Unfortunately, the fact that we often do not take morality seriously does not allow us to evade responsibility for that choice and its consequences. Thanks to the distinction noted previously, we may say the following. From an anthropological point of view, the institution of morality is often unserious, pursued in bad faith, employed hypocritically, and so on. From a normative point of view,

we are still subject to the standards of morality. One cannot simply side-step those standards by choosing not to care about them in selective cases, such as when they conflict with a desire for wealth or power.

In the background of all this, there lurk various concerns from moral psychology, including questions about motivation, the possibility of amorality, and debates among various types of externalists and internalists. These issues are perhaps interesting in their own right, but they are not of much importance here. Again, my argumentative strategy involves assuming that common-sense morality is basically correct. Insofar as our common-sense judgments imply anything about moral psychology, that is unlikely to create problems for the claims I have made in this chapter. Take amorality, for example. Roughly put, the amoralist is a person who judges that she is morally required to perform some action but feels absolutely zero motivation to perform that action. Now one might suspect that it is possible to evade moral responsibility by being an amoralist. The idea might be, for example, that if I lack any motivation to be moral, I thereby lack any reason to be moral. If I lack any reason to be moral, then arguably I should not be held accountable for choosing not to do that which I judge to be morally required. Perhaps one could use considerations like this to argue that humanity as a whole should not be held morally responsible for its various misdeeds. Yet this is unlikely to work. There is controversy as to whether amorality is even possible, much less whether any actual person is an amoralist. Many philosophers accept some variety of internalism, according to which the moral judgment itself carries some degree of motivation. Others accept some variety of externalism, in which moral judgment and moral motivation can be separated in some way. The very extensive details of these debates do not matter here, however. Even those who accept the existence of amoralists in the human population generally think amorality to be a rare phenomenon. In almost all cases, someone who judges that she is morally required to perform some particular action will feel some motivation to do so, even if that motivation is weak or merely a contingent fact of her own psychology. Whether as a matter of common sense or of moral psychology, virtually all agree that, in most cases, we do have reasons to be moral, if only because of our contingent motivations. This means that, the rare amoralist notwithstanding, in most cases we are rightly held to be morally responsible for failing to do what we judge to be morally required. In short, attempting to get humanity off the hook by appealing to amorality is unpromising, given the (at best) very rare frequency of genuine amorality.

### **The Asymmetry Between Good and III**

It is easy enough to point to the many atrocities committed by human beings throughout history, using these to infer that humanity is likely morally bad. Yet we might run the same kind of argument for humanity's

moral goodness. Throughout history, many human beings have engaged in actions that are clearly good from the viewpoint of common-sense morality. Why not take such actions as providing support for the view that human beings are likely morally good? Clearly this would create a problem for my view, for we would have an inductive argument of the same basic structure whose conclusion was in direct opposition to the one I have offered. How might the misanthropist respond to this?

One option is to claim that humanity's morally bad actions have been quantitatively greater than humanity's morally good actions, in terms of either number or overall magnitude, perhaps by a significant margin. Here one might admit that humanity is causally responsible for some good but hold that humanity is also responsible for a greater quantity of ill. Accordingly, one might argue that humanity is on balance morally bad.

I do not think this a promising approach, for two reasons. First, we have no reasonable way to measure the good and ill actions of humanity. How does one quantify the moral badness of murder versus the moral goodness of an act of charity? Economists have developed ways (e.g., utility functions) of measuring costs and benefits, which may be relevant to the moral value or disvalue of certain actions, but I am aware of no one who claims to be able to quantify moral value or disvalue itself. Furthermore, attempting to do so by borrowing from the tools of economists will involve making highly contentious assumptions in ethical theory, such as that the preferences of agents determine the value or disvalue of states of affairs. Second, even if there were some way to quantify moral value and disvalue and even if the magnitude of the latter were greater than that of the former, it is unclear that this would matter for the question of whether humanity is morally good or bad, for reasons I will now explain.

Once again relying on common sense, it is typically the case that the bad counts for more than the good, all else being equal. A small bit of damage can be enough to ruin an entire painting, even if the rest of the work is in pristine condition. A single malfunction in one's body can matter more than the thousands of other functions that are proceeding as they should. And, as I shall argue, moral ills are of greater significance than moral goods, even when the two are equal in various other respects. As Schopenhauer observes,

Just as we are conscious not of the healthiness of our whole body but only of the little place where the shoe pinches, so we think not of the totality of our successful activities but of some insignificant trifle or other which continues to vex us.<sup>14</sup>

We need not accept Schopenhauer's more fundamental claim that well-being is purely negative in order to agree that, in some sense, the pinching of the shoe matters more to us than the healthiness of the body. In many cases, a minor ill is of greater significance than a major good.

I do not claim that mild discomfort *outweighs* overall physical health. Making that claim would involve attempting to quantify the value and disvalue of the relevant states of affairs. Although I am skeptical that we can quantify value and disvalue in a non-arbitrary way, it is obvious that the good of general physical health is greater than (and thus outweighs) the ill of an uncomfortable foot. At the very least, in an ordinal utility function, no reasonable person would place freedom from slight discomfort above general physical health. Rather, the claim is that a relatively minor ill can disproportionately damage an otherwise valuable state of affairs. A small, lingering pain can make it difficult or impossible for someone to lead a happy life. This is not because the bad outweighs the good. If anything, the reverse is the case. Instead, the badness of the pain simply matters more than the goodness of the health in the rest of one's body. Here the bad assumes a far greater significance than the good.

This is not surprising if we consider that, when it comes to the question of the value or disvalue of some object or state of affairs, we rightly attend to the whole rather than its parts. In assessing a painting, we do not judge each bit of color individually in order to reach some aggregated verdict. Of course, the painting depends upon its parts but these are not usually the target of aesthetic assessment. Instead, we care about the resulting work in its entirety. Because of this, a painting might be ruined or greatly devalued by a change to a small portion of its parts, such as a slash to the canvas. Even if ninety-five percent of the painting remains in pristine condition, it has not lost merely five percent of its value. The damage has a disproportionate impact on the work as a whole. Here the bad feature of the work simply matters more than the good features. Leaving aside special cases, such as that of a collector who is specifically interested in damaged works of art, as a general rule the bad is of greater significance than the good.

This rule is not limited to aesthetic value. It also applies to one's own well-being or flourishing, both overall and in specific respects. Regarding the former, a single tragic event, or even a few moderate misfortunes, can be enough to mar one's life in a substantial way. The death of a loved one, obviously, can greatly damage the quality of one's life, even if that person has good fortune in other respects, including strong relationships with other loved ones. Regarding the latter, a professional failure might leave an indelible stain on one's work, as when a respected researcher is found to have plagiarized his early papers. Even if the rest of this researcher's work is undeniably of excellent quality, this lone misdeed will play an outsized role when it comes to an overall assessment of one's professional life. It is not canceled by the fact that the researcher wrote other papers free of plagiarism. Here I am assuming that we make honest, good-faith judgments. In reality, this cannot be assumed in all cases. A person guilty of serious scholarly malpractice might be treated with great respect (e.g., provided a seat on the Supreme Court) by persons who are corrupt and

unreasonable (e.g., a majority of the United States Senate).<sup>15</sup> My claim is only that particular misdeeds can leave a substantial blemish on one's professional life. This remains the case even if some choose to ignore that blemish.

What is true in the spheres of aesthetics and well-being also holds in the moral sphere. Moral ills have far greater significance than moral goods. This is evident from many examples. Suppose that we learn of some individual who is a serial abuser of children but who has also engaged in effective charitable work, having saved or improved many lives. We will typically judge such a person harshly. We certainly do not attempt to quantify the disvalue and value of his respective actions in order to weigh them against each other. Even if the good produced by the charitable work is of a greater quantity than the ill produced by his abuse, that would not yield a favorable assessment of the individual in question. It is not that the good of his charity is to be denied or discounted but rather that it does not matter very much when it comes to our ordinary moral judgments about this person. The fact that he repeatedly abused children is simply far more important than the fact that he performed admirable charitable work. In short, there is no symmetry between these two things.

I call the operative principle here the Asymmetry Thesis, which can be stated as follows:

Asymmetry Thesis: All else being equal, a morally bad feature counts for significantly more than a morally good feature.

This does not depend upon any particular theory as to why moral badness is of greater significance than moral goodness. I have not sought to offer such a theory. As I have said, my argumentative strategy involves relying upon common sense as far as possible. The Asymmetry Thesis is very plausible because it fits with the judgments that we routinely make about matters of value and disvalue, including those within the moral sphere. One can see that the thesis is true without needing to rely upon a theory to explain why it is true. I should note that Benatar relies on a similar idea in his argument that being brought into existence is always a harm but that argument is not concerned specifically with the moral asymmetry I claim here.<sup>16</sup>

This assumes, of course, that our common-sense value judgments are generally correct when it comes to affording significance. One might contest that. Perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that the bad has greater significance than the good. One might think this is a mistake specifically in the moral realm, which is our focus here. I do not know what the argument for this would be, but it would need to be very compelling, given the common-sense presumption in favor of asymmetry. I believe that the Asymmetry Thesis describes a feature of our ordinary value judgments,

namely that we recognize far greater significance in disvalue than we do in value. If this is an error, it appears to be a very widespread one, both in everyday judgment and in ethical theory. I shall have more to say in defense of this thesis in the course of responding to objections in the following chapter.

### Stating the Argument

We are finally in a position to present the argument for cognitivist misanthropy. It can be stated as follows:

1. Humans have committed, and continue to commit, many moral atrocities.
2. These atrocities have been perpetrated or enabled by a great many humans.
3. As a matter of anthropological fact, many humans are unserious about being moral.
4. Although many humans have morally good features, their morally bad features are of greater moral significance.
5. Therefore, humans in general are morally bad.

As I said at the start of this chapter, this argument is inductive in nature. It is logically possible that 1–4 are all true but that 5 is false. Because of this, the argument purports not to prove the conclusion but only to support it with evidence. I think that the support is strong. Of course, if one wished, I could provide a deductively valid argument with the same conclusion, relying on some conditional propositions but that would just shift debate to whether those propositions are true, which I would defend through some further argument that is sure to be inductive in nature. I prefer the above framing because it captures the uncertainty involved in the matter. What I am searching for is the best moral description of humanity or human beings in general. It would be dishonest to pretend that there are not competing descriptions that are also reasonable.

In the following chapter, I will address various objections to this argument. My responses there will serve, I hope, as further defense of the argument. Before I move on to that task, however, it will be useful to say something about why I take 1–4 to be true and why together they support 5 and to connect the argument to the various points made throughout the current chapter.

I take premise 1 to be true because of the many “horrors of history” and “horrors of the present” that I noted above. Premise 2 is supported by my previous observation that, as a matter of fact, many individuals have contributed to past and current moral ills, implying that these ills cannot be laid at the feet of just a few actors. Because of the many issues noted in the “Anthropological Morality is Unserious” section, I believe



that premise 3 is true. Finally, premise 4 just expresses the central idea of the Asymmetry Thesis. It is my view that, taken together, 1–4 provide strong support for the conclusion that human beings in general are morally bad. To state the argument even less formally: many human beings have done many morally atrocious things; many human beings do not even try to be moral in any serious fashion; morally bad features matter substantially more than any morally good features; so the most plausible description is that human beings are, generally speaking, morally bad. It is important to recall that 5 is a description and not an explanation. The causes or reasons for humanity's moral badness are not known to me.

### A Different Defense of Misanthropy

Very few philosophers have explicitly defended misanthropy.<sup>17</sup> A notable example is David Cooper, author of *Animals and Misanthropy* (2018). Like my own, his misanthropy is a kind of judgment rather than a sentiment, a negative verdict regarding humanity rather than a feeling of hatred. Cooper supports this verdict by considering humanity's monstrous treatment of non-human animals. It is further supported by contrasting human with non-human animals, the latter of whom generally lack the vices one commonly finds among human beings. Again like myself, Cooper endorses something close to the Asymmetry Thesis: "Attitudes to vice and virtue respectively are not symmetrical. Vices and other failings disturb us more than virtues please us, and more weight is placed in resisting or suppressing our vices than on cultivating virtues."<sup>18</sup>

There are some important differences between our accounts, however. Cooper writes, "But the great bulk of the misuse of animals is, as it were, institutionalised—something that infuses and is entrenched in communal, cultural and social practices."<sup>19</sup> Later in the book, he notes that "the failure, the debacle, is not only—or even primarily—that of individual persons. [...] But the larger failure belongs to something more amorphous, more 'collective'—the institution of morality, a way of life, modern society, humankind."<sup>20</sup> Without explicitly endorsing it, Cooper mentions Jared Diamond's article, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race."<sup>21</sup> The alleged mistake is the institution of agriculture:

Diamond and his followers argue that this development was the precondition of most of the ills of history. Wars of conquest, slavery, the subjection of women, despotism and much else were made possible and encouraged by the demands of an agricultural economy.<sup>22</sup>

I do not disagree that our brutality toward animals operates institutionally and collectively. Clearly, our societies and economies currently depend upon the exploitation of animals, and no individual can easily opt

out of this arrangement altogether. However, I think that Cooper's approach risks underappreciating the moral badness of many individual human beings. As I argue in Chapter 5, collective practices depend upon the individuals who comprise the collectives in question. Take the idea that agriculture served as the "precondition" of the bad things just mentioned. Perhaps this is true (I do not know), but agriculture was instituted because of the choices and allowances of human beings. Agriculture was not some pre-existing force that imposed itself upon helpless humans who had no choice but to obey its demands. Rather, it was created, developed, and maintained by people, presumably responding to the incentives it provided over a hunter-gatherer way of life. This is certainly not to say that all individuals had a choice in the matter. Obviously, the exploited classes—slaves, serfs, and migrant workers—used by the elite classes to work the land did not opt for their condition. The same goes for victims of conquest. The point, rather, is that agriculture and its alleged accompanying ills were driven by some human beings making choices, using their power and influence, navigating options, and so on.

We can distinguish between two problems posed by this, one associated with emphasizing the institutional nature of our moral ills and the other associated with emphasizing their collective nature. The problem with placing too much emphasis on the institutional nature of our misdeeds is that doing so easily blends into the idea that it is some abstract force that is responsible for the ills of history—agriculture, capitalism, patriarchy, religion, or something else. Of course, much that is morally bad has been done in the name and through the mechanisms of religion and the rest, but we must remember that it is human beings who act in the names and through the mechanisms of such institutions. Perhaps agriculture was a great mistake (again, I do not know), but if so it was a mistake made and perpetuated by human beings.

The problem with placing too much emphasis on the collective nature of our moral ills is that this threatens to undermine the notion that anyone is responsible for those ills. This makes it easy to engage in a kind of buck-passing, effectively excusing many ills because there is no immediately identifiable, responsible party. Consider the case of climate change, a problem that depends on collective action (and collective inaction). It is tempting to appeal to this fact in order to sidestep responsibility for the immense problems created by our emissions. As we have seen, however, collective action is dependent upon the actions of individuals. It is clear that global emissions arise from the actions (and inaction) of individuals, including consumers, government officials, politicians, members of corporate boards, and so on. Accordingly, although it is true that many of the worst moral ills are collectively caused or allowed, this does not exonerate the individuals who are involved. Focusing too heavily on the collective nature of these ills therefore runs the risk of underappreciating the moral badness of individual human beings.

There are some further differences between my and Cooper's stances on misanthropy. Most obviously, his book focuses exclusively on humanity's relations to non-human animals. Although I largely agree with his stance on the matter, he does not address the many other sectors of human affairs that, in my view, call for a misanthropic verdict. This is not a criticism, as it is perfectly reasonable to focus on one of those sectors in particular. Nonetheless, at some point, the misanthropist must look beyond our treatment of animals, as bad as it is. It could have been the case that our monstrous behavior toward animals was an exception, that in other areas humanity was stunningly virtuous. As we have seen, this is not so, but were it the case we might have avoided deserving the misanthropic verdict merely by ceasing our abuse of animals. This is not to say that Cooper is mistaken for taking our actual treatment of animals to warrant a kind of misanthropic position. That treatment may indeed be sufficient evidence for his conclusion. But the case for misanthropy is much stronger than a singular focus on our abuse of animals can countenance. Our brutality toward non-human creatures is morally horrifying but so is our injustice toward other persons, our indifference to future generations, and our destruction of the natural world. However awful some particular piece of the moral mosaic of humanity might be, we can be confident that it is largely consistent with many of the other pieces, constituting a rather unfortunate work on the whole. In this way, my project is broader than Cooper's because I make the case that humanity's badness is to be found in many arenas, including but not limited to our treatment of non-human animals.

Finally, Cooper does not limit his consideration to moral matters but also addresses various non-moral vices of humanity. In this way, my project is narrower than Cooper's because I do not address the question of non-moral vice, preferring to focus solely on the moral status of human beings. It may well be true that much of what I criticize in moral terms also deserves some kind of non-moral critique. Perhaps our moral badness is tied up with, for example, various other defects, such as a lack of imagination, a stupid propensity to commit the same mistakes over and over, irrational fear, ignorance, and other such things. This is plausible and Cooper's discussion of these non-moral vices is interesting but that is not an issue I address in this book.

## Notes

- 1 Alfred A. Cave, "Genocide in the Americas," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 273–295.
- 2 Yuki Tanaka and John W. Dower, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
- 3 See, for example, Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

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- 4 Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 1 (1995): 135–152.
- 5 David McNeill, "The Revenge of History: Noam Chomsky on Japan, China, the United States, and the Threat of Conflict in Asia," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 10, no. 54 (2012), <https://apjff.org/-Noam-Chomsky/4788/article.html>.
- 6 David Benatar, "The Misanthropic Argument for Anti-Natalism," in *Permissible Progeny? The Morality of Procreation and Parenting*, ed. Sarah Hannan, Samantha Brennan, and Richard Vernon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 34–64.
- 7 Immanuel Kant, "*The Metaphysics of Morals*," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6: 443.
- 8 See Toby Svoboda, *Duties Regarding Nature: A Kantian Environmental Ethic* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
- 9 Bertrand Russell, "Nice People," in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 156.
- 10 Michael Huemer, "How Good Are We?" <https://fakenous.net/?p=272>.
- 11 Don Gonyea, "Majority of White Americans Say They Believe Whites Face Discrimination," *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/24/559604836/majority-of-white-americans-think-theyre-discriminated-against>.
- 12 "Working at CIA: Diversity and Inclusion," <https://www.cia.gov/careers/working-at-cia/diversity/>.
- 13 To be clear, I do not deny that there is moral savagery among parties that happen to be enemies of the U.S. at a given moment, but it is a bit surprising to learn that this feature is exclusive to them.
- 14 Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Suffering of the World," in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1970), 41.
- 15 Fortunately, the low bar set by the Senate (an admittedly extreme example) is routinely cleared in most cases, as with any freshman composition course.
- 16 See Benatar, "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1997): 345–355.
- 17 In fact, the topic is rarely addressed, although it receives some attention in literary studies. See, for example, Andrew Gibson, *Misanthropy: The Critique of Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 18 David E. Cooper, *Animal and Misanthropy* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 66.
- 19 Cooper, 86.
- 20 Cooper, 102.
- 21 Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race," *Discover* 8, no. 5 (1987): 64–66.
- 22 Cooper, 95.

## 5 Objections to Cognitivist Misanthropy

Now that I have described and argued for cognitivist misanthropy, we are in a position to consider objections to it.

### **Objection: Misanthropy Misses the Target**

One might agree that human history has been morally catastrophic but hold that I have misattributed responsibility for the catastrophe. On one version of this objection, it is not humanity that is bad but rather some “social force” or set of social forces. Candidates for such forces include capitalism, religious fundamentalism, imperialism, racism, and many others. So, on this view, we should not be misanthropists but rather anti-capitalists, anti-racists, and so on. As a corollary of this position, should we manage to rectify these problematic forces and avoid replacing them with others that play the same role, the horrors I have observed in previous chapters would largely disappear. This is because, according to the objection, it is not humanity as such that is responsible for these horrors and thus humanity as such should not be the target of our condemnation.

This objection provides a useful opportunity for clarifying my position. Recall that the approach in this book is meant to be descriptive rather than explanatory. I believe that humanity is accurately described as being morally bad, but I have sought to explain neither why this is so nor how this badness is enacted. Attributing the moral ills of the past and present to some social force is compatible with judging humanity to be morally bad. Indeed, it is very plausible to make the latter judgment given that any candidate for the type of social force mentioned will be one produced and sustained by human beings. We cannot simply treat our economic arrangements or social ideologies as independent forces. They exist, at least in part, because we create, consent to, and sustain them. Accordingly, our species cannot escape moral responsibility for the atrocities carried out through these various forces. We should think of these forces as guises and mechanisms through which humanity operates. For this reason, this first objection does not really threaten my central claim. It can be true

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-5

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both that humanity is morally bad and that this badness is enacted through various social forces.

One might try to salvage the objection by pointing out that many of these social forces seem to have lives of their own. Individuals have little choice but to work within the social arrangements already laid out for them, and even powerful individuals do not simply select what forces shall hold sway. Hume makes a similar point in his critique of social contract theory:

Almost all the governments, which exist at present, or of which there remains any record in story, have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest, or both, without any pretence of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of the people.<sup>1</sup>

For the most part, we find ourselves subject to political, social, and economic forces to which we have not consented. However, although this point might be relevant for considerations of individual responsibility, it does not provide collective absolution. As Hume implies, usurpation and conquest are the story of humanity. My question is how best to describe such a species in a collective sense, not to assess individuals. Thus, although it is true that individuals rarely choose the social conditions in which they live, that is not relevant to the cognitivist misanthropy I defend.

We should also note that, although the social and economic arrangements of human societies have varied greatly both within and across human societies, the moral horrors associated with humanity seem always to remain. Great atrocities have been committed under the auspices of many different political, economic, and religious structures and ideologies. Because of this, it is not tenable to blame humanity's misdeeds on some rogue social force over which we have temporarily lost control. If we observed some intelligent, extraterrestrial species for which aggression and exploitation are common, that would tell us something about the species. This would remain so even if such aggression and exploitation were filtered through various structures and ideologies that change over time. Of course, studying and critiquing specific social forces can be worthwhile for various purposes. The point here is merely that such forces cannot be used to absolve our species of the misdeeds that it routinely performs.

### **Objection: Humans Are “Mixed” Rather than Bad**

Another objection runs as follows: While it is true that humanity is responsible for much that is morally bad, it is also responsible for much that is morally good. In any fair accounting, we must take both into account. Although there is no way to quantify such things in any precise fashion, we can plausibly judge that humanity as a whole is “mixed,”

displaying both good and bad qualities. Because it fails to appreciate the morally good qualities of humanity, cognitivist misanthropy is false. It makes the mistake of focusing on only the misdeeds and vices of the species and therefore its judgment of humanity is distorted.

Although the target of this book is humanity in a collective sense, the moral qualities of the species plausibly depend upon those of the individuals who comprise it. It is, of course, individuals who ultimately cause or enable atrocities. At an individual level, there is no question that there is great variance in our moral qualities. Some persons are monstrous, others are heroic, and the rest of us all fall in between, although I suspect most are closer to the former than the latter. In this sense, it is true that we observe a mixture of good and ill within humanity but this does not ensure that the objection works. An overall moral assessment of humanity surely must take into account the good as well as the ill but that accounting will involve a decision about how to weigh these various aspects. On one approach, we might rely on a simple cost–benefit analysis that weighs good and ill equally, using the same linear scale to measure both the moral costs and moral benefits of humanity’s actions. This is easiest to see in the case of a harmful or beneficial action. For instance, the “cost” of a life lost might be equivalent to the “benefit” of a life saved. The analysis could attempt a greater degree of nuance, such as by taking into account the quality-adjusted life years likely remaining to those who live and die.

Such a project would be faced with enormous practical problems, and no one seriously proposes undertaking it. Yet one might assume that there is some truth to the idea that, in principle, moral goods and ills have equal weight, even if it is practically impossible to measure and aggregate them. I think that this assumption is false. Instead, a moral ill counts for significantly more than a moral good, even when these are exactly counterbalanced in all other ways. This, of course, is the Asymmetry Thesis I defended in Chapter 4. The idea is easiest to illustrate through comparing harmful actions with beneficial ones. Suppose that some individual is responsible for saving a life but also for one murder. Even if the benefit of the one exactly matches the harm of the other (e.g., in terms of quality-adjusted life years saved and lost, respectively), we do not consider that to be a wash. The fact that this person is a murderer is, morally speaking, more important than the fact that this person saved a life. In short, there is a *moral* asymmetry between the harm and benefit, even when these are perfectly symmetrical in terms of the utility lost and gained. To make this more clear, suppose that the person in question remains responsible for exactly one murder but that she is responsible for five lives saved. Let us assume that each life is of equal value in terms of quality-adjusted life years lost or saved. Here the benefit substantially outweighs the harm, but in a moral assessment of the individual the single murder counts for more than the five lives saved, at least if we accept the Asymmetry Thesis.

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Why accept this thesis? Because it conforms very well to moral common sense. As a matter of fact, we recognize that certain moral ills can tarnish one's life as a whole. Some acts are sufficiently bad that we condemn persons for them—abuse of children, for example. In practice, we do not rescind our condemnation if we discover that the abuser was normally kind to others and engaged in charitable work. In general, the moral practices of human beings simply do not include the sort of accounting imagined above, in which we judge one another according to a careful weighing of the good and the ill for which each is responsible. In short, our common-sense moral judgments already adhere to something like the Asymmetry Thesis. Of course, one might argue that this bit of moral common sense is mistaken. Perhaps we should stop giving more weight to morally bad features than to morally good ones. This would deprive the Asymmetry Thesis of support, but I am not aware of any argument to that effect. Furthermore, part of the argumentative strategy of this book is to avoid taking controversial positions in ethical theory. Accordingly, the fact that the Asymmetry Thesis conforms to moral common sense is a major point in its favor.

### **Objection: Human Beings Are Ignorant of Moral Ills**

We might be tempted to excuse many human beings by appealing to their ignorance. Many of us are simply unaware of the existence, extent, or details of the horrific realities in our world. The American public is largely ignorant of the suffering of the Iraqi people in the wake of the United States' invasion. Most people have no idea that the animal products they consume are the end result of mass pain, perhaps imagining that the chicken led a happy life before being humanely terminated. Many of us believe comforting myths about history, which sanitize the ugly truth. Here we might blame the media or schools for either failing to educate the public or actively misleading it. These are familiar targets of blame. At any rate, according to this objection, we should not judge that human beings are morally bad in general, because our epistemic relation to many of those ills is one of ignorance. The thought behind this objection might be, for example, that we cannot be morally responsible for matters about which we are ignorant.

It is hard to see how this objection would work. If we are serious about being moral beings, then we will be motivated to avoid ignorance of this kind. The fact that many of us make little effort to reduce such ignorance indicates how unserious we are about the moral enterprise. It is plausible to think that, in general, we simply do not wish to know the unpleasant truths of history or foreign policy. Indeed, when one points out injustices committed by one's own country, typically she is either ignored or attacked. Anti-war protestors are dismissed as kooks, labeled as unpatriotic, and surveilled by intelligence agencies. Or consider someone suggesting that



our society was built upon genocide and slavery. This is not a very pleasing thought, nor does it fit with commonly held narratives. Someone who is serious about justice will face these dark truths, acknowledge them, and try to learn from them. How often do we observe that response as opposed to a defensive, reactionary one? My claim here is not that all moral criticisms are correct and should be accepted. Obviously critics might be mistaken, and at any rate reasonable persons might disagree on some such issue. Rather, the point is that we often make little effort to assuage our ignorance, and we often react with hostility toward those who question the sacred myths. It is hard to see how ignorance of *this* variety could be exculpatory.

Although it is true that we are deeply ignorant of many of the moral ills that fill both history and the present day, that ignorance is itself a function of our moral badness. We may treat that ignorance, in many cases at least, as yet another moral ill, for it is often deployed as a screen against the possible truths that we wish neither to accept nor to consider. In other words, sometimes ignorance is a matter of bad faith. This occurs, for example, when someone does not seriously question his own behavior, simply shrugging off the possibility that he is contributing to some moral ill but making no effort to look into that possibility. This is a kind of dishonesty and it is especially effective when that dishonesty is turned upon oneself. It allows us to claim ignorance as an excuse but this excuse is a weak one when we consider that the ignorance arises from our refusal to look. For the present objection to work, we need to imagine a situation in which someone is ignorant of the moral ills to which she contributes but where that ignorance is not a result of some questionable action or feature of the ignorant person herself. We can certainly imagine such cases, say an elaborate ruse in which someone is fed false information and blocked from accessing any alternative sources of information. But cases like this are very rare in most parts of our world.

One test for this is to consider what happens when ignorance is removed and persons are faced with some morally repugnant truth. As I have said, when this involves challenging political or cultural myths, many persons either ignore the matter or react defensively. Consider the case of factory farming. It is true that many people do not know the abhorrent details of what animals are made to suffer. For obvious reasons, the agricultural interests who profit from this setup have nothing to gain from advertising the death and pain that are essential to their business model. But some people do come to learn something of the truth through conversation, formal education, books, videos, or some other source. In my experience teaching the subject, although many students are somewhat disgusted by the treatment of animals in factory farms, almost all of them shrug and carry on purchasing and consuming factory-farmed animal products. I very much doubt that, compared with the population at large, they are atypical in having this response.

To my knowledge, only a tiny percentage of students seriously consider even reducing their reliance on such products. It seems that this is a standard response to many different moral ills. Recall what happened when the American public learned that its leaders had lied about the evidence that supposedly justified an offensive war against Iraq. The response of most people was simple indifference. A very small percentage of citizens in the United States really cared that the country had killed and destroyed on the basis of lies.

This last point should make us even more skeptical of the objection from ignorance. Even if it is the case that many persons are non-culpably ignorant of the moral ills that they cause or allow, experience shows that removing that ignorance often makes little or no difference to their causing or allowing of the relevant moral ills. If I enabled some grave injustice even if I were aware of it, the mere fact that I happened to be ignorant of that injustice would not absolve me. This assumes that, cured of my ignorance, I would simply proceed in the same manner, perhaps by rationalizing the injustice in some fashion. But this shows that my ignorance would not make a difference and so it is difficult to see how that ignorance, when it happens to hold, would be exculpatory.

### **Objection: The Irrelevance of Morality**

On yet another objection, cognitivist misanthropy is to be rejected because it rests on a naive, moralistic view of history and politics. It is an error to analyze human history and politics in moral terms, because morality is not relevant to history and politics. This objection fits well with, but does not strictly require, a commitment to some variety of political realism, which is roughly the view that political relations are best analyzed through the lenses of power and self-interest rather than morality. If this is right, then the central approach of this book is deeply mistaken, or so the objection says. I have argued that humanity is morally bad, but many of the cases supporting that are drawn from political relations, especially of the “international” variety. If it is a mistake to moralize about such things, then my argument for misanthropy would seem to fall apart.

In answering this objection, we need to distinguish between descriptive and normative types of political realism. In general, descriptive realism holds that, as a matter of fact, political relations are about power and self-interest rather than justice or some other moral category. Distinct from this, normative realism holds that the relevant agents (e.g., states) ought to pursue their own self-interest, employing any measure conducive to that end. I happen to think that, as a description of humanity’s political landscape, some version of political realism is true. If we look to history, it is very difficult to think that genuine moral commitments have played much of a role in human affairs. To be sure, states and their

analogues have routinely employed moralized rhetoric with regard to their wars, genocides, and slave trades but that rhetoric obviously warrants no esteem. The descriptive realist is thus probably correct. It does not follow from this, however, that normative realism is to be accepted. That would require some further argument. My own view is that, while descriptive realism is correct, this is a terrible fact about us and it may be taken as further evidence of the moral badness of humanity. There is nothing in the position of cognitivist misanthropy that is incompatible with descriptive political realism. The misanthropist can admit, as I do, that morality has played virtually no role in politics or history. Indeed, this is what we should expect as misanthropists. Of course, if humanity is morally bad, genuine moral commitments would play virtually no role in humanity's history.

Cognitivist misanthropy is also compatible with certain types of normative political realism. When it is said, for example, that some state ought to initiate a war against some rival, we must inquire regarding the nature of this "ought." If this is a moral prescription, then that probably would be incompatible with the central claim of this book, but it would make little sense for a realist to take this position. Instead, the prescription is likely to be of a pragmatic nature. For instance, it might be that going to war allows the state in question to achieve its goal of influencing some region of the globe. The state has reason to pursue the course of action if and because doing so helps it achieve that goal. Now that course of action or the goal itself (or both) might be deeply immoral but that does not change the fact that the state has a pragmatic reason to initiate the war. At the very least, the cognitivist misanthropist need not deny that there is some normative consideration in favor of war, namely pragmatic self-interest, even if she thinks that such a war would be immoral. One might even think that, all things considered, the state ought not to initiate war but that might mean only that the specific pragmatic consideration in favor of war is outweighed by other considerations. In such a case, the pragmatic–normative consideration is not obliterated but rather overcome by a competitor.

So far, I have argued only that my position is compatible with political realism, but there is a more fundamental response to the objection. The claim that humanity is morally bad is not a political claim, at least not in the sense relevant to the current objection. Rather, it is a moral claim. Accordingly, it cannot be dismissed simply by appealing to a view in political philosophy, even a correct one. I agree with the objection that it would be naive to think that history and politics can be understood according to moral explanations. I have argued only that humanity is morally bad. The history of the species, especially viewed from the vantage of realism, provides an enormous body of evidence in support of this moral claim. The presumed fact that morality does not drive political and historical events does not change the fact that many of those events have

been gravely immoral. Consider the Atlantic slave trade, the moral repugnance of which is obvious. It is not credible to think that the slave traders would have abandoned their ways and sought forgiveness if only some philosopher had offered a sound moral argument against the practice. Rather, the slave traders simply did not care very much about the obvious moral considerations. In this case, as in many others, morality was effectively powerless to alter the world. That does not change the fact that the slave trade was deeply immoral. When I claim that humanity is bad, that is merely an accurate description of our species. It remains accurate even if, by and large, human beings remain unmotivated to do anything about their badness.

Sometimes when one offers a moral criticism of some person's action, the reply is "What did you expect?" That is an odd response. Moral criticism often has nothing to do with expectation. Whether or not some person's actions are to be expected has no bearing on the moral features of those actions. After surveying the history of the species, it seems clear to me that we are morally bad. What did I expect? Well, given the general corruptness of our species, I expected something very close to the grim reality that we observe. Perhaps someone else will find this reality surprising. Either way, the facts about history will remain as they are.

### **Objection: Skepticism About Moral Responsibility**

Perhaps human beings are not morally responsible for their actions. In that case, we might object to cognitivist misanthropy for making the mistake of attributing moral responsibility to humans. Allegedly, a person can be morally bad only if that person is morally responsible for the putatively bad features in question, such as actions or aspects of character. So if no one is morally responsible for such features, then no one can be morally bad. In that case, cognitivist misanthropy would be false.

Arguments against moral responsibility often rely on the claim that human persons have little or no control over factors that, in some sense and to some degree, determine the kinds of persons we are and the kinds of actions we perform. A classic version of such an argument comes from Galen Strawson and runs roughly as follows.<sup>2</sup> A person acts as she does because of the way that she is at the present time. A person is the way that she is at the present time because of some way that she was in the past, and the actions she performed in the past were due to the way she was at that time. Likewise, she was the way that she was in the past because of the way she was at some still earlier time. The same holds for all previous times until we reach the moment at which the person came into existence. Arguably, this leaves no room for moral responsibility, because one does not have the right kind of control over the way she is nor over the actions she performs. One can change over time, but only if she happens to be some way that allows for that. Perhaps one person has a strong desire to

become kinder and another lacks this desire. This might lead the former to improve on that front (say through meditative practices) whereas the latter does not. In both cases, the individuals are simply acting in accordance with the ways that they are. Among many other things, this includes the psychological facts about these two individuals, such as their different motivations, desires, values, and so on. These facts themselves allegedly follow from the ways these individuals were at previous times. Of course, external conditions also play a role in shaping the way one is but that fact only strengthens the case against moral responsibility, given our lack of control over such conditions.

There are two initial responses to this objection. First, we might argue that humans are in fact morally responsible for at least some of their actions and aspects of their characters. This would require refuting arguments against moral responsibility. A second, though certainly not decisive, response is that few moral philosophers reject moral responsibility altogether, and virtually no one is a skeptic about such responsibility when it comes to ordinary practice. These are indications that accepting moral responsibility is a reasonable assumption, even if one is unable to refute specific arguments against that view.

Although I do not reject either of these responses, I wish to defend a third, namely that cognitivist misanthropy does not require one to take any position on the question of moral responsibility. Even if some argument like Strawson's is sound, it can remain true that humanity is morally bad. To see why, we must distinguish axiological claims from claims about responsibility. The central claim of this book is axiological. Human beings are, in general, morally bad, having committed and allowed many horrors throughout history. This claim does not entail that human beings are morally responsible for those horrors. Whether they are responsible is simply a further question, distinct from the question of moral badness. Suppose that we become convinced that the architects of some genocide are not morally responsible for it because they lack the right kind of control over their actions. Would that change the fact that the genocide was a horrific act? Now one might admit that the genocide is bad but deny that it is bad in a moral sense. Or one might allow that the genocide is morally bad but deny that the perpetrators themselves are morally bad. But neither of these moves is plausible. To commit genocide is to visit grave harm upon a group of persons and its commission is likely to be accompanied by features easily recognized as vicious: hate, greed, cowardice, and the like. The question of moral responsibility is almost certainly crucial for determining matters of praise or blame. If humans are not morally responsible for their actions or characters, then it is plausible to think that we deserve neither praise nor blame for them. In that case, if it is true that we are morally bad as a species, that is not our fault. Nonetheless, this lack of fault does not alter our badness.

**Objection: Misanthropy is Dangerous**

Unlike the preceding objections, this one points to the potential consequences of the adoption of cognitivist misanthropy. According to this objection, it is dangerous to adopt this view. There are various ways in which this might be so. Perhaps the committed misanthropist will feel less restricted than his non-misanthropist counterpart when it comes to engaging in antisocial or otherwise harmful actions. Matters would be far worse should such misanthropy come to be widely accepted. For a large population that thinks human beings are in general bad, what reason would there be to promote the well-being of persons in society or to abstain from actively harmful policies and actions? If human beings are viewed as bad, then arguably there is no reason to care about their individual or collective well-being. In short, the concern is that the misanthropist will not recognize any value in human life.

There are many reasons why objections like this one do not work. First, I observe that nothing in this objection challenges the truth of cognitivist misanthropy. Even if it is the case that its widespread adoption would be dangerous, that would not change the fact (if it is one) that humanity is morally bad. If the aim of the opponent of cognitivist misanthropy is to refute it, then this objection misses the mark. However, the objection is relevant to the question of whether we should promulgate cognitivist misanthropy. Perhaps, even if it is true that humanity is bad, there are reasons for the misanthropist to keep her view private, such as to avoid undesirable social outcomes. For reasons I explain below, I am not sympathetic to this idea of keeping the truth hidden, but I note here only that doing so provides one way to cut off the first objection. This is so because the objection merely points to the alleged danger of adopting a view, offering no reason to think the view is false.

Our second response may be to question whether cognitivist misanthropy is a dangerous view. The objection assumes that adopting the view will weaken one's aversion to antisocial and harmful actions. It is unclear why this would be so. Misanthropy does not undermine various reasons we have for treating one another with respect, decency, justice, and benevolence. Obviously, we frequently ignore those reasons or give them very little weight and this fact is consistent with the misanthropist view I have defended. This does not change the fact that we have those reasons. Chief among them, of course, are moral reasons for abstaining from antisocial and harmful behaviors. To say that human beings are morally bad is to say that, in general, human beings do not act in accordance with those (and other) reasons. This is no excuse for the misanthropist to join the rest of his species, although he might opt to do so. Recall that cognitivist misanthropy is a descriptive thesis about the moral qualities of human beings in general. It holds that, as a matter of fact, human beings

are morally bad. It says nothing about how we ought to act. Any moral reason or obligation we have will remain in force.

Now the critic of misanthropy might accept this last claim but insist that, although it does not give normative reasons to engage in antisocial or harmful actions, adopting a misanthropic view will make it more likely in a psychological sense that one engages in such actions. So let us consider a third response. We might grant that cognitivist misanthropy would weaken one's aversion to antisocial or harmful behavior but hold that this would make little difference in the world. If we look around, it is evident that we already place little value on human (and non-human) life. For instance, on a daily basis, thousands of children perish on this planet from easily preventable causes. Do most people who are aware of this fact care very much? Of course, if asked, most will admit that these deaths are tragic but that admission is cheap and easy. How many would be willing to accept a significant increase in their taxes to provide food, clean water, and medicine for at-risk children? To be clear, I am asking not how many would *say* they would accept this but rather how many would actually do so in a serious and sustained way, bearing this out in their political choices. If it comes to it, many will discover, without the need for any research, that although it would be nice to help these unfortunate kids, the corruption of foreign governments or the need to focus on our own problems (say, bailing out some financial institution) makes this infeasible. To be sure, there are some individuals and organizations that do admirable work on this and other fronts but this serious valuation of human life is clearly rare and localized. It is not to be observed among the population at large.

To take another example, the United States in recent years has engaged in the practice of imprisoning refugees fleeing violence in Central America, separating parents from their children (and then losing track of them later), all in violation of domestic and international law. Although there is a long history of the United States interfering in the domestic affairs of Central American countries, often in violent fashion, these refugees are non-ironically viewed by many as dangerous invaders. It is hard to find a clearer case of the devaluation of human life. To our discredit, this low estimation of the value of refugees' lives is not limited to the proximate causes of their internment, namely the policy of the executive branch and the actions of the thugs who enforce it. In addition, we find that a good portion of the public actively supports the practice. Of the rest, very few care in a serious way. If asked, many will express disapproval. A significantly smaller portion will have engaged in some action, such as attending a protest. How many have put in serious work fighting against this obviously immoral policy? Very few. Once again, for the most part, the population either supports the abuse of refugees or shrugs it off as not very important.

We could cite many similar examples. The point of mentioning these cases is to indicate that our estimation of the value of human life is

already very low. Even if we grant that the misanthropist's view is dangerous on its own, adding it to the sordid mix is unlikely to make much of a practical difference. Suppose that a population that is largely fine with caging refugee children becomes committed to cognitivist misanthropy overnight. Would the moral badness of that population become even worse? Possibly. Perhaps an even greater portion would be in favor of the abuse rather than merely tolerant of it. I am inclined to think, however, that the danger of cognitivist misanthropy would be merely over-determinative of our moral badness, like adding additional poison to an already lethal blend. The results will largely be the same: refugees in cages, thousands of daily deaths due to poverty, environmental devastation, and so on. All of this is granting the controversial claim that cognitivist misanthropy does indeed make one more likely to engage in antisocial and harmful behaviors.

Fourth and finally, I must point out that any philosophical view is unlikely to gain wide acceptance among either philosophers or the wider public. This is especially true of a view like cognitivist misanthropy. Human beings excel at ignoring or denying unpleasant ideas, regardless of strong evidence in their favor—climate change, racism, evolution, heliocentrism, and so on. The idea that one's own species is bad is especially unpleasant, so it is untenable to think that human beings would adopt the misanthropist view at any appreciable scale. To take an analogy, we might consider the epistemic standards of the home crowd at any sporting event. When judging the quality of the officiating, the crowd relies on the standard of whether or not the officials' calls favor the home team. The crowd approves of calls that are to the benefit of its favored team while disapproving vehemently of calls that are to that team's detriment. It matters not to the crowd whether the officials' calls are, in fact, correct. Even if video replay clearly shows that the home team violated one of the rules of the game, the crowd will repudiate the officials' "unfair" treatment of its team. I suspect that the public's estimation of cognitivist misanthropy would be similar, in the unlikely event that anyone outside academia learns of it. The view would be rejected because it is unpleasant or perhaps because it does not fit with preconceptions. In that case, there is virtually no chance for cognitivist misanthropy to cause harm, because there is virtually no chance that it will be accepted by more than a few people.

One might object that my analogy is unfair. The behavior of a crowd at a sporting event should not be taken too seriously. It is merely in good fun that the crowd abandons reasonable epistemic standards for a few hours, and surely the individuals who comprise such crowds return to reason when it comes to serious matters. I wish that were true, but the analogy seems apt to me, at least in many arenas of human life. Politics is an obvious example. It is very difficult to look at elections, for example, as involving much in the way of epistemic reasonableness. Support or



opposition to some candidate or policy seems to depend on cultural commitments to a far greater extent than considerations of facts, coherence, plausibility, the content of a candidate's platform, and so on. For instance, when asked by pollsters, a high proportion of supporters of Donald Trump claim to believe many obvious falsehoods. This is puzzling if we assume that the respondents are behaving as genuine epistemic agents who seek to understand reality. How could persons capable of running their own lives believe in absurd conspiracy theories, for example? If we instead assume that the respondents are behaving as supporters of their favored "team," their behavior makes much more sense. When it comes to politics and social issues, many people simply do not care very much about the truth. Instead, they are invested in promoting the "right" candidate, value, idea, or institution. This is not limited to false views. Perhaps someone believes that climate change is real and poses a very serious threat to human societies but only because that is what one is supposed to believe as a progressive. This person happens to have reached a correct view but only as a matter of luck. She is akin to any member of the crowd that cheers for his or her team regardless of what the facts might indicate. Sometimes the ire of the crowd happens to be directed at a genuine error on the part of the officials.

Because most human beings will dislike the idea, we have little to fear from cognitivist misanthropy. There is virtually no chance it will become widely accepted.

### **Objection: There is No Such Thing as Common-Sense Morality**

I have been explicit from the beginning of this book that my argumentative strategy relies upon common-sense morality. One might attack that reliance in the following manner.

First, one might claim that there is no such thing as common-sense morality, which is to be distinguished from the variegated prejudices, preferences, and fashions of different groups. One version of this skepticism about common-sense morality is relativistic in nature. Such a critic would claim that, if we look to history or across cultures, there is no uniform morality to be found. Instead, we observe different values and priorities, which change over time even with groups. If certain moral values and precepts were well-established bits of common sense, then we would expect to observe a stable situation in which there is much agreement across time and culture. We allegedly observe no such thing.

This is a legitimate objection. The standard response to relativism of this kind is not available to me here. That response allows that there might be great variance in moral beliefs across history and culture but this is compatible with there being a universal moral truth. This response works best for realists, who believe that moral facts are independent of the beliefs, agreements, and practices of human beings. Just as our beliefs

about the natural world might be false in virtue of failing to represent the reality of that world, so might our moral beliefs be false in virtue of failing to represent “moral reality.” The realist might allow that morality in the anthropological sense is relativistic, but she can still hold that morality in the proper, normative sense is universal. I cannot offer a response like this, because I am not engaged in ethical theory. The ethical theorist is free to reject the moral beliefs of her and other societies but that requires a defense of the novel position that she endorses. My approach is very different, for reasons that I have explained. It depends upon the idea that there is some shared set of values regarding what is right, virtuous, abhorrent, and so on. If, as the objection asserts, there is no such shared set of values, then my approach is in trouble.

Rather than appealing to ethical theory, which is bound to be controversial, I would point out that there *is* a great deal of moral agreement across history and cultures. Although the relativity of values in the anthropological sense is sometimes exaggerated, it cannot be denied to exist. Norms about sexuality seem to vary a great deal, for example. On many matters, however, we observe exactly the stability that the objection denies. I am not aware of any society that has taken murder or theft to be morally praiseworthy or even permissible. Every reasonable person agrees that it is bad to enslave other persons. It is widely accepted that we should usually keep our promises. No one doubts that treating other persons with respect is typically a good thing. These are just a few examples. To be sure, there is variance when it comes to the details of specific cases. What exactly counts as murder? When is it permissible to break a promise? Reasonable persons might disagree on the answers. But these marginal cases are beside the point. As a matter of fact, there is a core set of values that almost no one questions. It is close to universally agreed that, generally, it is bad to kill, lie, steal, and so on. Obviously, human societies and individuals have routinely acted against that core set of values but that is not evidence in support of the relativist’s position. Typically, when someone tells a lie, he does not justify that act by rejecting the very moral framework that treats lying as wrong. Instead, he might rationalize the behavior, guiltily succumb to the temptation, or simply not care that the action is wrong. In short, either he acknowledges in one way or another that his action is wrong or he denies that by claiming a special exemption.

Plausibly, much of this is accounted for by Kant’s notion of radical evil. We often perform actions that are, by our own lights, morally wrong because our self-interested inclinations win out. Such moral weakness is not an indication that we do not *accept* what I call common-sense morality. In fact, the reverse is likely true. The fact that there is a conflict between our moral commitments and self-interest indicates that we acknowledge the moral values in question, even if we have little interest in honoring those values. Even some of the great crimes of humanity fit

this model. Slavery in North America was always an obvious and grave injustice. This was explicitly recognized by abolitionists during the long history of slavery but it was also implicitly acknowledged by slavery's apologists, who worked very hard to rationalize the institution through appeals to the Bible and pseudoscience. This would not be necessary if it were not clear from the outset that enslaving other persons is a bad thing to do. Contrast this with something like killing and eating non-human animals in traditional ways, such as through hunting. To many people, it simply would not occur that there might be something morally questionable about doing this. There is no need for apologetics in a case like that. Now it may be the case that killing and eating animals is wrong, but I take it that common-sense morality does not indicate this. As I argue elsewhere in this book, factory farming, with its mass production of death and suffering, is repugnant from the point of view of common-sense morality. Perhaps this practice does require apologetics, or better yet concealment from the public, in order to survive.

This raises an important point about common-sense morality, namely that there can be disagreement about its application. Such disagreement can be in bad faith, as with apologetics for slavery or the defense of war crimes. In such cases, although a straightforward application of common-sense principles clearly proscribes some practice, one will still find individuals who are happy to deny the obvious, usually in defense of their own perceived interests. But there might also be good-faith disagreement. Consider, to take a well-known example, the tension between justice and mercy. I assume it is obvious to most people that both are good, but it is not obvious how to proceed in cases where justice and mercy pull in opposing directions, say the question of whether to grant parole to someone who has served part of a sentence for some horrific crime and who is genuinely contrite. Mercy might favor granting parole, whereas justice might favor denying it. It is possible for two parties to reasonably disagree in a case like this. Of course, they might disagree on some non-moral facts, such as whether the expressed contrition is genuine, but let us put that aside, as our focus is moral disagreement. Suppose that each party recognizes the value of both justice and mercy but they disagree on which should take priority in this specific case. Such good-faith disagreement is surely possible, especially when it comes to judging what degree of punishment is appropriate. Presumably, even those who place great weight on mercy will admit that punishment is sometimes appropriate, and those who place great weight on justice will admit that sometimes punishment should be ceased. But it is not a simple matter to determine what degree of punishment is most appropriate.

As I understand it, moral common sense consists of higher- and lower-order values and principles, many of which are vague. Examples may include the following: breaking a promise is usually wrong, causing gratuitous suffering is impermissible, greed is a bad character trait, torturing

babies for fun is repugnant, benevolence is praiseworthy, and many more. It would not be plausible to hold that moral common sense provides a decision procedure for how to act in specific cases. It clearly does not. In deciding how to act, we must consider various matters, weigh possibly conflicting moral reasons, consider non-moral factors that may be relevant, and so on. That being the case, it is not surprising that we encounter good-faith disagreement about specific moral issues. Nor is it surprising that bad-faith actors exploit the ambiguities of moral common sense for their own gain, as with politicians who prey on the belief of some voters that abortion is wrong, using the power this affords them to pursue the matters they really care about, such as enriching the rich at the expense of those very same voters.

One might complain about the vagueness and disorganization of common-sense morality but that is to miss the point. It is the job of an ethical theory to provide recodification and organization to a set of values or principles. What I call common-sense morality is just the storehouse of the various moral judgments—call them intuitions, if you like, but that vocabulary is not necessary—that human beings generally tend to hold. Judgments that are idiosyncratic, whether held by an individual or some group, do not fall within the realm of common-sense morality. This is not to say that idiosyncratic judgments are necessarily mistaken, but just that they do not count as common-sense judgments, as indicated by the controversy they invite. If one desires that widely held moral judgments be organized and made precise, then one is effectively asking for common-sense morality to be converted into some ethical theory. That is a reasonable enough starting point for an ethical theory, but once that step is taken we are no longer in the realm of common sense as such, although common-sense judgments might still serve to inform how the ethical theorist proceeds.

To return explicitly to the objection, the fact that individuals sometimes disagree in a moral sense on what to do in some specific scenario does not call common-sense morality into question. We should expect such disagreement to arise given that common-sense morality does not offer a procedure for resolving specific practical questions. The existence of even widespread practical disagreement is compatible with the existence of widely shared moral values and principles.

### **Objection: Common-Sense Morality Should Be Rejected Because of Its Content**

To consider now the second objection to common-sense morality, perhaps it is to be rejected because of its content. It may be that the body of beliefs and values comprising that morality is replete with falsehoods, inconsistencies, or unjustified propositions. At the very least, as we have seen, there is tension among some of our common-sense moral values,

especially those that often pull in opposing directions, such as mercy and justice. Furthermore, what reason is there to accept the content of common-sense morality? What could possibly justify that content? Various ethical theorists have sought to answer these questions, but there is nothing close to a consensus on the matter. Moreover, normative ethical theories differ greatly in the principles that they defend. We are familiar with the differences among various types of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue-oriented theories, for example. Why accept moral common sense over one of those competing theories?

As indicated in my response to the previous objection, this is to misunderstand the nature of moral common sense, which is not a proper competitor to any normative theory. Again, common-sense morality is just the storehouse of the various moral principles and values that humans generally tend to hold. These are not controversial. No one seriously denies that, ordinarily, we should not steal or murder. No one seriously rejects that benevolence is a praiseworthy feature. To hold such views does not constitute endorsing an ethical theory, not even in some nascent form. A proper theory seeks to provide consistent principles that offer guidance for action, if not a full-blown decision procedure. Common-sense morality is silent when it comes to such matters. By its nature, it does not seek to provide a structure to the principles and values that comprise it, much less a structure that offers action guidance. To the question of why we should accept moral common sense over (say) some version of consequentialism, the answer is that the two are not proper competitors.

This does not yet address the crux of the objection, namely that common-sense morality should be rejected because its content is false, unjustified, or inconsistent. We can deal with this by appealing once again to normative theory. Among prominent ethical theories, every one that I am aware of is largely compatible with the contents of common sense when it comes to the values and principles it endorses. Furthermore, what differentiates ethical theories from one another is their distinctive structures, including the justifications they offer. They are not very different when it comes to the practical action guidance they provide, although they vary greatly when it comes to specifying why certain courses of action are prescribed or proscribed. Normal human beings do not explicitly conduct their lives in accordance with normative theories, but imagine for a moment that they did so. By simply observing the actions of individuals on a given day, would we be able to reliably infer their theoretical allegiances? I doubt it. Adherents of the standard theories will engage in very similar behavior, especially when it comes to matters of omission. They are all likely to abstain from murder, theft, promise-breaking, and the like. They are also likely to help those in need when encountered, to attempt to be fair in how they treat others, and so on. We will start to notice differences if we ask these persons why they act the way they do. Why do they keep their promises, generally?

One might say that it is the honorable thing to do, another that he must respect the promise, a third that breaking promises usually does more harm than good. There are genuine differences here, but they do not usually make a practical difference for the question of whether one ought to keep a promise. The standard normative theories tend to converge on such practical matters, and what they converge upon strongly resembles that which I have been calling moral common sense.

To go further, I propose that normative theories are almost always constrained by common sense. If some theory entailed that murder is generally permissible, we would be immediately skeptical of that theory. This skepticism is likely to remain even if the theorist can offer valid arguments with reasonable premises. Most of us will think that there must be some mistake somewhere in the argumentation. Usually, theorists attempt to avoid violations of common-sense moral principles. When some theory does violate common sense, this is thought to require special justification. If no plausible justification is on offer, this is thought to be, at best, an embarrassment for the theory. Indeed, a common way of objecting to an ethical theory is to point to counterexamples, typically cases in which the theory allegedly requires or permits something that intuitively is morally bad in some way. Hence the familiar objection that, in principle, act utilitarianism requires us to harm some minority of persons in order to bring greater benefits to a majority or that Kantianism requires us to abstain from lying even when doing so will predictably result in harm to the innocent. What is going on here if not an appeal to common sense? The fact that some ethical theory seems to go against common sense is taken by most to be a problem. I take no position on whether there is anything to these particular objections. Instead, I note only that ethical theory already proceeds on the assumption that common-sense moral values and principles deserve some respect. When one is faced with some counterexample, the standard move is to deny that the theory in question entails it. So one might argue that, contrary to some objection, a given variety of act utilitarianism does not actually require us to harm some minority of persons. If that does not work, one might alter the theory, such as by introducing a distinction somewhere into its machinery. Simply biting the bullet and living with the counterexample is a last resort, an unsatisfactory maneuver that critics will see as a problem for the theory.

None of this offers a vindication of the content of common-sense morality, but the foregoing does give some indication that almost no one rejects it. By definition, its content is widely accepted. As we have just seen, ethical theorists themselves generally accept common-sense morality as well, except in special cases that are often thought by their peers to be problematic. If there are any experts on morality, it should be the ethical theorists.<sup>3</sup> If one found that accepted views in ethical theory diverged from those of moral common sense, this might give us some reason to

question common-sense morality. Analogously, if we were faced with some question about biology and if the views of biologists diverged from those commonly accepted among the general public, we would have some reason to doubt the views of the public and to think that the experts are more likely to be onto the truth. Of course, it is possible for expert consensus to be mistaken and for scientists to dismiss genuine local knowledge but these issues are beside the current point. In fact, we do not find that the views of alleged moral experts diverge from those of common sense. If anything, ethical theorists expend significant effort in trying to keep their theories in line with common sense. If there is cause to question the contents of moral common sense, it will not come from the alleged moral experts.

This calls to mind an important difference between inquiry of the moral variety and inquiry of other varieties. In the latter, it is often reasonably clear where to look for evidence. The paleontologist has fossils, the historian documents and other artifacts, the astronomer data from telescopes and probes, and so on. In such areas of inquiry, a researcher might make a discovery that diverges from what is commonly held, justifying her claim with sufficient evidence. In moral inquiry, there is no clear way of doing this. One reason this is so is that moral inquiry concerns itself with norms and values whereas the sciences and other fields of inquiry typically concern themselves with what is the case in an empirical sense. The natural sciences aim to know the natural world, which is available to them in some sense to study. This is not to suggest that such knowledge comes easily, but in principle one can see how it is possible for an inquirer to learn something that does not fit with common-sense beliefs. But there is no moral analogue to the natural world. One can, of course, study morality in the anthropological sense in a similar fashion, as this is an empirical matter, but morality in the normative sense is not something we can survey, at least not in the way that the sciences proceed. What else do we have to go on other than widely held normative principles and values that seem reasonable? This might explain why ethical theorists are hesitant to cross moral common sense, as it is not clear upon what else they can reasonably depend. It is easy enough to imagine other possibilities, of course. Someone might claim to have direct knowledge of the moral law through some sort of intellectual intuition, or to deduce a complete ethical theory from a set of self-evident axioms, or to have been informed by a divine being of what is truly moral. When these approaches clash with common sense in the directives they offer, it is perhaps worth noting that there is no reason to think there is any justification to them.

There is one version of this objection to which I have only a limited answer. It might be alleged that common-sense morality is to be rejected because all moralities are to be rejected. We may think of this as a type of nihilism. It might be supported by an error theory, which holds that all

moral judgments are false beliefs.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, someone who rejects morality in general will not be impressed by the observation that normative theories themselves are constrained by common sense. She has no use for morality at all, regardless of its source or means of justification. In the course of my argument, I have simply assumed that there is some morality that deserves our endorsement but that assumption provides no reason for the moral nihilist to change her mind. I can only note that full-blown moral nihilism of this sort is very rare, if it exists at all, so the assumption should be acceptable to virtually all readers. Virtually no one seriously rejects the idea that torturing the innocent for amusement is a bad thing to do.

This is true even for error theorists. With the exception of Richard Garner and his view that we should abolish morality, I am not aware of any error theorist who endorses rejecting morality altogether.<sup>5</sup> Most believe that, although current moral discourse and judgment are deeply flawed, they can be replaced with a form of morality that is unobjectionable. This is why one finds error theorists endorsing a kind of fictionalism, in which we would employ moral talk and judgment as a useful fiction, simply pretending to believe and to assert that, for example, certain actions are right or wrong.<sup>6</sup> Another option is to replace our current morality with one constituted by non-cognitive attitudes and utterances, which I call revisionary expressivism.<sup>7</sup> Moral error theorists think that, currently, our moral judgments are beliefs, such as the belief that murder is wrong. Here some proposition is taken to be true. In short, error theorists believe that our current morality is cognitivist or that it is composed of beliefs rather than (say) desires. For various reasons we need not discuss here, error theorists hold that all moral propositions are false, which entails that all moral discourse and judgment are composed of falsehoods. On the revisionary expressivist approach, we would stop employing morality in a cognitivist way and instead employ it in a non-cognitivist fashion. Instead of believing that murder is wrong, we would hold and express negative attitudes (e.g., disapproval) with respect to that act. We could thereby avoid holding false beliefs while maintaining morality and any utility it might carry. I mention these cases to illustrate that even moral error theorists almost universally recognize that morality should not be eliminated from human life.

Even at the level of theoretic discourse, philosophers find it difficult or undesirable to jettison morality from human life. I would venture that it is nearly impossible to do at a practical level. What would it look like for a person to live entirely without some notion of morality? I have no idea. As far as I am aware, I have never observed such a person. Notice that I am not saying that all persons are moral in the sense of being morally good. Obviously, that is opposed to my own view. Rather, it is difficult to imagine what it would be like to live without any moral thought or discourse, at least in one's language but probably also in one's psychology.



One feels a sense of betrayal with respect to a disloyal friend, appeals to some notion of fairness when discussing how to allot responsibilities, or suspects that cruel actions are to be avoided. Such a person could still be morally bad, but she is not a nihilist in the sense I am imagining. Even if it is used in purely self-serving ways, it is hard to see how a human being could live without any connection to morality. With all that said, perhaps there is someone out there who genuinely rejects morality altogether, achieving a kind of nihilism even at a practical level. I cannot really conceive of such a person but that may just be a limit of my own imagination. This genuine nihilist might reject common-sense morality in both a theoretical and practical sense. If a proponent of this view could offer a decent defense of the nihilistic view, then we would have cause to consider whether common-sense morality should be maintained. I have not yet come across such an argument, so I have no reason to accept the stance. But neither do I have a refutation of it.

## Notes

- 1 David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Volume 1, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1907), 447.
- 2 Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Studies* 75, no. 1/2 (1994): 5–24.
- 3 The modus tollens writes itself, as the saying goes.
- 4 See, for example, John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).
- 5 Richard Garner, "Abolishing Morality," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10, no. 5 (2007): 499–513.
- 6 Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 7 See Toby Svoboda, "Why Moral Error Theorists Should Become Revisionary Moral Expressivists," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2017): 48–72.

## 6 Misanthropy and Non-Human Nature

In ecological thought, including environmental philosophy, proponents of non-anthropocentric views, or those who afford moral standing to non-human entities, are sometimes charged with misanthropy, which is usually taken to be a criticism. This is because, in some cases, non-anthropocentric commitments would appear to favor the interests of non-humans over those of humans. I argue that such criticisms are misplaced. First, it is not clear that non-anthropocentrists, even those who might prioritize the interests of non-humans, are misanthropic in any sense, much less in one of the problematic varieties discussed in earlier chapters. Second, even if humanity's interests are ill served by non-anthropocentrism, that is compatible with the view that non-anthropocentrism is true. Finally, I argue that humanity's treatment of non-human nature provides further evidence in favor of cognitivist misanthropy. Humanity's ongoing destruction of non-human nature is of a remarkable scale and includes mass extinction due to climate change and other causes. If one affords any value to non-human nature, then humanity's destruction of it is a grave misdeed.

As we have seen, the term "misanthropy" is ambiguous and this sometimes makes it difficult to interpret objections that accuse environmentalists of misanthropy. As we have seen, my view is that some forms of misanthropy are indeed morally problematic but these are not plausibly attributed to prominent non-anthropocentric views. Other senses of misanthropy are plausibly attributed to non-anthropocentric views but these senses of misanthropy are not morally problematic. Before turning to those matters, we should first survey some of the commitments of non-anthropocentric theories as well as why some take them to entail misanthropy of some type.

### **Alleged Misanthropy in Non-Anthropocentric Theories**

A classic objection to non-anthropocentric environmental ethical theories is that they are misanthropic. Such theories recognize moral standing on the part of non-human entities, including non-human animals, plants,

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-6

and micro-organisms, as well as environmental “wholes,” such as species and ecosystems. To recognize moral standing on the part of some non-human entity is to recognize that moral agents have moral obligations to it. The nature of these moral obligations will differ across normative theories. Examples of potential obligations include duties to respect non-humans, not to violate their rights, to promote their flourishing, or not to harm them.

Paul Taylor’s egalitarian biocentrism offers a classic, and more detailed, example. On this view, all living things, including humans, have *equal* moral standing. He identifies a number of specific duties toward non-human organisms. Taylor recognizes that our various duties to living things can easily come into conflict, so he suggests a number of principles for prioritizing duties. For example, he thinks that our “duty of nonmaleficence” outweighs our duty of restitutive justice.<sup>1</sup> This opens the door to the possibility that our obligations to non-human organisms will sometimes take priority over our obligations to human beings. On a view like Taylor’s, this possibility cannot be disallowed in advance, for that would contravene his rejection of human superiority.

Another example is Peter Singer’s animal liberationism, according to which moral agents are obligated to promote the interests of sentient entities. Though not an *environmental* ethical theory, Singer’s position is clearly non-anthropocentric, for it recognizes the moral standing of non-human, sentient animals. Importantly, Singer is committed to the principle that equal interests deserve equal consideration regardless of the species membership of any relevant individuals. Usually, the interests of a randomly chosen human will be stronger than those of a randomly chosen non-human animal, as the former tend to have a richer array of interests but this is not necessarily the case. Especially if we aggregate the interests of all human beings and all sentient non-humans (say, for the purposes of deciding on what environmental policies will best promote the interests of all sentient beings on the whole) and even if we discount the interests of non-humans significantly, there still might be cases in which non-human interests swap human interests.

None of these theories seems to entail, require, or encourage any of the types of misanthropy noted in previous chapters. While advocating for policies that are detrimental to human interests, one need not dislike, hate, or disrespect humans or humanity. Advocating for such a policy is perfectly compatible with liking humans quite a lot, such that one might find it genuinely painful to stand for a policy inimical to their interests. Similarly, hate need not be involved in such advocacy, whether understood as intense dislike or voluntary ill will. Nor is there any evident reason why the non-anthropocentrist should hold something like the cognitivist misanthropy I advocate. Indeed, the non-anthropocentrist might judge (falsely) that human beings are morally wonderful creatures,

deeply regretting that there is not a “win-win” option in which the interests of all beings with moral standing are equally well served. Sometimes interests may conflict, and if we are serious about the moral standing of non-humans, then we must be open to the possibility that humanity will not always be the rightful winner. Alternatively, cognitivist misanthropy seems perfectly compatible with non-anthropocentrism. Indeed, someone who values non-human nature will not want for examples of human greed, brutality, and indifference. Our ecological misanthropist might point to the immense harm that humans have inflicted on non-humans: factory farming, habitat destruction, ocean acidification, climate change, trophy hunting, species extinction, and so on.

Unfortunately, a definition of “misanthropy” is rarely provided by those who object to allegedly misanthropic theories. This makes it difficult to comprehend what the objections actually are. Worse still, the charge of misanthropy is often entangled with another charge, namely so-called “ecofascism.” This paragraph from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry on “Environmental Ethics” is instructive:

Criticizing the individualistic approach in general for failing to accommodate conservation concerns for ecological wholes, J. Baird Callicott (1980) once advocated a version of land-ethical *holism* which takes Leopold’s statement “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” to be the supreme deontological principle. In this theory, the Earth’s biotic community per se is the sole locus of intrinsic value, whereas the value of its individual members is merely instrumental and dependent on their contribution to the “integrity, stability, and beauty” of the larger community. A straightforward implication of this version of the land ethic is that an individual member of the biotic community ought to be sacrificed whenever that is needed for the protection of the holistic good of the community. For instance, Callicott maintains that if culling a white-tailed deer is necessary for the protection of the holistic biotic good, then it is a land-ethical requirement to do so. But, to be consistent, the same point also applies to human individuals because they are also members of the biotic community. Not surprisingly, the misanthropy implied by Callicott’s land-ethical holism was widely criticized and regarded as a *reductio* of the position... Tom Regan (1983, p.362), in particular, condemned the holistic land ethic’s disregard of the rights of the individual as “environmental fascism.”<sup>2</sup>

Without any explanation, the authors say that Callicott’s theory implies misanthropy, but it is unclear why this should be so. What the authors and other critics they cite take issue with is Callicott’s commitment to a holistic view that allegedly leaves little room for moral consideration of

individuals. That may indeed be objectionable, but it is hard to see how that implies anything misanthropic. To be sure, the land ethic might require sacrificing individual humans for the sake of the ecological whole but only because it might require sacrificing individuals of *any* species. The problem here, if it is one, is that the land ethic gives exclusive consideration to the whole and not to the individuals who comprise it. For instance, in the referenced section of *Animal Rights*, Regan argues that the land ethic, if consistently applied, is sure to violate the rights of individuals, both human and non-human. But what is misanthropic about this? We would do well to distinguish between misanthropy and “fascist” views that prioritize the ecological whole over individual biota. It seems clear that one can be a misanthrope or misanthropist without accepting ecological holism. There is no evident reason to think that misanthropy will inherit the problems of holism. That being the case, we cannot adequately dismiss the former by refuting the latter.

Lisa Gerber provides one of the very few accounts of misanthropy in environmental philosophy, attempting both to identify what it is and to explain why it is morally problematic. She defines misanthropy as “a mistrust, hatred, and disgust of humankind.”<sup>3</sup> The conjunction is interesting because it suggests that one needs all three features in order to be a proper misanthrope. This is a demanding requirement. Simply hating humankind is not enough—one must also harbor disgust and mistrust toward it. Leaving aside the question of whether the conjunctive requirement is plausible, it is certainly reasonable to think that misanthropy has something to do with mistrust, hatred, or disgust. One thing to notice immediately is that, on Gerber’s definition, theories themselves cannot be literally misanthropic. Only beings capable of having attitudes, such as hate, can be misanthropic in the proper sense. Of course, one might argue that the adherents of some theory are bound to be misanthropic or at least are very likely to be so. This may be because, for example, certain cognitive commitments of accepting some theory are closely associated with other attitudes that constitute misanthropy. Perhaps there is something about accepting Callicott’s non-anthropocentric theory that turns someone toward mistrust, hatred, and disgust.

It is hard to see why this would be the case, however. Accepting the view that only the ecological whole deserves direct moral consideration does not seem likely to engender attitudes of mistrust, hatred, or disgust with regard to the individual entities that belong to the whole. At any rate, this is not usually the case with our attitudes toward things with part-whole relations. When it comes to consumer electronics, most of us care about the whole rather than the individual parts that comprise it. It does not matter to us precisely which serial-numbered parts are inside provided that the device works as expected. This, of course, does not entail any sort of negative attitude toward those parts. We have nothing against them. They are simply not objects of our concern. Of course,

the case of ecological holism might be different. Perhaps there is some good reason to think that proponents of Callicott's holism are destined to be misanthropic, but I am not aware of anyone who has specified why this would be the case, much less defended it.

Next, Gerber turns to defending the claim that misanthropy is bad. The case for this hinges on what misanthropy does to the person who harbors it, which in turn has consequences for how one interacts with other humans and non-human nature. She takes misanthropy to be a vice, one that brings "debilitating despair."<sup>4</sup> Gerber writes, "A misanthrope becomes closed minded, full of despair, and loses the hope necessary for moral and social change."<sup>5</sup> Although such an outcome is surely possible and perhaps likely for the person who genuinely hates humanity, it does not appear to be a necessary end for the kind of misanthropy I advocate. In Chapter 7, I will argue that cognitivist misanthropy offers grounds for hope, specifically in a world free of the moral ills wrought by humanity. This type of hope is unlikely to satisfy those who already reject misanthropy, as it depends on the disappearance of our species, but it does show that the misanthropist need not live in despair. Moreover, far from being closed-minded, the misanthropist I envision is open to possibilities that other views do not consider. The claim that human beings are, in general, morally bad and that our absence would constitute an improvement in the universe hardly fits with conventional wisdom. Even if one thinks that cognitivist misanthropy is false or dangerous, it is difficult to see how its adherents would be closed-minded, for they are open to a number of controversial ideas. Of course, as with any view, it is possible for the misanthropist to be dogmatic, to refuse to consider objections or alternatives in a serious way, but that is a possibility for any view. I see nothing in cognitivist misanthropy as such that would especially lend itself to such dogmatism.

Finally, it does not seem that the misanthropist must be incapable of promoting social and moral change. In Chapter 7, I will make the case that, although we should be pessimistic about humanity's moral prospects, there is nonetheless plenty of room for amelioration of social and moral ills in the world. Given our track record, I am very skeptical that we will ever achieve something resembling a just society, for example. But some injustices are greater than others, and history shows that we can make things less bad, at least for a time. It is my view that we have a moral obligation to make this attempt. In short, the variety of misanthropy I defend does not seem prone to Gerber's worries about closed-mindedness, despair, and loss of hope. Of course, Gerber did not direct this claim against my view specifically, so this is meant to be not a rejoinder but rather an opportunity to disentangle my view from other forms of misanthropy and to defend the former from *prima facie* concerns.

It is plausible to think that hatred of humanity is morally questionable, perhaps even impermissible. At the very least, it is certainly a dangerous

attitude and one that we have good reason to avoid. I am less sure that mistrust or disgust is morally questionable, as Gerber implies. It seems to me that both attitudes are often warranted in both epistemic and moral senses. It cannot be denied that human beings are frequently dishonest. This includes misrepresentation, bullshitting, deceptive omissions, and outright lying. It occurs at small scales among individual persons and at large scales among powerful institutions and groups. It is human beings who have frequently attempted to deceive one another about a great number of things, ranging from exaggeration about one's past actions to lies about the ravages of war. Each of us is acquainted with dishonest marketing techniques (such as those seeking to undermine the consumer's self-confidence) that are designed to get us to spend money on useless products. Is mistrust of the beings who do this anything but rational? Without a substantial degree of mistrust, it is likely that I would be scammed on a daily basis by the many unscrupulous, dishonest persons in our midst.

Perhaps such mistrust, though justified as a rational response to the evident dishonesty of humanity, is nonetheless morally problematic. This possibility once again raises the question of whether it can be morally bad to adopt an epistemically justified position. Answering this in the affirmative may be strange but I suppose it is possible. We might see that just as a kind of tragic outcome, an unavoidable misfortune in which one's intelligence and morality are at odds. I cannot answer that question here in an adequate question, but we can at least consider the moral merits and demerits of mistrust of humanity, leaving aside the epistemic issues. I simply do not see what is morally bad about an attitude of mistrust. Simply mistrusting another person does not carry with it any ill will toward that person. One might say that mistrust makes us more likely to treat that person in morally inappropriate ways, granting them less consideration than we grant to those we do not trust. Perhaps, but it certainly seems within our power to do the right thing even if our mistrust presents some obstacle to doing so. In that case, mistrust would not itself be morally problematic, except in the sense of sometimes presenting an impediment to moral action, an impediment that can be overcome. However, much hinges on the question of what counts as "morally inappropriate" in cases of mistrust. If, upon leaving my home to go to work, I discover a person in distress on the sidewalk, I should offer reasonable help to that person. This might involve letting them borrow my phone to make a call, acquiring medical assistance for them, offering directions, simply listening to them, and so on. I could do more than that, though. For instance, before heading off to work, I might give them my keys and let them stay in my house while they wait for transportation to arrive. This would be more comfortable for them. Yet I would not do this in reality, and I suspect that the reader would not either. Although I have nothing against this person, they are a complete stranger, and I have no reason to trust them. Is this mistrust morally bad?

I do not see why it would be so. Conversely, it would be foolish to trust this stranger. After all, some humans would rob me in those circumstances, and although it may be unlikely that this specific person would do so, it appears morally reasonable (not to mention rational) to harbor mistrust here. This is perfectly compatible with having respect for that person and seeking to offer them aid.

What about mistrust on a broader scale, say of humanity's governments, corporations, or populations taken in a collective sense? We might look to the lies and other forms of dishonesty accompanying the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. We might consider the misrepresentations regarding the dangers of tobacco or the reality of climate change.<sup>6</sup> It is not hard to find such examples. The difficulty comes when we look for cases of honesty from some party about matters that are not in line with its interests. For some reason, such cases are very hard to find, at least when such parties have a viable option for lying, misdirecting, or remaining silent. If we look to contemporary politics in the United States, it is even more obvious than normal that dishonesty carries the day, whether this be lies about stolen elections or the risks of vaccines. This current dishonesty is unusual only in being particularly clear and particularly stupid, but there is nothing unusual about the mere fact of dishonesty operating in politics. This is to be expected, of course. Powerful parties lie all the time. That is why it would be foolish not to mistrust them.

Once more, the foregoing speaks to the epistemic issue of whether it is rational to mistrust humanity's governments, corporations, and the like. Of course, the answer is yes. Is it morally bad to mistrust such parties? I see no reason to answer this in the affirmative. Many of the great injustices in modern times are driven by the sorts of institutions just mentioned, including those associated with war and climate change. They have earned our mistrust, and in fact they receive less of it than they deserve. Indeed, a failure to mistrust institutions runs the risk of being morally unserious. Are we to look at the mountains of corpses produced by such parties together with their lies and say of their kind, "Ah, they're not so bad. Give them another chance. Surely they'll be good and honest from now on?" If we simply trust these human institutions, putting our faith in humanity's alleged goodness, then we overlook the horrific reality, the many moral atrocities we have carried out through our various institutions. It seems to me that the morally serious person must be mistrustful of humanity. Mistrust is not a morally questionable attitude, but it may be a necessary one. Part of taking morality seriously involves acknowledging our ugly history and present. Usually, there is no reason to trust that human institutions will do better in the future when they have done so poorly in the past. If we nonetheless do trust them, in a way we fail to acknowledge the moral ills they have caused in the past, for it is these misdeeds that make them unworthy of trust.



Matters are similar for disgust toward humanity, so I will be briefer here. In short, if we honestly take stock of the misdeeds of humanity, it seems perfectly reasonable, in both epistemic and moral senses, to feel disgust. What to make of the species that regularly practiced slavery, violent domination, ethnic cleansing, and subjugation of various social groups and that created weapons of mass destruction and perfected the means of slaughtering vast numbers of sentient beings? Perhaps there are many answers, but one response is simply to feel the revulsion characteristic of disgust. One might argue that we *should* feel disgust at such events and for the agents who carried them out. Are they not, in fact, disgusting? Here I am referring to a kind of moral disgust, a genuine revulsion with regard to the moral catastrophe that humanity has been. As with mistrust of humanity, disgust seems not only reasonable but in fact appropriate, and I cannot detect a moral problem feeling repulsed by what our species has done.

Now we can imagine forms of disgust that indeed would be morally problematic, such as the disgust a racist might feel toward some groups of people. This attitude is morally bad, of course, but I submit that the problem lies with the disrespect that this particular form of disgust involves. This is a failure to regard others as persons equal to ourselves. That, of course, does not mean that all forms of disgust are morally questionable. Some things just call for disgust, whether of an aesthetic or moral variety. It is reasonable to be morally disgusted by a friend who does something dishonorable, but unlike the case of the racist's disgust, this need not (and usually does not) carry with it a failure to regard one's friend as an equal deserving of respect. This suggests that disgust is not inherently problematic in a moral sense, although it clearly can become so depending on other factors. The question is whether some form of disgust is warranted in a given case. If, as I have argued, humanity is indeed morally catastrophic, it seems perfectly reasonable to feel disgust toward humanity and this is evidently compatible with maintaining moral respect for human persons, much in the same way as one can maintain both respect and disgust for a dishonorable friend. Even if one rejects cognitivist misanthropy, it is surely the case that one can find plenty of human misdeeds regarding which disgust is appropriate.

After considering the critique of alleged ecological misanthropy, one begins to wonder whether this image of the misanthrope is not a strawman. The reader should consider whether they have ever met anyone answering to the description of a misanthrope that is offered by these critics, a miserable person full of despair and hatred, where these attitudes are directed at humanity itself rather than specific individuals or groups. For my part, I have never met such a person. Certainly, there is a great deal of hatred and despair in the world, and we can find examples in which these attitudes are debilitating to those who harbor them, but do they have anything to do with misanthropy? When I have encountered

such attitudes, either directly or anecdotally, they are not applied universally to human beings but rather to specific classes of persons. One loses trust in their friends, comes to resent colleagues, hates members of some political party, and so on. Are there genuine misanthropes who harbor such feelings toward humanity in general or toward every individual they encounter? Such persons may exist, but I am skeptical. So perhaps the above-discussed worries about misanthropy and its debilitating effects are not very realistic. Whatever one thinks of that issue, however, it is highly questionable whether adopting some non-anthropocentric theory will turn one into the sort of misanthrope discussed by Gerber, as we shall next see.

### A Problem with the Charge of Misanthropy

We can begin to see another substantial problem with the charge of misanthropy against non-anthropocentrism. There is a tendency to label any ethical theory that is inimical to the interest of human beings as misanthropic. This sounds bad because it calls to mind hatred or disrespect toward persons, either of which is surely troubling. Yet I am not aware of any non-anthropocentric theory that encourages, allows, or even permits such attitudes. On Taylor's biocentrism, for example, we are morally required to harbor respect for all living beings, including humans. If we adopt his view, then it would be wrong to maintain an attitude of disrespect for human persons.

It seems that the charge of misanthropy is often rooted in ambiguity and confusion. What appears to happen is the following. Someone puts forward an ethical theory that recognizes moral standing on the part of some non-human entities. In some actual or possible case of a conflict between the interests of humans and non-humans, any plausible non-anthropocentric view must be open to the *possibility* that the interests of the non-humans should win out. How, where, and why this is so will vary depending on the theory in question, but one that pre-emptively declares that human interests always override non-human interests hardly warrants being called non-anthropocentric. Suppose that, in some case of conflicting interests, the relevant ethical theory entails that the non-human interests warrant priority of consideration. Some critics might then label this theory misanthropic because it is bad for human beings. Because of the ambiguity in the term "misanthropic," some, possibly the critics themselves, will take this to mean that the theory in question involves hatred or disrespect for human persons. But this need not be the case, and as already noted I am aware of no non-anthropocentric theory for which it is the case.

I suspect that charges of misanthropy often trade on this ambiguity. A critic rightly apprehends that some view is inimical to the interests of humans in a given case, accuses the view or its proponent of misanthropy,

and implies, unintentionally perhaps, that the view is deeply objectionable on account of being hateful. But this is a mistake. A view can be misanthropic in the sense of being contrary to the interests of humans but this does not entail that it is misanthropic in the sense of advocating hatred or disrespect toward humans. Similarly, I once knew a high school chemistry teacher who despised sophomores. In order to show that his attitude was justified, this teacher would appeal to the dictionary definition of “sophomoric.” Because his students were sophomores, they must be sophomoric, hence “justifying” the teacher’s attitude toward them. Although this probably enhanced the vocabularies of a few students, it was obviously a poor defense of the teacher’s position.

Let us take an example. In a much-criticized paper, “Feeding People versus Saving Nature,” Holmes Rolston argues that sometimes we should let people starve in order to preserve natural habitats.<sup>7</sup> This paper is a frequent target for the charge of misanthropy but that criticism runs the risk of trading on the ambiguity just noted. It makes sense for Rolston, as a non-anthropocentrist, to think that the interests of non-humans should sometimes take priority over the interests of humans. After all, he believes that human and non-human species alike have intrinsic value and that moral agents have direct duties to all such beings. It is to be expected that there will sometimes be cases of conflicting interests among species, and a principled non-anthropocentrist must be open to the possibility that the human species will sometimes be on the losing end of what is morally appropriate, all things considered. If someone simply refuses to countenance this possibility, that person seems to stack the deck against non-anthropocentrism from the start. Obviously, Rolston’s argument might be flawed in various ways, but the charge of misanthropy is not compelling. There is indeed something suspect about burdening those facing famine with the costs of averting ecological destruction but this appears to be a matter of injustice when it comes to how burdens are shared. The ecological catastrophe on earth is driven mostly by the relatively well-off, a class of human beings that is not likely to include many persons who are at risk of famine. Pretty clearly, it is unjust to sacrifice the poor in order to pay the ecological debts of the rich. I am aware that doing just this is standard practice for humanity, of course. The point here is merely that doing so is obviously unjust. Arguably, Rolston’s suggestion advocates something like this and deserves to be criticized for it. But again, the problem is one of injustice and not one of misanthropy. It is not some morally suspect hatred of humans that is objectionable here.

### **The Axiology of Human Extinction**

The suggestion that the world would be better off without the human species is often met with bemusement, as if the prospect were unthinkable to the point of comedy. But if we acknowledge any value on the part of

non-human species, it is difficult to deny that the world would be, on balance, a better place without our species in its present state. Ours is but one of several million species on this planet. Although the human population has exploded in the last century or so, the number of human individuals is greatly exceeded by the number of non-human organisms. At present, many of these species are at risk of extinction due to human activities that are fueling climate change, habitat loss, pollution, and the like. It is reasonable to assume that, for the vast majority of species that are substantially affected by human beings, the relationship is on balance a harmful one and this holds on virtually any account of harm. For such species, the absence of humanity would constitute an improvement. There are, no doubt, exceptions to this. Perhaps rats and pigeons would do less well in a world devoid of humans. But given that humanity is causing a mass extinction event, as a general rule it seems true that human beings are bad for the rest of nature. If we encountered another species that was single-handedly responsible for such an extinction event, we would not hesitate to deem it malignant. Indeed, we attempt to eradicate invasive species that stand to cause much less ecological damage than that caused by humans.

Again, if we attempt an honest accounting, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that humanity, at least as it currently operates, is a source of massive net harm on this planet. I think this is obviously true in a purely ecological sense. In fact, it strikes me as not even credible to doubt this in a serious fashion. What reasonable argument could there be to show that the species responsible for mass extinction and potentially catastrophic climate change is, in truth, a force for ecological good? None comes to mind. A more promising approach, though not by very much, is to argue that the various non-ecological goods wrought by humanity are enough to outweigh (in some sense of weighing that we need not specify here) the ecological ills that humanity unquestionably produces. Yes, we are devastating life on this planet, but at least we produce some nice art, fine athletes, deep relationships, and so on. The rejoinder to an argument of this kind is provided in Chapter 5. The victims of humanity are not limited to the non-human world, which would be bad enough, but include many members of its own species. If, all things considered, a world with humanity is better than a world devoid of humanity, then the goods of humanity must outweigh not only its ecological ills but also those it visits upon itself. As we have seen, this is unlikely, given the asymmetry between good and ill as well as the extensive list of humanity's ills. But let us return our focus to non-human nature.

Some hardline anthropocentrist might deny that there is any value in non-human species. On a view like this, there is no non-human species anywhere in the universe that carries even the slightest bit of value and so anything that human beings do to such species cannot matter. But such a hardline view is theoretically implausible and contrary to our

common-sense moral commitments. We may begin with the latter point. I have never met another person who genuinely believes that the lives of non-human animals carry no value whatsoever. Virtually everyone recognizes that torturing kittens is bad for the kittens, that confining and slaughtering pigs is not a great deal for the pigs, and that prey suffers a misfortune as it is consumed. These are not moral claims about what is or is not permissible but rather evaluative claims about what is bad for certain non-humans. Plenty of human beings think it is permissible to confine and kill animals for their meat, but those individuals do not usually deny that this is at least sometimes bad for the affected animals. This implies that, by and large, we recognize that the lives of at least some non-human entities (e.g., many types of animal) carry some degree of value. For this reason, the hardline anthropocentrism noted above does not fit with our common-sense judgments.

It is possible, of course, that common sense misleads here, but I am aware of no plausible theoretical account defending the hardline view that non-human entities carry no value whatsoever. Descartes provides an account but it is not a plausible one. On his view, non-human animals are mere “machines,” purely material beings that operate according to the causal laws that govern all matter.<sup>8</sup> Unlike humans, these beings lack minds or the substance that is necessary for having mental activity of any kind, including the experience of pain. In short, animals have no qualia, no first-person perspective. Appearances suggest otherwise, of course, so Descartes is forced to say that non-human animals are like automata cleverly designed to appear to have minds, similar to a clockwork construct of a human being that one might mistake for an actual person. Infamously, Descartes not only defended vivisection but himself practiced it, dismissing the pained cries of the tortured creatures as he conducted his experiments on them. Consistency with one’s own theoretical commitments is not always a virtue.

Why should we accept this claim that non-human animals are mere machines? Why not take the simpler and more natural approach, admitting that some non-humans have qualia, including the experience of pain? Descartes gives two reasons, neither of them compelling. According to him, non-human animals lack both language and reason and so they must be purely mechanistic, lacking mental activity altogether. As Noam Chomsky once told interviewer Ali G, whether or not non-human animals have language is primarily a matter of how one defines language.<sup>9</sup> As Chomsky says there, most animal species have means of communication. Likewise, unless one defines rationality very narrowly, it is not plausible to think that all non-human animals lack reason. At the very least, many primates are capable of solving novel problems (e.g., with the use of tools), and it is natural to think that they come to these solutions through some sort of process in thought. But even if we grant that animals lack reason and language, that does not warrant the inference that

they lack mental capacities altogether. Descartes's own list of what counts as thought includes many items that need not be tied to either reason or language, such as imagining. A non-linguistic, non-rational creature might nonetheless possess qualia and the capacity to experience pain. Indeed, it seems obvious that many non-human animals are capable of suffering. Once we admit this, we have a hard time denying that there is some value in the lives of at least some non-humans, on the reasonable assumption that avoiding suffering is usually a good thing for the being that avoids it.

A different approach is to allow that there is value to be found in non-human species but hold that it is only a small fraction of the value to be found in humanity. This opens the door to the possibility that, although it would benefit many non-human species to be rid of humanity, the world would not be a better place as a result, given the exceptional value lost with the human species. It is tempting to simply dismiss this approach as a case of speciesism, the practice of granting more or less consideration to some entity solely on the basis of its species membership. As Peter Singer argues, species membership is morally irrelevant. After all, species are just biological categories. What matters, on Singer's view, is whether some being is sentient, because sentient beings have an interest in experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain.<sup>10</sup> Yet even though all species are in principle equal on his view, it is not the case that all interests are equally strong. The principle that Singer defends is that equal interests deserve equal consideration. If one grants priority of consideration to some being over another on account of the species to which they belong, that is a case of speciesism. But if one grants priority of consideration on the basis that one being's interests are greater than those of another, this on Singer's view is in keeping with the principle that equal interests deserve equal consideration. Because the interests relevant here are not equally strong, it can be appropriate to prioritize one over the other.

This opens an avenue for arguing that, even though there is nothing in principle that is exceptional about belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*, should humanity disappear, the net change in overall value would be negative. On average, it is plausible to think that the life of a typical human being contains a stronger set of interests than that of a typical non-human animal. This comes down not to species membership but rather to the fact that, of the species with which we are acquainted, human beings have a great capacity for joy and suffering. This may be due to our relatively long life spans, highly developed psychological traits such as memory and anticipation, ability to produce and appreciate beauty, and so on. This does not mean that humans should always win out in cases of conflicting interests. Although some researcher might have an interest (say, satisfying her curiosity) in performing a painful experiment on a chimpanzee, the chimpanzee likely has a stronger interest in avoiding that experiment. Here the relevant interests are not equal,

and the fact that the chimpanzee is non-human should not matter from an axiological point of view. Nonetheless, it is plausible to think that the typical human being has a capacity for greater well-being throughout her life than the typical chimpanzee. Accordingly, the loss of our species might be extremely costly even on a non-speciesist accounting. Although this would obviously benefit the members of many other species on earth, that might not be enough to offset the loss. Unlike the hardline anthropocentrist, one can admit that non-human species have value but still maintain that, all things considered, the disappearance of humanity would be bad.

This is not a very plausible line to take, however. The sheer number of non-human organisms dwarfs the number of human beings. This is so even if we limit consideration to sentient species. Once we admit that such beings have some amount of value, even a small fraction of that carried by humans, that value must be multiplied by a very large number. The fraction of value carried by non-humans would need to be extremely miniscule for it not to outweigh the value carried by humanity.

On yet another approach, one might concede that, looked at quantitatively, the disappearance of humanity would not constitute a net axiological loss for the world. Nonetheless, it might be claimed that humanity carries a unique kind of value, which cannot be replaced. This value might have something to do with our artistic or intellectual achievement or perhaps simply the capacity for such things. Should humanity go extinct, voluntarily or otherwise, then this unique value would be lost forever. Surely that is to be lamented. No matter how many animals, plants, and fungi are spared as a result of our extinction, they will never be able to fill the void. Although non-human species may carry value of their own, the universe will have lost a unique kind of good.

However, this approach will not work. It may be true that something of unique value would be lost with humanity's extinction, but the same is true for other species. Something of unique value is lost with the extinction of other animals, plants, fungi, and the rest. Now it might not be the case that each of these species is uniquely valuable. Perhaps some surviving species of plant is similar enough to its extinct brethren that nothing unique is lost. Yet even if some unique kind of value, such as the impressive respiratory power of whales, is spread across various species, it is still plausibly the case that much unique value is disappearing from the world, given the rate and extent of extinction. This makes it very plausible to think that the unique, irreplaceable value lost with non-human extinction is greater, and probably far greater, than the unique, irreplaceable value lost with human extinction. If so, then although something is certainly lost with the disappearance of humanity, more is lost with the disappearance of thousands of non-human species. Axiologically speaking, the non-human loss is plausibly greater than the human loss. Of course, it would be best not to have to choose, preserving the unique value carried

by human and non-human species alike, but so far our species has exhibited little interest in that.

Although I am not assuming that values can be quantified and weighed in any determinate fashion, my objection to this last approach does appeal to quantity in one way. The objection relies on the assumption that it is generally worse to lose more instances of unique value than it is to lose fewer instances. It would be a bad thing were the Mona Lisa to be destroyed. It would be even worse if the Mona Lisa and Starry Night were both destroyed. It is worse to lose two unique, irreplaceable objects of value than it is to lose just one of them. We may say this without assigning some quantity of value to each object. Admittedly, this is not a perfect analogy to the case of extinction just discussed. A better one is the following. Suppose that there is a storage facility containing thousands of works of art, including some very rare, highly prized pieces but also many replicas. Would it be worse for this facility to be destroyed or for the Mona Lisa to be destroyed? Both would be bad in some way, but the former is almost certainly worse, even if one assumes that the Mona Lisa is the greatest work of art ever produced. This is because the facility contains highly prized works that cannot be replaced. Perhaps we should not care at all about the loss of the replicas, but on the whole the destruction of the storage facility is the worse of the two possible outcomes. Similarly, one might think that many non-human species are neither uniquely valuable nor irreplaceable by some other species, but surely some of them are. The mass extinction currently being caused by humanity is likely to include many from the latter class. Let us assume, generously, that humanity has greater unique value than any other species. Just as it makes sense to sacrifice the greatest work of art in order to save many great works of art, so it makes sense to prefer the survival of many non-human species over the survival of humanity. One way to avoid this line of thinking is just to insist that humanity's value is so great that its loss is never preferable to that of even millions of uniquely valuable species. But I am not sure what could justify this claim, at least if we are to avoid a form of anthropocentrism that simply begs the question.

### **A Concern About Dismissing Misanthropy**

I will close this chapter by noting a lingering concern, namely that the easy dismissal of misanthropy in much (but not all) environmental thought might reveal a reluctance to evaluate humanity honestly. It seems to me that the moral truth about humanity is a terrible one. It is not pleasant to consider. There is no doubt a temptation to brush it away. We might do this by pointing to all the good that humanity does, its positive traits, instances of social and moral improvements if they can be found, and so on. None of this changes the horrifying reality of what we have done and continue to do. It is clear that, for the most part, we do not



seriously acknowledge the great moral ills we have brought about, except when it is politically convenient to point out the crimes of others. This makes me worry. If, when presented with the terrible truth of humanity's moral badness, we are immediately inclined to point to our morally good features, then I have to wonder how serious we are when it comes to that moral assessment. It is very convenient and comforting to downplay the bad and focus on the good. Given the Asymmetry Thesis, however, this is not likely to offer a compelling argument against cognitivist misanthropy. The fact that we have consistently been enslavers, conquerors, oppressors, thieves, and murderers counts for more than the fact that we have also had morally good features.

The point of this brief section, however, is not to defend the Asymmetry Thesis again. The point, rather, is to note how troubling it is that we do not give certain misanthropic viewpoints a serious hearing. That misanthropy is bad, mistaken, dangerous, or whatever is something that we all "know." When presented with evidence that a misanthropic outlook may be justified, many of us simply ignore it or change the subject. Even if one does not accept my arguments throughout this book, it should be clear that misanthropy is reasonable. At the very least, we should consider the evidence in its favor. It does not seem to me that we do that. We simply dismiss it as absurd or problematic, even using the charge of misanthropy as a supposed reason to reject certain theories. Why do we not honestly consider whether a misanthropic verdict might be true or otherwise appropriate? Perhaps because we simply do not want it to be true.

## Notes

- 1 Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 193.
- 2 Andrew Brennan and Yeuk-Sze Lo, "Environmental Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/ethics-environmental/>. The quoted reference is to Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1983.
- 3 Lisa Gerber, "What Is So Bad about Misanthropy?" *Environmental Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2002): 41.
- 4 Gerber, "What Is So Bad about Misanthropy?" 54.
- 5 Gerber, "What Is So Bad about Misanthropy?" 45.
- 6 For examples, see Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).
- 7 Holmes Rolston III, "Feeding People versus Saving Nature?" in *World Hunger and Morality*, ed. William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 248–267.
- 8 Rene Descartes, "Nonhumans as Machines," in *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. David R. Keller (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2010), 69–71.
- 9 Ali G, "Ali G Interviews Noam Chomsky," 2006, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOIM1\\_xOSro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOIM1_xOSro).
- 10 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1975).

## 7 Living as Misanthropists

### Reasons for Hope

This book has taken, very reasonably, a grim and pessimistic view of humanity. However, there is some cause for a certain type of optimism. To be clear, this optimism will be rather limited. It would be naive to expect humanity to undergo a radical moral transformation, leaving aside the vicious traits that have defined us throughout our history. Such a transformation is not impossible and so one might wish for it but we cannot *reasonably* hope for it. This is because the long chronicle of human atrocities, which stretches to include the present time, provides reason to think that humans have been and remain morally bad. I am aware of no good reason to think that this trend will be reversed in a significant and lasting fashion and so I cannot detect any good reason to hope that this might occur.

It is reasonable, nonetheless, to hope that the misdeeds of humanity will recede and eventually vanish from the universe. To begin, it is comforting to consider that the horrors that humanity regularly visits upon itself and non-human nature are very recent phenomena. Human history has taken up a minuscule portion of cosmic time. For the vast majority of that time, as far as we are aware, the universe has been happily free of genocide, war, economic exploitation, and the like. It is possible that other intelligent species have existed in the universe and perhaps some of them resembled us in harboring a strong taste for violence, injustice, and the rest. So far, however, there is no evidence for extraterrestrial life having existed, much less for extraterrestrial disvalue of a moral nature. This thought does nothing to lessen the severity of those ills that humanity has caused and allowed, but we may acknowledge the fortunate fact that, for many billions of years, there were no ills. It is a very bad thing that humans have produced several millennia of moral atrocities. It would be worse still if more atrocities were added over, say, the previous million years. Here we might think of the pre-human earth, as noted by Russell:

DOI: 10.4324/9781003189398-7

After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it generated Neros, Genghis Khans, and Hitlers. This, however, is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, that pre-human earth contained various phenomena that we might plausibly judge to be misfortunes, such as animal suffering, predation, and mass extinctions. But these natural occurrences, though bad in some sense (e.g., for the prey being consumed), are not morally bad, for they were not perpetrated by beings that we can plausibly hold to be capable of morality. With the advent of humanity, this changed. This misfortune humanity delivers to its own members and to other species is worse than that brought about by non-moral agents. An asteroid impact might bring great suffering and death but that is a misfortune that could not have been otherwise. The comparable degree of suffering and death brought about by human beings is far worse. We have the capacity to abstain from visiting such destruction upon the world, and it is plausible to think that we have an obligation to so abstain, and yet we choose largely to ignore this obligation, often because we prefer short-term benefits to ourselves. This fact is horrifying, but so far it has had a short life. To reflect on the fact that the universe has been, for most of its life, free of these moral horrors may bring comfort to some.

The foregoing is not a matter of hope, of course, because it is backward-looking, whereas hope is forward-looking. Yet thinking about the past can be instructive when it comes to anticipating the future. One way or another, it is likely that humanity will disappear from the universe, as has virtually every other species so far. There are many ways in which this might occur, the most obvious being self-destruction. Here the leading candidates seem to be environmental catastrophe and nuclear weapons. Humanity, or some segment of it, is racing toward dangerous climate change, which is virtually certain to entail grave harm or injustice to both human persons and non-human species. Despite some progress in addressing this dangerous reality and in seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, climate change has not been a high priority of those with the power to curtail it, especially in the United States, historically the largest contributor to the problem. If climate change is allowed to become sufficiently severe, at some point it may outstrip the adaptive capacities of humanity and lead to the extinction of our species, along with that of many others. Of course, humanity might survive climate change. The available evidence, together with reasonable projections of future emissions and other matters, suggests that the probability of an absolute catastrophe is relatively low. Nonetheless, it is one possible cause for a future extinction of humanity.

Unlike climate change, which will unfold across centuries or millennia, nuclear weapons could effectively destroy civilization in a matter of hours. Although some pockets of humanity would initially survive a global nuclear exchange, it is not difficult to imagine them dying off in the following years, given the climatic changes and societal disruptions that such a large-scale nuclear exchange is likely to bring. The risks posed by nuclear weapons receive little public attention but that does not make the risks any less grave. We might recall that the United States has twice used nuclear weapons against civilian population centers, killing tens of thousands of non-combatants in each case. Fortunately, such weapons have not been used offensively since that time but that is partly a matter of luck. If humanity continues to arm itself with such weapons, it is likely only a matter of time before they are used, whether intentionally or not. Depending on the scale of that use, it may well bring the end of humanity.

There are many other possible ways in which human beings might disappear, some of which appear fanciful, at least at the present time. Perhaps we shall be erased by a natural extinction event, such as a pandemic, gamma ray burst, or asteroid impact. Perhaps strong artificial intelligence will come into being and decide to remove us. Perhaps human beings will alter themselves radically via genetic engineering. I make no prediction about how the human species will come to an end. The foregoing are just possible candidates. My claim is only that it is very plausible to think that, one way or another, humanity will eventually disappear from this universe. We will then have a universe devoid of human life, as has been the case for the vast majority of cosmic time.

I suspect that many will find the prospect of human extinction disconcerting, regrettable, or even tragic. If the arguments in this book have been on target, then it is more reasonable to view this prospect with hope. All else being equal, a world containing moral atrocities is worse than a world lacking them. The former is worse than the latter both in a specifically moral sense and in an all-things-considered sense. Throughout our history, human beings have regularly engaged in such atrocities, and we are likely to continue to do so in the future. If our species ceases to exist, then these atrocities will likewise cease. We might think of this in the following way. Human history has been a moral nightmare, replete with injustice, cruelty, greed, and so on. The disappearance of humanity would bring an end to this nightmare. Whatever else one thinks of a universe without human beings, the absence of our injustice and the like would be a good thing. Because it is plausible to think this good thing will eventually come to pass, that makes it reasonable to hope for this in the future.

The point I seek to make here is easily misunderstood. What is to be regarded with hope is a world without humans and their misdeeds. This is distinct from hoping that human beings die off, which is an attitude I reject. One should not celebrate any process whereby humanity ceases

to exist, especially if that process itself involves injustice or other wrongdoing, as it likely would in the case of climate or nuclear catastrophe. Now it might be objected that one who wills the end must also will the means to that end. The thought here is that one cannot will a world free of humanity without thereby willing the extinction of humanity via some means, the latter of which may be unseemly, callous, morally impermissible, or otherwise objectionable. If this objection goes through, then perhaps hoping for a world without humanity requires one to hope for the dying off of humanity.

In response, it may be noted that it is not obviously true that willing some end requires willing some means to that end. But that view is not implausible, so let us assume that it is true. I have written specifically here about hoping rather than willing. The latter, akin to desiring, involves striving to bring something about. Perhaps that does require adopting some course of action, however effective it might be, in order to achieve some goal. Hope is a different matter. It is an evaluative attitude in which one looks forward to a possible state of affairs that is judged to be good in some sense. By itself, this attitude does not involve willing, for it does not require us to seek to bring anything about. Instead, one merely looks forward to a possible, future state of affairs that, should it hold in the future, would constitute a good. So it is at least coherent to hope for a future in which human misdeeds are absent without willing the demise of the perpetrators of those misdeeds.

The foregoing considerations have to do with time. It is comforting to consider that humanity's misdeeds have occupied a very short duration and are unlikely to last much longer. We may identify this as temporal hope. Another cause for hope concerns the spatial extent of such misdeeds. Currently, there is no evidence that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe. As far as we know, the systems outside our own are devoid of moral agents like ourselves. If that is true, then the rest of the universe is mercifully free of the moral horrors that typify our local space. This would be so simply because the rest of the universe would lack the sort of beings capable of the moral horrors that humanity regularly produces. For anyone troubled by the greed, injustice, and cruelty that fill our planet, it might be comforting to consider the possibility that such phenomena are hyper-localized, confined to a relatively small space. This does nothing to reduce the magnitude of the moral ills that occur within that space, but it does allow one to take some solace. It might have been the case that the universe was full of species like our own. Apparently, that is not the case and so the universe is significantly less bad than it might have been.

Of course, it is possible that intelligent, moral agents do exist elsewhere, currently undetected. If so, we know nothing of their nature. Perhaps they are radically different from us, largely free of vice and predisposed toward peace, justice, benevolence, and the like. Or perhaps

they are like us or possibly even worse. However, given the available evidence, it is permissible and reasonable to *hope* that moral catastrophe is confined to our tiny space and that the remainder of the universe is devoid of the ills with which we are well acquainted. With this spatial hope, we need not look to another time to find consolation. Instead, we can take comfort in the thought that, at the current moment, nearly every speck of the universe is possibly free of moral ill.

Now one might ask why it matters that moral catastrophe is spatially limited. As with the temporal hope noted above, the thought here is not that the absence of moral ills elsewhere in the universe mitigates the badness of moral ills in our local space. Rather, the thought is that the universe may be substantially less bad than it might have been. Conceptually, there is no reason why the rest of the universe should not be teeming with species like our own, trafficking in aggressive war, slavery, ecological devastation, and so on. From our observations so far, this appears not to be the case and so the available evidence permits us to hope that the universe is for the most part free of many of the horrors with which it could have been populated. This is comforting, although it does nothing to alleviate the catastrophe on earth.

### Moral Pessimism

The views defended in this book seem to fit naturally with a very pessimistic outlook regarding human beings and our general immorality. In some ways, this is correct, but I need to provide some clarification. As far as I know, it is not impossible for human beings to become morally decent but this would require a revolutionary change. When we look to history, we consistently find war, torture, theft, genocide, and the rest. There is little about current affairs to suggest that a moral revolution is anything but extremely unlikely, for we find those same ills at the present time. Indeed, despite great advantages in wealth, technology, and other resources relative to earlier generations, we find little interest in a serious pursuit of justice, especially among those with the power and resources to make a substantial contribution to that project. Inaction with regard to climate change provides a good example of this. Despite their causal responsibility for the greenhouse gases driving dangerous climate change, wealthy countries have been unwilling to make short-term sacrifices to their own economic growth, even though that likely condemns future generations to substantial suffering, including many parties who themselves will be low emitters who do not benefit from past emissions. Given the choice between a marginal increase in short-term profits and justice for the future, humanity continues to choose the former. Describing that choice as greedy and unjust is clearly apt.

To be sure, there are ready explanations for such maneuvers. For example, politicians fear that supporting a carbon tax will hinder their

own political fortunes, and fossil fuel corporations are incentivized to pursue short-term profits. As we have seen, however, an explanation for some behavior is not a justification for that behavior. In keeping with the principle of sufficient reason, every human action or inaction, no matter how depraved, is subject to explanation. Whether some explicable action or inaction is morally justified is a further question. Now a common defense of such morally questionable behavior points out that, if some person refuses to engage in that behavior, someone else will instead. Suppose, for example, that some CEO suddenly develops a conscience, deciding to curb the pursuit of profit in order to avoid (say) exploitation of workers through low pay and unsafe conditions. This is difficult to imagine, of course, but it is even more difficult to imagine that the board and shareholders would consent to reduced profits. The ethical CEO, this bizarre specimen, would be quickly retired and replaced with someone who will pursue the company's mission with greater commitment. So it is not surprising that we do not find many CEOs who put morality over profit, as that is an excellent way to cease being a CEO. Even if one does recognize the immorality of exploiting workers, it is easy enough to rationalize this: I might as well remain silent about the exploitation, for seeking to redress it will only result in my replacement by someone else who will be silent about it. To be sure, this sort of thinking might explain why many of us tolerate certain kinds of moral ill, but does it suggest any justification for that toleration? I do not think so.

To see why, we should first note that such an attempted justification depends on the belief that there are others who will be willing to engage in some ethically questionable behavior. This is often true but that reveals something unfortunate about us. There is indeed a large stock of individuals who are ready to step in to replace counterparts who become hindered by ethical considerations. This fact alone invites a misanthropic attitude. We can imagine a world in which nearly all of us refuse to destroy the planet for short-term profit, to engage in torture, to grant cover for corrupt political allies, and so on. In such a world, it would not be viable to excuse one's own wrongdoing by claiming that, had someone refused to act wrongly, someone else would have done so instead. That claim would simply not be true in most cases. Of course, the actual world is a much worse place than the one just imagined but that is a contingent fact, dependent on the choices and actions of the human beings who populate this world.

This should help us see that the attempted justification is not plausible. It depends on the thought that one's action or omission can be morally justified, provided that the same action or omission would have occurred had that same person not been the agent of it. An implication of this is that one's participation in genocide is morally justified when it is the case that, had one declined, another participant would have stepped in to help

carry out the task. This cannot be right. Obviously, an individual's participation in genocide is wrong. The fact that one's contemporaries are morally corrupt is no justification for oneself to be so as well.

Once again, we must be careful to distinguish the question of justification from the question of explanation. It is often perfectly understandable why someone might choose to go along with immoral policies. Perhaps one risks losing her job or suffering persecution as a result of doing the right thing. Depending on the context of some situation, such explanations may be relevant to how the individual in question is viewed. One might, for example, feel some sympathy for a low-level bureaucrat who goes along with enacting a morally repugnant policy, yet one might harbor contempt for a powerful senator who does the same. Again, all of this is perfectly understandable, but it does not change the fact that the policy in question is repugnant, nor does it change the fact that helping to enact such a policy contributes to the world's moral ills. We should recall that my purpose in this book is to survey humanity as a whole, not to condemn specific individuals or apportion blame. The low-level bureaucrat who files paperwork does not deserve public ridicule, although perhaps the powerful senator deserves precisely that. At any rate, the question of blame is not my focus. If it turns out that the blameworthiness of some individual is mitigated by the context in which he finds himself, that does not change the fact (if it is one) that he helped enact a morally repugnant policy.

On the whole, I am pessimistic that humanity will substantially improve itself in a moral sense. While this is not impossible, as far as I know, our history and current trajectory give little cause for optimism. Indeed, the considerations of this section indicate why such improvement could be very difficult. It appears that being a morally decent individual is sometimes difficult, requiring possibly great sacrifices. Although some are willing to make those sacrifices, many are not, often for understandable reasons. What hope is there for moral progress when those who refuse to enable repugnant policies are easily replaced by others who will do the job?.

### **Misanthropic Anti-Natalism**

Philosophical arguments against human procreation usually depend on the claim that life will be bad for those who are brought into existence. This type of anti-natalism is "philanthropic" in nature, but there is also a "misanthropic" type of anti-natalist argument.<sup>2</sup> Philanthropic anti-natalists tend to argue that we have reason not to procreate because of the ills that would be suffered by the procreated person. Misanthropic anti-natalists tend to argue that we have reason not to procreate because of the ills that the procreated person would bring about. It is the latter type of anti-natalism that is of interest to us here.



I begin with the following rough sketch of an argument for misanthropic anti-natalism.

- 1) Future generations of humanity are very likely to resemble past generations in their general moral qualities.
- 2) Past generations of humanity have been morally bad.
- 3) Therefore, future generations are likely to be morally bad.
- 4) We have strong moral reasons to avoid bringing about persons who are likely to be morally bad.
- 5) Therefore, we have strong moral reasons to avoid procreation.

The first claim in this argument follows from the moral pessimism discussed above. Because there is little reason to think that humanity will make substantial moral progress in the future, it is very likely that future generations will be broadly similar to their ancestors in terms of their moral qualities. The second claim has been defended in previous chapters. When we look to history, we see a species that has frequently engaged in aggressive war, environmental destruction, genocide, mass cruelty against sentient beings, and various other horrors. That species is plausibly described as morally bad, whether from the point of view of common-sense morality or normative theory. The third claim, of course, follows from the first two taken in conjunction. The fourth claim has not been addressed in this book up to this point and thus will require further attention below. The fifth claim simply follows from the conjunction of (3) and (4).

To claim that we have “strong moral reasons” to avoid bringing about bad people is intentionally vague. In the strongest sense, it may be that we have an unconditional obligation to abstain from doing so. Alternatively, it may be that so abstaining is merely supererogatory or perhaps doing so is normally an obligation but one that is easily overridden by other reasons. I take no position on the precise nature of the moral reasons involved here, as that would require its own study. The more interesting question is why we should think that claim (4) is true. Presumably, few would deny that we have moral reasons to avoid creating conditions that are likely to bring about substantial moral ills. For example, normally we should not place other persons in circumstances that incentivize them to harm one another (e.g., due to inadequate resources). If claim (3) is true, then procreation will create such conditions by ensuring that morally bad people remain in the world, permitting the nightmare to continue. By procreating, we make it very likely that the future will contain the moral ills associated with humanity throughout its history. So we have moral reasons not to procreate. To illustrate this thought, imagine that humanity had voluntarily ceased procreating in 1800 and that the last remnants of the species died early in the twentieth century. We are well acquainted with the many moral horrors of the actual twentieth century, perpetrated by various individuals and collectives. Devoid of humans, an alternate

twentieth century would have been free of these atrocities. Although the exact form of humanity's future cannot be predicted, it is very likely to include various moral horrors, as has always been the case.

In objection to the argument, one might point out that ceasing procreation will also make the future devoid of the moral goods that humanity might have brought about. While this future, human-less world would be free of moral repugnance, it will also be devoid of whatever justice, virtue, and beneficence humans might have cultivated. This gives us a moral reason, the objection continues, to continue to procreate. In response, I admit that it is plausible to think that we have such a reason to bring about future generations but this is compatible with the argument I have offered here. Given the vagueness of claim (4) above, it is possible that we have strong moral reasons to avoid procreation while having distinct moral reasons to pursue procreation. This, of course, is not an uncommon occurrence in moral life. We sometimes find ourselves in apparently dilemmatic situations, as when we have moral reason to tell the truth but also moral reason to avert the harm that sharing this truth would entail. In considering what, all things considered, we ought to do, we must consider how the competing reasons stack up against one another.

The argument laid out above does allow for the possibility that, despite some strong moral reasons against it, we ought to pursue procreation after all. But I think this is unlikely, given the Asymmetry Thesis discussed in previous chapters. More precisely, the objection raised in the previous paragraph is likely to fail on account of that thesis. Recall that the Asymmetry Thesis holds, roughly, that the morally bad carries substantially greater moral weight than the morally good, even if the good and the bad are equal in other, non-moral respects. As we have seen, this fits very well with common-sense judgments. If we discover that some philanthropist is also a murderer, most of us will condemn that person wholesale. If it is pointed out that the benefits of this person's philanthropy (say, fighting malaria through the distribution of mosquito nets) greatly outweigh the harms of his murder, we are unlikely to revise our judgment of this person. On a standard cost-benefit analysis, it may well be true that this person's life brought about substantially more good than ill but that does not constitute a moral assessment, although consideration of harms and benefits might be relevant to such an assessment. Rather, for purposes of moral assessment, murder counts for more than even effective philanthropy. In short, there is not a moral symmetry between the good and the ill in this case. Something similar probably holds for the issue of anti-natalism. Although it is true that ceasing to procreate will rob the future of whatever good humanity might have delivered, it will also spare the future of whatever ills humanity might have concocted. From a moral point of view, and with the Asymmetry Thesis in mind, this might be a very favorable arrangement.

Obviously, any philosophical argument for anti-natalism, misanthropic or philanthropic, will go unheeded by virtually everyone, even persons who might find some argument for anti-natalism to be sound. That is no objection to my argument in this section, because I am not offering personal or policy advice, nor does the argument purport to predict the future. I am merely trying to state what is true, and I think it is true that we have moral reasons not to procreate, perhaps very strong reasons. Humanity will not voluntarily fade away, although it might do so involuntarily. People will continue to reproduce, and future generations will likely cause and allow horrifying moral ills. Like ourselves, they might judge past generations harshly for their misdeeds while discounting, ignoring, or rationalizing their own. It would be well to avert those future moral ills, and it is within our power to do so. As in so many other cases, we shall not act on our moral reasons but that fact is not a point against those reasons themselves.

### **Meliorism**

Assuming that cognitivist misanthropy and moral pessimism are both correct, we can reasonably ask why we should bother attempting to be moral at all. In particular, we might doubt that beneficent undertakings are worthwhile, given that the world is likely to remain a moral catastrophe. My answer to such questions is that the world can be more or less bad, and even catastrophes can be mitigated to some degree. Assuming that we are genuine moral agents with duties of beneficence (among other types), we have an obligation to attempt to improve the world. Given the bad state of our world, that amounts to an obligation to mitigate the ills that everywhere surround us. While I have expressed pessimism about the likelihood of humanity's moral improvement, I have not expressed pessimism about the efficacy of individuals' moral actions.

Broadly speaking, this amounts to a melioristic approach. Often associated with the American pragmatist tradition, meliorism is the view that the world can be improved through human efforts. This seemingly optimistic view might appear to be a poor fit for the rather pessimistic outlook taken in this book, but it is of interest here because a melioristic stance is non-utopian. Like the pragmatists, we need not believe that our society can be turned into a paradise, but it can be improved in significant ways. Importantly, we can ameliorate the ills of society, at least to some degree. For example, we might reduce various forms of inequality by changing policies that harm the poor or discriminate on the basis of race. Of course, as humans often do, we might instead enhance the ills of society, but the point here is that improvement is possible. Because it is possible, we cannot plausibly use cognitivist misanthropy or moral pessimism as an excuse for moral inaction. It is true that a moral utopia of justice and good will is very unlikely, but we nonetheless have an obligation to

mitigate the severity of humanity's moral catastrophe as well as an obligation to avoid contributing further to that catastrophe.

Let us take again the example of climate change. Despite our ability to do so, it is unlikely that humanity will do enough to avert substantial climate injustice and harm, given our slowness to action and the uninterest or outright hostility of those with power. In my experience, some people are gravely disheartened by this. In virtually every class I have taught that covers climate change, at least one student expresses the view that it is too late to address the problem, questioning why we should invest energy and resources into the issue. Although it is understandable why observers might be disheartened, it would be an enormous mistake to surrender when it comes to addressing climate change. Even granting that we will not avoid substantial injustice and harm, it remains within our practical power to limit the magnitude of that injustice and harm. A planet that is, on average, three degrees warmer than its pre-industrial counterpart is no doubt a dangerous one, but it is likely to be significantly less dangerous than one that is four, five, or six degrees warmer. It is true that humanity has been a malignant phenomenon to both itself and the rest of nature, which is a strong point in favor of a misanthropic outlook, but it remains an open question just how destructive we will allow climate change to become. On the melioristic approach I favor, although it would be fantastical to expect our species to act in admirable fashion on this issue, we have moral reasons to limit warming as much as possible because doing so is likely to mitigate the moral ills associated with climate change. Once again, there is nothing utopian or unrealistic about this. There are many examples from history of such improvement, including progress on environmental policy, civil rights, and much more. The world we inhabit is clearly a bad place, but it might have been worse if not for the efforts of some people. The same holds for the future. The world is likely to remain a bad place, but it will be more or less so, partly as a result of our own action or inaction.

I should note that the meliorism I advocate here is normative rather than predictive. Because it is possible to improve our society and because we have obligations of beneficence, we have moral reasons to attempt such improvement. There is no guarantee that we will make the attempt and even if we do there is no guarantee that it will succeed. Every attempted reform to society of which I am aware, no matter how obviously just (say, the abolition of slavery in the United States), has met with hostility and often brutal suppression. This is in keeping with the general badness of our species. Because of that, it would be naive to think that moral improvement is a sure prospect or even a likely one. I certainly do not believe in anything like "the march of progress." Nonetheless, it is obvious that, in a moral sense, some states of affairs are better than others. All else being equal, a world with average warming limited to three degrees will contain less climate injustice and harm than a world with

average warming of five degrees. The former is still a feasible target and so we have good moral reason to aim for it. Of course, it is not always easy to identify cases of improvement in an all-things-considered sense but that is an epistemic problem. Here I am only arguing that, though important in its own right, improvement is sometimes feasible and this provides a firm foothold for a melioristic stance. Accordingly, we cannot use the cognitivist misanthropy or moral pessimism I have defended as an excuse for quietism. Our moral obligations remain in effect despite the badness of the species to which we belong.

## Comedy

Philosophers in the Western tradition have paid little attention to comedy, focusing instead on tragedy. This is unfortunate, as comedy is the more appropriate genre for representing humanity. Ours is a ridiculous species, its members displaying every manner of stupidity, willing to harm ourselves and others in the pursuit of trivial ends, all while pretending to believe obvious falsehoods. This is not the appropriate subject matter for tragedy. It is comedy that specializes in exposing and lampooning the ridiculous. I will argue here that a comic representation of humanity has three primary virtues for the misanthropist. First, it accurately represents humanity. Second, it provides a kind of palliative to the terrible truth about humanity that I have defended in previous chapters. Third, comedic genres are permitted wider latitude than more serious genres when it comes to free expression, allowing for especially incisive and honest critique.

Regarding the first point, the subjects of literary tragedy, like Hamlet and Oedipus, are not fools. The events that come to the tragic figure occur not through any fault of her own but rather through misfortune, destroying even the wise and virtuous.<sup>3</sup> Although humanity surely experiences grave ills, many of those it brings upon itself. If we look around, what do we see? A species that is hurtling toward environmental disaster with little concern, has a great fondness for war with itself, allows a few venal rulers the power to destroy the world on a whim with nuclear weapons, purports to believe in supernatural phenomena for which there is no evidence, is easily distracted by tribalistic ephemera, casts itself into the grip of consumerism, and is generally unwilling to alleviate acute suffering if that should come at the cost of any inconvenience. The species runs a serious risk of destroying itself but, on the whole, has almost no interest in addressing that risk. We might call this tragic but it is really comical, albeit in a very dark sense. There is no plausible case to be made that humanity is the victim of circumstances beyond its control, that its suffering and possible destruction come despite its rationality and best efforts. Rather, we are self-important clowns and fools, harming one another and risking self-destruction for ends that

are, quite transparently, of trivial concern, such as a marginal increase in profit for the ultra-wealthy.

Comedy, especially in the form of satire, also specializes in deriding the self-importance of human beings. For instance, the notion that the United States Senate is “the world’s greatest deliberative body” warrants laughter and ridicule, given the absurdity of its proceedings. To take another example, it is no accident that dictators especially dislike being mocked, for they are deserving targets of mockery, given their grandiloquence and pathetic lust for political power. Are figures like Kim Jong-un, Donald Trump, and Jair Bolsonaro not utterly ridiculous, deserving of contempt and laughter? True, they are also dangerous individuals, responsible for the deaths of many innocent persons, but recognizing that fact is compatible with mockery of their absurd personas. Of course, the self-importance of human beings is not limited to politicians and dictators. Fortunately, tenured academics have little in the way of political power beyond their own institutions (and not much there, either), but it would be difficult to find a class of persons whose endeavors are both more trivial and more self-prized. When a full professor publicly excoriates a graduate student for allegedly misunderstanding some arcane point, it is certainly abusive but is also comical when one considers the abuser’s self-seriousness in the face of trivia. In a case like this, the victim deserves sympathy, but the abuser deserves (among other things) contemptuous and dismissive laughter. As with so many other human enterprises, academia deserves to be lampooned, as it is in the novels of David Lodge, for example.<sup>4</sup>

As to the second point, comedy provides a welcome relief from the horrors of our reality, even when it calls attention to those very horrors. This is consonant with a “relief theory” of laughter, according to which the function of laughter is to provide an outlet for “nervous energy.”<sup>5</sup> Take the United States’ war of aggression against Iraq in 2003, followed by its search for non-existent weapons of mass destruction. These events offer ample support for the misanthropic viewpoint. To a reasonable, informed, ethically conscious person, a serious consideration of them must eventually become unbearable. To be sure, many of us escape this problem through ignorance, rationalization, denial, and the like, but for those who wish to be serious rational and moral beings, such solutions are not available. Fortunately, comedy provides a kind of relief from the unbeatability of humanity’s misdeeds. In the case of the United States’ aggression against Iraq, outlets like *The Daily Show* provided a comedic critique of the incompetence and lies of the Bush administration, sometimes even making fun of the war’s Democratic enablers for their cowardice and opportunism. In this case of malfeasance, as in so many others, the villains happened to be fools as well, allowing us to engage in genuine laughter at their expense. Such comedic representation need not minimize the malfeasance in question, although it is possible that

comedy might be misused in that way. Instead, we might rely on comedy as a kind of therapeutic practice, allowing us to acknowledge the terrible truths about our species without being psychologically destroyed by that acknowledgment.

Finally, I observe that, compared with other types of communication, comedy is afforded an unusual license to free expression. In particular, standup comics are among the few who are socially permitted to be honest—with limits to that permission, of course. Some ideas that would appear shocking if they appeared in a staid publication are readily entertained at a comedy show, even supposing the readership of the former to be identical to the audience of the latter. This wide latitude allows for incisive critiques that are often not possible in other genres. Consider George Carlin's observations about the death penalty:

We made them both up. Sanctity of life and the death penalty. Aren't we versatile? [...] Death penalty doesn't mean anything unless you use it on people who are afraid to die. Like the bankers who launder the drug money. [...] Forget the dealers. You want to slow down that drug traffic, you got to start executing a few of these fucking bankers. White, middle-class, Republican bankers. And I'm not talking about soft, American executions. I'm talking about fucking crucifixion, folks. Let's bring back crucifixion. It's a form of capital punishment that Christians and Jews of America can really appreciate.<sup>6</sup>

In a short span, Carlin critiques several varieties of deep hypocrisy in his society and he does so in a memorable fashion. In other contexts, musing about the execution of middle-class bankers would not be tolerated for long, meeting with condemnation and marginalization, but such talk is accepted in the context of standup comedy. The notion of such executions is obviously not a serious proposal but instead a means by which to highlight the cruelty and hypocrisy of capital punishment. One might advance a very similar critique in non-comedic contexts, for example by laying out sound arguments against capital punishment in an academic monograph, but we can reasonably expect such an approach to have substantially less social impact than Carlin's routine.

In this closing chapter, I have suggested a few ways in which the misanthropist might attempt to live. In short, we can imagine such a figure to be hopeful thanks to the spatial and temporal isolation of humanity, pessimistic about the prospect for humanity's moral improvement, not given to pro-creation, melioristic in moral interactions with others, and appreciative of comedic critique of the species. This is a perfectly reasonable fashion in which to live. I am under no illusions, of course. Very few will have any interest in attempting to live in such a way but that by itself is not a criticism of the views defended in this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 Bertrand Russell, "Philosophy and Politics," in *Unpopular Essays* (London: Routledge, 1950), 19.
- 2 David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2008).
- 3 Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 4 See David Lodge, *The Campus Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
- 5 John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/>.
- 6 George Carlin, "The Death Penalty," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDO6HV6xTmI>.



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