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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To Annabell, the dog
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Acknowledgements
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
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
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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 catastro-
phe. 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 vio-
lence and oppression: war, slavery, genocide, bloody revolution, and the
like. These events are often presented via sanitized or exculpatory descrip-
tions, 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 cur-
rent 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 iden-
tifies 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 punch-
ing 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 practi-
cal 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.