Misanthropy without Humanity

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Misanthropy is the dislike or hatred of humanity as a whole. The term derives from the Greek μῖσος (hatred) and ἄνθρωπος (human). Representations of misanthropy, in literature and elsewhere, have frequently attributed it to one or both of two motivations. On the one hand, the misanthrope is often depicted as being ruled by *passion*, their intense, emotional abhorrence of humanity the result of personal affronts or misfortunes. Thus, the protagonist of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, overcome with resentment and loathing for the society that has abused his generosity and good will, retreats into the wilderness, wishing only ill on his fellows; in the closing lines of the play, his epitaph records the hope that "a plague consume you, wicked caitiffs left!" (Shakespeare 1959, V.4.71; a caitiff is a wretched, despicable individual). On the other hand, the misanthropist will be guided by unbending *principle*, their reasoned disdain deriving from a high-minded moral code. In Molière's *The Misanthrope*, Alceste's uncompromising insistence on honesty and plain-speaking, and his refusal to indulge the dissembling fops and fools around him, similarly lead to self-imposed exile: "Finding on every hand base flattery, / Injustice, fraud, self-interest, treachery. ... / Ah, it's too much; mankind has grown so base, / I mean to break with the whole human race" (Molière 1989, I.1). Timon is a tragic hero, Alceste comic, but they share the character flaw of excess: where Timon is over generous, Alceste is too honest. Both are represented as extreme, even pathological, in their ways, and misanthropy is cast as a misguided consequence or symptom of intemperate inclinations.

In 2012, a video game was released which offers players the opportunity actively to pursue Timon's curse on humanity. *Plague Inc.*, developed by Ndemic Creations for mobile devices, casts you as a pathogen: you can select from bacterium, virus, parasite, and a variety of other microorganisms. Played out over a world map, you must select a country in which to infect patient zero, and then evolve over time by

manipulating traits such as your rate and mode of transmission (in arid or humid countries, for instance, or by means of carriers such as birds, insects, rodents and livestock), your manifesting symptoms (coughing and sneezing, seizures, cysts and necrosis, amongst many others), and your resistance to environmental and therapeutic threats (extreme climates, antibiotics, et al.). Your objective, which it seems hard to describe as anything other than misanthropic, is to spread across the world and obliterate the human species, and your progress is recorded by means of ongoing tallies of those you have managed to infect and kill. As time goes on, you can take advantage of opportunities to increase contagion (mass bird migrations, or Olympic gatherings), but, once humans have become aware of you, must also contend with their attempts at containment (closed borders, or animal culls), and their increasingly vigorous research for a cure. Timing is crucial: evolve too fast, and you will kill off your hosts before you can infect the whole world; too slow, and they will have time to develop a cure. The game was subsequently expanded to include scenarios that allow you to play as specific diseases such as the Black Death, smallpox and swine flu, or in alternative worlds beset by increased global warming, financial crises or xenophobia, as well as with entirely fictional plague types such as the Neurax worm, which takes over its hosts' minds, and the Necroa virus, which turns the infected into zombies.

In 2014, *Plague Inc.* was further expanded with a new disease to tie-in with the rebooted *Planet of the Apes* film series. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Wyatt 2011) tells the story of the development of an experimental viral-based drug which repairs and augments cognitive ability but, though stable in chimpanzees and other apes, proves fatal to humans. Events lead to the escape both of a group of enhanced apes and of the deadly virus, and the film's closing scenes show the apes retreating into a forest refuge and the infection spreading rapidly around the world. With *Plague Inc.*'s 'Simian Flu' expansion, which was released to coincide with the *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* film sequel (Reeves 2014), you control a pathogen once again, but this time there are two strains. You must develop both the human variant, which is debilitating in the usual ways, but also the ape form, which enhances its hosts: the

virus can boost communication, social cohesion, understanding of human behaviour, and more. You also gain a degree of direct control over the apes themselves, and are able to place colonies, move groups around the world, and rescue captive apes from research labs. In effect, you play both apes and virus, pursuing independent but complementary objectives: escape from, and destruction of, humanity.

Fig x. *Plague Inc.* (Ndemic Creations, 2012)

So how is the misanthropy of *Plague Inc.* and its Simian Flu expansion represented? Are players encouraged to recoil from humanity as a matter of passion or principle, or something else again? In fact, no motivation for annihilating the human species is posited during the course of the game, and players are engaged to pursue their gruesome goal without emotional investment or underpinning rationale. The end of humanity is simply the game's strategic objective, and a quality of cool, abstract calculation pervades the gameplay. The game's graphics consist in the main of the simplified satellite image of the world, displaying only the most basic natural topography dotted with icons for harbours and airports, and a series of stylised diagrams of the pathogen's various traits; altogether absent are explicit representations of the intense misery and suffering and the devastating social collapse that would be the reality of the pandemics the game models. Indications of a plague's effects are provided only in the form of graphs and tables recording the rate of infection or the number of countries affected, and by means of terse, minimally informative news headlines and announcements. Further, the game does not in any way condemn or denounce the course that you are required to pursue. Unlike the characterisations of the misanthropes Timon and Alceste, there is no sense here that ill-wishes toward humanity are improper or misguided, or symptomatic of some unhealthy aberration. In *Plague Inc.*, misanthropy is pathological only in the most literal sense.

The term *pathology* refers both to the study of "diseases and abnormal anatomical and physiological conditions," and to the collective features and behaviour of such a

condition ('Pathology, N.' 2014). By colloquial extension, someone who is *pathological* will exhibit "a quality or trait to a degree considered extreme or psychologically unhealthy" ('Pathological, Adj. and N.' 2013), as did Timon and Alceste. The philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem points out, however, that establishing what counts as normal or pathological, and the relationship between these two states, is by no means a straightforward matter (Canguilhem 1989). What is normal cannot simply be what is most common, as is often supposed: an anomalous individual can be perfectly healthy and will, in effect, constitute its own norm, even if it doesn't fit some statistical average (Canguilhem 1989, 144; Lechte 1994, 15). Further, any particular state of an organism, even a pathological state, will be characterised by typical patterns of behaviour that are appropriate for an organism in that state, i.e. it will be governed by norms (Gutting 1989, 47). In fact, Canguilhem argues, "There is no objective pathology. Structures or behaviors can be objectively described but they cannot be called 'pathological' on the strength of some purely objective criterion" (Canguilhem 1989, 226). Ascertaining what is normal or pathological is not a matter of applying some absolute, universal rule. Rather, the whole question of what is normal or pathological is highly situated, and depends on the nature of the specific organism and its environment. In particular, it depends on that organism's lived experience. A living creature will value certain states over others: it will value those that enhance it and allow it to flourish over those that impede or work to eliminate it (Canguilhem 1989, 126–127; Gutting 1989, 47). "Living beings prefer health to disease" (Canguilhem 1989, 222), and resolving what is to be considered normal or pathological will always be a matter of such preference and evaluation. Canguilhem reminds us, in fact, that it is from the Latin *valere*, which means to be in good health, that the term *value* derives (Canguilhem 1989, 201). A healthy state, Canguilhem ultimately argues, is not to be equated with some abstract, generalised notion of what is normal, but is one in which an organism, be it bird, fox or amoeba, is capable of tolerating an environment's inconstancies, accidents and infractions. It is one in which a creature is able to adapt and adjust to new situations and circumstances, which is to say one in which it is able to function

according to new norms, indeed to institute new norms (Canguilhem 1989, 196–199; Gutting 1989, 47–48).

It seems fair to say that Timon and Alceste manifest extreme qualities that are unhealthy to them, and constitute, even according to Canguilhem's careful analysis, a form of pathology. Neither is able to tolerate the inconstancies, accidents and infractions with which they are beset, and both are compelled to withdraw from human society altogether. Timon, in fact, entirely fails to adapt to his new circumstances, with fatal consequences. What makes Timon and Alceste ill is humanity's failure to live up to their inflated expectations, to comply with the standards they believe should hold for all civilized society. As such, their frustration and fury is directed toward those they recognise and acknowledge as their own kind: "how far / From rational we sorry creatures are" says Alceste (Molière 1989, V.7), and "His semblable, yea himself, Timon disdains" (Shakespeare 1959, IV.3.22). Their hatred is, in truth, a form of self-hatred. And it is in this way that these conventional representations of misanthropy would have us grant that hatred of humanity is pathological: what could possibly be more unhealthy than to hate yourself? It is this self-defeating impulse that is ultimately the deviation or abnormality that determines the archetypal misanthrope's downfall. But this characterisation of misanthropy as a pathological state is itself, of course, an evaluation, a particular, prejudicial depiction of the misanthrope and the object of their disaffection. In construing an individual's self-love and their love of humanity as both equivalent and necessary, it casts humanity itself as the norm. It is, in short, an anthropocentric portrayal of misanthropy, or, better, what we might call an *anthroponormative* portrayal. We can see this most clearly if we look at the circumstances in which the term *misanthropy* is actually employed, and those in which it is not.

Though dictionary definitions of "misanthropy," focusing perhaps too closely on etymology, tell us simply that it is the hatred of humanity ('Misanthropy, N.' 2013), the word has in fact been used only of *humans* who express this loathing. Agent Smith's (Hugo Weaving) damning diatribe in *The Matrix* (Wachowski sibblings

1999), fuelled by a visceral revulsion from the human form that he has been required to adopt, spells out the reasons for the machines' war on humanity: unlike all other mammals, humans do not regulate their interactions with their environment, but instead multiply indefinitely until they have consumed everything around them, and then spread to another area. Human beings, Smith says, are a virus or disease: "You are a plague, and we are the cure" (Wachowski sibblings 1999, pt. 1.30:55–1.31:59). But despite the evident passion and principle, it would be inappropriate to describe Agent Smith as a misanthrope. He is a machine, and there is no element of *self*-loathing in his detestation. Similarly, in *Plague Inc.* neither the varied diseases working to wipe out humanity, nor the enhanced apes who shun it, can rightly be called misanthropic, given that these are inhuman agents and do not hate themselves.

Following Canguilhem, what makes viruses, parasites, funguses, bacteria and other microorganisms pathological is the fact that they impact on the lived experience of a particular human individual. The coughs and sneezes, seizures and skin lesions, abscesses and organ failures caused by a plague will impede, incapacitate and ultimately eliminate those individuals. A plague is pathological because it is evaluated as such from a particular perspective, a human perspective. But Agent Smith, the machine, has an altogether different assessment of what constitutes a plague, and the so-called Simian Flu actually enhances the apes it infects. *Plague Inc.*, with its cool, calculated gameplay, motivated by neither passion nor principle, posits alternatives to the human perspective, and institutes inhuman norms. You play not as humanity, struggling to remain healthy in the face of a changeable, hostile environment, but as the plague itself, or as the apes, constantly evolving and transforming yourself to outwit and overcome your human opponent. For its duration, the game requires you, in short, to invest in the values, in the evaluations and preferences, of a virus or parasite or ape. As a consequence, despite first appearances, *Plague Inc.* is not, properly speaking, misanthropic, at least as that term has traditionally been used. Rather, it provides for non-anthropocentric modes of opposing humanity, rejecting the pathologisation of the misanthrope and

normalisation of the human. It intimates, in fact, that anthroponormative self-identification is itself a form of investment and valuation rather than a necessary and inevitable species-identity, and it entertains the possibility of a misanthropy without humanity.

Thanks
Steve Baker, Gary Gutting, Jane Harris, Sarah Irons, Kurt Lampe, Robert McKay, Richard Tyler.

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