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Introduction

SHAFTESBURY'S *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* was one of the most important philosophical works of the first part of the eighteenth century. It played a momentous role in turning European thought away from the negative and toward the positive—in nature, religion, morality, and art.

In the seventeenth century, many thought wilderness was grotesque and frightful. Shaftesbury argued that all aspects of nature unaltered by human activity are part of a singular beautiful system. It subsequently became increasingly common to cherish wild nature as the pinnacle of beauty.

In the seventeenth century, many thought the essence of religion was obedience to a God with the terrible power to punish. Shaftesbury argued that true religion consists of disinterested love of God's beautiful mind. It subsequently became increasingly common to place love of God's goodness, rather than fear of God's wrath, at the center of true religion.

In the seventeenth century, many took morality to be a set of commands designed to combat human sin and selfishness. Shaftesbury argued that virtue is an internal beauty that is the truest expression of human nature. It subsequently became increasingly common to identify morality with a beautiful soul attuned to the good of humanity.

In the seventeenth century, in Britain at least, visual arts were often considered mere physical productions of questionable moral status. Shaftesbury argued that appreciation of beautiful art is of exquisite value. It subsequently became increasingly common to glorify artists and their creations.

These shifts away from the negatives of fear and hostility toward the positives of admiration and love involved the ideas of numerous early

modern thinkers. But none played a bigger role than Shaftesbury's philosophy of beauty.

For twenty-first-century readers expecting a typical philosophical text, however, coming to *Characteristicks* can be a strange experience. *Characteristicks* starts with an emphatic denunciation of prefaces—an anti-preface. It then dives into “A Letter,” which begins like an actual letter and goes on to describe the writer's recent visit to a London meetinghouse, where he witnessed a religious fanatic speak in tongues. We then enter an epistolary essay on “wit and humour,” in which the writer assures his correspondent that he was serious the other day when he praised ridicule; a “soliloquy” that gives advice to advice-givers; a “rhapsody” that begins in a city park, moves to a stately home, and concludes in the wild woodlands; a series of “miscellaneous reflections” that are almost post-modern in their self-referentiality.

Shaftesbury's purpose in deploying these literary techniques was to make his ideas accessible to the educated readership of his day. But on a contemporary reader they can have exactly the opposite effect; they can be off-putting. My goal in this book is to elucidate for contemporary readers the great intellectual achievement of Shaftesbury's philosophy of beauty, as well as reveal the vexatious beauty of Shaftesbury's writing.

In the rest of this introduction, I recount Shaftesbury's life, the rise and fall of his philosophical influence, and the challenges and rewards of reading his characteristic prose. In the chapters that follow, I explain his views of the beauty of nature and God (chapter 1), of virtue (chapter 2), of art in general (chapter 3), of painting (chapter 4), and of writing (chapter 5).

Life

“Shaftesbury” was his title.¹ His name was Anthony Ashley Cooper, which was also the name of his father and grandfather. When he was born in 1671, his grandfather was soon to become the first Earl of Shaftesbury, and his father was Lord Ashley. When his grandfather died in 1683, his father became the second Earl of Shaftesbury and he became Lord Ashley. When his father died in 1699, he became the third Earl of Shaftesbury. If I didn't think it could have seemed affected and cause classification confusion, I might have called him “Cooper” throughout this book. Cooper was always his name. Cooper might have been more effective at evoking a singular writer rather than any of the roles he occupied. And Cooper suggests that one of his ancestors was a craftsman, a maker of barrels, which is, as we'll see in chapter 2, a job interestingly attuned to his concept of beauty. That

said, if there was a craftsman-ancestor, he would have had to have lived a very long time ago. From at least the fourteenth century, both sides of his family had been landed gentry, knights, and baronets.

His grandfather was named first Earl of Shaftesbury in 1672, when he was serving as Lord Chancellor and was one of the most powerful politicians in the country. In the years that followed, his grandfather opposed the Stuart monarchy, which he believed was leading to Catholic and absolutist rule. His grandfather also helped found the Whig Party and advanced the Exclusion Bill, through which he sought to expand the power of Parliament and ensure a Protestant succession to the throne. As a result, he was arrested in 1677 and imprisoned in the Tower of London until 1678. In 1681, he was arrested for high treason and sent again to the Tower. The treason charge was dropped, but, fearing further persecution from Royalist Tories, he fled in 1682 to Amsterdam, where he died in 1683.

When Anthony—the one who would grow up to be a philosopher—was four years old, he was sent to live with his grandfather, at St. Giles's House in Dorset. John Locke was his grandfather's right-hand man, and it was Locke who oversaw Anthony's early education. Anthony and Locke had great affection for each other, in the way of a close nephew-uncle relationship. Anthony gained from Locke a philosophical training of uncommon value, even if he would eventually come to disagree ardently with many of Locke's ideas.

After his grandfather died, Anthony (now Lord Ashley), age 12, was sent to private boarding school. He loathed it. Part of the reason seems to have been that students from Tory families opposed to his grandfather inflicted on him ridicule and scorn. But he had other reasons as well. He thought the behavior of the student body was boorish and decadent, and that the educational quality was dreadful. As someone who cherished his solitude and privacy, he also just seemed to be fundamentally ill-suited to the intensely communal life of a boarding school.

It's not clear how many years he spent at boarding school. But he had certainly left by 1687, when, shortly before his sixteenth birthday, he began his grand tour of Europe. His companions were Daniel Denoune, an excellent and admired tutor, and John Copley, one of his closest friends. His first stop was an extended visit with John Locke in the Netherlands, where Locke had fled to avoid Tory persecution. Then to Paris. Then, for the longest period, to cities throughout Italy. On the trip back north he visited Vienna, Prague, Dresden, Berlin, and Hamburg. The time he spent on his grand tour—especially in Italy—inspired in him a deep and abiding love of classical culture and art. On his trip through the

Alps and in scenic spots throughout Italy, he was also moved by the beauty of natural landscapes.

He returned to England in 1689. His father suffered from a degenerative malady that made him a virtual invalid, so, at age 18, he assumed many of the responsibilities that might have been expected to fall to his father. He did not enjoy it. There were painful family disputes. There was illicit burnbeating and hunting on his family's land, which he had to try to stop. There were legal battles with neighbors, whom he suspected of being encouraged by Tory enemies of his grandfather. His handling of these matters was characterized both by a powerful sense of duty that led him to work assiduously to address the problems and by an equally powerful animosity toward those who caused the problems. In years to come he would develop a more sanguine attitude toward humanity, but in his late teens and early twenties he bore prodigious contempt for people both near and far. He did write approvingly of the honesty and ability of laborers, and of the natural goodness of native Americans, but even then, his emphasis seemed to be on the contrasting mendacity of the upper classes and the stupid cruelty of English colonists.² He chafed at the public and social roles he was expected to occupy.

Even during the period in his twenties when he was at his most misanthropic, however, he had close friends about whom he cared deeply. In a letter from 1705 he wrote, "I never yet Lov'd any Soul in any degree that I could afterwards cease to love, or love but in a Less . . . In Friendship I must abide the Choice. Friends I have thus taken, are with Me *for better for wors* . . . I may loose Friends but they can never loose me."³ He was in his thirties when he wrote that letter, but the sentiment had been and always would remain true of him. His friendships were for him of the utmost importance and the greatest joy.

In his late teens and early twenties, he was also reading, writing, and talking about philosophy. Although he and Locke interacted less as the years went by (to Locke's disappointment), the two did continue their philosophical discussions, by letter and in person. When he visited Locke, their conversation was joined by Damaris Cudworth (Lady Masham), at whose Essex estate Locke spent the final years of his life. At least by 1694, he had written "an Essay of my own," which was probably an early draft of the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*.⁴ When Locke sent him the second edition of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke asked to see a copy of his essay, but he refused, explaining that he "should be verry sorry to be Oblig'd for an Agreeable Present made mee, to Return so Bad a one as a Bundle of such Thought as mine."⁵ One can only imagine what it would

be like to be asked, at age 23, to exchange an unfinished manuscript with the author of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

One of the unpleasant responsibilities he assumed from his father in the 1690s was participation in the administration of the Carolina Colony. He identified egregious mismanagement there, and was incensed by the ill treatment of the native Americans. But the Carolina Colony was also one of the most significant sites of African slavery, of which he would have been aware, and I know of no indication that he objected to that. Several decades later, Francis Hutcheson would use moral ideas with deep roots in Shaftesbury's philosophy of human nature to condemn African slavery. But as far as I know, he himself never drew that connection. There is, to my knowledge, no evidence that he was anything but complicit in African slavery in the colony he helped oversee.⁶

In 1695, he was elected a member of Parliament, where he served until 1698. During his time in Parliament, he promoted a bill to guarantee rights to defendants in treason cases (the charge of treason against his grandfather undoubtedly influencing this course of action). He supported a bill that restricted the franchise and excluded the non-affluent from running for office. He was generally a supporter of King William, but he also was in favor of disbanding William's standing army once the war with the French ended in 1697.

Because of his grandfather, he would always be closely associated with the Whig Party. And he certainly hewed throughout his life to certain Whig commitments, such as Protestant succession, religious toleration, and the power of Parliament. But he didn't toe the party line. As he saw it, he followed his principles, wherever they led, regardless of party.⁷ As a result, he was the object of "constant criticism . . . for his lack of party spirit."⁸ In 1696, he complained that there was a "bitter sentence" passed on him every day because he acted on principle rather than obedience to party. Tories never warmed to him when he sided with them. And the Whigs he disagreed with, according to his sometime-collaborator John Toland, "cou'd not endure him." Toland provides a vivid description of how Apostate-Whigs maligned him for his departure from strict party loyalty:

They gave out that he was splenetick and melancholy; whimsical and eaten up with vapors: whereas he was in reality just reverse, naturally cheerful and pleasant, ever steady in his Principles, and the farthest in the world from humorsom or fantastical. But becoming an Eyesore to them, as being an eternal reproach upon their conduct . . . they gave out that he was too bookish, because not given to Play, nor assiduous at

Court; that he was no good Companion, because not a Rake nor a hard Drinker, and that he was no Man of the World, because not selfish nor open to Bribes.⁹

In addition to providing some indication of his political status in the late 1690s, this letter offers a glimpse of what he was like as a person. There may have been disagreement about whether he was splenetic and melancholy, or cheerful and pleasant; my guess is that he behaved in ways that lent support to both assessments. But it seems that both sides would have agreed that he preferred books to “play,” that he did not enjoy court events, that he was not a rake or a big drinker. The letter also suggests that the social dynamic he found at Parliament echoed the one he had encountered at boarding school.

When Parliament was in session, he lived in Chelsea rather than Dorset. The smoke of the city damaged his health, causing or exacerbating respiratory illness. He also developed eye problems and frequent fevers. These health issues forced him, in 1698, to retire from Parliament, withdraw from many other of his responsibilities, and move to the Dutch city of Rotterdam. Recovering his health was certainly the principal reason. But the move also satisfied his long-standing desire for solitude, privacy, and the time and space to think, read, and write. Though his health might have forced it, he couldn’t have been entirely disappointed to have put some distance between himself and the political and familial entanglements of the previous nine years.

The Netherlands was an intellectual hotbed at the time, and he conversed regularly with other thinkers and writers. Among them was Pierre Bayle, who would become his good friend and one of his most important philosophical interlocutors. In a letter he wrote after Bayle’s death, he says that Bayle’s skepticism was the most valuable test for his thoughts, and that his own ideas dramatically improved as a result of Bayle’s scrutiny, debate, and argument.¹⁰ “Whatever Opinion of mind stood not the Test of his piercing Reason, I learnt by degrees either to discard as frivolouse, or not to rely on, with that Boldness as before: but That which bore the Tryall I priz’d as purest Gold.”¹¹ He also says that while “different opinions” in religion and philosophy “usually create not only dislike but Animosity and Hatred,” it “was far otherwise between Monsieur Bayle & my Self.”¹² “[T]he continuall differences in Opinions and the constant disputes that were between us, serv’d to improve our Friendship.”¹³ He could not have hoped for anyone better than Bayle with whom to discuss philosophy.

There's some evidence that he had a notion of living the kind of life of the mind he had in Rotterdam for the rest of his days.¹⁴ But various people in England persuaded him that responsibilities at home required his urgent attention. As well, his father was very sick. He returned to England in the middle of 1699, after living away for nine months. In November, his father died at age 46, and he assumed the Earldom.

In the years that followed, Shaftesbury saw to many matters of family and estate. He oversaw the important business of arranging marriages for his sisters. He set up a school, and helped fund education for poor children in his parish, as well as initiate action against those who were not caring properly for their children. He supervised the running of the large Shaftesbury household. He was landlord to the tenants on the family land in Dorset, working hard to manage rents, hunting, woodlands, and rabbit warrens. He was particularly attentive to how farming on his property was done, with a keen interest in land usage and horticulture. He bought a house near London, which he renovated and decorated. He commissioned artists to execute statues and family portraits. He built a "Philosopher's Tower" near St. Giles. He took a leading role in designing the gardens for his homes.

And he continued to be involved in politics. As Earl, he served in the House of Lords. He also worked to elect Whigs to Parliament, especially in the 1701 election. Whatever the difficulties of his relationship with some elements of the Whig Party, Shaftesbury never wavered in his hostility to certain Tories. In a letter discussing the 1701 election, he says that he had "the strongest Obligation on Earth" to "act with vigour" to defeat "the most inveterate of the Advers Party," and explains how pleased he is that "my Brother & his Friend" now sit in Parliament "instead of 2 inveterate Tories."¹⁵ At about this time, King William asked Shaftesbury to serve as Secretary of State. Shaftesbury declined. He was determined to be "active for the support of [William's] Government & for the Establishment of the Protestant Succession."¹⁶ But he "resolv'd absolutely against taking any Employment at Court," thinking he "could best serve Him & my Country" behind the scenes.¹⁷

But when William died and Anne assumed the throne in 1702, Shaftesbury's political fortunes soured. Anne viewed him with suspicion. Shortly after her succession, he was stripped of the vice-admiralty of Dorset. The position was largely ceremonial, but it had been in the Shaftesbury family for generations, and it signaled the hostility of Anne's government. Tories were also threatening to punish him for his role in the parliamentary elections. At the same time, his health took a significant turn for the worse. He once again began to crave privacy and solitude. To top it off, his estate was

in financial difficulty. His response to all these problems was to close down his Dorset household as much as possible, keeping only minimal staff, and withdraw to his home near London. That year he wrote: “My Efforts in time of Extremity, for this last year or two, have been so much beyond my Strength in every respect, that not only for my Mind’s sake (which is not a little, to one that loves Retirement as I do) but for my Health’s sake & on the Account of my private Circumstances I am oblig’d to give myself a Recess.”¹⁸ Apparently, however, the home near London did not offer the comfort, privacy, and other recuperative qualities Shaftesbury sought. He soon began planning another trip to the Netherlands. In August 1703, he traveled again to Rotterdam.

Shaftesbury engaged in far less socializing during his second period in Rotterdam than during the first. He conversed regularly with Bayle and hardly anyone else. He wanted to conserve energy, to restore his health. He was determined to be frugal, to remedy his estate’s financial situation. But he was also concentrating hard on writing philosophy. It seems likely that his energies were focused on *The Sociable Moralist*, which was completed by 1704. A revised version of that work, renamed *The Moralists*, would become central to his thought as a whole.

Shaftesbury returned to England in the summer of 1704. Unfortunately, his ship hit disastrously bad weather, and his respiratory illness flared dangerously, curtailing his activity for many months. But by the end of 1705, he was once again fully in charge of family and estate. In the several years that followed, he went to London occasionally, and still had his hand in political endeavors (albeit surreptitiously; he now sought to conceal his influence more than ever). But most of the time he lived in Dorset, where there were as many domestic issues to deal with as there had been before his second retreat. He also made time for philosophy. He completed his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* by September 1707, and turned *The Social Enthusiast* into *The Moralists* at about the same time. *Sensus Communis* appeared in 1709.

Shaftesbury felt keenly the importance of continuing the family line. But he did not want to get married. In 1708 he tried to pressure his younger brother Maurice into doing it. When that failed, he saw no choice but to look for a wife himself. “My only Brother,” he wrote in a letter, “refuses to think of Marriage & leaves the heavy part upon me.”¹⁹

Shaftesbury’s first courtship was to a beautiful woman from a rich family. It did not succeed. He then resolved, he writes in 1709, to settle for “a Breeder out of a good Family, with a right Education, befitting a mere Wife, and with no advantages but simple Innocence, Modesty, and

the plain Qualities of a good Mother.”²⁰ The person he chose was Jane Ewer, the youngest daughter of a family that was “well born,” although not wealthy, and of “worthy, virtuouse and good Parent’s.”²¹ He had not seen the Ewer daughters for eight or nine years, but he had this information about them: “They are a healthy sound Breed, and the Youngest (they tell me) is the strongest Constitution of all, well proportion’d, and of good make. No Beauty.”²² He made the arrangements for the marriage. When everything with the Ewer family was settled, he finally met Jane. With joy, he immediately changed his tune. Writing to the same correspondent, he says, “But I can now tell you (which I cou’d not before) that I have seen the Young Lady and I protest I think she is injur’d in having been represented to me as *no Beauty* for so I writ you word before I had seen her . . . [L]et me tell you I think I was wrong when I said from common Report, that she was *no Beauty*. For I think her a *very great Beauty*.”²³ They married in August 1709. All the evidence suggests it was a happy union for both of them. (As it happened, younger brother Maurice got married shortly after Shaftesbury did, in a match Shaftesbury severely disapproved of.)

Upon getting married, Shaftesbury sold his house in Chelsea and moved with Jane to a new home in Reigate, south of London. Hoping to put the family finances on a stable footing, he scaled back the household at St. Giles’s House in Dorset. He and Jane spent almost all of 1710 in Reigate.

Shaftesbury was now less involved in politics than he had been in previous years. But Robert Harley, the Lord High Treasurer and most powerful politician of the period, thought Shaftesbury’s influence was still important enough to warrant seeking his support. Seventeen-ten was also the year the Anglican clergyman Henry Sacheverell was put on trial for the fiery anti-Whig sermon he had delivered the previous Fifth of November, and Shaftesbury fully endorsed the resulting governmental action against Sacheverell, although he was not directly involved in it. One of the few times Shaftesbury left Reigate in 1710 was to travel to Dorset to deal with local ferment caused by the Sacheverell affair.

Shaftesbury’s main focus at the time was philosophy. He completed *Soliloquy* in 1710, and then dedicated himself to forming that and his most important previous writings into a single unified work. He revised several other essays, and made especially extensive changes to the *Inquiry*. He wrote what he called “Miscellaneous Reflections,” over 50,000 words of commentary that connected and extended the ideas of the other essays. He added footnotes, with copious cross-references to emphasize the consistency of thought throughout. He compiled an index, which is noteworthy because at the time almost no books written in English had indexes.

Shaftesbury must have devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to such efforts. It seems that he had now decided that his greatest legacy would be his philosophy, as delivered in a magnificent book. He chose for the title of his magnum opus: *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*.

Shaftesbury's devotion to philosophy can also be seen as making a virtue out of necessity. His poor health left him increasingly unfit for other activities. Toward the end of 1710, his health was so poor that it was decided that his survival depended on leaving England for the more salubrious climate of Italy. His wife Jane was pregnant, however, and they could not leave until she gave birth.

His son was born in February 1711. In the months that followed, Shaftesbury shepherded *Characteristicks* into publication, while also seeing to the complex arrangements for the trip to Italy. The three-volume *Characteristicks* came out at the beginning of June. His son was brought to stay at the home of Shaftesbury's sister Anne. Then, at the end of June, Shaftesbury and Jane—along with Shaftesbury's secretary, Jane's two companions, six servants, and four hundred pounds of luggage—embarked on the grueling trip to Naples.

On the day of departure, Shaftesbury wrote a note telling himself that a firm, uncompromising choice had to be made between philosophy and politics. He had to be “wholly *in*” one of them, and “wholly *out*” of the other.²⁴ He must not try to “engage anew in both Parts.” And philosophy was what he resolved to do, with a determination to resist any distraction from the other, even in the unlikely event that he was “restor'd” to health. More than four months after leaving England, in November 1711, his party finally arrived in Naples. Once there, Shaftesbury largely kept to his resolution. Although significantly (and sometimes drastically) limited by poor health, he conversed with Napolitano intellectuals, he cultivated his interests in painting and sculpture, he patronized the arts, and he worked on his philosophy.

One of his priorities was a second edition of *Characteristicks*. The most conspicuous new element was to be a set of engraved illustrations, every detail of which Shaftesbury sought to control completely. In an outstanding article from 1974, Felix Paknadel writes, “[H]is notes and correspondence dealing with them are much more abundant than those about the revision of the text of *Characteristics* . . . [T]hese illustrations were not for him mere ornaments. They were to convey in another medium the main points of his written work, to ‘instil some thoughts of virtue and honesty, and the love of liberty and mankind.’ They were an ‘underplot’ working in

perfect harmony with the main plot.”²⁵ Shaftesbury was also meticulous—obsessive, even—about other aspects of the book’s appearance, sending the printer voluminous instructions about all aspects of layout and ornamentation. The result was, according to his biographer Robert Voitle, a strikingly “beautiful book at a time when English books were about the ugliest produced anywhere.”²⁶

Shaftesbury was also engaged in new writing. His goal was to produce a second major work, which would be called *Second Characters, or the Language of Forms*. The topic would be fine art and what we now call aesthetics. It “was planned as a collection of four treatises . . . to be linked by cross-references and thus interconnected in the same way as the essays comprising his *Characteristicks*.”²⁷ Shaftesbury completed two of the four treatises: a treatise on painting, and a discussion of public support for the arts. The third planned treatise was to be an analysis of a mythological image that represented all of human life; as far as we know, Shaftesbury did not make a significant start on that one. The fourth treatise, projected to develop a fundamental theory of the visual arts, was never completed, although there are enough notes, sketches, and fragments to indicate what Shaftesbury had in mind.

Shaftesbury died in Naples in February 1713. His body was sent to St. Giles in Dorset and buried there in June. Jane returned to England to raise their son. The beautiful revised edition of *Characteristicks* appeared in 1714.

The Rise and Fall of Shaftesbury’s Influence

In the first half of the eighteenth century, Shaftesbury was a giant on the philosophical scene. Astell (1709),²⁸ Mandeville (1723),²⁹ Balguy (1726),³⁰ and Berkeley (1732)³¹ all wrote books largely devoted to refuting him. The title of Hutcheson’s first major publication (1725) was: *An Inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue; in two treatises. In which the principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain’d and Defended*. In his introduction to *Fifteen Sermons* (1726), Joseph Butler singled out Shaftesbury for extended discussion (arguing that although his theory gets some important things right, it ultimately fails because it does not account for the authority of the reflective moral capacity).³² A host of other writers also published refutations and defenses of Shaftesbury in this period. Harris suggests that reading Shaftesbury was perhaps the single most important event of Hume’s early intellectual life.³³ Rivers maintains that Shaftesbury was “the key influence on Scottish moral philosophy in the

1720s and 30's."³⁴ Den Uyl says that Shaftesbury was "second only to Locke in terms of influence during the eighteenth century."³⁵

Eleven editions of the three-volume *Characteristicks* were published by 1790. Its influence extended beyond philosophy. Along with Joseph Addison, Shaftesbury paved the way for a new approach to English writing, pioneering a kind of polite and entertaining essay aimed at the educated classes.³⁶ Shaftesbury was a significant influence on eighteenth-century British poetry. According to Moore, his view of morality directly inspired James Thomson in the writing of his *Seasons* (1276–1730); Mark Akenside, whose *Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744) "versifies" *Characteristicks* in an attempt to defend Shaftesbury from the attacks of Mandeville; and James Harris, who renders Shaftesbury's theory into verse in *Concord* (1751).³⁷ Moore claims that Shaftesbury's influence—"not only in idea, but also in phrasing"—can be found in Fielding, Lyttelton, Armstrong, and a host of others.³⁸ Robertson claims that Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* is "in large part pure Shaftesbury filtered through Bolingbroke."³⁹ Shaftesbury influenced the writings of Yeats,⁴⁰ Burke,⁴¹ and Wordsworth.⁴²

Shaftesbury's influence was also immense on the continent, especially in Germany. Boyer writes, "Shaftesbury shaped eighteenth-century German thought to a degree that can now seem quite astonishing."⁴³ Leibniz said that Shaftesbury was an "excellent and sublime" mind who went even "beyond Plato and Descartes." Leibniz bestowed exorbitant praise on almost every part of *Characteristicks*, maintaining that "There are few works in which soundness and elegance are so well combined."⁴⁴ Leibniz was particularly impressed by *The Moralists*, which he called "the most sublime philosophy" whose "grandeur and beauty" of ideas "ravished me and brought me to a state of ecstasy."⁴⁵ Shaftesbury was instrumental to the philosophical development of Mendelssohn, Hamann, Jacobi, and Wieland.⁴⁶ Lessing's aesthetics bear strong connections to Shaftesbury's views on art.⁴⁷ Herder called Shaftesbury "the beloved Plato of Europe" and the "virtuoso of humanity."⁴⁸ Goethe's views of nature bear clear marks of Shaftesbury's influence.⁴⁹ Shaftesbury's ideas helped shape the thought of Schiller and Schleiermacher.⁵⁰ In France, Voltaire called Shaftesbury "one of the boldest of English philosophers."⁵¹ Montesquieu ranked him as one of the four greatest poets, along with Plato, Malebranche, and Montaigne.⁵² Diderot published a translation of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue*.⁵³

In Great Britain, however, Shaftesbury's star dimmed considerably in the second half of the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury's writing had always been polarizing. Brown wrote in 1751:

It has been the Fate of Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, beyond that of most other Books, to be idolized by one Party, and detested by another. While the first regard it as a Work of *perfect Excellence*, as containing every Thing that can render Mankind wise and happy; the latter are disposed to rank it among the most pernicious of Writings, and brand it as one continued Heap of *Fustian Scurrility*, and *Falsehood*.⁵⁴

The literary critic Horatio Walpole wrote in a work published in 1806:

Few writings have attracted more attention, or excited more discussion, than the works of this noble author; who has been applauded and condemned with equal extravagance . . . For a considerable time he stood in high repute as a polite writer, and was regarded by many as the standard of elegant composition: his imitators, as well as admirers were numerous, and he was esteemed the head of the school of sentimental philosophy. Of late years he has been as much depreciated as he was before extolled, and in both cases the matter has been carried to an extreme.⁵⁵

A century after Brown's assessment of the reaction to Shaftesbury, and a half century after Walpole's, Shaftesbury's thought had drifted far from the center of the philosophical conversation. In the 1720s and '30s, it was very likely that a British philosopher concerned with morality and religion would at some point reckon seriously with Shaftesbury. By 1861, John Stuart Mill could develop philosophical views that overlap considerably with those expounded in *Characteristicks* without any indication of having given Shaftesbury any significant thought at all.

Shaftesbury's style was a major factor in his fall from philosophical grace. The way he wrote, which so many in his own day found enchanting, did not age well. Representative of this attitude is a 1758 letter the poet Thomas Gray writes to a friend who "cannot conceive how Lord Shaftesbury came to be a Philosopher in vogue."⁵⁶ Among the reasons Gray gives for Shaftesbury's baffling popularity is that Shaftesbury was "vain," that he "seemed always to mean more than he said," and that "men are very prone to believe what they do not understand." Shaftesbury thought it was "graceful, half to cover and half conceal the mind," but "an interval of about forty years has pretty well destroyed the charm." Gray accused Shaftesbury of writing with a coronet on his head.

Adam Smith's assessment was equally negative. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith deigns to mention Shaftesbury only once, in passing, despite the significant similarities between their views.⁵⁷ Smith does

discuss Shaftesbury in his university lectures on rhetoric. But there he is critical to the point of dismissiveness, using Shaftesbury as an example of stylistic failure. Shaftesbury, Smith says, is a “much inferior” writer.⁵⁸ His style leads him “frequently into a dungeon of metaphorical obscurity.”⁵⁹ His modes of expression “often become so obscure that their meaning is not to be discovered without great attention and being altogether awake.”⁶⁰ Sometimes Shaftesbury “designs to banter and laugh at his adversary,” but he seldom manages to pull it off: “he hardly ever makes us laugh, only in two places in the whole *characteristics*.”⁶¹ Other times Shaftesbury “is disposed to be in a Rapture,” but with no greater success, his attempts “always unbounded, overstretcht, and unsupported by the appearance of Reason.”⁶²

De Quincy, more succinctly, rated Shaftesbury “the most absolute and undistinguished pedant that perhaps literature has to show.”⁶³

Reading Characteristics

Annoyance with Shaftesbury’s style is understandable. The problem is not that his writing is turgid or dense. It’s that it can often seem perversely indirect, overly elaborate, meretricious. Cogent ideas sometimes appear in danger of being strangled by pomposity and cleverness.

But *Characteristicks* is, nonetheless, well worth the effort. I’ll try to make that case in the chapters to come. At several points, I’ll discuss his style, explaining why Shaftesbury wrote the way he did. I’ll explain how he intended for the literary aspects to serve philosophical purposes, which we can identify by locating his different authorial voices and metaphoric flights of fancy within the larger context of his thought as a whole. First, though, let’s look at several examples of passages from *Characteristicks* that Gray, Smith, and De Quincey might have had in mind when criticizing him.

Here’s a typical passage from the third volume of *Characteristicks*.

I have often known *Pretenders to Wit* break out into admiration, on the sight of some raw, heedless, unthinking Gentleman; declaring on this occasion, That they esteem’d it the happiest Case in the World, “Never to think, or trouble one’s Head with *Study* or *Consideration*.” This I have always look’d upon as one of the highest *Airs of Distinction*, which the self-admiring Wits are us’d to give them-selves, in publick Company. Now the *Echo* or *Antiphony* which these elegant Exclaimers hope, by this Reflection, to draw necessarily from their Audience, is, “That they themselves are over-fraighted with this Merchandize of

Thought; and have not only enough for *Ballast*, but such a *Cargo* over and above, as is enough to sink 'em by its Weight." (C 3.183–184)*

This prose would not delight Strunk and White. But when we expend the energy necessary to parse it, we see that it succeeds at the worthwhile task of nailing the phenomenon of the humblebrag. It describes a person who is apparently disparaging himself for being too reflective, but who in actuality is boasting of great intellect.

Here's another bit of prose I wouldn't call exactly pellucid:

'Tis esteem'd the highest Compliment which can be paid a *Writer*, on the occasion of some new Work he has made publick, to tell him, "That he has undoubtedly *surpass'd* HIMSELF." And indeed when one observes how well this Compliment is receiv'd, one wou'd imagine it to contain some wonderful *Hyperbole* of Praise. For according to the Strain of modern Politeness; 'tis not an ordinary Violation of Truth, which can afford a Tribute sufficient to answer any common degree of *Merit*. Now 'tis well known that the Gentlemen whose Merit lies towards *Authorship*, are unwilling to make the least abatement on the foot of this Ceremonial. One wou'd wonder therefore to find 'em so entirely satisfy'd with a Form of Praise, which in plain sense amounts to no more than a bare Affirmative, "That they have in some manner differ'd from themselves, and are become somewhat *worse* or *better*, than their common rate." For if the vilest Writer grows *viler* than ordinary, or exceeds his natural pitch on either side, he is justly said to *exceed*, or go *beyond himself*. (C 1.173–174)

I had to re-read this multiple times before I could make sense of it. But the point is straightforward enough. The narrator is wondering why writers are so pleased with the assessment "He has surpassed himself." If a writer has written well in the past, it implies that his current work is even better. But if a writer has written poorly in the past, it implies that his current work is even worse. So why does everyone take it to be such high praise? In the next paragraph the narrator gives an answer. People take "You have surpassed yourself" to mean that they have acted more fully in accord with their "true" selves than they ever have before. And people believe that while they may have some faults, their "true" selves are worthy and

* I use 'C' to refer to Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, with A Notion of the Historical Draught, or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules and a Letter Concerning Design*, in three volumes (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), with the first number following referring to the volume and the second to the page.

deserving. In addition to their flaws and sins, people are convinced they have within “the Reality of a *better SELF*” (C 1.174). The narrator goes on to explore this belief that one’s “*genuine, true, and natural SELF*” is entirely worthy and deserving (C 1.174). He eventually arrives at this conclusion: we identify the true self with internal moral principles, with values. To act in line with one’s moral principles is thus to act in line with who one really is. To surpass oneself is to realize one’s own values more fully than one has done before. The narrator expands on this conclusion in another passage that requires non-trivial effort to parse.

Shou’d an intimate Friend of ours, who had endur’d many Sicknesses, and run many ill Adventures while he travel’d thro’ the remotest parts of the East, and hottest Countrys of the South, return to us so alter’d in his whole outward Figure, that till we had for a time convers’d with him, we cou’d not know him again to be the same Person; the matter wou’d not seem so very strange, nor wou’d our concern on this account be very great. But shou’d a like Face and Figure of a Friend return to us with Thoughts and Humours of a strange and foreign Turn, with Passions, Affections, and Opinions wholly different from any thing we had formerly known; we shou’d say in earnest, and with the greatest Amazement and Concern, that this was *another Creature*, and not *the Friend* whom we once knew familiarly. (C 1.176)

Maybe this paragraph’s syntax could have been simpler. But the central claim is not *recherche*: we think people’s deep psychological principles are more essential than their physical characteristics. It’s a claim that has affinities with Strohminger and Nichols’s 2014 finding that our “notions of personal identity are largely informed by the mental faculties affecting social relationships,” while “purely physical traits” have a “tenuous connection to identity.”⁶⁴ Shaftesbury doesn’t anticipate perfectly Strohminger and Nichols’s results. At the same time, he’s not a million miles away. While the writing style might be baroque, the thought remains surprisingly fresh.

Another passage has as its central figure “a native of ETHIOPIA” who has never seen anyone with a “*fair Complexion*.” A racial example such as this is going to strike us as problematic. Shaftesbury criticized severely those who told and believed travel stories about the moral barbarity of Africans and native Americans. He argued that all humans had the same natural moral sense, and that, if anything, it was the Europeans who were likely to be morally worse than the Africans or native Americans. But still: he was very far from being a champion of racial equality. Most telling in this regard is his oversight of the Carolina Colony during the time of a

terrible growth in slavery. He also seemed to be as comfortable trafficking in racist stereotypes as other writers of his day. To give an indication of how he wrote about people of other races is one reason to look at this passage. But I also want to suggest that this passage introduces a philosophical point that is separable from the racial elements, as well as from the complicated syntax.

If a Native of ETHIOPIA were on a sudden transported into EUROPE, and placed either at PARIS or VENICE at a time of Carnival, when the general Face of Mankind was disguis'd, and almost every Creature wore a Mask; 'tis probable he wou'd for some time be at a stand, before he discover'd the Cheat: not imagining that a whole People cou'd be so fantastical, as upon Agreement, at an appointed time, to transform themselves by a Variety of Habits, and make it a solemn Practice to impose on one another, by this universal Confusion of Characters and Persons. Tho he might at first perhaps have look'd on this with a serious eye, it wou'd be hardly possible for him to hold his Countenance, when he had perceiv'd what was carrying on. The EUROPEANS, on their side, might laugh perhaps at this Simplicity. But our ETHIOPIAN wou'd certainly laugh with better reason. 'Tis easy to see which of the two wou'd be ridiculous. For he who laughs, and is himself ridiculous, bears a double share of Ridicule. However, shou'd it so happen, that in the Transport of Ridicule, our ETHIOPIAN, having his Head still running upon *Masks*, and knowing nothing of the *fair* Complexion and common Dress of the EUROPEANS, shou'd upon the sight of a natural Face and Habit, laugh just as heartily as before; wou'd not he in his turn become ridiculous, by carrying the Jest too far; when by a silly Presumption he took *Nature* for mere *Art*? (C 1.52–53)

An Ethiopian is transported to carnival in Europe. Not having any reason to think that an entire population would wear masks, he assumes the ridiculous masks people are wearing are their natural faces. The Europeans laugh at him for this mistake. When he realizes they're wearing ridiculous masks, he laughs at them. And he laughs with better reason. His mistake about what the carnival-goers' natural faces were like was perfectly reasonable. It's the carnival-goers who are ridiculous—for laughing at his reasonable mistake, and for wearing ridiculous masks in the first place. But then he sees a natural European face, and he laughs at it because he thinks it's one more ridiculous mask. His first mistake was thinking that faces that were in fact ridiculously artificial were natural. His second mistake is thinking that a face that is in fact natural is artificial.

The story might betray the view that Ethiopians are of lesser intelligence, or the view that Europeans are more natural and beautiful (although I do not think it's clear the passage suggests either of those). In what follows the passage, however, it emerges that Shaftesbury tells the story to make a point about the destructive power of enforced religion (C 1.53–54). In ancient times, authorities demanded only that people fulfill their civic duties; they didn't care about the religious beliefs people held. In modern times, authorities do demand that people hold certain religious beliefs. It's impossible, however, to hold a belief just because one has been commanded to. Moreover, those in authority keep changing, so the commands keep changing as well. In response to these impossible and changing demands, people adopt grotesque rites and rituals that distort their natural moral sense. The result is analogous to the carnival: an entire population whose conduct is as artificial and ridiculous as the masks of the carnival-goers. As the Ethiopian had good reason to laugh at the carnival-goers, we have good reason to laugh at people engaged in such ridiculous religious masquerades. But just because some outward appearances are unnatural and worthy of ridicule, we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that all of them are. Some conduct may manifest what is good and moral in human nature. It's a mistake to think that artificial and insincere rites and rituals are reflections of human nature. Such rites and rituals deserve ridicule. But it's also a mistake—a mistake akin to the Ethiopian's belief that a "*fair* Complexion" is a mask—not to recognize natural human virtue and love of God when it does present.⁶⁵

Shaftesbury may not be right about religion and morality. His use of the Ethiopian may be objectionable. I think, nonetheless, his point is profound, and the story is a vivid metaphor for it.

In this book I quote from Shaftesbury a lot. Sometimes I use longish block quotes. I try to explain in my own words the content of the block quotes. My goal is to make it possible for you to understand my view of Shaftesbury's position even if you skip over the block quotes. So skipping over them is something you can do. But there are two reasons I hope you read them anyway. One reason is to check my view against Shaftesbury's text; my interpretations may be incorrect, or at least different from yours. The other reason is that the way Shaftesbury expresses his thought is essential to what makes him a fascinating writer. Skipping over the block quotes would be rather like reading the lyrics without playing the record.⁶⁶

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