

Update on “iguana”

I believe the critter toward the top of the engraving looks much more like an iguana than a chameleon. But Daniel Carey pointed out that there is an image in Athanasius Kircher (see below), from the 17th century, in which a very-similar-looking critter is said to be a chameleon. Kieran Healey said something similar many years ago, but for some reason I refused to pay attention. So it seems quite likely that the critter is supposed to be a chameleon, even if it more closely resembles an iguana, and that Shaftesbury is using it to make a point about the changeability of human nature: that just as the chameleon changes colors, so too can we become better or worse. This certainly fits with Shaftesbury’s belief that depending on their upbringing and mental regimen, humans can either rise to the greatest heights of virtue or fall to the lowest depths of depravity.

