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Shaftesbury on Life as a Work of Art

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1. Introduction

In the scholarship on Shaftesbury's ethics and aesthetics three questions have often taken center stage.

First, does Shaftesbury have an objectivist conception of morality, according to which the responses of the moral sense represent mind-independent features of reality, or does he have a subjectivist conception, according to which the responses of the moral sense constitute morality itself? An example of the objectivist interpretation is Irwin, who claims that Shaftesbury 'treats the moral sense as a sign of objective moral properties, not as their metaphysical basis,' and that the moral sense has 'an indicative (or detective) role' (Irwin 2008, 369). An example of the subjectivist interpretation is Taylor, who claims that Shaftesbury brings about 'the internalization, or we might say "subjectivization," of a teleological ethic of nature' (Taylor 1989, 255). According to Taylor, Shaftesbury explains goodness by 'affection,' attributing it 'not to the intrinsic loveability of the object but to certain inclinations implanted in the subject... The explanation turns on a feature of the lover's motivation' (Taylor 1989, 256).¹

¹ For arguments for the objectivist interpretation, see: Irwin 2008, 369 and 2015, 866-7; Rivers 2000, 143; Schneewind 1998, 302. For arguments for the subjectivist interpretation, see: Price 1769, 317; Sidgwick 1902, 187, 212-13; Taylor 1989, 255-6; Tuveson 1948, 258.

Second, does Shaftesbury have an egoist view of human motivation, according to which our reason to be virtuous is that it will promote our own welfare, or does he have a non-egoistic view, according to which we have a reason to be virtuous that is independent of our own welfare? On the egoist side are those who emphasize that in the *Inquiry concerning Virtue* Shaftesbury answers the question ‘What obligation there is to virtue, or what reason to embrace it?’ by arguing that being virtuous is in every person’s self-interest (Characteristics 192-230). On the non-egoist side are those who point out that Shaftesbury develops a complex psychological view that he explicitly opposes to that of egoists who would ‘reduce all [the human heart’s] motions, balances and weights to that one principle and foundation of a cool and deliberate *Selfishness*’ (Characteristics 54).²

Third, does Shaftesbury think aesthetic value is independent of ethical value? The most well-known advocate of the independence side of this debate is Stolnitz, who claims that for Shaftesbury aesthetic experience is autonomous, independent of the artwork’s moral value or any other type of consideration. Stolnitz writes, ‘Shaftesbury sets in motion the idea which marks off modern from traditional aesthetics, viz., the concept of “aesthetic disinterestedness.” ...Because the experience is disinterested, it is significantly different from such other experiences as garden variety perception or moral activity or theoretical inquiry’ (Stolnitz 1961a). A recent powerful advocate of the non-independence side is Guyer, who

² For arguments for the egoist interpretation, see: Grote 2010; Peach 1958; and Trianosky.

For arguments for the non-egoist interpretation, see Carey 2006; Den Uyl 1998; Irwin 2008; and Schneewind 2008.

claims that “[f]or Shaftesbury, the disinterestedness of the aesthetic did not separate it from the ethical, but connected it to the latter” (Guyer 2008, 13).³

These debates about *Characteristics* have sometimes been conducted as though Shaftesbury’s primary goal was to argue for particular theoretical positions on each of these three meta-ethical, meta-aesthetic questions. But as Garrett (2013, 37-41), Rivers (2000, 87), and Den Uyl (1998, 282) have pointed out, Shaftesbury’s fundamental philosophical goal was hortatory, not theoretical. His ultimate aim was to urge his readers to live in a certain way, not to convince scholars to believe one thing or another on any speculative matter. In this, Shaftesbury’s work is more closely aligned with the ‘self-help’ (as Aaron Garrett puts it) we find in the sermons of people like Benjamin Whichcote than with the philosophical position-taking we find in the treatises of people like David Hume. That is not to say that we cannot locate in Shaftesbury commitments that bear on the meta-ethical and meta-aesthetic questions. But we can search for those commitments by exploring Shaftesbury’s urgings to virtue and not only by looking for explicit theoretical argumentation.

An aspect of Shaftesbury’s practical philosophy that is especially illuminating in this regard is his exhortation to us to live our lives as though they are works of art. Shaftesbury might have been the first person to express that thought in the English language. The thought is central to both his *Soliloquy* and his *Moralists*. And yet the secondary literature has not given nearly as much attention to his idea of life-as-a-work-of-art as it has to meta-ethical and meta-aesthetic questions that Shaftesbury himself would have been less likely to

³ For arguments for the view that aesthetic disinterestedness leads to the autonomy of the aesthetic in Shaftesbury, see Stolnitz 1961a, 1961b, and 1961c. For arguments against Stolnitz’s interpretation, see Guyer 2008; Mortensen 1994; Rind 2002; and Townsend 1982.

foreground. Amir provides a helpful discussion of this idea, but the discussion is quite brief and not central to Amir's main topic (Amir 2015, 28). Brown (1995) mentions Shaftesbury's development of this idea, but Brown's essay is primarily concerned not with Shaftesbury but with how the idea figures in the later Scottish Enlightenment. Sellars (2016) explains how Shaftesbury develops the idea of life as a work of art in the unpublished *Askemata*, but we can expand the strong points of Sellars' interpretation by showing the leading role the idea plays in Shaftesbury's published work. I will try to show that when we attend fully to how Shaftesbury develops life-as-a-work-of-art in *Characteristics* we will gain a much clearer view not only of the answers to the meta-ethical and meta-aesthetic questions of the secondary literature but also to the overriding goal of Shaftesbury's practical philosophy.

The thinker who in our time has come to be most closely associated with the idea of life as a work of art is probably Nietzsche.⁴ Nietzsche says of people who live their lives as works of art that they are 'free spirits,' 'immoralists,' 'annihilators,' members of the 'cult of the untrue.' From such statements we might naturally draw the conclusion that the idea of life as a work of art leads to egoism, subjectivism, and the independence of art from morality. I will argue, however, that Shaftesbury's notion of life as a work of art has exactly the opposite implications: that a proper understanding of this idea in Shaftesbury reveals him to be a moral objectivist, a non-egoist, and a believer in the deep interconnection between art and morality

⁴ See also Foucault 1984, 350-1. For compelling comparison of Foucault and Shaftesbury, see Sellars 2016, 406-8.

2. What is a Shaftesburean artist?

When Nietzscheans hear of a true artist, they are likely to think of a free-spirited painter, musician, or poet, a Beethoven or Rimbaud or Picasso, an innovator in the fine arts. When Shaftesbury was writing at the turn of the eighteenth century, 'artist' was used differently: to designate someone skilled at accomplishing a practical task, 'an artificer, mechanic, craftsman, [or] artisan' (O.E.D.). A wheelwright is this type of artist, as is a baker, a cobbler, or any other adept workman. Distinctive of such an artist is the ability to achieve a tangible goal, the possession of a practical skill. Shaftesbury has this meaning in mind when he speaks of the 'artists' of old Egypt who engaged in manufacture and trade (Characteristics 357). Elsewhere Shaftesbury calls Prometheus that 'plastic artist,' a moniker based on Prometheus's ability to manufacture objects out of unformed matter (Characteristics 239). The same meaning is present when Shaftesbury says that a magistrate is an 'artist' who has the practical goal of calming the unruly fears of citizens (Characteristics 10).

By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, 'artist' had also come to be used to refer to painters, musicians, and poets. Shaftesbury uses the word this way too. In this passage his artists are sculptors: "Thus, the best artists are said to have been indefatigable in studying the best statues, as esteeming them a better rule than the perfectest human bodies could afford' (Characteristics 67; see also 92 and 102). Here his artists are painters: 'According to this Rule of the *Unity of Time*, ... one shou'd ask an Artist, who had painted this History of *The Judgment of Hercules*, "Which of these four Periods or Dates of Time above propos'd he intended in his Picture to represent"' (Judgment of Hercules: 219; see also 218, 247 and Characteristics 66, 90-2, 101-2). Elsewhere Shaftesbury's artists are orators (Characteristics 107), writers (Characteristics 147 and 150), and musicians (Characteristics

62). In the index he himself compiled for *Characteristics*, under ‘Artist rejoice in Criticism’ Shaftesbury writes, ‘See Poet, Painter, Architect’ (Shaftesbury’s Index, 255).

So there’s an older definition of ‘artist’: one skilled in practical tasks, such as a cobbler or wheelwright, an *artisan*. And there’s a newer definition: one who practices the fine arts, such as a painter or musician, a *fine artist*. We might think there are important differences between them. Fine artists engage in aesthetic activities that are not useful, or at least are not primarily useful, not valued chiefly for their usefulness. Artisans produce works whose *raison-d’être* is precisely their usefulness. Painters and musicians are lauded for their originality, for their capacity to create something novel. Cobblers and wheelwrights may be esteemed for the ability to make exactly what was expected, to succeed at an established craft.

What’s notable about Shaftesbury’s usage is that his ‘artist’ seamlessly covers artisans and fine artists. Both types cohabit the word when he writes, ‘[W]ithout a *Publick Voice*, knowingly guided and directed, there is nothing which can raise a true Ambition in the Artist; nothing which can exalt the Genius of the Workman’ (Judgment of Hercules 247). He compares ‘our writing-artists to the manufacturers in stuff or silk’ (Characteristics 340), as though both the writers and the fabric-makers belong in the same category. Perhaps most indicative of Shaftesbury’s non-distinction between the artisan and the fine artist is the following:

There is nothing more certain than that a real genius and thorough artist in whatever kind can never, without the greatest unwillingness and shame, be induced to act below his character and, for mere interest, be prevailed with to prostitute his art or science by performing contrary to its known rules. Whoever has heard anything of the lives of famous statuaries, architects, or painters, will call to mind many instances

of this nature. Or whoever has made any acquaintance with the better sort of mechanics, such as are real lovers of their art and masters in it, must have observed their natural fidelity in this respect. (Characteristics 117)

Here we find ‘mechanics’ rubbing shoulders with ‘statuaries, architects [and] painters.’ Shaftesburean artists are both old-fashioned artisans and avant-garde artistes. To be an artist, for Shaftesbury, is to make things—to fashion out of raw materials a finished product. And that’s the job of both the painter and the wheelwright.

3. What constitutes success for a Shaftesburean artist?

Shaftesbury says that successful artists are those committed to ‘the justness and truth of work,’ to ‘truth and the perfection of their art’ (Characteristics 117-18). He claims, famously, that ‘all beauty is truth’ (Characteristics 65).

Some might balk at truth’s being the goal of all artists, artisans and fine artists alike. Strictly speaking, it might be thought, truth is a property of propositions that describe correctly states of affairs. But the bits of music and machinery that some artists produce are not in the propositional business of describing states of affairs. True and false claims may be made *about* them. But the music or machine itself just *is*. Every bit of music or machinery that exists, equally exists. There is no sense in which one can be any more or less true than any other.

Such a dismissal of Shaftesbury’s notion of the ‘truth of work’ would betray a constricted conception of truth. *True* can be used to designate representational accuracy between a proposition’s content and the state of affairs the proposition purports to describe. But that is not the word’s only—nor its earliest, nor its most literal—meaning. *True* is also commonly used ‘of a person,’ such as when we speak of a true friend, of those who act true

to form, of someone whose heart remains true (from the O.E.D, as are the rest of the quotations in this paragraph). In such cases, to be true is to be ‘faithful’ or ‘loyal, constant, steadfast.’ *True* can be used to describe ‘linear objects,’ to signify that they are straight or level. An 1875 book on carpentry and joinery gives instructions on how a ‘strip [can] be cut and planed up perfectly true and even on its sides and ends.’ *True* can be used of music or a singer’s voice, in the sense of being ‘correct in pitch’ or ‘exactly in tune.’ *True* can be used of mechanical things, in the sense of being ‘accurately formed’ and ‘correctly calibrated.’ An 1885 instructional manual for harness-makers and carriage-builders gives the following instruction: ‘To find if the axle is true in the line of the arms, get the height from the ground to the middle of the axle cap.’ The day I was writing this paragraph I took my bicycle to the shop for a tune-up and the mechanic told me that as part of the service he would ‘true the wheels.’

All these senses of ‘true’ involve agreement or matching. Representational accuracy—agreement between a proposition and a state of affairs the proposition purports to describe—is one type of match. But it is only one type. There can also be an agreement or match between an object and a standard against which it is compared: between a friend’s conduct and an expectation of loyalty, between a road and a criterion of straightness, between voiced notes and musical pitches, between car parts and a model of mechanical precision, between a bicycle wheel and a circle.

When Shaftesbury tells us that true artists are those committed fully and above all else to the ‘truth of work,’ he means that true artists are committed to making things in accord with a standard. And he equates the meeting of this standard with the achievement of beauty. ‘For all beauty is truth.’

What is the standard of artistic truth? What must a work agree with in order to be beautiful? Shaftesbury uses various words to describe it: harmony, regularity, proportion, order, balance, symmetry. Beauty, as he puts it, is “*Unity of Design*” (Judgment of Hercules 214; see also Judgment of Hercules 217, 229 and Characteristics 66, 109, 274, 276). One of his characters from *The Moralists* explains our response to this property through examples. He focuses first on simpler beauties, on things whose beauty is entirely bodily. Bodily beauty is a feature of ‘figure, colour, motion or sound’ (Characteristics 326). He simplifies further by focusing on physical things whose beauty results from ‘mere figure’ (Ibid.). Then he simplifies even further by focusing on the beauty of only the most basic shapes.

Nor need we go so high as sculpture, architecture or the designs of those who from this study of beauty have raised such delightful arts. It is enough if we consider the simplest of figures, as either a round ball, a cube or die. Why is even an infant pleased with the first view of these proportions? Why is the sphere or globe, the cylinder and obelisk, preferred and the irregular figures, in respect of these, rejected and despised? (Ibid.)

Human beings experience as beautiful things that are regular and proportionate. This is the experience of beauty lies at the heart of Shaftesbury’s philosophy. Four features of it are crucial.

First, the experience of beauty is affective, not merely intellectual. Harmony and order delight in a way disharmony and disorder do not. You are ‘imprinted’ with a ‘plain internal sensation’ in favor of the former (Characteristics 273-4). For things with this property you have a ‘liking,’ a ‘taste’ (Characteristics 172). They awaken in you an ‘original satisfaction,’ a ‘natural joy’ (Characteristics 203). This is in contrast to those distinctions and judgments we make that have no affective component. You can judge that one pile of rocks

is bigger than another without having any preference for or differential emotional reaction to either. But regular and proportionate forms please us in a way that irregular and disproportionate ones do not. We prefer the regular and proportionate. We have a positive feeling toward them that we do not have toward the irregular and disproportionate. Imagine hearing notes that are disharmonious. Then they come into harmony. You know the moment they come into harmony. You know because at that moment you have an affectively positive response. You feel a kind of satisfaction, a joy. Contemplate the movement of an elegant timepiece. See how all the various pieces—cogs, mainspring, balance wheel, escapement—slot perfectly into place, how they all combine to form a single harmoniously functioning mechanism. Becoming aware of this will be a delight, not merely drily intellectual but positively affective.

Second, the experience of beauty is natural, not artificial. Some preferences can be explained by contingent events. That someone is pleased by a handshake rather than a bow, by a hat rather than a bare head, is the result of how she was raised. Had she been raised differently, had different events occurred, she would have had different preferences. But all humans tend to be pleased by the regular regardless of their upbringing, and all humans experience this pleasure from an early age. The preference for the regular over the irregular is ‘strongly imprinted on’ every human mind; it is not the result of ‘learning’ (Characteristics 273). It’s a pleasure based on elements of human nature that are instinctive or innate, ‘exclusive of art, culture or discipline’ (Characteristics 325). ‘[T]here is a power in numbers, harmony, proportion and beauty of every kind, which naturally captivates the heart’ (Characteristics 351-2).

Third, the experience of beauty is a response to features of the object itself, not to how the object promotes our own interests. Some of our preferences, clearly enough, are

self-interested. You prefer the larger sum of money because it will better enable you to meet your selfish desires. Person A pleases you more than Person B because she more effectively advances your well-being. But our pleasure in and preference for beautiful things can be wholly unconnected to thoughts of what will benefit us. Consider coming to understand an elegant mathematical theorem. The balance and order of the theorem will produce a ‘satisfaction’ that does not draw anything from self-interest, depending not at all on the belief that you stand to gain anything by it (Characteristics 202).

When we have thoroughly searched into the nature of this contemplative delight, we shall find it of a kind which relates not in the least to any private interest of the creature, nor has for its object any self-good or advantage of the private system. The admiration, joy or love turns wholly upon what is exterior and foreign to our-selves. (Ibid.)

Music delights in the same way. The ‘natural joy’ we receive from the resolution of a complex Bach fugue has nothing to do with self-oriented preferences. It’s based in the ‘original satisfaction’ we take in experiencing the ‘truest harmony’ (Characteristics 203 and 151). Or consider again the movement of an elegant timepiece. You may stand to benefit from the object’s excellence. But there’s also a joy that’s independent of self-interested concerns, a delight you take in how systematically the thing works. There’s a palpable satisfaction simply in witnessing the ‘justness and truth’ of the mechanism (Characteristics 117; see also 318-9).

Fourth, the experience of beauty is a response to the meeting of a mind-independent normative standard, not merely a reflection of our subjective likes and dislikes. Some of our preferences are merely reflections of our subjective likes and dislikes. I prefer vanilla to chocolate ice cream. But that preference is not a response to the mind-independent

superiority of vanilla. There are mind-independent differences in the chemical constitution of the two flavors, and my preference for vanilla is responsive to those non-normative chemical facts. But my preference does not track a mind-independent normative fact. Other people can prefer chocolate without being wrong. I can change so that I prefer chocolate without making a mistake, without falling away from what is correct. In sharp contrast (according to Shaftesbury) is my preference for harmony and regularity over disharmony and irregularity. The distinctions between ‘beauty’ and ‘the deformed ... have their foundation in nature,’ not in my subjective aspects (Characteristics 327). “Harmony is harmony by nature,” writes Shaftesbury, ‘let men judge ever so ridiculously of music. So is symmetry and proportion founded still in Nature, let men’s fancy prove ever so barbarous, or their fashions ever so Gothic in their architecture, sculpture, or whatever other designing art’ (Characteristics 157). My preference for the harmonious and regular tracks mind-independent normative fact.

About the beauty of things more complex than simple shapes we often disagree. But even when we disagree about what is more beautiful we still always assume that there is a single correct answer that is based in nature.

It is controverted, ‘Which is the finest pile? the loveliest shape or face?’; but without controversy it is allowed ‘there is a beauty of each kind’. This no one goes about to teach, nor is it learned by any but confessed by all. All own the standard, rule and measure, but, in applying it to things, disorder arises, ignorance prevails, interest and passion breed disturbance. (Characteristics 327)

Our disagreements about beauty presuppose a standard independent of our responses, for we disagree about which responses are the right ones.

On Shaftesbury's view, then, there is a standard of beauty—harmony, regularity, symmetry, proportion, order, balance—and it is as natural and objective as mathematical correctness. Whether something is beautiful is independent of human interests and likes. But human sensibilities are tuned to that standard. We're built to feel a certain distinctive pleasure when encounter harmony, regularity, symmetry, etc. And the Shaftesburean artist is successful when she produces work that is in accord with that standard.

4. What is a Shaftesburean artist of life?

A wheelwright works wood. A composer arranges notes. A sculpture shapes stone. What does an artist of her own life deploy her art on?

The material of an artist of life, Shaftesbury tells us, is mental, not physical. The '*architect of his own life*' passes 'over bodies' and focuses instead on 'that which is intelligent' (Characteristics 332). The 'fabrics of architecture, sculpture and the rest of that sort' are worked by 'hand,' while the stuff of moral beauty 'is engendered in your heart (...) or derives itself from your parent-mind' (Characteristics 324). 'To treat your life as a work of art is to try to beautify 'your sentiments, your resolutions, principles, determinations, actions' (Ibid.). It is to strive for the 'symmetry and order of a mind' (Characteristics 64). It is to aim to raise 'mental children' that are 'handsome and noble' (Characteristics 324).

Shaftesbury includes 'actions' in his list of 'mental children,' but he stresses the importance of striving to beautify one's settled dispositions rather than producing any particular external behavior. External behavior on its own is neither virtuous nor vicious. We don't praise a person who 'abstains from executing his ill purpose [only] through a fear of some impending punishment or through the allurements of some exterior reward' (Characteristics 169). We don't blame someone who causes harm accidentally and contrary

to his intentions (*Characteristics* 174). It's a person's reasons for acting that determine her moral status, her internal motivational states that elicit moral disgust or joy. Moral beauty is for Shaftesbury instantiated in 'temper' and 'character,' not external behavior.

To illustrate the importance of focusing on inward character Shaftesbury tells a story of two brothers. The elder brother uses his greater strength to unfair advantage in their games of 'football' (*Characteristics* 84). At first the younger brother tries to fight for the ball, but it is 'to little purpose' (*Ibid.*). Then the younger brother hits on a different strategy. He decides to ignore the ball and 'lay about his elder brother. It is then that the scene changes. For the elder, like an arrant coward, upon this treatment, presently grows civil and affords the younger as fair play afterwards as he can desire' (*Ibid.*). The conflict between a person's unruly appetites and her reasonable motives is like the battle between the two brothers. A person may take her unruly appetites to be givens and resign herself to battling against them again and again. But that's a losing strategy. The successful approach is to work to transform the unruly appetites into 'handsome and noble' affections.

To strive to beautify one's character is to try to make one's self into something true in the same way architects, painters, and mechanics try to produce true work. It is to be a 'self-improving artist' (*Characteristics* 332). The O.E.D. credits that phrase from *Characteristics* as the earliest appearance of the term 'self-improvement,' and Shaftesbury meant by it the same thing we'd expect in a self-help book of today: conscious effort to improve one's *self*, to turn one's sentiments, resolutions, and principles (one's mental children) into what one wants them to be. Having ugly internal aspects but producing correct behavior from fear of punishment, from desire for reward, or from brute psychological force exerted over unruly appetites: none of those constitutes self-improvement. Self-improvement is the transformation of internal aspects into something

beautiful (see Amir 28 and Garrett 37-41). And it is a commitment to this activity that defines the artist of life.

5. What constitutes success for a Shaftesburean artist of life?

What shape ought the artist of life give to her mental material? What internal features are ‘fair and shapely’ (Characteristics 326)? What qualities, what ‘numbers and proportion in a life’ (Characteristics 64), correspond to the elegant proportions of a building, the harmony of a musical composition, the circularity of a wheel? What are the ‘*measures and rhythms of the true life*’ (Characteristics 65)?

Brown (1995, 52) has suggested that Shaftesbury eschews a contentful answer to that question. On to this interpretation, Shaftesbury thinks that while we all know what it’s like to experience ‘the effect’ of a person’s moral beauty, the cause is ‘unintelligible,’ a ‘kind of charm or enchantment,’ a ‘*je ne sais quoi*,’ an ‘I know not what’ (Characteristics 148). This is a misreading. Shaftesbury does speak of an inability to understand or articulate the underlying nature of the beauty of a thing, and he acknowledges that some believe the love of virtue is one such mystery. But that lack of understanding characterizes only the *hoi polloi*, not the *cognoscenti*. The ‘rest of mankind’ might think that ‘no account’ can be given of the causes of beauty (Ibid.). Real artists, in contrast, do understand and can articulate the features that make something beautiful. The ‘virtuoso tribe’—the artistic experts—know ‘the rules’ (Ibid.). Musicians can explain the harmonies that untutored listeners experience as a kind of charm. Painters are consciously aware of the balance of line and color that to the uninformed appear as enchantment. While a watch may seem to some to work by magic a watchmaker understands fully the mechanism.

What is it about virtue that accounts for the delightful effect that others experience as ‘moral magic’ (Characteristics 63)? We have seen that Shaftesbury uses a number of different words when describing what is characteristic of beautiful objects: harmony, regularity, symmetry, proportion, order, balance. These words apply equally to what is characteristic of moral beauty. But just as ‘harmony’ is an especially appropriate word for music, and ‘proportion’ especially appropriate for architecture, ‘integrity’ is particularly apt for moral beauty. ‘[I]o have this entire affection or integrity of mind,’ Shaftesbury writes, ‘is morality, justice, piety and natural religion’ (Characteristics 206). He equates ‘Everything which is an improvement of virtue’ with ‘an establishment of right affection and integrity’ (Characteristics 230).

Integrity is the property of being one, of wholeness. Something has integrity when it constitutes a single coherent entity, when each part harmonizes with every other. We generally use the word ‘integrity’ nowadays to signify internal harmony, the state of being in agreement with oneself. To have this kind of integrity is to act in accord with one’s own principles, all of one’s psychological aspects cohering with each other. To lack this integrity is to be in conflict with oneself, to harbor incompatible desires. Shaftesbury affirms the importance of this kind of integrity, contending that it is something the virtuous possess and the vicious do not. The virtuous person has ‘a mind or reason well composed, quiet, easy within itself and such as can freely bear its own inspection and review’ (Characteristics 206). The virtuous person finds ‘converse with himself’ pleasurable (Characteristics Ibid.). He experiences the ‘mental pleasures,’ his psychological harmony providing him ‘*the chief means and power of self-enjoyment*’ (Characteristics 211). Within the vicious person, in contrast, there is conflict. The vicious person’s motivational principles are in ‘Contradiction’ (Characteristics

210), his psyche riven by ‘contrariety and disturbance’ (Characteristics 207). ‘Knavery is ... dissonance and disproportion’ (Characteristics 93).

But internal harmony is not the only aspect of integrity essential to Shaftesbury’s virtue. To have the integrity that is virtue is also to be in harmony with the rest of humanity. A person has this kind of integrity when ‘all his inclinations and affections, his dispositions of mind and temper [are] suitable and agreeing with the good of his kind or of that system in which he is included and of which he constitutes a part’ (Characteristics 192). ‘To love the public, to study universal good, and to promote the interest of the whole world, as far as lies within our power, is surely the height of goodness’ (Characteristics 20). Shaftesbury develops this point by drawing an extended contrast between ‘*partial* affection’ and ‘*entire* affection (from whence integrity has its name)’ (Characteristics 205). The former is a regard for ‘some one part of society’ while the latter is ‘an entire, sincere and truly moral’ regard for ‘society itself’ (Ibid.). ‘Entire affection or integrity’ is ‘consciousness of just behaviour towards mankind in general’ (Ibid.). It is not ‘social love in part’ but rather love for ‘complete society’ (Ibid.).

So there are two aspects of the integrity that is Shaftesburean virtue: within the virtuous person, and between the virtuous person and the rest of humanity. All the parts of the virtuous person harmonize with each other, and the virtuous person harmonizes with everyone else. ‘[T]o have one’s affections right and entire, not only in respect of oneself but of society and the public: this is rectitude, integrity or virtue’ (Characteristics 192). Shaftesbury often puts this point in terms of a system. Something is a system when all its elements fit together perfectly, each working with every other toward a unitary purpose. The internal aspects of a virtuous person constitute a perfect ‘self-system’ or ‘private system’ (Characteristics 192, 200, 202, 217, 219). And the virtuous person is a perfect cog in the

‘system of the kind,’ in the ‘public’ system of humanity of which she is a part (Characteristics 192).

We have seen that Shaftesbury claims that beauty is truth. His characters in *The Moralists* make goodness a third part of that equation, maintaining that goodness, beauty, and truth are ‘one and the same’ (Characteristics 320). The narrator of *Miscellaneous Reflections* echoes the point: ‘[W]hat is beautiful is harmonious and proportionable, what is harmonious and proportionable is true; and what is at once both beautiful and true is, of consequence, agreeable and good’ (Characteristics 415). And since goodness and beauty are ‘one and the same,’ we should expect our experience of the moral beauty of people to have the same four features as our experience of the physical beauty of objects. Shaftesbury holds exactly that.

First, the experience of beauty is affectively positive, a feeling of joy, not merely an intellectual apprehension. And we experience that joy not only when we hear musical harmonies, not only when we observe a proportionate sculpture, not only when we grasp an elegant timepiece, but also when we witness virtuous characters. We have a ‘taste’ for some mental features over others. We have a ‘liking’ for ‘justice, generosity, gratitude, [and] other virtue[s]’ and a ‘dislike of their contraries’ (Characteristics 178).

The mind, which is spectator or auditor of other minds, cannot be without its eye and ear so as to discern proportion, distinguish sound, and scan each sentiment or thought which comes before it... It feels the soft and harsh, the agreeable and disagreeable in the affections, and finds a foul and fair, a harmonious and a dissonant, as really and truly here as in any musical numbers or in the outward forms or representations of sensible things. Nor can it withhold its admiration and ecstasy, its aversion and scorn, any more in what relates to one than to the other of these subjects. (Characteristics 172-3)

In the same way we feel positively toward harmonious music and proportionate shapes we feel positively toward integral, systematic characters. This is what Shaftesbury means when he says that we have a ‘moral sense’ (Characteristics 180): our emotional sensibilities are tuned to the standard of order, regularity, balance, and integrity in people as well as things.

Second, our experience of beauty is natural, a response based on our original constitution and not the result of art, culture, or education. And we are as naturally pleased by the beauty of virtue as we are by the beauty of musical harmonies and proportionate objects. Our ‘*Sense of right and wrong*’ is ‘as natural to us as natural affection itself and [is] a first principle in our constitution and make... [T]his affection [is] an original one of earliest rise in the soul or affectionate part...’ (Characteristics 179). Just as we are originally built to enjoy certain sights as soon as we see them (an infant is more pleased by the regular shapes than the irregular) so too are we originally built to enjoy certain characters as soon as we encounter them (we feel positive affection toward the kind that we do not feel toward the cruel). God ‘has implanted in us’ the ‘original ideas of goodness’ (Characteristics 18). ‘[T]he discernment itself is natural and from nature alone’ (Characteristics 327). The pleasure we receive from virtue and the pain we receive from vice is a feature of our hard-wiring.

Third, our experience of beauty is non-egoistic, a response to features of things themselves and not simply a reflection of their tendency to promote our own interests. The pleasure we receive from virtue is non-egoistic as well, as independent of thoughts about what will promote our own interests as is the pleasure we receive from the harmony and proportion of music and mechanism. Shaftesbury makes this point by comparing encounters with the virtuous to ‘discoveries’ of ‘speculative truths’ (Characteristics 202). There is a pleasure you receive from coming to understand scientific truths that has nothing to do with what you think will benefit you. You may think that understanding will benefit

you in some way, and that may give rise to another kind of pleasure. But there is a joy of understanding that is entirely distinct from that self-interested one. In the same way, while you may stand to benefit from the virtue of another person, there is a joy you receive from her that is entirely distinct from anything having to do with your own benefit.

When we have thoroughly searched into the nature of this contemplative delight we shall find it of a kind which relates not in the least to any private interest of the creature nor has for its object any self-good or advantage of the private system. The admiration, joy or love turns wholly upon what is exterior and foreign to ourselves... But this speculative pleasure, however considerable and valuable it may be or however superior to any motion of mere sense, must yet be far surpassed by virtuous motion and the exercise of benignity and goodness, where, together with the most delightful affection of the soul, there is joined a pleasing assent and approbation of the mind to what is acted in this good disposition and honest bent. (*Characteristics* 203)

Toward morally beautiful people we feel affection, love. We may think they'll benefit us. But we bear them a love and affection that doesn't depend on that thought at all.

Fourth, beauty is a mind-independent property, the meeting of an eternal and immutable normative standard, not merely a reflection of our subjective sensibilities. And the beauty of virtue is just as mind-independent as the beauty of harmonies and proportions. This is the point of Shaftesbury's most programmatic statement of *Characteristics*, when he tells us that his fundamental goal is to establish that moral beauty is as mind-independent as the beauty of objects:

It has been the main scope and principal end of these volumes to assert the reality of a beauty and charm in moral as well as natural subjects, and to demonstrate the reasonableness of a proportionate

taste and determinate choice in life and manners. The standard of this kind and the noted character of moral truth [are] firmly established in nature itself. (Characteristics 466)

The narrator of *Soliloquy* makes the same point:

Harmony is harmony by nature, let men judge ever so ridiculously of music. So is symmetry and proportion founded still in nature, let men's fancy prove ever so barbarous, or their fashions ever so Gothic in their architecture, sculpture or whatever other designing art. It is the same case where life and manners are concerned. Virtue has the same fixed standard. The same numbers, harmony and proportion will have place in morals and are discoverable in the characters and affections of mankind, in which are laid the just foundations of an art and science superior to every other of human practice and comprehension. (Characteristics 157-8)

The harmony of musical notes is objectively beautiful. To opt for harmony over disharmony is to make a choice in accord with nature, with mind-independent normative fact. The same is true of a preference for virtue over vice. The superiority of virtue does not depend on 'fashion, law, custom or religion' (Characteristics 175), nor on '*fancy or will, not even on the supreme will itself*' (Characteristics 267). The superiority of harmonious characters is based on the '*eternal measures and immutable independent nature of worth and virtue*' (Characteristics 175). Shaftesbury tells us that 'in respect of virtue [he is] a realist' (Characteristics 266), by which he means that he believes the superiority of the '*measures and rhythms of the true life*' (Characteristics 65) are as real as the beauty of harmony, symmetry, and proportion.

Underscoring Shaftesbury's realism is his frequent mention of moral 'numbers.' There are truths about numbers, and those truths are eternal and immutable. We respond in a certain way to numerical truths because they are true. Nothing about the numbers

depends on our responses to them. Virtue has the same status. Virtue is a relationship between the parts of an individual, and between the individual and others, that is number-like in its eternality and immutability. Shaftesbury thus speaks of ‘the harmony and numbers of an inward kind [that] represent the beauties of a human soul’ (Characteristics 63), of the ‘numbers and proportion in a life at large’ (Characteristics 64), of ‘those numbers which make the harmony of a mind’ (Characteristics 93), of those ‘numbers ... which make life perfect’ (Characteristics 141), of ‘the sense of inward numbers, the knowledge and practice of the social virtues, and of the familiarity and favour of the moral graces [that] are essential to the character of a deserving artist’ (Characteristics 150), and of ‘the harmony and numbers of the heart, and beauty of the affections, which form the manners and conduct of a truly social life’ (Characteristics 353). Shaftesbury takes it to be obvious and uncontested that some numerical claims are eternally and immutably right, others wrong. Moral characters and modes of living are right and wrong in the same way.

Some people are morally beautiful. Shaftesbury’s list would include Socrates, Epictetus, Benjamin Whichcote, and Theocles. To be with them is a joy. They delight us. With them we sense that everything is attuned, in line, as it ought to be. It’s the same sense of something’s being completely right that we have when we grasp the truth of a mathematical theorem, hear the resolution of a fugue, observe the movement of a fine timepiece. What we are responding to in these morally beautiful people, what accounts for our delight and joy, is their complete integrity: the perfect unity of their psyches and their perfect concord with the rest of humanity. To succeed at the art of living is to become that kind of person. It is to craft your moral features into the kind of character that elicits the ‘admiration, joy or love’ that we feel towards Socrates, Epictetus, Whichcote, Theocles—towards all things beautiful and true.

Shaftesbury himself seemed to do much of the work of making of his self a work of art in the unpublished notebooks known as *Askemata*. As I mentioned in section 1, Sellars shows how Shaftesbury pursues this project, showing that Shaftesbury conceives of the ‘*philosophical art*’ [Askemata 284; Rand 268] as the ‘art of living’ (Sellars 2016, 399-400). Shaftesbury believes that a work of art is beautiful insofar as it has unity of design and systematicity, all its parts constituting a single piece. And in the *Askemata* we see him using philosophy to bring his self into just that kind of unity. He looks ‘within myself’ and asks whether he finds there ‘connections and consistency, agreement or disagreement’ (Askemata 282-3; Rand 267). Following the Stoics, he tells himself that so long as he concerns himself chiefly with external goods over which he lacks control he will lack consistency and agreement; he will be pulled in different directions by the vicissitudes of daily life. To bring his self into the consistency and agreement that constitutes the beauty of a work of art—‘to free myself from those contradictory pursuits and opposite passions which make me inconsistent with myself and own resolutions’ (Askemata 285; Rand 270)—he must focus on internal matters. He must ‘sett[e] matters within’ that he has the power to bring into harmony (Askemata 286; Rand 271). Shaftesbury then uses the activity of private writing, the results of which make up the *Askemata*, as a kind of self-help therapy toward the goal of focusing concern on the right things (see Garrett 2013).

6. Why should we care about that kind of success?

Why should we do the work of turning ourselves into something morally beautiful? Why make the effort to instantiate the properties of harmony and proportion? Why undertake the job of self-improvement?

Early in his career, when writing the first version of the *Inquiry*, which appeared in 1699, Shaftesbury took this question very seriously. He devoted the entire second part of the *Inquiry* to answering it, attempting to show in great detail that virtue produces psychological and social benefits that vicious people lack (Characteristics 192-230). By the time he published *Soliloquy* in 1610, however, Shaftesbury had come to look askance at the question. He probably continued to believe that virtuous people enjoy psychological and social benefits vicious people lack. But he now held that there is something amiss with someone who requires an answer to the question. Shaftesbury vivifies the problem by comparing someone who requires an answer to a fellow with ‘the countenance of a gentleman’ who asks: ‘why I would avoid being nasty when nobody was present?’ (Characteristics 58). Shaftesbury says that he can give such a person the ‘slight answer’ that he would not want to smell his own nastiness. But his interlocutor next asks why he should avoid being nasty when ‘he had a cold’ and couldn’t smell anything? In response Shaftesbury says that he is as loath to ‘see myself nasty as that others should see me in that condition.’ His interlocutor then asks, ‘But what if it were in the dark?’ and he could not even see himself. At this point Shaftesbury says that what is objectionable about the nasty interlocutor is that he initiates this line of questioning in the first place, revealing that he simply does not understand ‘what *in reality* I owed myself, and what became me, as a human creature.’ Right from the start, when the interlocutor first begins to ask, Shaftesbury thinks: ‘I should be fully satisfied that he himself was a very nasty gentleman who could ask this question, and that it would be a hard matter for me to make him ever conceive what true cleanliness was.’ Shaftesbury then contends that a person who asks why he should be moral is as far removed from an understanding and appreciation of virtue as the interlocutor is from cleanliness.

Much in the same manner have I heard it asked, ‘Why should a man be honest in the dark?’ What a man must be to ask this question I will not say. But for those who have no better a reason for being honest than the fear of a gibbet or a jail, I should not, I confess, much covet their company or acquaintance. (*Characteristics* 58)

By requiring an answer to the question of why he shouldn’t be nasty when no one else is present, a person reveals that he is in fact ‘a very nasty gentleman.’ By requiring an answer to the question of why he should be honest in the dark, an agent reveals that he is in fact a dishonest character.

I think the difference between Shaftesbury’s earlier focus on the question ‘Why be moral?’ and his later deflection of it is due to his development of the idea that we should treat our lives as a work of art—to his assimilation of virtuous character to true and beautiful works of art.⁵ The connection between living well and producing true and just works of art—and the beside-the-point-ness of self-interested benefits—is explicit in Shaftesbury’s story of an artisan who turns down even very lucrative jobs if they require that he produce anything shoddy:

‘Sir,’ says a poor fellow of this kind, to his rich customer, ‘you are mistaken in coming to me for such a piece of workmanship. Let who will make it for you as you fancy, I know it to be wrong. Whatever I have made hitherto has been true work.

⁵ In the 1714 version of the *Inquiry* Shaftesbury included passages that emphasized the comparison of virtue and beauty that were not in the 1699 edition. In the Klein edition of *Characteristics* those passages occur at 172-3, 178, and 202-3. In Walford’s edition of the *Inquiry* they occur at paragraphs 48-51, 76, 171 (Walford 1977, 16-17, 26, 65). For a list of passages that occur in the 1714 edition but not the 1699 edition, see Walford 1977, 123.

And neither for your sake or anybody's else shall I put my hand to any other.' This is virtue, real virtue, and love of truth, independent of opinion and above the world! This disposition, transferred to the whole of life, perfects a character and makes that probity and worth which the learned are often at such a loss to explain. For is there not a workmanship and a truth in actions? (Characteristics 117)

Here we have a clear statement of the aspiration to live one's life as a work of art, where the artistry held up for emulation is not the groundbreaking creativity of a Beethoven or a Picasso but a mechanic's steadfast commitment to quality work. And here too we have a response to the question 'Why be moral' that is different from the *Inquiry's* extended delineation of the psychological and social benefits of virtue. A person who transfers the artistic disposition to the whole of her life doesn't need to hear any of the psycho-social details. The overriding value of doing things the right way is all the reason she needs.

This deflection of the 'why be moral?' question reveals the weakness of interpreting Shaftesbury as an egoist about motivation. Those who interpret Shaftesbury as an egoist contend that he believes that our ultimate motive for doing anything is that it will give us more pleasure than the alternatives.⁶ But while it may be true that Shaftesbury consistently believes that virtue is pleasurable for virtuous people, we can now see that there are two reasons that belief does not imply any meaningfully egoistic view.

First, in his description of the poor mechanic and his response to the nasty gentleman Shaftesbury expresses the idea that crafting true works of art has a normative trumping power over any other consideration. The mechanic disregards out of hand every possible advantage he might receive from producing work that is 'wrong.' The nasty

⁶ For the strongest recent statement of this view, see Grote 2010.

gentleman is despicable because he needs to know about the effect of cleanliness. But something that has normative trumping power for a person is for her an end in itself. If a person is not willing to sacrifice X for anything else, an egoist may continue to assert that it is because X gives the person more pleasure than everything else. But that assertion is now toothless, adding nothing to the explanation of the person's conduct. For in this case the egoist cannot articulate another end to which X is merely a means. The egoist may say that the person is doing what she's doing because it gives her the pleasure of X, but that is explanatorily indistinguishable from saying the person is doing it because she cares about X for its own sake. And this is the point Shaftesbury is striving to make in his stories of the poor mechanic and the nasty gentleman: that we should view true work and virtue as ends in itself and not as mere means to anything else.

Second, while the egoist claims that the artist cares about true work because it gives her pleasure, there is no basis for preferring that claim to the claim that the artist receives pleasure from true work because she cares about it for its own sake. Artists wish to create work that is beautiful and true. The creation of something beautiful and true—getting something exactly right—produces in artists satisfaction, delight, joy, ecstasy. Those feelings are pleasurable, and thus could be said to contribute to artists' happiness. But that does not mean that increasing their happiness must be the artists' ultimate reason for trying to create works that are beautiful and true. Creating beautiful and true work may matter to them not merely because it causes them to experience positive feelings. It may be the case that they experience those positive feelings because they've accomplished what matters to them, because they think they've got something right. The egoist interpretation holds that the artist's desire to get it right is explained by the pleasure getting it right gives her. But egoists

give us no reason for preferring that explanation to the one that holds that the artist's pleasure in getting it right is explained by her prior concern to get it right.

7. Conclusion

According to Shaftesbury, the experience of beauty—an experience that is both a feeling of joy and a recognition of something's being exactly right—is the polestar of thorough artists of every kind, higher and lower, virtuoso and mechanic. This experience is also what gives aim to the 'moral artist' (Characteristics 93), to the 'self-improving artist' (Characteristics 332), to the person who seeks to make of her life a work of art. With this in mind, let us return now to the three questions that have often taken center stage in Shaftesbury scholarship. How does our understanding of Shaftesbury's idea of life as a work of art bear on them?

Does Shaftesbury have an objectivist conception of morality, according to which the responses of the moral sense represent mind-independent features of reality, or does he have a subjectivist conception, according to which the responses of the moral sense constitute morality itself? Perhaps a Nietzschean view of artistic creation implies a subjectivist interpretation of the idea of living your life as a work of art. But we have seen that Shaftesbury's conception of an artist is that of someone who is firmly committed to making things in accord with a pre-established standard of harmony, order, and balance, and this is a standard that is prior to and independent of the mind of the artist herself. It is clear, therefore, that when Shaftesbury tells us to live our lives as works of art, he is not saying anything that suggests the view that our emotional responses in any way constitute what is right and wrong. His belief is that our emotional responses—the pleasures we experience from musical harmony, mechanical perfection, and personal virtue—inform us of the truth of mind-independent reality.

Does Shaftesbury have an egoist view of human motivation, according to which our reason to be virtuous is that it will promote our own welfare, or does he have a non-egoistic view, according to which we have a reason to be virtuous that is independent of our own welfare? When writing the *Inquiry concerning Virtue* early in his career Shaftesbury thought it was worthwhile to answer the question ‘Why be virtuous?’ by pointing to the self-interested benefits of virtue. But once he developed the idea of life as a work of art he came to think that just as an artist has an overriding reason to produce quality work independent of any benefits it may produce for her, so too does every person have an overriding reason to live in alignment with the standard of virtue regardless of any other, self-oriented considerations. The egoist interpretation claims that Shaftesbury thinks our ultimate motive is always our own pleasure, and that everything else is a mere means to that. But the whole point of Shaftesbury’s stories of the mechanic who refuses to do shoddy work and the gentleman who wonders why he should be clean is that virtuous people care about meeting the standard of truth and beauty for its own sake.

Does Shaftesbury think aesthetic value is independent of ethical value? Some modern thinkers believe that the aesthetic value of a work of art is entirely independent of its moral merits, and Stolnitz has held Shaftesbury up as an originator of that viewpoint. But once we realize that Shaftesbury believes that the beauty of a work of art consists of meeting a certain standard, and that the virtue of living your life as a work of art consists of meeting the very same standard, we see that Shaftesbury would never have accepted the idea that aesthetic value is independent of moral merit. For the two are one and the same. This constitutes a vindication of the interpretation of Guyer, who says that Shaftesbury’s goal was ‘to open the way for the recognition that at bottom beauty and moral goodness are closely connected, thus “That *Beauty* and *Good* are still the same”’ (Guyer 2008, 13). Rind criticizes Stolnitz by arguing that Stolnitz’s interpretation ‘rests on an opposition between “love” and “choice of

action” that is quite alien to Shaftesbury’s thought’ (Rind 72), and Shaftesbury’s idea of life as a work of art reveals the important sense in which Rind is absolutely correct: someone who loves beauty will be motivated to conduct herself (to choose actions) in ways that instantiate the beautiful. We also see, however, that there is something potentially misleading in the criticism of Stolnitz put forward by Mortensen. Mortensen suggests that Shaftesbury was chiefly concerned to show that proper artistic contemplation is important because it serves the moral purpose of improving the viewer’s character. Mortensen writes, ‘It is my contention that Shaftesbury, rather than separating the contemplation of beauty from the sphere of morality, wants to place it solidly within the realm of an acceptable morality’ (Mortensen 1994, 637). But while Shaftesbury did think that the beauty of representative art would improve one’s moral character, he did not think that the beauty of an artwork could be reduced to the instrumental value of improving virtue, as all things beautiful and virtuous are equally instantiations of the same standard of harmony, order, and balance.

I hope to have shown that through the lens of Shaftesbury’s idea of life as a work of art we can uncover many of his most important ethical and aesthetic commitments. I also hope we have come to see how Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* is an extended exhortation to turn your life into a thing of real beauty, to make of yourself an embodiment of the most fundamental truth of creation.

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