

Shaftesbury on politeness, honesty, and virtue

Michael B. Gill

Politeness, honesty, and public copulation

What is the relationship between politeness and honesty? A common view is that they are opposed.

On this view, politeness is a concern for outward appearance that covers up what one truly is. Politeness is a mask, a façade, something that conceals, while honesty reveals. The truly honest person, on this view, the sincere and authentic, the person of integrity, is one who hides nothing, who engages in full disclosure. The honest person not only means what he says but says what he means. His internal and his external aspects are exactly the same. He's transparent. He never dissembles. This is the kind of person who may be called "brutally frank." His company may be unpolished, even abrasive. But you always know exactly where he stands. He's the type of person who refuses to don the gauzy mask of politeness that others use to obscure what they really feel.

This idea of an opposition between honesty and politeness can be found in many contexts. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it manifested as a disdain for courtly manners. The puritan hostility to popish sacraments was a version of the same idea, based as it was on the belief that solicitude toward the external show of formal ritual was incompatible with true concern for the internal state of one's immortal soul. Rousseau may be the patron saint of this idea, interpreted as he often is as condemning mannered society and apotheosizing natural man. Or consider MTV's *Real World*, the first American reality TV show, which promised (or threatened) "to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real."ⁱ

But let us use as our exemplar of the principledly impolite person Pierre Bayle's pungent portrait of the Ancient Greek Cynic Diogenes. Diogenes the Cynic, Bayle tells us, contemned the niceties that normal people use to conceal the full truth about themselves and in his day-to-day life pushed rejection of polite dissembling to its logical conclusion. This meant concealing absolutely nothing about himself, not even his sexual relations, which he had with his wife "in the middle of the street" (Bayle 95-6).ⁱⁱ The logic behind Diogenes' public copulation decision was clear enough. If an act is something that a person performs without shame in private, then there should be no shame in performing the same act in

public. If something is a blameless aspect of a person's nature, then it is irrational to blame him for manifesting it. As Bayle put it, "When an action is good and lawful in itself, there should not be any shame in committing it. Now, the marital duty is an action that is good and lawful in itself; therefore, there should be no shame in performing it. Therefore, it can be lawfully performed in public" (Bayle 98). Indeed, for a person to conceal a part of his nature — for him to go out of his way to prevent anyone from witnessing something he does — is perniciously pretentious: it's for him to pretend that he's something he's not. Thus "the people called barbarians [i.e., those who are not ashamed to be seen having sex] have much less deviated from the laws of nature than those peoples who have so multiplied the laws of decency and civility in accordance with the subtleties of their minds; and that, after all, since natural law never loses its authority, everyone is allowed to return to it at any time and place whatsoever, without regard to the arbitrary yoke of customs and opinions of his countrymen" (Bayle 99).

Bayle was disgusted by Diogenes' behavior and the argumentation that led to it. Diogenes's position revealed just "how much human reason is capable of misleading us." But Bayle was hard-pressed to find the flaw in Diogenes' logic. He couldn't honestly say that he apprehended an immutable and eternal law of nature that forbade public copulation. And while street sex did, of course, violate "accepted customs ... to be impolite, boorish, and a poor observer of customs is not a criminal action or an evil one, morally speaking" (Bayle 100). In the end, Bayle had to rely on "Scripture" to justify his opposition to street sex. It is "true religion," he concluded, that "alone furnishes us with excellent arms against the sophisms of" people like Diogenes (Bayle 99).

Although Bayle thought that Diogenes' behavior was atrocious, he couldn't explain what was morally wrong with it. He didn't have the philosophical ammunition to attack the Cynic logic that led to the conclusion that Diogenes was acting with honesty and authenticity — that Diogenes was a paragon of integrity.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, took honesty to be at the core of the moral life. But he also sided with his friend Bayle in being adamantly opposed to violations of decorum and decency. Shaftesbury would have scorned any attempt, Cynic or otherwise, to justify rudeness, let alone disgusting behavior. Unlike Bayle, however, Shaftesbury refused to base his views on how to live on Scripture. Indeed, using Scripture in this way would have been antithetical to his entire intellectual orientation. So how would

Shaftesbury condemn what Diogenes claimed to be the most honest approach to our sexual nature? How did Shaftesbury marry his profound moral emphasis on integrity and authenticity to his insistence on the moral necessity of politeness? That's the first question I want to address in this essay. After that I'll turn to a second question: namely, what reasons does Shaftesbury give us for being polite, or moral, at all.

Three kinds of impolite writing

Explorations of politeness pervade much of what Shaftesbury wrote.ⁱⁱⁱ But let's focus on what he says about politeness's relationship to honesty, authenticity, and integrity in one of his greatest works, the *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*. Shaftesbury's initial topic here is writing, just as the subtitle would lead us to expect, and in the opening sections, he discusses the offense of delivering to public view writings that should have remained private — an offense morally akin to Diogenes' assault on manners and decency. Eventually, however, Shaftesbury extends his lessons about writing to how one should conduct oneself in general. The picture Shaftesbury develops in the *Soliloquy* of the virtues of honest and polished writing reveal in the end some of the most powerful aspects of his account of the reasons to live a virtuous life overall.

Shaftesbury begins the *Soliloquy* by criticizing several kinds of writers. The first are “the writers of memoirs” with titles such as “The Artless Midnight Thoughts of a Gentleman at Court,” “Meditations Miscellaneous,” and “Occasional Reflections upon Several Subjects.”^{iv} These memoirists, as Shaftesbury reads them, ask us to watch them work through their emotional and spiritual problems, revealing in print all their most intimate “meditations, occasional reflections, [and] solitary thoughts” (74). Shaftesbury saw nothing wrong with the activity of trying to improve the state of one's soul through meditation and reflection (a point to which we will return in the next section). But he thought it was indecent to publically expose oneself while doing it — indecent for memoirists to exhibit “on the stage of the world that practice which they should have kept to themselves.” These writers came forth covered in “froth and scum” they should have cleansed themselves of in private. Their books were “crudities,” misshapen “miscarriages and abortions” that “they beget in public” (74-5). He compares the authors of these books of self-improvement to quack doctors who spell out to their audiences in disgusting detail the benefits special supplements have had on their digestive systems. “The proverb, no

doubt, is very just, ‘physician, cure thyself!’,” says Shaftesbury. “Yet methinks one should have but an ill time to be present at these bodily operations. Nor is the reader in truth any better entertained when he is obliged to assist at the experimental discussions of his practicing author, who all the while is in reality doing no better than taking his physic in public” (74).

But while Shaftesbury found secular memoirs unpalatable, he was even more appalled by the published reflections of “candidates for authorship” who “happen to be of the sanctified kind” — that is, the religious ruminations of ministers, priests, and other clerics (75). Like secular memoirists, these self-appointed “holy advisors” manifested a breathtaking self-aggrandizement, presuming that every thought that happened to pass through their heads was something that other people needed to hear for their edification. In a characteristically sarcastic passage, Shaftesbury says that most of us cannot imagine how far the “charity [of these religious writers] is apt to extend. So exceeding great is their indulgence and tenderness for mankind that they are unwilling the least sample of their devout exercise should be lost. Though there are already so many formularies and rituals appointed for this species of soliloquy, they can allow nothing to lie concealed which passes in this religious commerce and way of dialogue between them and their soul” (75). Also like the secular memoirists, the sanctified authors wrote very badly, delivering “abortions,” or works that should have been much more extensively polished. But the sanctified memoirists were in a crucial respect even worse than the secular ones, for they maintained that the crudity of their language was actually a virtue. Rather than apologize for the ugliness of their writing, they aggressively defended it, claiming in effect that their clunky first thoughts were more honest and virtuous than the elegantly revised thoughts of others. Like the brutally frank person — like Bayle’s Diogenes — they took the unpleasantly impolite to be morally superior to the pleasantly refined. As Shaftesbury puts it, “A saint-author of all men least values politeness. He scorns to confine that spirit in which he writes to rules of criticism and profane learning. Nor is he inclined in any respect to play the critic on himself, or regulate his style or language by the standard of good company and people of the better sort. He is above the consideration of that which in a narrow sense we call ‘manners’” (75). As an illustration of the rejection of politeness in certain kinds of religious writing Shaftesbury points to the letters of Pope Gregory, whose disdain for polite expression led him to carry on “a kind of massacre upon every product of human wit” (439). Gregory condemned the

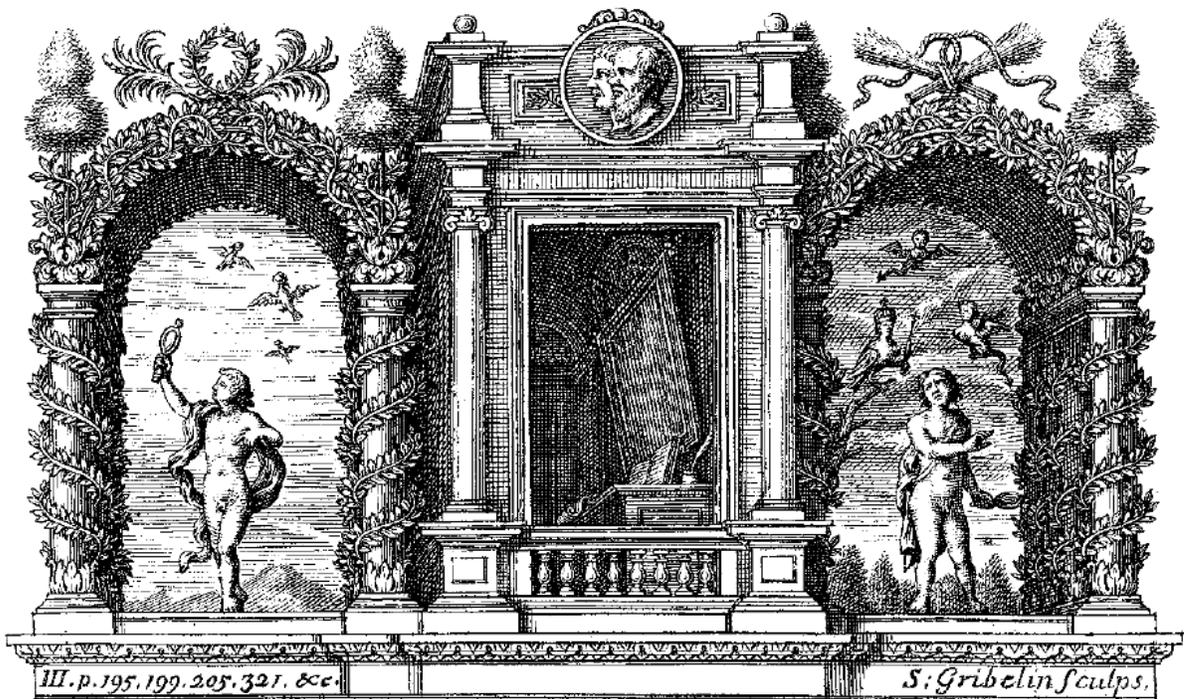
teaching of grammar^v, eschewed elegant expression, and boasted of his own cacophonousness. “I have scorned observing the art of eloquence,” he wrote. “I do not avoid the clash of m-sounds; I do not steer clear of a mingling of barbarisms; I spurn careful attention to positionings and changings of prepositions and inflections, because I am most firmly of the opinion that it is unworthy for me to constrain the words of the heavenly oracle beneath the rubrics of Donatus” (439).^{vi} This is, truly, the literary equivalent of Diogenes’ street sex.

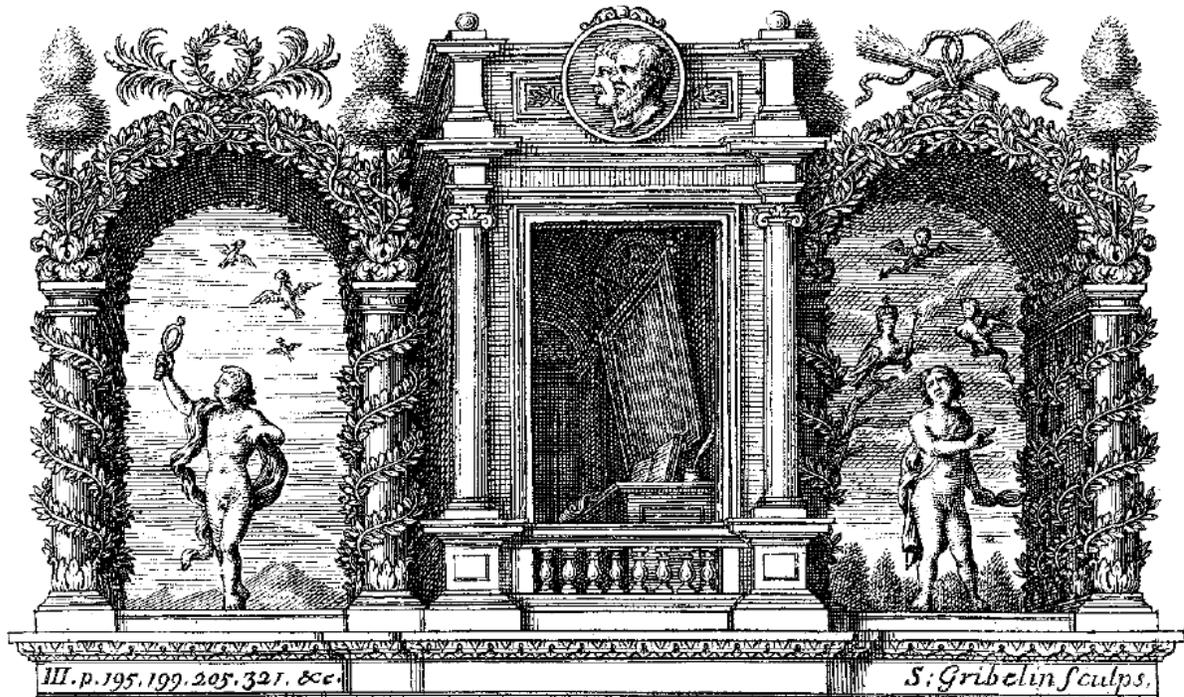
A third kind of bad writing Shaftesbury discusses is contemporary philosophy. He is not as scathing about the philosophy of his day as he is about rude religious ruminations. But he does think that the combined influences of scholasticism and empirical science have turned philosophy into something egregiously “pedantic.” Philosophy used to be written in a way that gave it the power to effect dramatic change on the morals of individuals and the politics of nations. But in its current state, exemplified by the epistemological writings of Locke and Descartes, its role has been greatly diminished. “She [philosophy] is no longer active in the world nor can hardly, with any advantage, be brought upon the public stage,” one of Shaftesbury’s characters laments. “We have immured her, poor lady, in colleges and cells and have set her servilely to such works as those in the mines. Empirics and pedantic sophists are her chief pupils. The school syllogism and the elixir are the choicest of her products” (232). While Pope Gregory’s stylistic offenses were intentional and aggressive, philosophy’s pedantry is merely hapless.

The problem common to all of these types of writing — secular memoirs, sanctified edifications, epistemological philosophy — was a lack of polish, a lack of politeness. Such writers were qualmless about sharing with others their awkward half-thoughts, their mental fits and starts, their struggles to develop and form ideas. Indeed, as we’ve seen, the sanctified edifiers were downright enthusiastic about the lack of polish of their writing, of the view that this alone ensured the honesty of the work. But as Shaftesbury saw it, publishing such things was tantamount to going to a dinner party in one’s nightclothes with the plan of dressing and grooming among the guests, rather than fully arranging oneself in private before arrival. For Shaftesbury, publishing such things was akin to taking one’s toilet in public.^{vii}

The mirror method

This analogy between polished writing and good grooming is one that *Soliloquy* develops in rich detail. For how does one arrange oneself in preparation for a public appearance? Typically, a person looks at himself, notes the things that could look better, and makes a judgment about what to do to achieve that improvement. He takes conscious measures to refine various of his aspects. Then he looks at himself again. He makes further refinements. He looks at himself once more to see if he's achieved his goal. Typically, that is to say, a person preparing for a public appearance engages in a process that involves a mirror. And this (not some narcissistic preoccupation with dressing and grooming) is what Shaftesbury wants to call attention to: the process of writing should involve a kind of mirroring that is analogous to the conscious, self-reflective method of putting oneself together in preparation for a public appearance.





The importance of the mirror-analogy is manifest from the very start of the *Soliloquy*, the emblem for which is a triptych of mirrors. The figure on the left panel of the triptych is a beautiful, well-proportioned boy, who represents the good. The landscape around the good boy is bright and open, and he is looking directly into a hand-mirror. In contrast, the figure on the right panel is misshapen and scared, and hounded by harpies. This boy lives in a dark, ugly place. He too has a mirror in his hand, but unlike the good boy he is “turn’d strongly away from it,” refusing “to look at himself.”^{viii} The large central panel of the triptych is a picture of a desk in a study. Looming over the desk, dominating the picture, is a massive mirror. No one is present, but a scroll and pen are there, waiting for use. The message is clear: to align with the good and the cheery, and avoid the evil and dismal, the writer must use the mirror on himself. The question the image poses is whether any of us are up to the task.

The text of the *Soliloquy* goes on to give detailed instruction on how to write with a mirror — on how to converse with oneself, how to engage in the private, self-reflective, corrective activity that eventually produces polished public prose. The key, according to Shaftesbury, is that a writer divide himself into two: that he adopt the role of the presenter and the presented to, the actor and the audience, the surgeon and the patient. The writer must be his own mirror.

How can we do this? How can we split ourselves into two? Shaftesbury suggests a simple method: talk to yourself. Literally. Hold up to your thoughts “a kind of *vocal* looking-glass” (78). Try out your ideas by speaking them aloud. Practice actual soliloquy. Spend “some discourse and bestow[...] a little breath and clear voice purely upon [yourself]” (72). For we would almost certainly “be less noisy and more profitable in company if at convenient times we discharged some of our articulate sound and spoke to ourselves *viva voc* when alone” (72). Talking to yourself, engaging in soliloquy, is the part of the thinking process that you should complete on your own, when no one else is around, *before* you express your ideas to others. What you present to the public should first have passed through this private process of thorough self-reflection.^{ix}

It is sometimes said that you should never trust a person who writes more than he reads. To this Shaftesbury might have added: never take seriously a person who expounds more in public than he does in private. “It is the hardest thing in the world to be a good thinker,” as he puts it, “without being a strong self-examiner and thorough-paced dialogist in [the] solitary way” of soliloquy (76). To ensure that one’s work can withstand legitimate criticism, one must first “play the critic thoroughly upon [oneself].” To have any hope of advancing defensible ideas, those ideas must “sound correction by themselves, and been well-formed and disciplined before they are brought into the field” (76). Thinking, Shaftesbury is telling us here, is harder than most people think. It’s not a matter of simply saying the first thing that comes to mind. It is, rather, the effort of trying to figure out what the last thing should be.

It’s clear that this kind of extensive and intensive reflection is something that Shaftesbury himself engaged in prior to publication. Shaftesbury’s private notebooks are replete with dialogues he had with himself, and those dialogues are circuitous and tormented, at times rough in tone and substance. They contain a fair amount of excoriating self-criticism — at times, self-disgust — and the writing is often raw, crude, even ugly. The contrast with Shaftesbury’s finished product could not be greater. Each individual treatise in the *Characteristics* follows its own intricate artistic design, with argumentative progressions whose pacing and reversals, twists and turns, are plotted with the care of a Jane Austen novel. Each treatise has a unique narrative voice. And the prose throughout the *Characteristics* is polished to a high gleam. There is often a casual, conversational air about it, as though the words were flowing out of effortlessly entertaining companion, but that appearance of

effortlessness is itself the result of effortful art. Shaftesbury sought to “give an extemporary air to what was written, and make the effect of art be felt without discovering the artifice” (348; cf 399). He aimed for a kind of writing that is “so far from making any ostentation of method that it conceals the artifice as much as possible, endeavouring only to express the effect of art under the appearance of the greatest ease and negligence” (116). And of course Shaftesbury also polished the physical appearance of the book, planning each illustration in meticulous detail down to the individual flourish and jot.^x Every aspect of the *Characteristics* — from its overarching philosophical ideas, to the digressions that initially seem off-hand but on closer inspection turn out to be carefully crafted and argumentatively crucial, to the smallest of background elements of each panel of every triptych — Shaftesbury consciously chose in order to produce a certain effect.^{xi} The metaphoric writing-mirror in Shaftesbury’s study got lots of heavy use.

Diogenes the Cynic wanted to appear in public exactly as he was in private. But when we compare Shaftesbury’s notebooks to his *Characteristics*, we cannot but be struck by the effort Shaftesbury put into presenting to the public something that was *different* from what he did in private.^{xii} And what bears directly on the question with which we started this essay is that Shaftesbury believed that a polished, finished product such as the *Characteristics* — a work that resulted from conscious art — was more genuine and honest than its artless counterpart. As Shaftesbury saw it, the refined work was more “unaffected,” more “natural,” than the unrefined. In the *New York Times* I once read a movie review that wondered whether a certain film was “the blossoming of authenticity or the triumph of artifice.” The dichotomy of that review’s question’s premise is exactly what Shaftesbury’s view rejects. Shaftesbury’s view is that the blossoming of authenticity *is* a triumph of artifice.

But how can this be? What warrants Shaftesbury’s claim that his artful performance is more genuine, honest, and natural than the artless behavior of people like Diogenes? Is there anything more to this claim than an author’s desire to grab his readers’ attention by paradoxical proclamation?

The artful as more natural than the artless: a three-pronged view

I think, in fact, there is a three-pronged approach that makes good sense of Shaftesbury’s belief that the artful can be more genuine, honest, and natural than the artless. The first prong is Shaftesbury’s teleological conception of the natural.

What's natural for an organism to do, on the teleological conception, is what it's built to do, the end for which the organism is designed, the achievement of its given goal. Such an achievement is not a forgone conclusion. It can require a great deal of conscious effort, skill and, perhaps, luck. Many individuals may fail at it. Indeed, most may fail. Success at achieving the given goal may be statistically rare. But that does not mean that those that do succeed are thereby *unnatural*. Just the contrary. It is the few that do what they are built to do that are most natural. Consider a turtle species that buries its eggs on the beach. When the eggs hatch, the baby turtles make a mad dash for the sea. Gulls and other predators are at the ready, however, and a majority of the baby turtles are eaten before their feet ever touch the water. Maybe only one out of a hundred manages to escape predation, head out to the open sea, and live a long, productive turtle life. But the statistically unusual turtle that achieves this end is not thereby unnatural. It is that turtle, statistically unusual though it is, that is living in the way turtles are designed to live.^{xiii} That turtle is doing — is accomplishing — what is natural.^{xiv}

Similarly, Shaftesbury believes, it takes great deal of effort, in addition to native endowment and luck in upbringing, for a person to achieve the pinnacles of politeness, manners, and morals. Indeed, the large majority of people fail to achieve this goal, with many not even putting in any significant effort toward it at all. But those few who do succeed are not thereby conducting themselves unnaturally. On the contrary. The few that do succeed are living the most natural lives of all. Those who achieve the heights of refinement are like world-class athletes whose physical prowess is extremely rare and yet also paradigmatic of the nature of the human body. They are like the turtles that make it to the ocean and go on to lead long, productive turtle lives.

Shaftesbury's most developed example of this kind of rarely refined individual is Theocles, from *The Moralists* — the moral equivalent of an Olympic athlete.^{xv} Shaftesbury's belief is that Theocles conducts himself more naturally than Diogenes, and that that would still be the case even if Diogenes-like behavior were far the more common of the two. The conscious effort Theocles puts into the perfection of his character enables him to achieve the end for which he was designed, while Diogenes, by wallowing in primitive crudity, is like a sea turtle that never makes it out of the sand. So when Shaftesbury says in the *Soliloquy*, "If a natural good taste be not already formed in us, why should not we endeavour to form it, and become natural?" (151), it is not merely paradoxical proclamation. Shaftesbury's

teleological conception of human nature makes sensible the idea that we have to work hard to achieve what is most natural to us.

This teleological conception of human nature is not without its difficulties. Most notably, it owes us an account of the reason for privileging as natural one way of life rather than any other, and it's far from obvious how Shaftesbury can ground that kind of substantive normative conclusion without begging some of the most important questions. What other than one's approval of Theocles justifies the judgment that he is natural, while the court dandy, the country bumpkin, and the world's Diogeneses are unnatural? I doubt that there is a fully satisfactory, non-question-begging view of human nature that will capture all of what Shaftesbury wants to include in his view of the best, Theocles-like life. But that may not be a problem for our purposes. For to follow Shaftesbury in affirming the naturalness of the mirror-method we may need to accept only one aspect of his view of human nature — namely, that humans are naturally *reflective* beings. The plausible idea here is that humans are built not merely to have affections and motives but also to be conscious that they have them. They are built to develop second-order affections and motives towards their own first-order affections and motives, with the former being capable of altering the latter (172). To explain how that helps Shaftesbury, let us turn to the second of the three prongs of his approach to the artful and the natural.

This second prong is more earthy. The best way I can think of introducing it is through bullshit. Bullshit, as Harry Frankfurt has famously analyzed it, is speech that has no connection to the truth.^{xvi} This distinguishes bullshit from both honesty and deception. If you ask me how much money I have in my wallet and my goal is to be honest, I will look in my wallet and give you an accurate account. What I say to you will non-accidentally represent how the world is. If my goal is to deceive you, I will purposely give you an inaccurate account. What I say to you in that case will non-accidentally misrepresent how the world is. But the third possibility — wherein lies the bullshit — is that I don't care at all whether what I say is accurate or inaccurate but only that I make a certain impression on you. The third possibility is that my desire for you to think something about me is completely disengaged from its truth or falsity. In this third case, I will tell you that I have a certain amount of money in my wallet without looking in my wallet or giving any thought at all to what's there. I'm not concerned, in this case, whether my answer represents or misrepresents the world. I may tell you the first thing that pops into my head, not because it

bears any particular relation to the way the world is but just because it seems like the thing to say at the moment. Frankfurt gives as a prime example of this type of bullshit a campaigning politician's declaration of love for his country. Frankfurt's point is not that the politician *doesn't* love his country, not that he's lying. The point is that he's saying something that's simply untethered to his actual feelings. He'd say the same thing regardless of how he feels. He declares his patriotism because it's convenient to do so, not because it's either an accurate or an inaccurate representation. The words that the politician uses to express his love for his country do not reveal or conceal what he truly thinks but rather forestall his truly engaging in any serious thinking at all.

Now it turns out that bullshit is often easier than honesty. When we're asked about our attitudes toward our country, toward a musical performance, toward a potential romantic partner, or whatever, the well-worn phrases and clichés can come to our lips (or keyboard) almost unbidden, without any advance thought required. Uttering those phrases and clichés as soon as they pop into our heads is as simple as can be. What takes considerably more effort is finding the words to capture what we truly think about such things. For what we truly think about things that are truly worth thinking about is almost always more complex and fine-grained than the well-worn phrases and clichés. As Shaftesbury explains, "One would think there was nothing easier for us than to know our own minds and understand what our main scope was, what we plainly drove at and what we proposed to ourselves, as our end, in every occurrence of our lives. But our thoughts have generally such an obscure implicit language that it is the hardest thing in the world to make them speak out distinctly" (77-8). The words that accurately represent, the honest words, are not the first ones that come to mind. Uttering the first thing that comes to mind may not reveal our deepest thoughts but rather prevent us from thinking at all. It may just pass on the surrounding bullshit.^{xvii} Accurate and honest words are more likely to be the ones we come to last and finally, after careful, conscious introspection — after using the methodological mirror of Shaftesburean soliloquy.

The word Shaftesbury himself uses for speech that we call bullshit is "froth." People who never engage in soliloquy, he tells us, exhibit a "frothiness or ventosity in speech" (72). They manifest a "frothy distemper" (74). They subject the rest of us to their "froth and scum" (74). Their talk suffers from "a certain tumour or flatulency" (76). "It is," as Shaftesbury explains, "no wonder if such quaint practitioners grow to an enormous size of

absurdity, while they continue in the reverse of that practice by which alone we correct the redundancy of humours and chasten the exuberance of conceit and fancy. A remarkable instance of the want of this sovereign remedy may be drawn from our common ‘great talkers,’ who engross the greatest part of the conversations of the world... [I]t is a certain observation in our science that they who are great talkers in company have never been any talkers by themselves, nor used to these private discussions of our home regimen, for which reason their froth abounds” (76). Shaftesbury’s aim in expounding the practice of soliloquy is to teach writers how to implement the “sovereign remedy” or “home regimen” that prevents “froth.” This practice will produce writings that are more sincere and authentic — that are truer, fuller reflections of an author’s mind — than the bullshit spewed by “great talkers.” The effort of careful consideration, the using of a mirror on one’s thoughts prior to public presentation, does not conceal one’s real nature but reveals it, both to others and to oneself.

Perhaps Diogenes and his literary counterparts, such as the sanctified candidates for authorship, were not always guilty of dealing in froth or bullshit. But they did commit a similar offense. Like the frothy bullshitters, Diogenes and the sanctified memoirists privileged their initial, unrefined impulses (whether physical or literary). They believed that any alteration to those primitive impulses would wrench them away from their genuine or authentic selves, from who they really were. Shaftesbury maintains exactly the opposite, and it is just here that the first two prongs of the approach we are discussing work in concert. According to Shaftesbury, it is part of the teleological nature of each of us to be a reflective being, a being who looks at himself and judges what he sees. The capacity for self-refinement that such scrutiny opens up is integral to human nature, not in the sense of being statistically common but rather in the sense of being what we are built to do. The results of the exercise of that mirroring activity are a truer representation of what we really are — a truer representation of what is distinctively human, of what is essential to our humanity — than are our impulsive, unreflective movements.

It’s self-reflection and refinement, moreover, that leads us to our truest selves. To see this, let us turn to the third prong of the Shaftesburean attack on the Diogeneses of the world.

Those who think honesty consists of privileging one’s first responses and eschewing the reflection of second (and third, and fourth) thoughts often seem to be working with a

primitive understanding of the self. Their idea seems to be that the self is a beautiful, enduring simple that sits somewhere inside, gemlike, needing only to be uncovered to be seen. An honest portrayal of the self, on this way of thinking, is a matter merely of revelation, of simply showing to others what has always been there.

Shaftesbury does not see the self as anything so simple.^{xviii} According to Shaftesbury, a self is an enduring, coherent viewpoint, that which keeps one “in the same mind from one day to another” (84). And having a self — like being natural — is not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, many do not have true selves, changing their minds from day to day, lacking the constancy necessary for a mental identity. “For it is not certainly by virtue of our face merely that we are ourselves. It is not we who change when our complexion or shape changes. But there is that which, being wholly metamorphosed and converted, we are thereby in reality transformed and lost” (127). To bring one’s thoughts into coherence — to make up one’s mind and thus become a unitary self as opposed to simply a single body — one must engage in intellectual effort, in the conscious reflection that is our (teleologically-understood) nature. Conscious reflection is necessary “to gain [a person] a will and ensure him a certain resolution by which he shall know where to find himself, be sure of his own meaning and design and, as to all his desires, opinions and inclinations, be warranted one and the same person today as yesterday and tomorrow as today” (84).

For Shaftesbury, having a self — a true self, a consistent and enduring character — is a hard-won accomplishment. And it’s the deliberative process of second (third, and fourth) thoughts, not the fast and easy dealing of bullshit, that produces it. The hard work of philosophical thought doesn’t discover what you really are so much as it creates it. If what we mean by honesty is the accurate representation of our selves, it’s the publication not of frothy first responses but of careful, conscious reflections that is most honest.

Why use the mirror-method? Why be moral?

Shaftesbury starts out the *Soliloquy* speaking only to authors. But he eventually extends his self-reflective advice, telling us that we should submit our conduct as a whole to the looking-glass scrutiny. To “advance in morals and true wisdom,” he says, you must “‘Divide yourself? or ‘Be two!’” (77). The “home-dialect of soliloquy” is a pre-requisite not only for effective writing but also for a virtuous character. Truthfulness and integrity will follow if you split yourself into an agent and an observer — and then do only that which will enable

the former to pass “the inspection and review” of the latter (203). You should use the mirror method — self-scrutinizing and adjusting until you are happy with what you see, until you are able to bear your own survey — to polish not only your physical appearance and literary products but your life in general.

But now we are faced with another question: why bother? Why take all the time and trouble to produce polished prose and conduct rather than settle for the first thing that comes to mind? Why put in all the self-reflective effort of soliloquy when unreflective output is so much easier?^{xix}

An initial answer to that question is that polished prose and conduct are more agreeable or pleasant than that which is rough or unpolished. Now agreeability or pleasantness may seem to some to be a fairly trivial consideration. And there were certain religious moralists of Shaftesbury’s day who went even further than that. Intensely impressed by the idea of the Fall, these religious moralists declared pleasure to be downright bad, the devil’s inducement to sin. For these self-denying, self-flagellating types, pleasure and morality were mortal enemies between which we had to choose. Shaftesbury thought these religious moralists were dead wrong. On Shaftesbury’s view, it’s morality that’s pleasant and immorality that’s unpleasant.^{xx} Those who are unpleasant or difficult to be around, on Shaftesbury’s view, are not simply being impolite; they’re failing in virtue. And this is because the polite *is* the moral. Thus Shaftesbury tells us that his aim is “to recommend morals on the same foot with what in a lower sense is called manners and to advance philosophy ... on the very foundation of what is called agreeable and polite” (408).

This is not much of an answer, however, to the person who doesn’t care about being pleasant or agreeable. Perhaps, such a person would say, politeness is moral — or at any rate, you can use the terms that way if you like. But then the question just becomes: why should I be moral? Why should I put in the self-reflective effort to polish my conduct and character when it’s easier for me not to? Gaining concession to the equation of politeness and morality will not win the day for Shaftesbury. It will just push the question, “Why be polite?” back to the question “Why be moral?”

Shaftesbury’s response to the “Why be moral?” question is something I have explored in previous works. I have maintained that Shaftesbury believed that humans, given the kinds of beings they naturally are, will inevitably reflect on their own conduct and be happy with what they see only if they act virtuously. As Shaftesbury puts it in the *Inquiry*,

“Every reasoning or reflecting Creature is, by his Nature, forc’d to endure the Review of his own Mind, and Actions; and to have Representations of himself, and his inward Affairs, constantly passing before him, obvious to him, and revolving in his Mind. Now as nothing can be more grievous than this is, to one who has thrown off natural Affection; so nothing can be more delightful to one who has preserv’d it with sincerity” (205). According to this line of thought, we cannot help but reflect on what we do, we will enjoy that self-review only if we act morally, and thus virtue is necessary for an enjoyable life. Shaftesbury’s main argument for this comes in Part 2 of the *Inquiry*. That’s where he develops a moral psychology to support his claim that the inevitability of self-reflection makes the mirror-method of writing and living necessary for happiness.^{xxi}

But while much of that Shaftesburean moral psychology is compelling, it’s not completely convincing as a justification either for polite writing or virtuous living. And that’s because it’s far from clear that all people do inevitably reflect on their writing or their character, or that all reflect in the way Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry* answer supposes. The popular memoirists and clerical writers Shaftesbury criticizes in the *Soliloquy* might never feel any discomfort about their work. Perhaps they simply churn it out without ever going back to look, or perhaps they think what they’ve written is actually really good. Similarly, people who lie and cheat may never think back on what they’ve done, or perhaps feel satisfaction at having accomplished their goals. I’m thinking here not only of psychopaths (who are so rare and abnormal that it’s probably legitimate not to let them count as counterexamples to an account of morality and human nature) but also of more run-of-the-mill jerks. Shaftesbury’s robust, substantive teleology of human nature implies that all humans reflect on their conduct in a way that ensures that only the virtuous will be happy. But I don’t know if we can share that faith.

I now believe, moreover, that Shaftesbury himself came to doubt the scope of the answer he developed in the second part of the *Inquiry* to the question, Why be moral? In a passage from the *Soliloquy* and a passage from the *Essay on Freedom of Wit and Humour*, Shaftesbury lays out three ways of life: [1] the life of the honest person, who reflects on his conduct and likes what he sees, [2] the life of the half-knave, who acts immorally, reflects on his conduct, and dislikes what he sees, and [3] the life of the full knave, who acts immorally but isn’t bothered by it in the slightest. In Part 2 of the *Inquiry*, Shaftesbury proceeds as though the life of the full knave were an impossibility — as though the choice were only

between morality and half-knavery. But in those passages from the *Soliloquy* and the *Essay*, the possibility of full knavery is something he seriously considers.

In the *Soliloquy* passage, Shaftesbury recounts the internal dialogue a person might have with himself upon realizing that he refrains from cheating and harming others not because he cares about virtue but only to avoid negative repercussions for himself. Why shouldn't I lie and betray, the person ask himself, given that doing so would be in my interest? No doubt I would lie and betray, he answers himself, "provided I were sure not to be punished for it." The dialogue continues:

"And what reason has the greatest rogue in nature for not doing thus?"

"The same reason and no other."

"Am I not then, at the bottom, the same as he?"

"The same: an arrant villain, though perhaps more a coward and not so perfect in my kind..."

"Why therefore do I cherish such weaknesses? Why do I sympathize with others? Why please myself in the conceit of worth and honour, a character, a memory, an issue or a name? What else are these but scruples in my way? Wherefore do I thus belie my own interest and, by keeping myself half-knave, approve myself a thorough fool?" (78-9).

Being a half-knave is the worst course of action. There are two alternatives to it, being an honest person and being a full knave. And here, at least, Shaftesbury doesn't seem to think it's perfectly obvious why we should opt for the former over the latter.

Shaftesbury makes the same point in the *Essay*. He says there that the half-knavish characters of those who act only for their own interests and yet still wish to enjoy reflecting on their own conduct are "as ridiculous as the way of children who eat their cake and afterwards cry for it" (60). Such people "should be told, as children, that they cannot eat their cake and have it." But he then goes on to say that "[w]hen men indeed are become accomplished knaves, they are past crying for their cake."

[I]t is in reality the thorough profligate knave, the very complete unnatural villain alone, who can any way bid for happiness with the honest man. True interest is wholly on one side or the other. All between is inconsistency, irresolution, remorse, vexation and an argue fit, from hot to cold, from one passion to another quite contrary, a perpetual discord of life and an alternate disquiet and self-dislike. (60-1)

In a footnote to this passage, Shaftesbury approvingly quotes Horace: “The more resolutely he stayed the same in his vices, the less wretched he was and better off than he who struggles on a rope, now taut, now slack” (61). We see, then, once again, that while there are obvious and compelling reasons to regard half-knavery as inferior to virtue, it is less clear how to respond convincingly to someone who questions whether virtue is superior to full knavery.

Earlier in the same section of the *Essay*, Shaftesbury writes:

Should one who had the countenance of a gentleman ask me why I would avoid being nasty when nobody was present, in the first place 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. However, I might, notwithstanding this, be contented to give him a slight answer and say, “It was because I had a nose.” Should he trouble me further and ask again, “What if I had a cold or what if naturally I had no such nice smell?” I might answer perhaps that “I cared as little to see myself nasty as that others should see me in that condition.” “But what if it were in the dark?”... 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. (58)

If someone never engages in self-reflection — if someone never looks at himself in the mirror, or never smells himself — it will be virtually impossible to convince him that he has any intrinsic reason to be clean and presentable. And if he is not harmed in any way by others’ thinking him unclean and unpresentable, then we might not be able to convince him to attend to his grooming. And Shaftesbury seems to think that the same thing is true with regard to virtue and character (as well as to writing). If a person really doesn’t care about the shape of his character (or what his writing is like), and if there are no compelling extrinsic benefits to his improving either of these things through the mirror-method, then that person may very well not be able to see any reason to go to all the trouble — to put forth all of that effort — of polishing his character (or his writing).

So what can be said to those for whom full knavery is a real option? What I think we’ve found is that Shaftesbury does not have an answer that will rationally convince such people to be virtuous instead. This does not discredit his view, however. Or rather, it doesn’t discredit the sentimentalist aspects of his view (even while it might do damage to the

rationalist aspects).^{xxii} There are two reasons for this. First of all, a truly sentimentalist account of morality should hold that an individual's reasons to be moral will, in the end, bottom out in the sentiments of that individual. Consequently, according to a sentimentalist account, if direct sentimental attachment to virtue is something an individual lacks, we simply have to face the fact that that individual will not place any intrinsic value on virtue. If you want to rationally persuade such an individual to be virtuous, all you can do is try to show that acting morally will bring extrinsic benefits and prevent extrinsic harms. And if such individuals believe that the balance of extrinsic benefits and harms does not favor virtue — if their expected utility calculus gives more value to immorality — there is no further rational argument you can make to convince them otherwise. This is what sentimentalism about virtue should imply, and this is what Shaftesbury's discussions of full knavery in the *Soliloquy* and the *Essay* suggest (even if his more rationalist moments in *The Moralists* may suggest otherwise).

But secondly, Shaftesbury still can and does provide a powerful description of the reasons some people will embrace virtue and reject knavery even while allowing that the balance of extrinsic benefits and harms may favor the latter. To make vivid these reasons, Shaftesbury describes the commitment certain artists and artisans have to producing good work. Truly committed sculptures, painters, and architects will not be able to bring themselves to produce work they know to be inferior, even if doing so will lead to better consequences for them. Their commitment to their art compels them to try to produce only the best, regardless of what will otherwise be to their advantage. The same is true of “the better sort of mechanics” who will refuse to make something that they think is poorly executed even if that is what will bring the most handsome reward. As Shaftesbury writes, “[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... Be they ever so idle, dissolute or debauched, how regardless soever of other rules, they abhor any transgression in their art and would choose to lose customers and starve rather than, by a base compliance with the world, to act contrary to what they call the justness and truth of work. ‘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. 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?" (117). We readily accept the possibility of artists and craftsmen remaining committed to their art or craft regardless of the rewards that may result from betraying it. We don't think truly committed artists need an answer to the question, "Why produce beautiful works rather than ugly ones?" because we understand their valuing the art as an end in itself. We don't think truly committed craftsmen need an answer to the question, "Why produce reliable machines rather than untrustworthy ones?" because we understand their valuing the craft as an end in itself. But according to Shaftesbury, one's life — one's character and conduct — can be, or can fail to be, morally beautiful or ugly, reliable or untrustworthy. And the commitment people who appreciate moral beauty and reliability have to instantiate those features can have the same force on what they do as artists' and craftsmen's commitment to their work. Shaftesbury equates reasons of morality, aesthetics, and craftsmanship. The value art has for an artist, proficient workmanship has for a craftsman, and virtue has for the truly virtuous are all of a piece. And, according to Shaftesbury, writers should place the same value on their writing. Writers should give to their sentences the same kind of care that sculptors give to their sculptures, architects give to their buildings, and the virtuous give to their conduct — a kind of care that trumps convenience, expediency, and financial advancement (118). That is why it is proper in a discussion of Shaftesbury to run together discussion of the reasons to be moral and the reasons to write well: for Shaftesbury, the two types of reasons are one and the same.

Shaftesbury is famous for his equation of morality and aesthetics — for the idea that our approval of what is virtuous is a subset of our delight in what is beautiful. "Beauty and good are," as his favored character Theocles tells us, "one and the same" (327).^{xxiii} Some might object that this equation diminishes morality, reducing it to an enterprise of less importance than we should have previously thought. But such an objection would be deeply mistaken. For Shaftesbury's God is an artist and the world His creation of beauty. To make of one's life something beautiful is not to deal in trifles, nor to dissemble or deceive. It is to

imitate God. Shaftesbury's equation of morality and aesthetics elevates virtue to divine emulation.^{xxiv}

Bayle's Diogenes was not a knave who lies and cheats. But Diogenes was like the knave in failing to recognize his life as a work of art, in failing to appreciate that his conduct and character could be something ugly or beautiful. No one thinks that beautiful painting and writing come easy. They come from hard, conscious, reflective work. The same is true for the production of beautiful conduct and character. What I have tried to explain here is Shaftesbury's belief that such work is essential to being both polite and honest — and even to being a self with integrity at all.

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ⁱ For an entertaining and informative historical account of the idea of an opposition between honesty and outward shows of politeness, see Magill. I got the MTV *Real World* quote from there.

ⁱⁱ There was disagreement about whether Diogenes and his wife actually had sex in the street or merely mimicked the motions of the act in order to make a point to onlookers, "who were ignorant of what was going on under the cloak" (Bayle 97). Discussion of this issue took on some indelicate issues, such as whether it would have been possible for the Cynics to "even erect their muscles before witnesses." Diogenes was also said to have masturbated in the marketplace, which gave rise to similar controversy (Bayle 100).

ⁱⁱⁱ The indispensable work on Shaftesbury and politeness is Klein (1994). I have learned a tremendous amount from Klein's work and only wish I had succeeded in incorporating more of it into this and my other writings on Shaftesbury.

^{iv} See Klein's footnote on page 71 of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). All references to Shaftesbury's work are to Klein's edition of *Characteristics*.

^v Pope Gregory and his ilk are the mirror image of people who today make a great show of being morally horrified by missing apostrophes on road signs, misplaced commas on menus, and split infinitives in newspaper articles (see, for instance, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*). I suppose Aristotle was right and every virtue, including concern for grammar, has both a corresponding deficiency and excess. (The most practically wise discussion of grammar and morality in the English language that I know of is Wallace.)

^{vi} Here is another translation, which perhaps manifests Gregory's attitude toward writing even more clearly: "I do not shun colliding metacism: I do not go out of my way to avoid the jumble of barbarism and I scorn to adhere to the set positions and directions and cases of the preposition: because I strongly believe it to be unseemly that I should bind the words of heavenly prophecy under the rules of Donatus."

^{vii} I sometimes have to catch flights that leave very early in the morning, at five or six am. Allowing time for check-in and security, this means getting up almost in the middle of the night. Waiting in line such mornings, I am consistently struck by how well-groomed most of the other people in line are, how properly put together, despite the ungodly early hour. Rather than snatch another half an hour of sleep, they decide to get up even earlier than they have to in order to present to the world a version of themselves that has been reflectively refined. They care about their appearance even though they really don't have anything to gain by it; it matters to them intrinsically; they take a pride in it for its own sake; to come out ungroomed would be to let themselves down. Shaftesbury's point is that each of us should have the same attitude toward the sentences we write and display before others, that we should be as aghast at making public unpolished prose as those passengers would be at arriving at the airport disheveled and unbrushed (an attitude toward writing that anyone who grades undergraduate philosophy papers can only wish were more common).

^{viii} The quotation is from Shaftesbury's instructions for the illustration, as quoted in Paknadel 307.

^{ix} This is similar to the good advice sometimes given to young students who are learning how to write, which is to revise by *listening* to what they have written — i.e., to read their early drafts literally out loud. (But just as Shaftesbury advises us to “retire into some thick wood, or . . . take the point of some high hill” [73] when engaged in soliloquy, so too should writers reading aloud their own drafts take themselves off somewhere private [and not remain seated in the middle of a crowded coffeeshop]).

^x See Paknadel.

^{xi} Shaftesbury’s gathering all of his writings together into the *Characteristics* is itself noteworthy. Lots of other writers, from his era as well as ours, have been content over the course of their careers to write a number of different pieces and to let them remain forever in separate covers, as discrete things. The effort Shaftesbury exerted to create a single emphatic book bespeaks his intense desire to turn all of his disparate ideas into a signal whole. He must have felt that anything less would have been unacceptably loose-ended, unfinished. I suspect, as well, that Shaftesbury’s avidity to make all of his writings of a piece was only the most conspicuous symptom of his life-long aspiration to fashion from the myriad contradictory aspects of his personality a unified self — that his collecting his essays was an essential means to his “recollection of himself” (185). (For discussion of this feature of Shaftesbury’s sense of himself, see Klein [1994] 70-3 and Gill [2006], 115-6).

^{xii} We commentators sometimes seem to proceed on the assumption that a thinker’s *real* thoughts are what are found in notebooks, letters, and private jottings to self — that the polished and published works are but translucent veils to the true beliefs, which are expressed in the unpolished and unpublished writings. (A relative of such commentators: the kind of music fan who always prefers the version of a song on the demo tapes instead of the finished studio product into which the musician poured countless hours of conscious effort.) But when we consider the nature of Shaftesbury’s advice to authors, and how assiduously he himself followed it, we should, I think, have serious qualms about rooting around in his unpublished writings for interpretative picklocks. Indeed, given Shaftesbury’s philosophy of politeness and composition and how he followed it, this type of scholarly sleuthing comes uncomfortably close to spying on someone fastidious about his appearance, and greatly concerned for decorum, perform his morning ablutions.

^{xiii} It’s the Olive Ridley (in case you were wondering).

^{xiv} Shaftesbury makes similar points about what is natural for non-human animals at *Characteristics* 132-3. For discussion of this conception of the natural, see Lance and Little (2004) and (2007).

^{xv} I explore Shaftesbury’s view of Theocles’ character, and the effort and external advantages one needs to emulate it, in Gill (2006), 104-8 and Gill (2010).

^{xvi} See Frankfurt.

^{xvii} If you have a fine and sophisticated automobile, you don’t get replacement parts off the shelf at a generic auto parts shop. As a master mechanic I used to know put it, “That stuff is just ill-fitting junk.” Similarly, if you have a complex and thoroughly-considered attitude toward a subject worth the trouble, you don’t express it with the off-the-shelf language that you can grab almost without thinking, much easier than the alternative though that may be. (I once heard a radio interview with Michael Stipe, and his intelligent, thoughtful answers were conspicuously more halting than the typical rock star’s. It made for awkward listening. But as Stipe explained, to answer a question honestly takes effort and thought. Quick and

entertaining rock star-cliché answers are almost always just bullshit. [Or as my brother used to say, “It’s harder to say what you think than most people think.”])

^{xviii} For rich discussions of Shaftesbury’s view of the self, see Winkler and Purviance.

^{xix} If an Olive Ridley turtle could live a long, fat life by wallowing in the sand rather than swimming out to open sea, why shouldn’t he wallow? Shaftesbury addresses a question of this sort at 427.

^{xx} Klein (1994) is the best discussion of Shaftesbury’s bringing together the moral and the pleasant, and its role in his criticism of the religious moralists. This aspect of Shaftesbury’s work had a huge influence on Hume’s view of the agreeability of virtue (Hume’s *Enquiry* VII-VIII) and on Hume’s criticism of the “monkish virtues” (Hume’s *Enquiry* IX.1.3).

^{xxi} I discuss Shaftesbury’s argument in Part 2 of the *Inquiry* in Gill (2000).

^{xxii} I discuss the difference between the rationalist and sentimentalist strands of Shaftesbury’s moral views in Gill (2000). The sentimentalist aspect of Shaftesbury’s view of what to say to someone who sees no intrinsic reason not to be a full knave is the immediate antecedent of Hume’s response to the sensible knave (Hume’s *Enquiry* IX.2.22-23).

^{xxiii} In the *Characteristics*, see also 65, 150, 157-8, 172-3, 191, 254-5, 324, 414-418. I discuss the morality-beauty analogy in Gill (2007).

^{xxiv} I discuss this feature of Shaftesbury’s philosophy in Gill (2006), 104-8.