



This engraving comes from the first page of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit*. Shaftesbury commissioned it himself for the 1711 edition. He intended for the image to illustrate the relationship between virtue and religion, which was his topic in Book I of the *Inquiry*.

Shaftesbury argued that one's conception of God greatly affects one's moral character. The belief that God has created a universe in which "every thing is govern'd, order'd, or regulated *for the best*" tends to beautify one's character, while the belief that God is "arbitrary" and "violent" tends to deform one's character. As examples of deleterious or deforming religious belief, Shaftesbury pointed to the worship of pagan gods, such as Jupiter, who are represented as performing all manner of wanton and vengeful acts, and to voluntarist-supralapsarian Christian sects, such as Calvinism, which held that God had decided "arbitrarily, and without reason [that] some Beings were destin'd to endure perpetual Ill, and others as constantly to enjoy Good." Shaftesbury's chief example of the morally beautifying belief in a orderly and benevolent God is Theocles, the reasonable enthusiast who is the hero of *The Moralists*. Theocles' leading passion is his profound love for the natural world, which transports him to ecstatic states of high-flown rapture. But he is also a deft philosophical interlocutor, fully capable of mounting a convincing rational defense of his beliefs. Perhaps most importantly, Theocles exudes a personal warmth and serene friendliness that brings everyone he knows into harmony with each other.

The right half of the image is supposed to illustrate what will happen to you if you worship an arbitrary and violent god (i.e., if you worship a slovenly hag who carries around a serpent). You'll occupy a barren blasted nightmarish landscape of devils, dragons, severed bodies and three-headed dogs. I guess you'll also be born under the astrological sign of cancer. The left half of the image illustrates what will happen to you if you worship an orderly, harmonious, and proportioned god. You'll reside in a formal garden at midday and you'll be a Libra.

I chose this image for the cover of *The British Moralists and the Birth of Secular Ethics* because I thought it embodied the philosophical nexus of religion, morality, and human nature that I wanted to explore in my book. Note, however, that the illustration does not offer any suggestions about how atheism or the lack of religion might affect one's moral

character. It turns out, however, that this is a topic Shaftesbury discusses. He says that while good religion promotes virtue and bad religion promotes vice, the lack of religion does not have any particular moral influence one way or the other. According to Shaftesbury, it's harder for an atheist to be virtuous than it is for a perfect theist, but it is possible. And atheists will likely be less vicious than people who worship an arbitrary and violent God.

This raises the question of what image Shaftesbury should have chosen if he had commissioned an illustration of the relationship between virtue and the lack of religion. In what kind of landscape would the atheist reside?

I don't know what's with the iguana.