

CHAPTER 1

SHAFTESBURY

RIDICULE AS THE TEST OF TRUTH

How happy would it be, therefore, to exchange this vulgar, sordid, profuse, horrid laughter for that more reserved, gentle kind, which hardly is to be called laughter, or which at least is of another species?

—Shaftesbury (*The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury*)

Modern philosophy's study of humor in the good life begins with a British philosopher of the Enlightenment, the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's search for a form of humor "suitable with one who understands himself" (*Life*, 226) places humor at the core of the philosophic ideal of self-knowledge.¹ As he revives the ancient philosophical practices that emphasize the importance of humor in the active philosophical life, he recalls the irony of the Xenophonic Socrates, the Aristotelian virtue of wit (*eutrapelia*), the Cynic's ideal of free speech, and the Stoic's use of humor to advance moral education, and assigns to each an important role in modern philosophy.

Shaftesbury's originality lies in his unprecedented and unparalleled defense of humor, wit, ridicule, and good humor as important epistemological tools that promote truth and rationality. Shaftesbury considers ridicule a test of truth, humor a tool for reason, properly educated laughter a form of critical reflection, and good humor or cheerfulness the disposition in which philosophical and religious truth are most effectively comprehended. He views humor as a necessary tool for self-education and moral advice in the philosopher's inner dialogue, conversation, and writing. Humor counters overwhelming enthusiasm, deflates emotional excess, discloses intellectual and moral obtuseness, and enables a sense of proportion necessary for a

philosophical character. In philosophical conversation, wit and humor—more efficacious than earnest criticism for the distance they create between passion and argument—promote the philosophic goal of rationality as free critical debate. Finally, the use of humor and wit in philosophic writing annuls the writer’s authority, thereby promoting the autonomy of the reader, a necessary condition for developing independent thought and moral self-education. Critics and commentators have addressed many of these interconnected themes, but their treatment of Shaftesbury’s discussion is random. In contrast, I emphasize in this chapter the richness of Shaftesbury’s treatment of humor and its centrality to his understanding of the good life.

Shaftesbury was raised and educated in the first Earl’s household by John Locke, thus giving rise to the latter’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.² The third Earl had received under Locke’s tutelage a thorough education in Greek and Latin, which made him remarkably knowledgeable in ancient philosophy. Reviving the ancient ideal of the active philosophical life, Shaftesbury attempted to harmonize a political life with a philosophical one, alternating between intense public service and periods of philosophical retreats, until he abandoned London for health reasons (1711). His grandfather founded the Whig party, which the third Earl generally supported although not unconditionally so. Following Locke’s advice he began his adult life by extensive travels through the continent, living twice in Holland where he befriended French Protestants and skeptics, and most probably became acquainted with Spinoza’s philosophy.³

Shaftesbury founded the “moral sense” school of ethics, according to which natural affection for virtue predisposes human beings to act virtuously.⁴ Although much of Shaftesbury’s work differed from the dominant style of philosophical discourse of his era and the philosophical tradition since then,⁵ his philosophy was very much in vogue during the first half of the eighteenth century, so much so that Oliver Goldsmith was prompted to write that Shaftesbury had “more imitators in Britain than any other writer I know” (Goldsmith 1759, 15). Indeed, Francis Hutcheson, the most important English-speaking philosopher between Berkeley and Hume, championed his thought, and Mandeville, Berkeley, and Butler testified to Shaftesbury’s importance by criticizing his work.⁶ Shaftesbury also enjoyed an equally high status abroad. Leibniz praised him.⁷ Montesquieu referred to him as one of “the four great poets” of the Western world along with Plato, Malebranche, and Montaigne (Montesquieu 1979, VII, 171), and his eulogy of Shaftesbury was paraphrased by a multitude of learned men in France, Germany, and England. Shaftesbury’s influence could be traced in the work of the French philosophers LeClerc, Voltaire, and especially

Diderot, and through the efforts of Robert Molesworth, Shaftesbury's writings influenced the Dublin scene as well as numerous writers of the Scottish enlightenment. Herder labeled Shaftesbury the "beloved Plato of Europe" and the "virtuoso of humanity," who "has had a marked influence on the best minds of our century, on those who have striven with determination and sincerity for the true, the beautiful, and the good."⁸

Shaftesbury provided the philosophical basis for the eighteenth century's change of attitude toward laughter, which propelled humor into British social, economic, and political significance:

First had come the Puritan, enthusiastic, morose, and austere, then the rake, cynical, gay and debauched: two extremes in agreement of the natural depravity of human nature, and either intensively holy or intensely profane. What good-natured men wanted was a more equable way of life, in which the archetype was neither the saint nor the wit but the benevolent and good-humoured gentleman, cheerful in his religion, sober in his wit: his theologians were the latitudinarian divines, his journalists were Addison and Steele, his philosopher Shaftesbury . . . (Tave 1960, 3)⁹

The typical English moralist of the Enlightenment, Shaftesbury was representative of the widely prevailing way of thought sweeping Europe throughout the eighteenth century,¹⁰ during which amiable humor replaced Hobbes' laughter of superiority.¹¹ The new view of humor as incongruity, which Shaftesbury helped to promote, elevated it to an unprecedented moral and intellectual height, creating thus an appreciation of humor that continues to this day.

Shaftesbury's original views on humor not only influenced his contemporaries, but also had an enormous subsequent effect on aesthetics. Despite his extreme criticism of contemporary satire, especially the work of Swift, Shaftesbury justified satiric attempts to establish moral and social truths. Moreover, his views on the relation of humor to truth, reason, virtue, and religion launched an ongoing debate among philosophers, characterized by Richard Brett as "an interminable philosophic controversy over the subject of ridicule, which rose to a special prominence and roused peculiarly strong emotions" (Brett 1951, 168). In particular, Shaftesbury unmistakably influenced subsequent philosophers who defended humor, notably Hamann and, either directly or not, Kierkegaard. Shaftesbury's innovative views and widespread influence require that we begin with the Enlightenment philosopher to formulate the main issues of the role of humor in modern philosophy.

Significant as Shaftesbury's views are, it is not an easy task to extract from his work an explicit theory of the role of humor in the good life. First, he purposefully avoids a systematic exposition of his thought. Although he delineates his own project with various references to ancient philosophy, it is Socrates who is his pre-eminent philosophical model. Accordingly, Shaftesbury maintains that the aim of the philosopher is to edify by furthering the other's autonomy. By contrast, the magisterial approach, which induces passivity before authority, is not suitable to philosophy's aim and capacity. Philosophy aims at producing moral agents, and the form of Shaftesbury's collected writings, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), is meant to meet this challenge by transforming readers into philosophers who are morally intelligent agents. Moreover, the magisterial approach violates the limits of human knowledge, promising more than philosophy can provide. Endorsing the skeptical methodology of various Greek philosophers and such moderns as Pierre Bayle, Shaftesbury urges his readers to embark on an open-ended quest for truth. With the exception of one early systematic work published without his consent,¹² he writes letters, dialogues, and miscellanies, which he considers more suitable to his educational goals. This style of philosophizing, however, presents an obstacle in the way of a clear-cut understanding of his views on humor.

Second, Shaftesbury makes extensive use of wit, humor and irony, and on occasion assumes an external perspective ostensibly not his own, which occasionally obscures the meaning of his writings. His *The Adept Lady* (1702), a short satire on some representatives of the Quakers, *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), and *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709), establish Shaftesbury as a wit and bring him notoriety as a champion of raillery in discussions of such serious subjects as religion; but they also ambiguate his views on the tools he uses to convey his message. Edward Fowler, the hostile author of *Reflections upon A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1709), while finding the letter has "sparkling Air, nice Turns, and clever sorts of Fancy, or lively Allusions," has conceded its wit to be "full of Wind, and much Froth" (Fowler 1709, 24; quoted in Wolf 1993, 565). Moreover, in the five highly discursive essays, *Miscellaneous Reflections on the Preceding Treatises, and other Critical Subjects*, Shaftesbury added to the *Characteristics*, he assumes the voice of a commentator on the contents of the latter. He presents himself in the *Miscellaneous* as a "critic or interpreter of this new writer" who comments on "some late pieces of a British author." The "author of the preceding treatises," he qualifies as "being by profession a nice inspector into the ridicule of things" (*Misc.*, I, ii; CR II, 163), and deems the author of the

Miscellanies a “mere comic humorist in respect of those inferior subjects,” which, after the manner of his “familiar prose satire,” he presumes to criticize (*Misc.*, V, i; CR II, 446). Editor Lawrence Klein justly remarks, then, that Shaftesbury takes great care in giving the *Characteristics* play, both in the sense of humor and playfulness, and in the sense of variety and open-endedness (Klein 1999, xiii). The humor and playfulness that characterize Shaftesbury’s work, while fitting his purpose, hinder a clear understanding of his views on humor.

Third, the nature and purpose of Shaftesbury’s humor is not entirely clear on the basis of his writing style and the available biographical evidence. The biographical details about Shaftesbury’s humor are scarce. We know that he could appreciate ridicule’s bite because in his early teens he probably had to endure it from his classmates, and throughout his life he must have continued to encounter the scorn his grandfather’s name provoked.¹³ Raised by the latter, he may have been influenced by the remark his grandfather used to repeat, as Locke recorded: “There were in every one, two men, the wise and the foolish, and that each of them must be allowed his turn. If you would have the wise, the grave, the serious, always to rule and have the sway, the fool would grow so peevish and troublesome, that he would put the wise man out of order and make him fit for nothing.”¹⁴ Moreover, Shaftesbury’s style generates disagreement among commentators as to the quality, naturalness, and purpose of his humor. Stanley Grean notes Shaftesbury’s “heavy use of irony and satire, particularly when dealing with religious issues” (Grean 1967, xvii). In contrast, Richard Wolf (1993) finds Shaftesbury’s works humorous and devoid of the biting wit of his contemporaries, such as Jonathan Swift’s. Wolf adds that both Shaftesbury’s reservations about raillery and his manner of harnessing wit and humor in the service of philosophy were strongly influenced by his devotion to certain strands of classical thought and to classical models, especially those of Socrates, Xenophon, and Horace (Wolf 1933). Similarly, John Toland suggests that Shaftesbury’s innate disposition is toward “Socratic Irony and innocent Raillery” (Toland 1721, viii). John Robertson, in contrast, finds Shaftesbury melancholic in his private notebooks, not written for publication and published posthumously as *Exercises (Askêmata)*. Robertson concludes that humor, ridicule, and banter are not natural to Shaftesbury, but the outcome of self-discipline (Robertson 1963, xxi–ii).¹⁵

Fourth, Shaftesbury holds strong reservations about his advocacy and use of satiric wit that are clearly seen in his *Exercises* and his reply to Leibniz’s critique of the *Characteristics* (1711). Referring to himself in the third person, he writes:

Particularly in what relates to the two great concessions of that author in favour of raillery and the way of humour. Does not the author himself secretly confess as much in his work? And does he not seem to despise himself . . . when, after having passed his principal and main philosophical work . . . he returns again to his mixed satirical ways of raillery and irony, so fashionable in our nation, which can be hardly brought to attend to any writing, or consider anything as witty, able, or ingenious which has not strongly this turn?¹⁶

More than any other work he wrote, *The Adept Ladys* illustrates the sort of jester's performance for which Shaftesbury castigated himself. His biographer, Robert Voitle, labels it a "hasty *jeu d'esprit* and not a very witty one" (Voitle 1984, 199). The challenge Shaftesbury set for himself for the first time in *the Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* was to manage his dangerous talents as a writer of raillery in order to encourage thought and virtue in his reader. Wolf suggests that in Shaftesbury's subsequent works "it is the concept of a fair, decorous, and proportionally appropriate raillery that makes his approach very different from that found in *The Adept Ladys* and in such works as Swift's *Tale of a Tub*" (Wolf 1993, 7).¹⁷ Similarly, John Hayman aligns Shaftesbury with Augustan satiric reformers, such as Addison and Steele, who are intent on curbing the malice of contemporary raillery and providing a proper model of good humored mental disposition (Hayman 1968, 1970). Given the expectations that an author's wit exemplifies his views on wit and humor, assessing Shaftesbury's reservations about his use of wit is relevant to understanding his views.

A fifth difficulty for a study of Shaftesbury's view of the role of humor in the good life is his inconsistent use of relevant terms. Shaftesbury uses *raillery*, *ridicule*, *banter*, *buffoonery*, *laughter*, *comic*, *satire*, *wit*, *humor*, and *good humor*. Moreover, he confesses to lacking an appropriate term for designating the kind of laughter he advocates, that "more reserved, gentle kind, which hardly is to be called laughter, or which at least is of another species" (*Life*, 226). Stuart Tave remarks:

If we look closely at what he means by "ridicule," we find something far more benevolent than satiric, something very like the familiar figure of "good humour," heightened by an airy, gentlemanly ease. We can do no better than go directly to his opponents, who saw this quite clearly, though to them it was clearly evidence of Shaftesbury's confusion or dishonesty. (Tave 1960, 35)¹⁸

Leibniz, for example, notices as well that Shaftesbury is an inconsistent advocate of raillery or ridicule. He maintains that when Shaftesbury introduces the concept of “good humor,” he partly retracts from his position on ridicule. Shaftesbury seeks no quarrel with his critic but rather is honored and satisfied by “the candor and justness of his censure.”¹⁹ Laurent Jaffro, a contemporary scholar sympathetic to Shaftesbury’s endeavor, similarly remarks on Shaftesbury’s inconsistent use of terms:

. . . in the same discourse, Shaftesbury confounds laughter (in its different forms), smile, mockery and amiable pleasantry; he moves from passions to styles and literary genres; he substitutes to laughter the general problem of ridicule and the question of the art of ridiculing. At the end of these metamorphoses, laughter is nothing else than reflection” (Jaffro 1996, 43; my translation).

Although this is an apt description of Shaftesbury’s confusion of terms, I suggest that there is a certain degree of consistency in their use.

A sixth and final obstacle to a systematic exposition of Shaftesbury’s view on humor is voiced in his reply to Leibniz’s criticism of his thesis on ridicule. Shaftesbury’s response is to admit that his views on “the way of humour” are continuously evolving.²⁰ Françoise Badelon justly remarks, then, that “the place of laughter is the object of a permanent discussion in Shaftesbury’s work” (Badelon 2000, 29; my translation).

The question I address in this chapter is: What is the role of humor in the Shaftesburean good life? Keeping in mind the problems involved in attempting a systematic account of humor within the Shaftesburean good life, I first introduce Shaftesbury’s view of the good life. I then differentiate between good humor, ridicule, humor, and wit in subsequent sections that center on Shaftesbury’s views of the comic, ridicule, humor, and wit. I suggest that Shaftesbury refers to ridicule as humor when used in inner dialogue and as wit or humor when used in conversation. Following eighteenth-century custom, wit and humor are not clearly differentiated although Shaftesbury does on occasion suggest that the former is a means to the latter. Ridicule and raillery are not discarded in favor of good humor, as some commentators have argued (i.e., Leibniz, Tave): good humor cannot fulfill a critical function, whereas ridicule can and Shaftesbury is definitely interested in the corrective and critical role of laughter no less than in the open and cheerful disposition that goes by the name of good humor.

A study of Shaftesbury’s views of the tragic and the comic as they apply to life is important for determining the appropriate attitude toward

it, whether life should be approached in earnest or jest. I suggest that Shaftesbury's attitude is encapsulated in his notion of good humor, which is nonetheless not clearly differentiated from humor. I address ridicule subsequently as the principal term for which Shaftesbury is renowned, clarifying its relation to truth and reason, and introducing Shaftesbury's application of ridicule in fighting fanaticism, curbing enthusiasm, and criticizing organized religion. An elaboration on ridicule's application as humor within inner dialogue or soliloquy, and as humor and wit within philosophical conversation and writing follows. In the concluding remarks, I assess the originality and feasibility of using humor within the good life as recommended by Shaftesbury.

A comprehensive study of the comic and related notions such as ridicule, humor and wit, and good humor within Shaftesbury's thought has not been undertaken. Although all comprehensive studies of Shaftesbury address some of his views on ridicule, wit, humor, and good humor, they tend to focus on a limited aspect of one or two views in isolation: the political aspect of the freedom of ridicule (Grean 1967); the cultural aspect of humor and politeness (Klein 1994); Shaftesbury's view on ridicule as a test of truth and its influence on satire (Brett 1951) or the controversy it generated (Aldridge 1948); the relationship of enthusiasm and humor (Larthomas 1985, 1986); and the role of humor and wit in writing (Benda 1982), in conversation (Malherbe 2000), in communication in general (Jaffro 1998), and in sociability (Brugère 1999). Moreover, these studies do not explicitly connect humor and related notions to the Shaftesburean good life because the question of their role in such a life has not been asked. This chapter fills a lack, then, by providing a comprehensive study of all the notions related to the comic that are relevant to an understanding of Shaftesbury's view of the good life, and in explaining their necessary role in attaining to such a life. I argue that without the use of ridicule, humor and good humor, the Shaftesburean good life cannot be attained.

THE GOOD LIFE

"The most ingenious way of becoming foolish is by a system," Shaftesbury asserts (*Soliloquy*, iii, 1; CR I, 189). He attests thus to his main inspiration, the open-ended teachings of Socrates, not only as interpreted in its more orthodox form by Plato, but also as expressed more popularly by Xenophon. Despite the Greek and Roman sources of Shaftesbury's thought, in particular Platonism and Roman Stoicism, Shaftesbury's main purpose is to address contemporary needs. More interested in reforming the morals, manners and

taste of his day than in discursive reasoning, he aims to promote liberty by devising a cultural program for a post-courtly European culture. To this end, he criticizes the court, ridicules the Church, and rebukes contemporary philosophy for its aloofness from practical affairs and neglect of its role as moral and political educator.

Shaftesbury tells us that his “design is to advance something new, or at least something different from what is commonly current in philosophy and morals” (*Misc.*, III, i; CR II, 251–2). Hardly distinguishable from good education, philosophy for Shaftesbury is a practical endeavor. He intends to bring philosophy back to the everyday world, an aspiration that explains the themes, design and style of his work. Like Hobbes and Locke, who strengthened their influence by writing in plain language, Shaftesbury aims to reach a lay audience unfamiliar with philosophical terminology. Shaftesbury endeavors to rescue the philosophical tradition of the Cambridge Platonists from their dull and pedantic folio volumes, in order to make them available to individuals of culture and sensibility. Bemoaning philosophy’s fate in the modern world, Shaftesbury complains, “she is no longer active in the world nor can hardly, with any advantage, be brought on the public stage. 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” (*Moralists*, I, 1; CR II, 4–5). It appears he convinced his contemporaries of the importance of his project, for Addison, the editor of the *Spectator*, is a close reader of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics*, and subscribers are duly informed of the paper’s policy to bring “philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses” (quoted in Brett 1951, 41).

To justify his approach, Shaftesbury depicts the English gentleman bored and bullied by clerics and academics. He regularly denigrates the clerical and the homiletic, the academic and the pedantic. He considers sermons and lectures unsuitable vehicles for edification, and often dismisses or ridicules their formal, systematic, consistent, methodical, and abstract character. He blames these traits for the sterility of most philosophical writing. He condemns the style of the pulpit and the classroom as authoritarian or “magisterial,” a word that, in light of its Latin origin—*magister*—combines a reference to the schoolteacher and to the magistrate. Indeed, as Laurence Klein notes, Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* is a collection of “rhetorical gambits aiming to represent a discursive practice distinct from that of the lecture or the sermon” (Klein 1999, xiii).

Shaftesbury maintains that a more polite approach than the lecture or the sermon is required for a more effective philosophy. For Shaftesbury, *politeness*, a term referring to the conventions of both good manners and

refined conversation, fulfills the fundamental rhetorical necessity of making concessions to the knowledge, interests, and attention span of an audience. In this respect, Klein explains, Shaftesbury aims to regulate “style or language by the standard of good company and people of the better sort”—members of the English upper orders, wealthy although not necessarily landed gentlemen, educated and literate although not necessarily learned, men of the world who could naturally be reached through humor, playfulness, variety, and open-endedness (Klein 1994, 75; 1999, xiii). Shaftesbury replaces the magisterial manner with a polite form of writing that is more informal, miscellaneous, conversational, open-ended, and skeptical.

Philosophy, insists Shaftesbury, should make people effective participants in the world. Neither an intellectual discipline for specialists nor a profession, it is rather wisdom accessible to every thoughtful individual: “If philosophy be, as we take it, the study of happiness, must not everyone, in some manner or other, either skillfully or unskillfully philosophize?” (*Moralists*, iii, 3; CR II, 150; see 153). Given the profusion of human weaknesses, however, it is a therapeutic enterprise as well. In order to understand how philosophy succeeds as a practical activity in pursuit of moral self-knowledge and moral transformation, Shaftesbury’s views of virtue, enthusiasm, and beauty should be explored: Virtue is a noble enthusiasm that forms an inward harmonious beauty, unattainable, however, without the use of humor.

VIRTUE

Shaftesbury’s philosophy reflects the change in attitude toward nature and evil in the transition from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, when, as Basil Willey explains, “the Fall is no longer a haunting obsession, and whatever may be true of man, Nature is now to be contemplated as the finished and unimprovable product of divine wisdom, omnipotence, and benevolence” (Willey 1986, 35).²¹ Shaftesbury parts company with theologians who postulate a personal Devil, as well as with philosophers like Bayle who propose a Manichean approach to evil. His optimistic philosophy plays a major role in transforming nature from a fallen world into a revelation of divine goodness and beauty. Nature in this view is God’s good creation designed for human use and enjoyment.

The world is providentially ruled by a Supreme Mind that may be alternatively conceived as the Soul of the universe or as a personality that transcends the world.²² The Supreme Mind’s rule is absolutely beneficent: Nothing in the universe is “ill” relative to the whole, and everything is as it must be.²³ In this perfect universe the goodness or evil of each system is

judged in terms of the functioning of the system as a whole: "Pleasure and pain, beauty and deformity, good and ill, seemed to me everywhere interwoven," declares Philocles, the protagonist of *The Moralists*, "and yet, this tapestry made of many contrasting colors produces a harmonious over-all effect" (*Moralists*, i, 2; CR II, 14). That which we consider "evil" is comparable to some of the details of this tapestry, the shading in a picture, or the dissonances in a symphony. Nature, the Sovereign Artist, creates harmony out of contrasting elements. According to this view "seeming blemishes" are the results of limited perspectives. Nature does not err, and "when she seems most ignorant or perverse in her productions, I assert her even then as wise and provident as in her godliest works" (*Moralists*, i, 3; CR II, 22).

Shaftesbury views Nature as an arena of conflicting forces and interests in which the lower species must always yield to the higher, the lesser to the greater. In this ecologically ordered world of mutual interdependence among living organisms in their natural setting, terrestrial forms are maintained by mutual sacrifice and surrender, as one species preys on another. If in the hierarchy of organisms the sacrifice of one species is considered appropriate at the lower levels, it must be so at all levels, including the human. Each system of organisms is contained in some larger system to which its own interest or good is subordinated. Ultimately, all species are subject to "the superior nature of the world" (*Moralists*, i, 3; CR II, 22). According to this view, we must not expect exceptions to be made to preserve individual creatures or even species that are necessarily transient. Not only is it justifiable for one species to prey on another, but also disasters such as earthquakes or floods, which harm individual creatures or destroy whole species, are justified on the grounds that all lesser systems of beings must submit to the necessary order of nature as a whole.

The absolute "benevolence" of the ruling Mind, according to Shaftesbury, serves as a model for the proper frame of mind of the human being. People are so constituted as to find happiness in all benevolent affections and actions, and misery in the contrary.²⁴ For Shaftesbury, continuously changing Nature manifests a perfect adjustment of matter to form, and form to environment, as in Stoic doctrine. Shaftesbury finds the same perfection in the harmony of the human affections, as in the harmony and proportion manifested in the greater world.²⁵ Delight in evil, he acknowledges, exists but it is "unnatural" (*Inquiry*, II, ii, 3; CR I, 331).

This being so, all cajolery and terrorism used by religion are vicious and fallacious. God, he claims, is to be loved without hope of reward or fear of punishment.²⁶ In Shaftesbury's view true religion should be based on nature rather than on revelation. Religion is an enemy of virtue in so far as it deprecates human good nature and relies on future rewards and

punishments: "Little were you aware," Theocles exclaims in *The Moralists*, "that the cruel enemy opposed to Virtue should be religion itself!" Theocles concludes that "by building a future state on the ruins of virtue, religion in general, and the cause of a deity is betrayed; and by making rewards and punishments the principal motives to duty, the Christian religion in particular is overthrown, and its greatest principle, that of Love, rejected and exposed" (*Moralists*, ii, 2; CR II, 256).

Orthodoxy is also the enemy of true or natural religion because it establishes faith not on the beautiful and harmonious order of things (the best and only genuine external evidence), but on miracles, that is, on violations of this order.²⁷

Immortality is likely enough, Shaftesbury holds, yet future happiness is not a reward for right living, because virtue and happiness are the same.²⁸ Similarly, future punishment should not be an incentive for acting morally because such considerations weaken natural moral interests and because there is no merit in moral acts prompted by fear of punishment. Nonetheless, he concedes that a strong hope of future reward and fear of future punishment may lead men into habits conducive to true virtue, whereas a weak belief in future rewards and punishments is entirely detrimental to morality.²⁹

Virtue is natural to humankind, but is nevertheless subject to refinement. Perfect virtue in this view amounts to a perfected taste in morals. To be good-humored and cultured is to be religious and moral, and thus happy. Conversely, malevolence and malfeasance lead to misery.³⁰

Shaftesbury advocates this view of virtue as early as his first publication, a laudatory preface to an edition of sermons by the Cambridge Latitudinarian, Benjamin Whichcote (1698). Whimsically apologizing for publishing yet more sermons when so great a number have already been preached and printed with so little apparent effect, he asks, why it is that men who profess to be Christians live the lives they do. This is not, he suggests, on account of any radical depravity to be found in mankind, but rather because exhortation is misdirected when religion is perverted to serve political ends. In response to the view that natural sociability and goodness are not innate human characteristics, which is accepted by atheists and defenders of religion alike, Shaftesbury affirms the divine perfection of nature and the "good nature" of the human being against atheists, who see the universe as a chaos of atoms, and against the orthodox, who hold that we live in a world that has been permanently ruined by the fall of Adam.³¹

Like Nature, Shaftesbury claims, human beings are essentially "good," and, in contradistinction to Hobbes' view, naturally sociable.³² Human virtue consists, he says, in "following Nature," in the sense that it is a repro-

duction within the individual microcosm of the harmony and proportion manifest in the greater world. In the *Inquiry* (1699), Shaftesbury proposes to differentiate the “good and natural” affections, which are directed toward the general welfare of a group, from the “ill and unnatural,” which are directed neither toward private nor public good.³³ We possess by nature a faculty he calls the “moral sense,” which enables us to both distinguish between right and wrong and prefer the right (*Inquiry*, I, iii, 2; CR I, 262). This faculty is closely akin to the aesthetic sense, by which we recognize and approve the harmonious and proportionate. The virtue of a rational creature consists in a “rational affection” toward what is right, that is, a “just sentiment” or a “proper disposition” (*Inquiry*, I, iii, 2; CR I, 262).

Shaftesbury follows the Stoics in holding that the conditions for our happiness are internal and subject to our own power, that “opinion” is important in attaining the good life, and that the highest good is not the “tumultuous joy” of unregulated passions, but a “constant, fixed, and regular joy, which carries tranquility along with it, and which has no rejoyt” (*Life*, 116). Heavily influenced by Greek thought, Shaftesbury’s philosophy is nonetheless crucially shaped by a modern way of thinking, as is also evidenced in his theory of enthusiasm.

ENTHUSIASM

Shaftesbury’s theory of enthusiasm, which accounts for the importance he attributes to humor, is another modern twist of an ancient view, in this case the important role Plato assigns to enthusiasm in his philosophy (*Phaedrus* 241e, 249e, 253a, 263d; *Ion*; *Symposium*). For Shaftesbury, enthusiasm is the inner movement of the human spirit, carrying it beyond itself toward the vision of the good. Only the mind so “taken up in vision” is capable of the affection that is the essence of the moral life—the life in harmony with Nature and God.

Shaftesbury’s theory of enthusiasm thus resolves an epistemological problem. Knowing with certainty that all things work for the best presupposes a comprehension of the universe as a whole that is impossible for the finite mind to grasp (*Moralists*, iii, 1; CR II, 108). Because it is impossible to know that everything “demonstrates order and perfection,” we must rely on enthusiasm or ultimate commitment to show us the way (*Moralists*, ii, 4; CR II, 67). Human beings are able to surmount the limitations of finitude, and, at least at moments, to intuit the harmony of the whole universe, through ecstatic moments of faith or enthusiasm in which the mind is “caught up in vision.” Shaftesbury’s final epistemological appeal is not to evidence or logic alone, but to enthusiasm. He considers enthusiasm a rational process

that does not contradict logic or evidence, but rather affords a higher vantage point from which logic and evidence derive their meaning. This is the only standpoint from which one can be reconciled to a view of the paradoxical relationship of universal and particular providence, and to the concept of particular evils embedded in the universal Good.

Enthusiasm arose within Protestant discourse as a way to characterize and disparage the excesses of Protestant fervor. The term first appeared in the early seventeenth century, meaning “divine possession,” and by 1656 the word “enthusiast” first appeared in an English dictionary, where it referred to Reformation Anabaptists as “a sect of people that thought themselves inspired with a Divine spirit, and to have a clear sight of all things which they believed.”³⁴ “Enthusiasm” may have been transformed into a general slur against Nonconformists because it attacked religious positions in terms of the believer’s psychology and “transferred religious argument from issues of doctrine to estimations of social personality” (Klein 1994, 162). In the Restoration period, the valence of “enthusiasm” was entirely negative, but, by the 1690s, the term came under transvaluative pressure.³⁵ Shaftesbury made a twofold contribution to the transformation of “enthusiasm.” First, he joined in the transvaluation, establishing a positive meaning for it. Second, he continued the polemical and denigrating uses of “enthusiasm,” but found new objects for them.

Shaftesbury’s rehabilitation of the affections as foundations of moral agency sanctioned a re-estimation of passionate phenomena such as enthusiasm. Shaftesbury embraces enthusiasm as an important expression of natural affection, as he explains referring to himself in the *Miscellany*: “So far is he from degrading enthusiasm or disclaiming it in himself; that he looks on this passion, simply considered, as the most natural, and its object as the justest in the world” (*Misc.*, II, i; CR II, 176). Although enthusiasm at best is Platonic divine love inspiring in the individual an understanding of the order of the world and a respect for ultimate beauty, the notion can be applied to lesser states of inspiration as well. At all levels of intensity, however, enthusiasm lifts the individual beyond his ordinary capacities into a higher level of cognition enabling the intuition of matters beyond the self. In this respect, enthusiasm is an essential feature of humanity, closely related to the sociability first described by Shaftesbury in the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*.

Unless refined, enthusiasm is vulgar and conducive to vice, delusion, and self-deception. In his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), motivated by the appearance in London of a group of prophetically inspired Christians, Shaftesbury sets the “prophets” aside and, applying his notion of enthusiasm, proceeds to attack the Church. Zealots can be found inside the estab-

lished Church as well as at its borders. Because enthusiasm is a pervasive feature of human life, enthusiastic prophets are all too likely to pass it on to the reigning clerics and magistrates, thereby giving rise to fanaticism. Thus, Shaftesbury takes a stock element of Anglican polemic and turns it against the Anglican Church, or at least its High Church functionaries.

In keeping with the Protestant tradition he inherited, Shaftesbury defines religious enthusiasm as “uncontrolled passion.” He portrays “every worshipper of the zealot-kind” as affectively unhinged, “no longer self-governed, but set adrift to the wide sea of passion” (*Misc.*, V, iii; CR II, 353–69). He makes clear that enthusiasm in general is a condition in which sound affections escape the mind’s control and grow to excess—a classic instance of the loss of autonomy, as depicted in the *Inquiry*. Moreover, as the *Inquiry* leads one to predict, enthusiasm is highly conducive to vice. In addition to affections that are inherently vicious, affections can become vicious if not harmoniously balanced or moderated by reason: “Above all other enslaving vices, and restrainers of reason and just thought, the most evidently ruinous and fatal to the understanding is that of superstition, bigotry, and vulgar enthusiasm” (*Misc.*, II, i; CR II, 180; see also *Misc.*, V, iii; CR II, 345).

Shaftesbury describes “virtue itself” as “no other than a noble enthusiasm justly directed and regulated” (*Misc.*, II, i; CR II, 176). Enthusiasm is not only the culmination of Shaftesbury’s philosophy, but also the dynamic element that enlivens it and sets his thought apart from that of the Deists and rationalists of the Augustan age. Although his allegiance lies with reason, Shaftesbury insists that reason must continually strive to transcend itself. The processes of discursive reason are not, and can never be, sufficient for achieving a complete understanding of the harmonious universal order.

BEAUTY

Shaftesbury’s view of the ultimate harmony of nature necessarily leads him to assert the substantial unity of the true, the beautiful, and the good. Nature is a teleological continuum in which all things contribute (when viewed in the largest sense) to the good and the beautiful. Thus, he writes, “the most natural beauty in the world is honesty and moral truth. For all beauty is truth” (*Essay*, iv, 3; CR I, 94). Harmony and proportion are the classic attributes that link this triad of values: “. . . what 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” (*Misc.*, III, ii; CR II, 268–9).

The harmonious and the proportionate are also the fruitful or the useful in the highest sense (*Misc.*, II, ii; CR II, 207). The physical harmony of the body, Shaftesbury notes, is linked with attractiveness and health, just as emotional harmony is a prerequisite for virtue. However, *utility*, as Shaftesbury uses the term, does not have merely a material or economic connotation, but is broadly conceived as comprehending all that is useful in achieving the larger ends of human life. Therefore, it is not merely the appearance of beauty that counts but the beauty that lies within. External beauty's purpose is to lead us to the inner beauties that are "the most real and essential," and that not only afford the greatest pleasure but also are of the highest benefit.

The taste for the aesthetic in Shaftesbury's thought is nowhere more clear than in his emphasis on harmony and proportion that is a ground-motif of his metaphysical and ethical theory, as well as of his aesthetics. "The study and love of symmetry and order" is not only the basis of our appreciation of beauty; it is also the source of philosophical and scientific inquiry (*Misc.*, III, ii; CR II, 267). He finds in it the basis for the disinterested pleasure that the study of mathematics affords. The mind delights in those "inward numbers" that designate the ultimately proportionate relationships of all that participates in Being itself: "There is a power in numbers, harmony, proportion and beauty of every kind, which naturally captivates the heart and raises the imagination to an opinion or conceit of something majestic and divine" (*Misc.*, II, 1; CR II, 174). There is "a natural joy in the contemplation of those numbers. That harmony, proportion and concord, which supports the universal nature and is essential in the constitution and form of every particular species or order of beings. . . ." There is a "beautiful, proportioned and becoming action" (*Inquiry*, II, ii, 1; CR I, 296), which is "improving to the temper, advantageous to social affection, and highly assistant to virtue, which is itself no other than the love of order and beauty in society" (*Inquiry*, I, iii, 3; CR I, 279).

Shaftesbury refers again and again to music, architecture, and painting analogies when defending his theory against the Hobbes-Locke thesis of natural indifference toward the good. According to the latter view, nothing is intrinsically good or bad, admirable or contemptible, except in relation to some law or rule under which it is made to fall, and backed by penalties: "That all actions are naturally indifferent; that they have no note or character of good or ill in themselves; but are distinguished by mere fashion, law, or arbitrary decree."³⁶ In contradistinction to this view, Shaftesbury maintains that right and wrong are just as fixed to standards in nature as are harmony and dissonance in music. Something akin to harmony or proportion of numbers is to be found in all these fields. In *Soliloquy*, the true artist is said to be one who is not "at loss in those numbers which make

the harmony of a mind. For knavery is mere dissonance and disproportion” (*Soliloquy*, i, 3; CR I, 136). The genuine artist must have an eye or ear for these “inward numbers” (*Soliloquy*, iii, 3; CR I, 217), and “the real honest man . . . instead of outward forms of symmetries, is struck with that of inward character, the harmony and numbers of the heart and beauties of the affections . . .” (*Misc.*, II, i; CR II, 177).

The meaning of “inward numbers” as a key to the virtuous character is obscure: It is not clarified in Shaftesbury’s writings and perhaps was not fully clear to him. There may be some Platonic-Pythagorean background to it, which presumably he inherited from Ficino and the Cambridge Platonists. Does he find a basic resemblance between a moral and a mathematical insight? This line of thought has been developed by a number of thinkers of this period, including Samuel Clarke, Sir Isaac Newton’s collaborator, and William Wollaston.³⁷ Charles Taylor suggests that these thinkers are wrong, however, because

the key analogy behind his numbers and proportions seems to be not so much mathematical necessity as the requirements of orderly wholes. The good life, the good character, was one in which everything took its right place and proportions, no more, no less. The key concept was therefore something like the original Platonic or Stoic one of a whole of things, ordered for the good. One finds the standards by which to live, the firm criteria in nature of the right, through a grasp of the whole order in which one is set. The good person loves the whole order of things. (Taylor 1989, 254)

Shaftesbury does not limit the “natural joy” he describes to the contemplation of harmony and proportion in the fine arts, but finds this joy in the whole range of human activities and pleasures. For Shaftesbury, harmony is not merely a mechanical symmetry of parts in a whole, but rather an organization manifesting an inner creative power. Far from viewing harmony as a static balance of forces, he thinks of it dialectically as the product of a complex interplay of tensions. This is clearly evidenced in his views of the inner harmony of the affections and of the ultimate harmony of Nature. Although he praises symmetry, he does not view harmony as a simple balance of uniform elements. This is evident in his description of the beauties of the natural world, which reveals a genuine appreciation for irregular or asymmetrical design (*Moralists*, iii, 2; CR II, 125).

For this reason Shaftesbury maintains that “the science of virtuosi and that of virtue itself become, in a manner, one and the same” (*Soliloquy*, iii, 3; CR I, 217). The virtuoso appreciates or creates aesthetic form. Because

for Shaftesbury aesthetic and moral forms are continuous, to be a virtuoso is one of the best preparations for the moral life; better, he remarks, than mere pedantry or empty scholarship. The true virtuoso understands the principles of harmony that underlie both good art and genuine character. "The moral artist who . . . is thus knowing in the inward form and structure of his fellow-creature, will hardly, I presume, be found unknowing in himself, or at a loss in those numbers which make the harmony of a mind" (*Soliloquy*, i, 3; CR I, 136). Shaftesbury explains that this does not apply to the artist who merely copies external forms, but to the one who represents "the graces and perfections of minds," that is, the moral artist who knows the laws of internal form (135).

Beauty is one of Shaftesbury's "innate" ideas, one of those "ideas" that humans are "really born to and could hardly by any means avoid" (*Misc.*, I, i; CR II, 178). Beauty depends upon the sense of harmony and proportion that Shaftesbury considers "con-natural" and one of the strongest capacities of the mind. Indeed, in addition to explicitly equating the quest for goodness with the quest for beauty, Shaftesbury contends that becoming moral involves becoming a kind of "self-improving artist." The term *self-improving artist* is particularly apt, as it captures Shaftesbury's idea that living well involves taking oneself to be a work of art that one should strive to make as beautiful as possible. Or, as Shaftesbury put it, the "wise and able Man" is he who "having righter models in his eye, becomes in truth the architect of his own life and fortune" (*Moralists*, iii, 2; CR II, 144). Thus, Shaftesbury's moral theory culminates in an aesthetic of creative "inward form," and his legacy is none other than the Greek idea of the beauty of morals. This renewed connection between morality and beauty is one of Shaftesbury's major contributions to the history of ideas.³⁸

The moral or good life should never degenerate into moralism, ossified virtue, or mechanical conformity to external or too abstractly applied laws. The good life requires the spontaneity rediscovered after reflection, invention, and creativity; it requires a certain genius. Shaftesbury invites moralists to see in morality one of the fine arts, maybe the finest, given that morality is the art of living.

Shaftesbury insists that humor is indispensable for the practice of the art of living. The good life lies in the cheerfulness, the happiness, and the quietude that result from the exercise of a virtuous character. The harmony of the virtuous character is an effect of proportion, moral tact, and the spontaneity, art, or genius required for its continuous creation. Humor is essential for attaining this character because it teaches proportion, it has the flexibility necessary to promote tact and the art needed to work with one's character in a creative and spontaneous manner.

Yet Shaftesbury does not clearly differentiate between good humor and humor, and between ridicule and humor. Thus, both the following discussion of the comic, which introduces the notion of good humor, and the subsequent discussion of ridicule are relevant to an understanding of the role of humor within the Shaftesburean good life.

THE COMIC

The question of whether life is tragic or comic may be important in its own right. In a study of humor in the good life, it gains added significance because whether we perceive life as tragic or comic may determine whether it should be approached in earnest or jest. For Shaftesbury life is neither tragedy nor comedy, thus neither gravity nor jest is the proper attitude toward it: It is rather a mixture of earnestness and jest. For want of a better term, Shaftesbury deems this mixture, “another species of laughter,” which he identifies sometimes as good humor and sometimes as humor (*hilaritas*). Good humor and humor are not clearly differentiated, but Shaftesbury occasionally suggests the latter is a means to the former. Humor is a remedy for the melancholy he diagnoses as the source of both a tragic view of life and certain forms of the comic. Shaftesbury’s reasons for assessing life as neither tragedy nor mere comedy, as outlined later, shed light on his views of good humor and humor, and on his difficulty of differentiating the two.

THE TRAGIC AND THE COMIC

Shaftesbury rejects the idea that existence is ultimately tragic on the grounds that the cosmic system excludes all real ill, the world is ruled by both universal and personal providence, human nature is good, death is natural, and virtue secures happiness.

Evil is relegated to the status of appearance and is denied thereby ultimate reality. Nothing that is wholly evil can exist because it would be entirely self-negating (*Moralists*, ii, 3; CR II, 57). Evil, for Shaftesbury, is not an absolute entity; it can only be understood as part of the structure of our experience. The common error human beings make is to evaluate the natural order in relation to the satisfaction of their individual needs and desires. It is the species as a whole, however, and ultimately the universal scheme of things that must be given primary consideration. Nature is “not for man, but man for Nature,” and it is man who must “submit to the elements of Nature, and not the elements to him. Few of these are at all fitted to him, and none perfectly” (*Moralists*, ii, 4; CR II, 73).

Nonetheless, Shaftesbury maintains that providence works in and through all events, even the smallest. That is, no part of the universe is logically exempt from the purposive control of the Supreme Mind. Although Shaftesbury holds that "Providence is in all,"³⁹ that it is both universal and particular, it is only when we see it as universal can we understand it as particular. This line of reasoning leads Shaftesbury to the extreme statements found in his *Exercises*, the private notebooks published after his death: "Persuade them that to be affronted, to be despised, to be poor or to smart, is not to suffer; that the sack or ruin of cities and destruction of mankind are not in themselves ill; and that with respect to the whole, these things are orderly, good, beautiful." One should learn not only to accept whatever happens in the course of events, but also love it, whether it is "hardship, poverty, sickness, death." God kills "kindly, fatherly; for the good of everything, and as the preserver of the whole" (*Life*, 30, 43). Shaftesbury uses more carefully guarded language in the *Characteristics*, though the underlying sentiment is the same.

This is the kind of optimism that Voltaire mercilessly lampoons in *Candide* (1759).⁴⁰ For Shaftesbury, however, the notion of evil is significant for designating the existence of unfortunate events in relation to individuals or nations. Shaftesbury does not deny that evil is an actual part of our experience; it is absolute, not proximate, evil that he rejects, and he does so on the grounds that it has no ontological status. His treatment of proximate evils is rigorous and his optimism is by no means naïve and unrealistic. He does not gloss over or deny the depth or the extent of moral and social evils, and he is keenly aware of the power of irrational impulses, the "unnatural affections," in human nature. His letters reveal more clearly than the *Characteristics* that he views life as a continuous struggle against evil forces and corrupted interests. He never advocates the inevitability of progress, and he negates the moral perfectibility of humanity. In *The Moralists*, Palemon cries out: "Oh! What treacheries! What disorders! And how corrupt is all!" (*Moralists*, i, 2; CR II, 13).

Shaftesbury does not ignore the reality of suffering nor seeks to blind us to the tragic facts of our finite experience. Finite tragedies, those from which we suffer in experience, should be properly interpreted, however, as an integral part of a rationally governed whole. To this purpose, we need a right view of God. In contrast, melancholy is at the origin of an erroneous view of religion that yields a tragic view of life: "The melancholy way of treating religion is that which, according to my apprehension, renders it so tragical, and is the occasion of its acting in reality such dismal tragedies in the world" (*Letter*, 4; CR I, 24). It is imperative for Shaftesbury to dissociate religion from melancholic and tragic moods. Otherwise, instead of