

An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour —a letter to a friend

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—This work is the second of the five Treatises in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Its title fits less than half its content; there are all sorts of other good things on offer here.

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glossary

affection: In the early modern period, 'affection' could mean 'fondness', as it does today; but it was also often used to cover desires, approvals, likings, disapprovals, dislikings, etc. In this work it is mainly used to refer to pro-feelings, but the negative ones may be hovering in the background.

animal spirits: This stuff was supposed to be matter that is even more finely divided than air, able to move extremely fast and seep into tiny crevices. and (this being Shaftesbury's point on page 4) continuously active. his other mentions of 'spirits' in this work are to mental items.

education: In early modern times this word had a somewhat broader meaning than it does today. It wouldn't have been misleading to replace it by 'upbringing' on almost every occasion

formality: On page 6 this refers to intellectual conduct that is stiff, rule-governed, prim.

generous: It had today's sense of 'free in giving' but also the sense of 'noble-minded, magnanimous, rich in positive emotions' etc.

genius: Sometimes used to mean nothing much more than 'intellect'; more often meaning '(the possessor of) very high-level intellect'. In early modern times 'genius' wasn't given the very strong meaning it has today.

humour: In ancient Greek medicine it was held that the human body contains four basic kinds of fluid ('humours'), the proportions of which in a given body settled that person's physical and mental qualities. By the early modern period this theory was dead; but the use of 'humours' to refer to bodily states, character-traits, moods, lingered on. In the

present work (including its title), Shaftesbury uses the word mainly in our present sense.

imposture: Willful and fraudulent deception.

luxury: This meant something like: *extreme* or *inordinate* indulgence in sensual pleasures.

magistrate: In this work, as in general in early modern times, 'a magistrate' is anyone with an official role in government; 'the magistrate' usually means 'the government' or 'the ruler'. The 'magistracy' is also just the government, or the collective of all the senior officials in the government.

mixed company: On page 6 Shaftesbury uses this to mean 'company comprising people of different backgrounds or characters', not in its more usual sense of 'company containing both men and women'.

moral: In early modern times, 'moral' could mean roughly what it does today, but also had a use in which it meant 'having to do with intentional human action'. On page 25 its use is even broader than that: Shaftesbury is saying that the beauty and significance of fine works of art comes from their bearing on the human condition—how they affect people's feelings and thoughts.

passive obedience: The doctrine that anything short of or other than absolute obedience to the monarch is sinful.

peculiar: Individual, pertaining exclusively to one individual. On page 27 the requirement that a work of visual or literary art not contain anything 'peculiar or distinct' means that it is not to have any features that mark off what is represented in a highly individual way that would, Shaftesbury thinks, be distracting.

performer: In early modern times, a 'performance' could be the writing of a book, the composing of an opera, or the like. The 'performers' referred to on page 25 are poets and composers rather than actors and singers and violinists.

popular: It means 'of the people'; in early modern times it seldom means 'liked by the people'.

prince: As was common in his day, Shaftesbury uses 'prince' to mean 'ruler' or 'chief of government'. It doesn't stand for a *rank* that would distinguish 'prince' from 'king' or indeed from 'commoner'.

principle: In a few places Shaftesbury uses this word in a once-common but now-obsolete sense in which it means 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energizer', or the like.

raillery: Good-humoured witty ridicule or teasing, done with a light touch. Engaging in raillery is **rallying**.

science: In early modern times this word applied to any body of knowledge or theory that is (perhaps) axiomatised and (certainly) conceptually highly organised.

selfish: In the paragraph 'It is the height of wisdom...' on page 20 Shaftesbury is using the word to mean merely 'self-ish', i.e. 'self-related' or 'concerned with one's own interests'. Most of his uses of the word make it mean also '... to the exclusion of proper care for the interests of others'.

speculation: This has nothing to do with guess-work. It means 'an intellectual pursuit that doesn't involve morality'. ethics is a 'practical' discipline, chemistry is a 'speculative' one.

vice, vicious: Morally wrong conduct, not necessarily of the special kind that we reserve 'vice' for these days, or the different special kind that we label as 'vicious'.

vulgar: Applied to people who have no social rank, are not much educated, and (the suggestion often is) not very intelligent.

wit: This often meant about the same as 'intelligence'; but in Shaftesbury and some other writers it usually carries some suggestion of today's meaning—e.g. in the work's title and in the link on page 1 between 'wit' and 'raillery'.

Part I

Section 1

When in conversation the other day I spoke in defence of raillery [see Glossary], you were surprised; and I have been thinking about why. Is it possible that you have supposed me to be such a grave [= 'solemn'] person that I would dislike all conversation of this kind? Or were you afraid that if you put me to the test by the use of raillery I would fail?

I must confess that you had reason enough for your caution if you thought me to be basically such a true zealot that I couldn't bear the least raillery on my own opinions. I know there are many people like that. Anything that *they* think is grave or solemn must, they hold, be treated only in a grave and solemn way; though they don't mind treating differently anything that *others* think—they are eager to try the edge of ridicule against any opinions except their own.

Is it fair for them to take this attitude? Isn't it just and reasonable to handle our own opinions as freely as we do other people's? To be sparing with our own opinions may be regarded as a piece of selfishness. We might be accused of willful ignorance and blind idolatry, for having taken opinions on trust and consecrated in ourselves certain idol-notions that we won't allow to be unveiled or seen in day light. [For 'idol notions' see Bacon's *New Organon*, aphorism 1:39.] The items that we carefully tuck away in some dark corner of our minds may be monsters rather than divinities or sacred truths; the spectres can impose on us if we refuse to turn them every way and view their shapes and complexions in every light. Something that can be shown only in a certain light is questionable. Truth, they say, can stand any light; and one of the principal lights. . . . by which things are to be

viewed in order to evaluate them thoroughly is ridicule itself, i.e. the form of test through which we discover whatever is vulnerable to fair raillery in any subject. . . .

So I want you to know fully what my views are regarding this, so that you can judge whether I •was sincere the other day in defending raillery, and •can still plead for those able friends of ours who are often criticised for their humour of this kind, and for the freedom they take in this airy way of conversing and writing.

Section 2

Seriously, thinking about how this species of wit is sometimes employed, and how excessively some of our contemporaries have been using it lately, one may be a little confused and unsure •what to think of the practice or •where this rallying frame of mind will eventually take us. It has passed from the men of pleasure to the men of business. Politicians have been infected with it, so that grave affairs of state have been treated with an air of irony and banter. The ablest negotiators have been known as the most notable clowns; the most celebrated authors have shown themselves as the greatest masters of burlesque.

There is indeed a kind of *defensive raillery* (if I may so call it) which I am willing enough to allow—in affairs of any kind—when the spirit of inquiry would force a discovery of more truth than can conveniently be told, •and the raillery is a device for heading off inquiry. In some contexts the worst harm we can do to truth is to discover too much of it. It's the same with •understandings as with •eyes: for a given size and structure just so much light is necessary, and no more;

anything beyond that brings darkness and confusion.

It is real humanity and kindness to hide strong truths from tender eyes. And it is easier and more civil to do this by pleasant humour than by a harsh denial or by remarkable reserve [= 'by conspicuously buttoning your lip']. But to work at confusing men by creating mysteries, and getting advantage or pleasure from the perplexity you are throwing them into by such uncertain talk, is as *mean* when it is done through raillery as when it is done with the greatest seriousness in a solemn attempt to deceive. It may still be necessary, as it was long ago, for wise men to speak in parables with a double meaning, so that the enemy will be confused and only those who have ears to hear will hear. [This echoes *Matthew* 13:9 where Jesus, after presenting a parable, says 'Who hath ears to hear, let him hear'.] But it is certainly a mean, impotent, and dull sort of 'wit' that confuses everyone and leaves even one's friends unsure what one's real opinions are on the topic in question.

This is the crude sort of raillery that is so offensive in good company. And indeed there's as much difference between the two sorts of raillery as between •fair-dealing and •hypocrisy, or between the most genteel wit and the most scurrilous clowning. But this illiberal kind of wit will lose its credit—i.e. will be exposed for the low device that it is—by freedom of conversation. That is because wit is its own remedy; its true value is settled by free trade in it; the only danger is setting up an embargo. The same thing happens here as in the case of trade: tariffs and restrictions reduce trade to a low ebb; nothing is as advantageous to it as a free port.

We have seen in our own time the decline and ruin of a false sort of wit that delighted our ancestors so much that their poems and plays, as well as their sermons, were full of it. All humour involved some sort of play on words; the very language of the ·royal· court was full of puns. But now such word-play is banished from the town and from all good

company; there are only a few signs of it in the country; and it seems at last to have been restricted to the schools, as the chief entertainment of teachers and their pupils. Other kinds of wit will also improve in our hands, and humour will refine itself, as long as we take care *not* to tamper with it and hold it down by severe discipline and rigorous prohibitions. Everything that is civilised in conversation is due to liberty: we polish one another, and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of friendly collision. To restrain this is inevitably to cause men's understandings to rust. It is to destroy civility, good breeding, and even charity itself, under a pretence of maintaining it. [Here 'charity' seems to mean, roughly, 'kindness'.]

Section 3

To describe *true raillery* would be as difficult and perhaps as pointless as defining *good manners*.

Shaftesbury's next sentence: None can understand the speculation, besides those who have the practice.

meaning: To understand what true raillery is, you have to know how to engage in it. To understand what good manners are, you have to be well-mannered.

Yet everyone thinks himself well-mannered; and the most dry and rigid pedant imagines that he can rally with a good grace and humour. I have known cases where an author has been criticised for defending the use of raillery by some of those grave gentlemen who at the same time have constantly used that weapon themselves, though they had no gift for it. I think this can be seen in the case of many zealots who have taken it upon themselves to answer our modern free-writers [= 'writers who are free-thinkers' = 'writers who are atheists or anyway don't shrink in horror from atheism']. When

these severe gentlemen, with the grim look of true inquisitors, condescend to leave their austerity and deal in a joking and pleasant manner with an adversary whom they would prefer to treat very differently, they don't do it gracefully. To do them justice, I'm sure that if they had their way their conduct and tone would be pretty much the same all through; they would probably give up ·occasional· farce and stay with continuous tragedy! But as things are, there's nothing so ridiculous as the two-faced performance of writers who with one face force a smile and with another show nothing but rage and fury. Having signed up for the tournament and agreed to the fair laws of combat by wit and argument, they have no sooner tried their weapon than you hear them crying aloud for help and delivering ·their adversary· over to the secular arm. [That is a joke. At some times and places, when a court of some Church found a person guilty of a crime for which it was unwilling or legally unable to enforce punishment, it would ask 'the secular arm' of government to do the punishing.]

There can't be a more preposterous sight than an executioner and a clown acting their part upon the same stage! But I'm convinced that anyone will find this to be the real picture of certain modern zealots in their controversial writings. They are no more masters of solemnity than they are of good humour, always running into •harsh severity on one side and •awkward buffoonery on the other. Between anger and pleasure, zeal and joking, their writing is about as graceful as the play of cantankerous children who at the same instant are both peevish and wild, and can laugh and cry almost in the same breath.

There's no need for me to explain how agreeable such writings are like to be, and what effect they'll have towards winning over or convincing those who are supposed to be in error! It's not surprising to hear the zealots publicly lamenting the fact that while their adversaries' books are so

current, their answers to them can hardly make their way into the world or be taken the least notice of. Pedantry and bigotry are millstones that can sink the best book if it carries the least part of their dead weight. The temperament of the •pedagogue doesn't suit the times, and the world may be willing to learn but it isn't willing to be •tutored. When a philosopher speaks, men hear him willingly as long as he keeps to his philosophy. A Christian is heard as long as he keeps to his professed charity and meekness. And in a gentleman we allow of joking and raillery as long as it is managed with good manners and is never crude or clownish. But if a mere academic scholar—impersonating all these characters and in his writings bouncing back and forth from one to another—appears over-all to be as little able to keep the temperament of Christianity as to use the reason of a philosopher or the raillery of a well-mannered gentleman, is it any wonder if the monstrous product of such a jumbled brain strikes the world as ridiculous?

If you think, my friend, that by this description I have done wrong to these zealot-writers in religious controversy, just read a few pages in any one of them...and then pronounce.

Section 4

Now that I have said this much about authors and writings, you'll hear my thoughts (which you asked for) on the subject of conversation, and especially a recent free-ranging conversation that I had with some friends of yours whom you thought I should have very solemnly condemned.

It was, I must admit, a very entertaining conversation, despite its ending as abruptly as it did and in a confusion that almost annihilated everything that had been said. Some details of this conversation oughtn't to be recorded on paper,

I think. It will be enough if I remind you of the general lines of how the conversation went. Many fine schemes were destroyed; many grave reasonings were overturned: but because this was done without offence to the parties concerned and with improvement to the good humour of the company, it gave us a still keener appetite for such conversations. And I'm convinced that if Reason herself were asked to judge how her own interests fared in this conversation, she would answer that she received more advantage in the main from that easy and familiar way of conversing than from the usual stiff adherence to one particular opinion.

Perhaps you are still in the frame of mind of not believing me to be in earnest about this. You may continue to tell me that I am merely trying to be paradoxical when I commend as advantageous to reason a conversation that ended in such total uncertainty concerning things that had seemingly been so well established.

I answer that according to my notion of *reason*, one can't learn how to use it from the written treatises of the •learned or from the set lectures of the •eloquent. The only way someone can be made a reasoner is through the habit of reasoning. And men can never be better invited into the habit than when they find pleasure in it. Now, the only way for such speculative [see Glossary] conversations to be at all agreeable is for them to have

- a freedom of raillery,
- a liberty in decent language to question everything, and
- permission to unravel or refute any argument without giving offence to the arguer.

The fact is that conversations on theoretical matters have been made burdensome to mankind by the strictness of the laws laid down for them, and by the prevailing pedantry and

bigotry of those who reign in them and assume themselves to be dictators in these provinces.

The ancient the satirist's complaint in poetry—'Must I always be only a *listener*?'—is an equally natural complaint in theology, in morals, and in philosophy. *Taking turns* is a mighty law of discourse, and mightily longed for by mankind. In matters of reason, more is done in a minute or two of question and reply than is achieved by hours of continuous discourse. Orations are fit only to move the passions; and the power of rhetoric is to terrify, exalt, enchant or delight, rather than to satisfy or instruct. A free conversation is •a close fight, compared with which the other way—the lecture or oration—is merely •a waving of weapons in the air. So being obstructed and manacled in conferences, and being restricted to hearing orations on certain subjects, is bound to give us a distaste for those subjects, making them—when managed in that way—as disagreeable to us as the managers are. Men would rather reason •about trifles if they can reason freely and without the imposition of authority than reason •about the best and most useful subjects in the world when they are held under restraint and fear.

And it's no wonder that men are generally such weak reasoners who don't much care for strict argument in conversations on minor topics, given that they're afraid to exert their reason in greater matters, and are forced to argue feebly in contexts where they need the greatest activity and strength. What happens here is like what happens in strong and healthy bodies that are debarred from their natural exercise and confined in a narrow space. They are forced to use odd gestures and contortions. They have a sort of action; they do still move; but they do it utterly ungracefully. That happens because the animal spirits [see Glossary] in such sound and active limbs can't lie dead, i.e. unemployed. And in the same way the natural free •mental• spirits of clever

men, if they are imprisoned and controlled, will discover other ways of acting so as to relieve themselves in their constraint. . . .

If men are forbidden to speak their minds •seriously on certain subjects, they'll do it •ironically. If they are forbidden to speak at all on such subjects, or if they think it really dangerous to do so, they will then redouble their disguise, wrap themselves in mystery, and talk in such a way that they'll hardly be understood. . . .by people who are disposed to do them harm. Thus raillery comes more into fashion, and goes to extremes. The persecuting spirit has aroused the bantering one; and lack of liberty may account for the lack of true civilisedness, and for the corruption or wrong use of joking and humour.

[In the next sentence, the italicised words come from the Latin *urbs* = 'city' and *rus* = 'countryside'.] If in this respect we go beyond the limits of what we call *urbanity* and are apt sometimes to behave in a buffooning *rustic* manner, we have the ridiculous solemnity and sour mood of our pedagogues to thank for this; or, rather, they can thank themselves if they in particular meet with the heaviest of this kind of treatment. For it will naturally fall heaviest where the constraint has been the severest. The greater the weight is, the more bitter will be the satire. . . .

To see that this really is so, look at the countries where spiritual tyranny is highest. The greatest of buffoons are the Italians. In their writings, in their freer sort of conversations, on their stages and in their streets buffoonery and burlesque are in the highest vogue. It's the only way the poor cramped wretches can express a free thought. We have to concede that they are better than us at this sort of wit. And it's not surprising that we who have more liberty are less nimble in that gross kind of raillery and ridicule?

Section 5

I really think that that's why the ancients exhibit so little of this spirit, and why in all the writings of the more polished ages there's hardly a sign of mere burlesque or anything like it. Their treatment of the very gravest subjects was indeed somewhat different from ours: their treatises were generally written in a free and familiar style; they chose to represent real discourse and conversation by treating their subjects in the manner of dialogue and free debate. . . . The usual wit and humour of their real discourses appeared in the ones that they composed; and this was fair, because without wit and humour reason can hardly be tested, or be identified as such. The magisterial voice and high strain of the pedagogue commands reverence and awe; it is admirably fitted to keep understandings at a distance and out of reach; whereas the other manner gives the fairest hold, and allows an antagonist to use his full strength hand to hand, on level ground. . . .

But some gentlemen are so full of the spirit of bigotry and false zeal that when they hear principles [see Glossary] examined, sciences and arts inquired into, and matters of importance treated with this frank kind of humour, they quickly conclude that all the professions must collapse, all establishments come to ruin, and nothing orderly or decent be left standing in the world. They fear—or *say* they do—that religion itself will be endangered by this free way ·of discussing things·; so they are as much alarmed by this liberty when it occurs in private conversation and under prudent management as if it were crudely used in public company or before the most solemn assembly. But I see the situation very differently. For you have to remember, my friend, that I am writing to you in defence only of the liberty of the club—the sort of freedom that is employed among gentlemen and friends who know one another perfectly well.

That it is natural for me to defend liberty with this restriction can be inferred from the very notion I have of liberty itself.

It is surely a violation of the freedom of public assemblies for anyone to take the chair without having been called or invited to it. To raise questions or steer debates that offend the public ear is to be lacking in the respect that is due to common society. In public such subjects should be treated either •not at all or •in a manner that doesn't lead to scandal or disturbance. The public is not on any account to be laughed at to its face, or scolded for its follies in such a way that it thinks it is being treated with contempt. And what is contrary to •good manners in this way is equally contrary to •liberty. Coming across as superior to the vulgar [see Glossary] and as despising the multitude—that's the conduct of men of slavish principles [Shaftesbury's phrase]. Men who love mankind will respect and honour gatherings and societies of men. And in mixed company [see Glossary], and in places where men have unselectively come together for amusement or for business, it is an imposition and a hardship to force them to hear what they dislike, and to discuss matters in a dialect that is unfamiliar to many of them. It's a breach of the harmony of public conversation to say things in a way that •is above the common reach and •silences others, robbing them of their turn. But in private society. . . where friends meet knowingly, and with the actual intention of exercising their wit and looking freely into all subjects, I see no basis for anyone to claim to be offended at the way of raillery and humour, which is the very life of such conversations—the only thing that makes good company, and frees it from the formality of business and the tutorial dogmaticness of the schools.

Section 6

To return now to our argument. If the best of our modern conversations are apt to be chiefly concerned with trifles; if rational discourses. . . have become discredited and disgraced because of their formality [see Glossary]; then there's all the more reason to allow humour and gaiety. An easier way of treating these subjects will make them more agreeable and familiar. Disagreeing about them will be like disagreeing about other matters; they needn't spoil good company, or detract from the ease or pleasure of a civilised conversation; and the oftener these conversations are renewed the better will be their effect. We'll become better reasoners by reasoning in a pleasant and relaxed fashion, taking up or laying down these subjects, as we please. So I admit that I can't be scandalized by the raillery that you took notice of, or by its effect on our company. The humour was agreeable, and the pleasant confusion in which the conversation ended pleases me as I look back on it, when I realise that instead of being discouraged from resuming the debate we were so much the readier to meet again at any time and disagree about the same subjects, perhaps even with more ease and satisfaction than before.

As you know, we had been occupying ourselves for a long time with the subject of morality and religion. Among different opinions presented and maintained with great life and ingenuity by various participants, every now and then someone would appeal to 'common sense'. Everyone allowed the appeal, and was willing to have his views put to that test, because everyone was sure that common sense would justify *him*. But when the hearing was conducted—the issue examined in the court of common sense—no judgment could be given. This, however, didn't inhibit the debaters from renewing the appeal to common sense on the next occasion

·when it seemed relevant to do so·. No-one ventured to call the authority of the court into question, until a gentleman whose good understanding had never been brought in doubt very gravely asked the company to tell him what common sense was. he said:

‘If by the word “sense” we understand *opinion and judgment*, and by the word “common” we mean *what is true of all mankind or of any considerable part of it*, it will be hard to discover what the subject of common sense could be! For anything that accords with the “sense” of one part of mankind clashes with the “sense” of another. And if ·the content of· common sense were settled by majority vote, it would change as often as men change, and something that squares with common sense today will clash with it tomorrow or soon thereafter.’

But despite the different judgments of mankind on *most* topics, it was thought ·by the members of our conversational group· that they agreed on *some*. The question then arose as to *what* those subjects were. The questioner said:

‘It is thought that any topic that matters much will be in the categories of **(1)** religion, **(2)** policy [here = ‘abstract political theory] or **(3)** morals.

(1) There’s no need to say anything about differences in religion; the situation is fully known to everyone, and feelingly understood by Christians, in particular, among themselves. They have taken turns in applying rigorous tests to one another. When any party happened to have the power ·of the state·, it did everything it possibly could to make its private “sense” the public one; but it never succeeded—and *common sense* was as hard to pin down as *catholic* or *orthodox* ·when these are taken as general terms, not the names of two branches of Christianity·. What

one ·sect· regards as an inconceivable mystery is easy for another sect to grasp; what is absurd to one is rigorously proved for another.

(2) As for policy: there is equally a question as what “sense” or whose “sense” could be called *common*. If plain British or Dutch “sense” is right, Turkish and French “sense” must be very wrong. And although passive obedience [see Glossary] strikes us as mere nonsense, we have found it to be the “common sense” of a large party among ourselves, a larger party in Europe, and perhaps the greatest part of all the world besides.

(3) As for morals; the difference is still wider, if that is possible. Setting aside the opinions and customs of the many barbarous and illiterate nations, and attending only to the few nations that have achieved literature and philosophy, even *they* haven’t yet been able to agree on one single system, or acknowledge the same moral principles. And some of our most admired modern philosophers, even, have told us flatly that virtue and vice have no other law or standard than mere fashion and vogue.’

It might have seemed unfair in our friends if they had treated only the graver subjects in this manner, and allowed the lighter ones to escape; for our follies in the gayer part of life are as solemn as our follies in the most serious. The fault is that we take the laugh only half-way: we ridicule the false •pronouncement but leave uncriticised the false •joke, which becomes as utterly deceitful as the other. Our entertainments, our plays, our amusements become solemn. We dream of happinesses and possessions and enjoyments regarding which we have no understanding, don’t know anything for certain; and yet we pursue these as ·though they were· the best known and most certain things in the

world. There's nothing so foolish and deluding as a partial scepticism; for while the doubt is cast only on one side, the certainty grows so much stronger on the other. While only one face of folly appears ridiculous, the other grows more solemn and deceiving.

But that's not how things stood with our friends. They seemed better critics, and more intellectually able and fair

in their way of questioning accepted opinions and exposing the ridiculousness of things. If you'll allow me to continue in the tone they adopted, I'll conduct an experiment: there's a way of going about things that you thought •made assured knowledge impossible and •introduced endless scepticism; I want to discover whether by proceeding in that very same way we can get that assured knowledge back.

Part II

Section 1

If an Ethiopian were suddenly transported into Europe and placed either in Paris or Venice at a time of Carnival, when almost everyone wears a mask, he would probably be at a loss for some time until he discovered the cheat; because at first it wouldn't enter his head that a whole people could be so wild as to agree at an appointed time to transform themselves by changing their clothing ·and wearing masks and· making a serious solemn practice of deceiving one another by this universal confusion of characters and persons. He might at first have looked on this with a serious eye, but once he discovered what was going on he'd have found it hard to keep a straight face. The Europeans might laugh back, mocking his simplicity. But our Ethiopian would have better reason for laughter. It's easy to see which of the two would be ·more· ridiculous: someone who laughs and is himself ridiculous bears a double share of ridicule. But then this might happen: Our Ethiopian, still in fits of laughter with his head full of masks, and knowing nothing of the fair complexion and

common dress of the Europeans, happens to see someone with no mask and in his normal clothing; and this makes him laugh as much as ever. By a silly presumption he is taking nature for mere art, and mistaking a sober and sensible man for one of those ridiculous amateur actors! Isn't he making himself ridiculous by carrying the joke too far?

[In this paragraph and the next, Shaftesbury is talking about **(i)** ways in which truth has been disguised in terms of **(ii)** the wearing of masks and fooling around at Carnival. Sometimes he uses the language of **(ii)** when really he is talking only about **(i)**; read alertly!] There was a time when men were accountable only for their actions and behaviour [Shaftesbury's phrase]. Their opinions were left to themselves. They were free to differ in these, as in their faces! everyone acquired the manner and look that was natural for him. But in the course of time it came to be thought decent to correct men's •faces and to make their •intellectual complexions uniform and of one sort. Thus the magistrate [see Glossary] became a dresser, and after he had given up his power to a new order of clothiers, he in

turn was dressed as he deserved! But although. . . it was agreed that only one manner of dress was correct, and only one particular manner of behaving to which all people must conform, the misery was that neither the magistrate nor the clothiers themselves could settle which of the various styles and manners was the exactly true one. Imagine now what the effect must be •when men came to be persecuted from all sides about their manner and appearance, and had to struggle and improvise in attempts to adjust and compose their facial expressions according to the right mode; •when a thousand patterns of dress were current, and kept altering according to fashion and the mood of the times! Judge whether men's faces weren't likely to show strain, and the natural face of mankind distorted, convulsed, and made hardly recognisable.

But although the general face of things has been made unnatural or artificial by this unhappy concern for dress and over-tenderness for the safety of complexions, we mustn't be led by this to think that •all faces are alike besmeared or plastered, that •it's all a matter of rouge and varnish, or that •the face of truth is any less beautiful under all the counterfeit faces that have been put on her. We must remember the Carnival: •what has led to this wild jumble of people, •who started it, and •why men were pushed into this pastime. We may have a good laugh at the original deception, and if pity doesn't stop us we can have fun at the expense of the folly and madness of those who are thus caught and manipulated by these impostures [see Glossary]. But we should remember our Ethiopian, and beware lest by taking plain nature for a mask we become more ridiculous than the people we are ridiculing. Now, if a misplaced joke or ridicule can lead the judgment so far astray, it's probable that an excess of fear or horror may have the same result.

[The 'Magi' referred to here are mythical creatures with magical powers who are supposed to have created a kingdom in Persia (here called 'Asia'). When Shaftesbury compares them with the Knights Templars whom he calls 'a body of conjurers' he is expressing his contempt for the supposed magic powers of the supposed Magi.] If, my friend, you had chanced to live in Asia at the time when the Magi by a wicked imposture got possession of the empire, no doubt you would have detested that act; and it might have happened that the very persons of the men, after all the cheats and abuses they had committed, became so odious to you that you would have seen them killed with as relentless an eye as our later European ancestors saw the destruction of the Knights Templars—a similar body of conjurers who had almost become an over-match for the civil sovereign. Your indignation might have led you to propose the razing of all monuments and memorials of those 'magicians'. You might have resolved not to leave so much as their houses standing. But if it had happened that these magicians when they were in power had made any collection of books, or written any themselves, treating of philosophy, or morals, or any other science [see Glossary] or branch of learning, would you have carried your resentment so far as to •destroy these also and to •condemn every opinion or doctrine the Magi had espoused, simply because they had espoused it? Hardly a Scythian, a Tatar, or a Goth would act or reason so absurdly. Much less would you, my friend, have carried out this. . . priest-massacre with such a barbarous zeal. Seriously, destroying a philosophy out of hatred for a man shows thinking as wildly barbaric as murdering a man in order to plunder his wit and get the inheritance of his understanding!

I must admit that if all the institutions, statutes, and regulations of this ancient hierarchy, •the Magi•, had resembled the basic law of the order itself, it might have been right to

suppress them, for one can't read that law of theirs—

a Magus must be born of a mother and her son—without some abhorrence. But the conjurers (which is what they were, *not* magicians) thought that their •principles should look as good as possible to the world so as better to conceal their •practice; so they found it to be highly in their interests to accept some excellent moral rules and to establish the very best maxims of this kind. They may have thought at the outset that it would be to their advantage to recommend the greatest purity of religion, and the greatest integrity of life and manners. Perhaps they also preached up charity and good-will. And they may have •presented to the world the fairest face of human nature and, together with their laws and political institutions, have •interwoven the most honest morals with best doctrine in the world.

So how should we have behaved towards them? How should we have carried ourselves towards this order of men at the time of the discovery of their cheat and ruin of their empire? Should we have started to work instantly on their systems, struck indiscriminately at *all* their opinions and doctrines, and erected a contrary philosophy in defiance of them? Should we have attacked every religious and moral principle, denied every natural and social affection, and made men as much like wolves to one another as was possible for them, while describing them as 'wolves' and trying to make them see themselves as far more monstrous and corrupt than with the worst intentions it was ever possible for the worst of them to become? No doubt you'll think that this would have been a very preposterous line to take, which could have been followed only by mean spirits

who had held in awe and overfrightened by the Magi.

Yet an able and witty philosopher of our nation was recently so possessed with a horror of this kind that he directly acted in this spirit of massacre—with respect both to politics and to morals.¹ The fright he got from seeing the then-governing powers, who had unjustly taken authority over the people, gave him such a horror of all popular [see Glossary] government, and of the very notion of liberty itself, that to extinguish it for ever he recommends the extinguishing of books, and urges princes [see Glossary] not to spare so much as an ancient Roman or Greek historian. Isn't this in truth somewhat gothic? And doesn't our philosopher look rather like a savage in treating philosophy and learning in the way the Scythians are said to have treated Anacharsis and others ·as punishment· for having visited the wise of Greece and learned the manners of a civilised people?

His quarrel with •religion was the same as his quarrel with •liberty: the events during his lifetime gave him the same terror of each. All he could see were the ravages of •enthusiasm [here = 'fanaticism'] and the tricks of the people who created and then steered •that spirit. And this good sociable man—savage and unsociable as he tried to make himself and all mankind appear by his philosophy—exposed himself ·to great hostility· during his life, and took great pains that after his death we might be spared the kinds of events that led to these terrors. He tried to show us that

Both in religion and in morals we are imposed on by our governors; there is nothing which by nature inclines us either way, nothing that naturally draws us to the love of anything beyond ourselves;

¹ Hobbes, who expresses himself thus: 'By reading these Greek and Latin authors, men have from their childhood fallen into a habit (under a false show of *liberty*) of favouring riots, and of licentiously controlling the actions of their sovereigns.' (*Leviathan* II.21). By this reasoning, it should follow that there can never be any riots or deposing of sovereigns at Constantinople, or in the Mughal empire. In other passages he expresses his view about this destruction of ancient literature in favour of his *Leviathan* hypothesis and new philosophy.

although his love for such great truths and sovereign maxims as he imagined these to be made him the most laborious of all men in composing systems of this kind *for our use*; and forced him, despite his natural fear, to run continually the highest risk of being a martyr for our deliverance.

So let me head off your anxieties and assure you that there's no such mighty danger as we are apt to imagine from these fierce prosecutors of superstition, who are so *down on* every religious or moral principle. Whatever savages they may appear to be in philosophy, they are in their ordinary lives as civilised as one could wish. Their freedom in communicating their principles is a witness on their behalf: it's the height of sociableness to be friendly and communicative in that way.

If their principles were concealed from us and made a mystery, they might indeed become considerable [= 'become something that we had to reckon with']. Things are often made considerable by being kept as secrets of a sect or party; and nothing helps this more than the hostility and anxiety of a contrary party. If hearing maxims that are thought to be poisonous immediately pushes us into horrors and consternation, we're in no state to use the familiar and easy part of reason that is the best antidote. The only poison to reason is passion, for false reasoning is soon corrected when passion is removed. But if merely *hearing* a philosophical proposition is enough to move us into a passion, it's clear that the poison already has a grip on us and we are effectively prevented from using our reasoning faculty.

If it weren't for prejudices of this kind, why shouldn't we entertain ourselves with the fancy of one of these modern reformers we have been speaking of? What should we say to one of these anti-zealots who, with all the zeal of such a cool philosophy, should earnestly assure us:

'You are the most mistaken men in the world, to imagine that there's any such thing as natural faith or justice. What is *right* is determined by force and power. There's no such thing in reality as virtue; no principle [see Glossary] of order in things in heaven or on earth; no secret **charm** or force of nature by which everyone is •made to work willingly or unwillingly towards public good, and is •punished and tormented if he does otherwise.'

Isn't this the very **charm** itself? Isn't the gentleman at this instant under the power of it? ·The next paragraph is what we could say to him·.

Sir! the philosophy you have condescended to reveal to us is most extraordinary. We are indebted to you for your instruction. But please tell us: this zeal of yours on our behalf—where does it come from? What are we to you? Are you our father? And even if you were, why this concern for us? Is there then such a thing as natural affection? If not, then why all this industry and danger on our account? Why not keep this secret to yourself? What good does it do *you* to deliver *us* from the cheat? The more that are taken in by it, the better. It's directly against your interests to undeceive us, and let us know that you are governed only by private interest, and that nothing nobler or broader should govern us whom you converse with. Leave us to ourselves and to that notable •art by which we are happily tamed and made as mild and sheepish as we are. It's not fit that we should know that by •nature we are all wolves. Is it possible that someone who has really discovered himself to be a wolf should work hard to communicate such a discovery?

Section 2

In reality, my friend, there's nothing to frown at here, when we're being challenged to defend common honesty by fair honest gentlemen who are so different in practice from how they want to appear in theory. I know that some people are knaves in •notion and principle as well as in •practice: they think all honesty as well as all religion is a mere cheat, and so in consistency they have resolved deliberately to use whatever force or skill they have for their private advantage. But men like that never open themselves in friendship to others. They have no such passion for truth, or love for mankind. They have no *quarrel with* religion or morals, but they know what use to make of both when the opportunity arises. If they ever reveal their principles, it is never intentionally; they are sure to preach honesty, and go to church.

On the other hand, the gentlemen whose side I am taking can't be called hypocrites. They speak as ill of themselves as they possibly can. If they have hard thoughts of human nature, it's still a proof of their humanity that they give such a warning to the world. If they represent men as being by nature treacherous and wild, they do this out of care for mankind, to help them not to be caught easily through being too tame and trusting.

Impostors naturally speak the •best of human nature, to make it easier for them to manipulate it. These gentlemen •whom I am defending., on the other hand, speak the •worst; and they would rather be censured along with the rest than allow a few impostors to prevail over the many. It's the opinion that men are good that makes it easy for them to trust one another; and it's through trust that we are betrayed and put at the mercy of power, with our very *reason* being captured by those in whom we have gradually come to have

an implicit faith. But if each of us supposes all the others to be by nature outright savages, we'll take care to come less into one another's power; and, taking it that everyone is insatiably hungry for power, we'll build better defences against the evil •of malign power.—not by putting everything into one hand (as •Hobbes., the champion of this cause, wants us to do), but on the contrary by a proper division and balance of power, and by the restraint of good laws and limitations that can secure the public liberty.

You may want to ask me 'Do you really think these gentlemen are fully convinced of the principles they so often advance in company?' My answer is as follows (•it runs to the end of the paragraph.). I wouldn't absolutely question the gentlemen's sincerity, but there is something of a mystery about their conduct, more than has been suspected. Perhaps the reason why men of wit delight so much in espousing these paradoxical theories is not •that they are fully satisfied with them, but •that they want to make a better job of opposing some other theories whose fair appearance has helped (they think) to bring mankind under subjection. They think that by the general scepticism that they want to introduce they'll better deal with the dogmatic spirit that prevails in some subjects. And when they have accustomed men to putting up with being contradicted and hearing the nature of things being argue over in a general way, it may be safer (they conclude) to argue separately about certain matters of detail over which they aren't quite so well satisfied. From this you may get a better sense of why in conversation the spirit of raillery prevails so much, and notions are taken up for no reason except that they are odd and out of the way.

Section 3

But, speaking for myself, I have no worries about this sceptical kind of wit. Men may in a serious way be so pushed and puzzled by different ways of thinking, different systems and schemes imposed by authority, that lose all notion or comprehension of truth. I can easily grasp the effect that *awe* has over men's understandings. I can very well suppose men may be •frightened out of their wits, but I don't see that they can be •laughed out of them! I can hardly imagine that in pleasant conversation they should ever be talked out of their love for society, or reasoned out of humanity and common sense. Wit framed by good manners can't hurt any cause or interest that I care about; and philosophical speculations, managed in a civilised way, surely can't ever make mankind more unsociable or uncivilized. *That's* not the direction from which I can expect an invasion of savageness and barbarity. What I have found is that virtue never suffers as much from being •contested as it does from being •betrayed. My fear is not so much •from virtue's witty antagonists, who give it exercise defending itself, as from its tender nurses, who are apt to smother it in blankets and kill it by their excess of care!

I have known a building that was tilting in one direction and was then so thoroughly 'fixed' that it leaned and fell in the opposite direction. Something like that may have

happened in morals. Not satisfied with showing the *natural* advantages of honesty and virtue, men have actually *lessened* these in order (they thought) to advance another foundation for virtue. They have made virtue such a mercenary thing, and have talked so much about its rewards, that one can hardly tell what there is in virtue that is worth rewarding; for there's not much honesty or value in being bribed or terrified into behaving honestly. . . .

If the love of doing good is not in itself a good and right inclination, I don't know how there can possibly be such a thing as goodness or virtue. And if the inclination is right, we are perverting it if we think of it solely in terms of the reward for it, conceiving such wonders of the grace and favour that virtue will bring, when so little is shown of the intrinsic worth or value of the thing itself.

I'm almost tempted to think that the true reason why some of the most heroic virtues have so little notice taken of them in our holy religion is that if they had been entitled to a share of the infinite reward that providence has by revelation assigned to other duties there would have been no room left for disinterestedness. [This seems to mean: there would have been no reward left over for disinterestedness, but Shaftesbury can't have meant that, because it is too obvious that an 'infinite reward' is not an exhaustible quantity.] **(i)** Private friendship and **(ii)** zeal for the public and for our country are purely voluntary virtues for a Christian.² They aren't essential parts of his charity. He isn't

² No fair reader can think that by 'private friendship' I mean the common benevolence and charity that every Christian is obliged to show towards all men, and in particular towards his fellow-Christians, his neighbour, his brother, his more or less closely related kindred; but the special relation that is formed by a consent and harmony of minds, by mutual esteem, and reciprocal tenderness and affection—what we emphatically call a *friendship*. That's what there was between the two Jewish heroes that I shall mention shortly, whose love and tenderness surpassed that of women (2 *Samuel*, ch. 1). Such were the friendships, described so often by poets, between Pylades and Orestes, Theseus and Pirithous, and many others. Such were those between philosophers, heroes, and the greatest of men—between Socrates and Antisthenes, Plato and Dion, Epaminondas and Pelopidas, Cato and Brutus. . . . And such there may have been more recently, and perhaps even in our own age, though envy prevents the few examples of this kind from being mentioned in public. [This very long footnote continues with Shaftesbury's response to critics of what he has said about the status of friendship in the system of Christian virtues, a response based largely on what 'the learned and pious Bishop Taylor' wrote in his *Treatise of Friendship*.]

so tied to the affairs of this life; nor is he obliged to involve himself in this lower world in ways that won't help him to acquire a better world in the after-life. His real concerns are in heaven, and he has no occasion for any extra cares or embarrassments here on earth that may obstruct his way to heaven or hold him back in the careful task of working out his own salvation. But if any portion of reward is reserved hereafter for the generous part of **(ii)** a patriot, or that of **(i)** a thorough friend, this is still behind the curtain and happily concealed from us, so that we may be the more deserving of it when it comes.

It seems indeed that in the Jewish scheme of things each of these virtues had its illustrious examples, and was in some manner recommended to us as honourable and deserving to be imitated. Even Saul—who is presented to us as a bad prince—appears to have been respected and praised, before his death and after, for his love of his native country. And the remarkable love between his son Jonathan and his successor David gives us a noble view of a disinterested

friendship, at least on one side. But the heroic virtue of these persons had only the common reward of *praise* attributed to it, and couldn't claim a future reward under a religion that didn't teach any future state and didn't present any rewards or punishments except this-worldly ones in accordance with the written law.

And thus the Jews as well as the heathens were left to be instructed by their philosophy in the sublime part of virtue, and induced by reason to do what they had never been commanded to do. No premium or penalty being enforced in these cases, the disinterested part stood alone, the virtue was a free choice, and the magnanimity of the act was left entire. Someone who wanted to be generous, had the means to do so. Someone who fully wanted to serve his friend or his country, even at the cost of his life,³ could do it on fair terms. his sole reason was that *Dulce et decorum est*—it was inviting and becoming, or sweet and fitting. It was good and honest. And I'll try to convince you that this is still a good reason, and one that squares with common sense. . . .

³ 'Perhaps', says the holy apostle Paul, 'for a good man some would even dare to die' (*Romans* 5:7) He judiciously supposes this to belong to human nature; though he is so far from basing any precept on it that he introduces his private opinion with a very dubious 'perhaps'.