

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 III

Section 1

The Roman satirist ·Juvenal· may be thought more than ordinarily satirical when, speaking of the nobility and the court, he is so far from allowing them to be the standard of politeness and good sense that he makes them in a way the reverse: *Common-sense is rare in men of that rank*. Some of the ablest commentators, however, interpret this very differently from how it is ordinarily understood: they give the poet's 'common sense' a Greek derivation through which it stands for

a sense of public good and of the common interest; love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness, or the sort of civility that comes from a sound sense of the common rights of mankind and the natural equality there is among those of the same species.

And if we think carefully about this, it must seem rather hard or unkind in the poet to have denied wit or ability to a court such as that of Rome, even under a Tiberius or a Nero. But it didn't take any deep satire to question whether humanity or a sense of public good and of the common interest of mankind was properly the spirit of a court! It was hard to see what *community* there was among courtiers; or what *public* there was containing an absolute prince [see Glossary] and his slave-subjects. As for real *society*, there couldn't be any between people whose only sense of good was their sense of their own individual welfare. [Shaftesbury attaches to this paragraph an enormous footnote giving details of the battles among the commentators on how that line of Juvenal's should be understood.]

So our poet seems to be not so immoderate in his censure if we take him to be criticising the heart rather than the head. Reflecting on the education [see Glossary] that a court will offer he thinks it's not likely to raise any affection towards a country. He sees young princes and lords as the young masters of the world: being indulged in all their passions, and trained up in all sorts of licentiousness, they have a thorough contempt and disregard of mankind. (And mankind in a way *deserves* this, when it permits arbitrary power and adores tyranny!). . . .

A public spirit can only come from a social feeling, or a sense of partnership with human kind. Now, there are none so far from being 'partners' in this sense, or sharers in this common affection, as those who •scarcely know an equal and •don't regard themselves as subject to any law of fellowship or community. That is how •morality and •good government go together. There's is no real love of virtue without the knowledge of public good; and where absolute power is, there is no public.

Those who live under a tyranny, and have learned to admire its power as sacred and divine, are perverted as much in their religion as in their morals. According to their way of thinking, **public good** isn't the standard or rule of government for the universe any more than it is for the state. They have almost no notion of what is good or just other than what mere **will and power** have determined. Omnipotence, they think, would hardly *be* omnipotence if it weren't free to dispense with the laws of fairness and change the standard of moral rectitude just as it pleased.

But despite prejudices and corruptions of this kind, there clearly is still something of a public principle [see

Glossary], even where it is most perverted and depressed. The worst of governments—the despotic kind—can show sufficient instances of zeal and affection towards it. Where no other government is known, a despotic government usually receives the allegiance and duty that is owing to a better form. The eastern countries and many barbarous nations have been and still are examples of this kind. The personal love they bear their prince [see Glossary], however severe he is towards them, may be evidence of what a natural affection mankind have towards government. If men really have no public parent, no magistrate in common to cherish and protect them, they will still imagine they have one; and like new-born creatures who have never seen their mother they will imagine one for themselves, and (as if prompted by nature) apply for favour and protection to something of about the right shape. Lacking a true foster-father and chief, they will follow a false one; and lacking a legal government and just prince, they will obey even a tyrant, and endure a whole series of tyrants in the same family line.

As for us Britons, thank heaven, we have a better sense of government passed down to us from our ancestors. We have the notion of a public, and a constitution; and how a legislature and an executive should be structured. We understand weight and measure in these matters, and can reason soundly about the balance of power and property. The maxims we draw from our reasoning are as evident as conclusions in mathematics. Our increasing knowledge shows us every day, more and more, what common sense is in politics: and this is bound to lead us to understand a like sense in morals, which is the foundation of politics.

It is ridiculous to say that there's an obligation on man to act sociably or honestly •in a formed government but not •in what is commonly called 'the state of nature'. To put it in the fashionable language of our modern philosophy:

Society being founded on a compact, the surrender that every man makes of his private unlimited right into the hands of the majority, or whoever is appointed by the majority, is freely chosen and based on a promise.

Now, this promise was made in the state of nature; and whatever can make •a promise obligatory in the state of nature must make •all other acts of humanity as much our real duty. . . . Thus faith, justice, honesty, and virtue must all have been as early as the state of nature, or they could never have been at all. The civil union or confederacy could never make right or wrong if right and wrong didn't exist already. Someone who was free to perform any villainy before his contract will and should dispose as freely of his contract when it suits him to do so. . . .

- A man is obliged to keep his word.
- Why?
- Because he has given his word to keep it.

What a striking account of the origin of moral justice and the rise of civil government and allegiance!

Section 2

But setting aside these complaints against a philosophy that says so much about nature and means so little, we can surely accept this as a principle:

If anything is natural in any creature or any kind •of creature•, it's whatever tends to preserve the kind itself and conduces to its welfare and support.

If in original and pure nature it is wrong to break a promise or to be treacherous, it is as truly wrong to be in any respect inhuman, or in any way lacking in our natural part towards human kind. [Those last seven words are Shaftesbury's.] If eating and drinking are natural, so is herding [i.e. coming together in

a herd]. If any appetite or sense is natural, so is the sense of fellowship. If there's anything natural in the affection between the sexes, the affection towards the consequent offspring is equally natural; and so again between the offspring themselves, as kindred and companions brought up under the same discipline in the same household. That's how a clan or tribe is gradually formed, a public is recognised; and besides the *pleasure* found in social entertainment, language, and conversation there is such an obvious *necessity* for continuing this good set of relationships that •having no sense or feeling of this kind, no love of country, community, or anything in common, would be the same as •having so sense even of the most obvious means of self-preservation and the most necessary condition of self-enjoyment.

I don't know how the wit of man could puzzle away at this and come up with the answer that civil government and society are a kind of invention, a skilful contrivance. My own view is that this herding principle, this inclination to associate, is so natural and strong in most men that *its* violence might easily be blamed for much of the disorder that has arisen in the general society of mankind.

Universal good—the interests of the world in general—is a kind of remote philosophical object. That greater community ('the world in general') is hard to *see*; and the interests of a nation or of a whole people or body politic aren't easy to get hold of either. In smaller groups men can know one another personally, they can get a better taste of society, and enjoy the common good and interests of a smaller public. They see right across and around their community, and see and individually know those whom they serve, and know what the purpose is of their associating and working together. All men naturally have their share of this drive to come together; and those whose faculties are the most lively and active have such a large share of it that unless it is properly directed

by right reason it can't find things to do in such a remote sphere as that of the body politic at large. For here one may not even know by sight one in a thousand of those whose interests are concerned. No visible band is formed, no strict alliance; the relations are all with different persons, orders, and ranks of men—not men that one meets and talks to, but men of whom one has some idea according to the general view or notion of a state or commonwealth.

Thus the social aim is disturbed for lack of definite scope. The virtue of •feeling what others feel and •working together is apt to get lost for lack of direction in such a wide field. And the passion •for herding together• is nowhere as strongly felt or vigorously exerted as in actual joint action or war, in which the highest geniuses [see Glossary] are often known to be the readiest to take part. That is because the most generous [see Glossary] spirits are the most *combining*: they delight most to move in harmony with others, and feel (if I can put it this way) in the strongest manner the force of the confederating charm.

It's strange to think that war, which of all things appears the most savage, should be the passion of the most heroic spirits. But it's in war that the knot of fellowship is pulled tightest. It's in war that mutual help is most given, mutual danger run, and common affection most exerted and employed. For heroism and philanthropy are almost the same thing. To turn a lover of mankind into a ravager, a hero and deliverer into an oppressor and destroyer, all it takes is a small misguidance of the affection.

Hence other divisions amongst men. Hence, blocking peace and civil government, the love of party and of subdivision by cabal. For sedition is a kind of cantonizing—i.e. splitting into sub-groups—that has already begun within the state. When a society grows vast and bulky, it is natural to cantonize; and powerful states have found that sending

colonies abroad brings other advantages than merely having elbow-room at home, or extending their dominion into distant countries. Vast empires are unnatural in many respects, but especially in the fact that in such an empire, however well it is constituted, the affairs of many must be in the hands of very few; and the relation between the magistrate and people is less visible—in a way it is lost—in a body that is so unwieldy in its limbs, and whose limbs lie so far from one another and from the head.

It is in bodies like this that strong factions are most likely to arise. What happens is that the associating spirits, lacking exercise, form new movements within which they can have a narrower sphere of activity because they can't get action in a greater. Thus we have wheels within wheels. And some nations are structured in such a way that, absurd as this is as a matter of political theory, we have one empire within another. Nothing is as delightful as incorporating—i.e. forming bodies or groups.

- All sorts of distinctions are invented.
- Religious societies are formed.
- Orders are set up. and their interests espoused and served with the utmost zeal and passion.

There's never any lack of founders and patrons of this sort. Wonders are performed in this wrong social spirit by the members of separate societies. Man's *associating genius* is never better proved than in the societies that are formed in opposition to the general society of mankind, and to the real interests of the state.

In short, the very spirit of *faction* seems mainly to be nothing but the misuse or irregularity of the social love and common affection that is natural to mankind. That's because the opposite of sociableness is selfishness; and of all characters the thoroughly selfish one is the least ready to join any group or faction. The men of this sort—i.e. the selfish

ones—are true men of moderation. They have too much self-knowledge and self-control to be in danger of entering warmly into any cause or engaging deeply with any side or faction.

Section 3

As you know, it is commonly said that self-interest governs the world. But I think that anyone who looks closely into the affairs of the human world will find that passion, humour, caprice, zeal, faction, and a thousand other springs that go against self-interest have as large a role in the movements of this machine as self-interest does. There are more wheels and balances in this engine than are easily imagined. It is too complex to fall under one simple view, or be explained in a word or two. Those who study this mechanism must have a very selective eye to overlook all other motions besides those of the lowest and narrowest range. In the plan or description of this clockwork, it is hard that no wheel or balance should be allowed on the side of the better and broader affections; that nothing should be understood to be done in kindness or generosity, nothing in pure good-nature or friendship or through any social or natural affection of any kind, given that the main springs of this machine may well turn out to be either these very natural affections themselves or some compound kind containing them and retaining more than one half of their nature.

But don't expect me to draw you up a formal blueprint of the passions or to claim to show you their genealogy and inter-relations—how they are interwoven with one another, or how they interfere with our happiness and interest. To devise a sound plan or model that would enable you to see how much of the load in this architectural structure is carried by the friendly and natural affections would be

beyond the scope and above the level of a letter like this.

Modern designers, I know, would willingly get these natural materials off their hands, so that they could build in a more uniform way. They would like to new-frame the human heart, and intensely want to reduce all its motions, balances and weights to one principle and foundation—cool and deliberate selfishness. Men, it seems, are unwilling to think they can be outwitted and imposed on by nature so as to be made to serve her purposes, rather than their own. They're ashamed to be drawn out of themselves in this way, and forced away from what they regard as their true interest.

There have always been narrow-minded philosophers who have thought to set this difference to rights [= 'to put and end to this struggle [between man and nature]'] by conquering nature in themselves. A father and founder among these [Epicurus] saw well this power of nature, and he understood it so far that he urged his followers not to have children or to serve their country. There was no dealing with nature, it seems, while these alluring objects stood in the way! He saw clearly that

relatives,
friends,
countrymen,
laws,
political constitutions,
the beauty of order and government, and
the interests of society and mankind

were objects that would naturally create stronger affections than any that were grounded on the narrow base of mere self. So his advice not to marry or engage at all in the ·service of the· public was wise, and suitable to his design. The only way to be truly a disciple of •this philosophy was to leave family, friends, country, and society, and cling to •it. . . .

But the modern revivers of this philosophy seem to be of a lower genius. They seem to have understood less of this force of nature, and have thought to alter the •thing by changing a •name. They give an account of all the social passions and natural affections that puts them all in the 'selfish' category. Thus civility, hospitality, humanity towards strangers or people in distress, is only a more deliberate selfishness. An honest heart is only a more cunning one; and honesty and good-nature are a more deliberate or better-regulated self-love. The love of relative, children and posterity is purely love of self and of one's own immediate blood; as if, by this calculation all mankind were not included, because they are all of one blood, and joined by inter-marriages and alliances! . . . Thus, love of one's country and love of mankind must also be self-love. Magnanimity and courage, no doubt, are also versions of this universal self-love! For courage (says our modern philosopher) is constant anger.⁴ And all men (says a witty poet [Lord Rochester] would be cowards if they dared to.

We can accept without argument that the poet and the philosopher were both cowards; they may have reported what they knew about themselves. But true courage has so little to do with anger that the strongest evidence that someone is *not* brave is that he is very angry. True courage is the cool and calm sort. The bravest of men have the least of a brutal bullying insolence, and are found to be the most serene, pleasant, and free in the very time of danger. We know that rage can make a coward forget himself and fight. But what is done in fury or anger can't be attributed to courage. If that were not so, womankind might claim to be the braver sex, because their hatred and anger have always been known to be stronger and more lasting ·than men's·.

⁴ Sudden courage, says Hobbes, is anger. Therefore courage considered as constant and belonging to a character must on his account be defined as 'constant anger' or 'anger constantly returning'.

[Shaftesbury writes harshly of ‘still lower’ writers who use word-play and cheap jokes to propagate the idea that self-interest is the only basic human motivation. He continues:] If these gentlemen who delight so much in the play of words but shy away from definitions would simply tell us what self-interest *is*, and pin down what happiness and good are, that would put an end to this enigmatical wit. We will all agree that happiness is to be pursued, and in fact *is* always sought after; but whether it is to be found in

following nature, and giving way to common affection, or rather in

suppressing nature and turning every passion towards private advantage. . . . or the preservation of mere life,

that is something we could debate about. The question would not be ‘Who loves himself and who doesn’t?’ but rather ‘Who loves and serves himself in the most right and true manner?’

It is the height of wisdom, no doubt, to be *rightly* selfish [see Glossary]. And to value life, as far as life is good, belongs as much to courage as to discretion. But a wretched life is no wise man’s wish. To be without honesty is in effect to be without natural affection or sociableness of any kind. And a life without natural affection, friendship, or sociableness would be found a wretched one if it were tried. The value of self-interest depends on the intrinsic value and worth of these feelings and affections. What makes a man *himself* is, more than anything else, his temperament and the nature of his passions and affections. If he loses what is manly and worthy in these, he is as much lost to himself as when he loses his memory and understanding. The least step into villainy or baseness changes the character and value of a life. Someone who is willing to preserve his life at any cost is abusing himself more than anyone else can abuse him. And if life is not a dear thing indeed [here = ‘utterly beyond any price’],

someone who refused to live as a villain and preferred death to a base action was a gainer by the bargain.

Section 4

It’s as well for you, my friend, that in your education you haven’t had much to do with the philosophy or the philosophers of our days. A good poet and an honest historian can provide enough learning for a gentleman. And when a gentleman reads these authors for pleasure, he’ll get the *feel* of them and understand them better than will a pedant, with all his labours and the aid of his volumes of commentators. I’m aware that it used to be the custom to send the youth of highest quality to philosophers to be formed. It was in their schools, in their company, and by their precepts and example that the illustrious pupils became used to hardship and were exercised in the severest courses of temperance and self-denial. By such an early discipline they were equipped

- to command others,
- to maintain their country’s honour in war,
- to rule wisely in the state, and
- to fight against luxury and corruption in times of prosperity and peace.

If any of these arts [here = ‘skills’] are included in university learning, that’s good; but some universities these days are shaped in such a way that they seem *not* to be very effective for these purposes, and *not* to make a good job of preparing the young for right conduct in the world or sound knowledge of men and things. If you had been thoroughly ‘educated’ in the ethics or politics of the schools, I would never have thought of writing a word to you about common sense or the love of mankind. I wouldn’t have quoted the poet’s *dulce & decorum*. . . . Our philosophy these days runs

along the lines of the able sophister who said ‘Skin for skin: all that a man has he will give for his life.’ [This ‘able but tricky reasoner’ was Satan addressing God in *Job* 2:4.] According to some men it is orthodox theology and sound philosophy to value lives in terms of the number and exquisiteness of the pleasing sensations they contain. They constantly set these sensations in opposition to dry virtue and honesty. And upon this basis they see fit to call ‘a fool’ anyone who would risk his life ‘for anything’, or part with any of these pleasing sensations unless he could later get them back—be repaid in the same coin—with interest. So it seems that we are to learn virtue through money-lending, and to be wise and live well by raising the value of life and of the pleasures of sense!

But you, my friend, are stubborn about this. Instead of being led to think mournfully of death, or to bewail the loss of anything you may sometimes have risked by your honesty, you can laugh at such maxims as these, and be entertained by the *improved selfishness* and *philosophical cowardice* of these fashionable moralists! You won’t be taught to value life in terms of their price-scale, or degrade honesty as they do who make it only a •name. You are convinced that there’s something more in the •thing than fashion or applause; that worth and merit are substantial, and don’t depend on what men imagine or what they want; and that honour is as much itself when acting by itself and unseen as when seen and applauded by all the world.

If someone who looked like a gentleman were to ask me ‘Why should I avoid being nasty when no-one else is present?’, my first thought would be that someone who could ask this question must himself be a very nasty gentleman, and that it would be hard to make him conceive what true cleanliness is. Still, I might settle for giving him a slight answer, saying ‘Because you have a nose.’

If he pressed on by asking ‘What if I had a cold?’ or ‘What if I naturally lacked a delicate sense of smell?’ I might answer that I cared as little to see myself nasty as that others should see me in that condition. ‘But what if it were in the dark?’ Even then, though I had neither nose nor eyes, my sense of the matter would still be the same; my nature would rebel at the thought of what was sordid: or if it didn’t, that would show that I had a wretched nature indeed and hated myself for being a beast. I could never honour myself while I had no better a sense of what I owed myself, and what was fitting for me as a human creature.

In much the same way have heard it asked ‘Why should a man be honest in the dark?’ I won’t say what sort of man would ask this question; but I wouldn’t much want to know him or spend time in his company—or in the company of anyone whose best reason for being honest was his fear of the gallows or a jail. . . .

I know very well that many services to the public are done merely for the sake of reward; and that informers in particular are to be taken care of, and sometimes given state pensions; but let me have my particular thoughts of these gentlemen’s *merit*. ‘Thinking of all the people who contribute to solving and prosecuting crimes’, I shall never give my esteem ‘to paid informers, or’ to anyone but •the voluntary discoverers of villainy and •the vigorous prosecutors of their country’s interests. And in this respect I don’t know of anything greater or nobler than undertaking and managing an important accusation through which some high criminal of state, or some organised body of conspirators against the public, can be arraigned and brought to punishment through the honest zeal and public affection of a private man.

I know that the mere vulgar [see Glossary] of mankind often need a correctional object such as the gallows before their eyes. But I don’t believe that any man with a liberal

education—or any man with common honesty—ever needed to bring this idea into his mind in order to restrain himself from acting as a knave. And if a saint had no virtue except what was raised in him by the thought of reward

and punishment in the after-life, I don't know whose love or esteem he might gain, but I would never think him worthy of mine. . . .

Part IV

Section 1

I hope you are now convinced that as I am in earnest in defending raillery so also I can be sober too in the use of it. [The most recent occurrence of •the word 'raillery' was at the end of Part II section 2, but some of the intervening material has had a little of the teasing tone that defines •it.] It really is hard work learning to temper and regulate the humour that nature has given us so that it works as a more *lenitive remedy* against vice [see Glossary] and a kind of *specific* against superstition and melancholy delusion. [In that sentence, the italicised expressions are medical terms.] There's a big difference between trying to •raise a laugh from everything and trying to •discover in each thing what there is that can fairly be laughed at. For nothing is ridiculous except what is deformed; and there's no defence against raillery except being handsome and just. So it would be the hardest thing in the world to deny fair honesty the use of this weapon, which can never cut into honesty itself and can cut into everything that is contrary to it.

If we take our lead from the Italian stage-buffoons, we can learn from them that in their lowest and most scurrilous kind of wit there's no better target than the passions of cowardice and avarice. No-one in the world could turn

real bravery or generosity into ridicule. A glutton or mere sensualist is as ridiculous as the other two characters—the cowardly and the money-hungry ones. And unaffected temperance can't be made the subject of contempt by any but the grossest and most contemptible of mankind. Now, these three ingredients—bravery, generosity, temperance—make up a virtuous character, as the contrary three make up a vicious one. So how can we possibly make a joke of honesty? To laugh both ways is nonsensical. And if there really is something ridiculous about sottishness, avarice, and cowardice, you can see what follows: it would take a thoroughly ridiculous person to muster all his wit to ridicule wisdom or laugh at honesty or good manners.

A man of thorough good breeding, whatever else he may be, is incapable of acting in a crude or brutal [here = 'animal-like'] manner. He doesn't wonder whether to act in such a way or consider the matter by prudential rules of self-interest and advantage. He acts from his nature—in a way *necessarily*—and without reflection; and if he didn't, he wouldn't *be* a well-bred man, not one who could be relied on to be such in all circumstances. It's the same with the honest man: he can't think about whether to act

in a plainly villainous manner. . . . Anyone who wants to enjoy a freedom of mind, and to be truly in command of himself, must be above the thought of stooping to anything villainous or base. And anyone who is capable of stooping in that way must give up the thought of manliness, resolution, friendship, merit, and a ·good· character in his own eyes and the eyes of others. To pretend to have these enjoyments and advantages together with the privileges of a licentious principle [see Glossary]—to pretend to enjoy society and a free mind while having a knavish heart—is as ridiculous as the conduct of children who eat their cake and then cry for it. When men begin to deliberate about dishonesty, find that ·the thought of· it doesn't make them sick, and ask slyly 'Why should I stick at a good piece of knavery if there's a good sum to be earned by it?', they should be told like children that they can't eat their cake and have it.

When men have become accomplished knaves, they are past crying for their cake. They know themselves, and mankind knows them. These are not the ones who are so much envied or admired; we are more attracted by the moderate kind ·of knave·. But if we had good sense we would think of the thoroughly profligate knave, the very complete unnatural villain, as the honest man's only competitor for happiness. True ·self-interest is wholly on one side or the other—·the complete knave or the honest man·—and everything between these is inconsistency, indecision, remorse, vexation, and ·something like· a fit of malaria:

- from hot to cold,
- from one passion to the opposite one,
- a perpetual discord of life, and
- an alternate disquiet and self-dislike.

The only rest or repose must be through

- one settled, considered resolution, which when once taken must be courageously kept,

- the passions and affections brought under obedience to it,
- the temperament steeled and hardened to the mind, ·i.e.· the disposition hardened to the judgment.

Temperament and judgment must agree; otherwise there's nothing but disturbance and confusion. To allow oneself the secret but serious thought 'Why shouldn't I do this little villainy, or commit this one treachery—just once?' is the most ridiculous thing in the world, and contrary to common sense. A common honest man, not disturbed by philosophy and subtle reasonings about his interests, has no answer to the thought of villainy except that he can't find in his heart to try to conquer his natural aversion to it. . . .

The fact is that in the present state of thinking about morals in the world, honesty is not likely to gain much by philosophy or deep speculations of any kind. In the main it's best to stick to common sense and go no further. In moral questions men's first thoughts are generally better than their second; their natural notions better than the ones refined by study or consultation with casuists [= 'specialists in applied morality']. There's a common saying that expresses •common sense, namely that *honesty is the best policy*; but according to •refined sense, the only people who conduct themselves intelligently in this world are arrant knaves; the only ones who serve themselves serve their passions and indulge their loosest appetites and desires. So much for the wise and the wisdom of this world!

An ordinary man talking in a commonsensical way about a vile action says naturally and heartily 'I wouldn't be guilty of that for the whole world'. But speculative men—·men who are interested in *theories*·— find many qualifications and special cases: many ways of evasion; many remedies; many alleviations. One wrong action may be made up for (they think) by

- a good gift to the right person,
- a right method of applying for a pardon,
- good alms-houses and charitable foundations erected for right worshippers, and
- zeal shown for the right belief

—especially when the action is one that increases the man's power (as they say) to do good and serve the true cause.

Many a good estate, many a high position, has been gained through something like this. Some crowns may also have been purchased on these terms; and I think that some great emperors in the past were much assisted by these principles or ones like them, and later showed themselves grateful to the cause and party that had assisted them. Those who forged such morals have been enriched, and the world has paid a large price for this philosophy: the original plain principles of humanity, and the simple honest precepts of peace and mutual love, have by a sort of spiritual chemistry been transformed into the highest corrosives. . . .yielding the strongest spirit of mutual hatred and malignant persecution.

Section 2

But we aren't the sort of people, my friend, who are given to melancholy reflections. Let the solemn reprovers of vice proceed in the manner most suitable to their genius and character; I'm ready to celebrate with them the successes they have achieved in the authoritative way that is allowed to them. But I don't know why others can't be allowed to ridicule folly, and recommend wisdom and virtue (if they can) through humour and jokes. I don't know why poets, or others who chiefly to entertain themselves and others, can't be allowed this privilege. And if our standing reformers complain that they aren't heard so well by the gentlemen of fashion—if they exclaim against the airy wits

who fly to ridicule as a protection and launch successful counter-attacks from that quarter—why shouldn't someone who is only a volunteer in this cause be allowed to engage the adversary on his own terms and expose himself willingly to such counter-attacks as long as he is allowed fair play of the same kind?

By 'gentlemen of fashion' I mean those to whom a natural good genius or the force of good education [see Glossary] has given a sense of what is naturally graceful and appropriate. Some of them by mere nature, others by art and practice, are masters of

- an ear in music,
- an eye in painting,
- an imagination in ordinary matters of ornament and grace,
- a judgment about proportions of all kinds, and
- a general good taste in most of the subjects that provide the world's abler people with amusement and delight.

However wild such gentlemen as these may be, however irregular in their morals, they must at the same time discover their inconsistency and live •at variance with themselves and •in contradiction to the principle on which they base their highest pleasure and entertainment.

Of all the beauties that connoisseurs pursue, poets celebrate, musicians sing, and architects or artists of all kinds describe or create, the most delightful—the most engaging and moving—is that which is drawn from real life and from the passions. Nothing affects the heart like what comes purely *from* the heart and expresses its own nature: the beauty of sentiments, the grace of actions, the flavour of characters, and the proportions and features of a human mind. We can learn this lesson of philosophy even from a romance, a poem, or a play, when the fable-spinning author

•leads us with such pleasure through the labyrinth of the affections and •gets us to care, whether or not we want to, about the passions of his heroes and heroines. . . .

Let poets or the men of harmony deny if they can this force of nature, or withstand this moral [see Glossary] magic. And they carry a double portion of this charm about them. **(i)** The very passion that inspires them is itself the love of harmony, decency and proportion; and this inspiration isn't narrow or selfish (for nobody composes for himself!) but works for the pleasure and good of others, even down to posterity and future ages. **(ii)** It is evident in these performers [see Glossary] that their chief theme and subject—what raises their genius the most, and by which they so effectively move others—is purely manners and the moral part [Shaftesbury's phrase]. For the effect of their art, and also its beauty, is this:

‘in vocal measures of syllables and sounds, to express the harmony and rhythms of an inward kind; and represent the beauties of a human soul by proper settings and contrasts, which serve as grace-notes making this music of the passions more powerful and enchanting.’

The admirers of beauty in the fair sex might laugh to hear of a ‘moral part’ in their amours. Yet what a fuss is made about a heart! What an intricate search of sentiments and tender thoughts! What praises of a humour, a sense, a *je-ne-sais-quoi* of wit, and all those graces of mind that these virtuoso-lovers—these connoisseurs of the arts who are also lovers of women—delight to celebrate! Let them settle this matter among themselves, and regulate as they think fit the proportions that these different beauties hold one to another; but they must allow that *there is* •a beauty of the mind, and that it is essential to •the beauty they care about. Why else is an air of foolishness enough to stop a lover in his tracks? Why does the look and manner of an idiot destroy

the effect of all those outward charms, and rob the fair one of her power, even though she has all the right armament of features and complexion? We may imagine what we please about beauty as something substantial and solid; but a really thorough investigation of this matter would reveal that what we most admire even in a person's outward features is only a mysterious expression—a kind of shadow—of something inward in the temperament. [Shaftesbury develops this point in some detail, adding colour rather than content to what he has to say.]

Nor can the men of cooler passions and more deliberate pursuits withstand the force of beauty in others. Everyone is a connoisseur at his own level; everyone pursues a grace and courts a Venus of one kind or another. Whatever is handsome, honest, fitting in things will force its way. [Shaftesbury gives those adjectives in Latin, which enables him to use *venustum* for ‘handsome’.] Those who refuse to give this scope in the nobler subjects of a rational and moral kind will find that it is prevalent elsewhere, in a lower order of things. Those who overlook the main springs of action, and despise the thought of harmony and proportion in everyday life, will still be preoccupied with lower forms of them in their care for the common arts, or in the care and development of merely mechanical beauties. The models of houses, buildings, and their accompanying ornaments; the plans of gardens, and their compartments; the ordering of walks, plantations, avenues; and a thousand other symmetries, will occupy the mental space that •in some people• is occupied by symmetry and order of a happier and higher sort. . . .

[In this paragraph, ‘harmony’ and ‘dissonances’ are used metaphorically, referring to order and disorder in the moral realm.] The men of pleasure, who seem the greatest despisers of this philosophical beauty, are often forced to confess its charms. They can commend honesty as heartily as anyone, and are as much

struck with the beauty of a generous act. They admire the thing itself though not the means. They would like if they could to make honesty and luxury [see Glossary] agree, but the rules of harmony won't permit it; the dissonances are too strong. Still, attempts of this kind are not unpleasant to observe. Some voluptuous people are indeed sordid pleaders for baseness and corruption of every sort; but others having better characters try to keep in step with honesty, and having a better understanding of pleasure want to bring it under some rule. They condemn *this* style and praise *that*. 'It was good up to here, but then it went wrong.' 'Such-and-such a case was allowable, but this other one is not to be admitted.' They introduce a justice and an order into their pleasures. They would like reason to be on their side, to account in some way for their lives, and to shape themselves into some kind of consistency and agreement. And if they found they couldn't do this, they would choose to sacrifice their own pleasures to the pleasures that arise from generous behaviour, regularity of conduct, and a consistency of life and manners. . . .

There are other spurs to this thought; but the main one is a strong view of merit in a generous character as contrasted with some detestably vile one. That is why among poets the satirists seldom fail to do justice to virtue; and none of the nobler poets are false to this cause either. Even modern wits whose taste runs towards elegance and pleasure, when bare-faced villainy stands in their way and brings the contrary species in view, can sing in passionate strains the praises of plain honesty.

When we are highly friends with the world, successful with the fair, and prosperous in the possession of other beautiful things, we may—and usually do—despise this sober mistress, 'plain honesty'. But

- when we see what wildness and excess naturally produce in the world, and

- when we find that through luxury and in the service of vile interests knaves are advanced above us, and the vilest of men are preferred over the most honest,

then we see virtue in a new light, and with the assistance of this setting we can discern the beauty of honesty, and the reality of the charms that we hadn't previously understood to be either natural or powerful.

Section 3

And thus, after all, the most natural beauty in the world is honesty and moral truth, for all beauty is truth. True features make the beauty of a face; true proportions make the beauty of architecture, and true measures make the beauty of music. In poetry, which is all fable, truth still is the perfection. And anyone who is scholar enough to read the ancient Philosopher (or his modern followers) regarding the nature of a dramatic and epic poem will easily understand this account of truth.

A painter, if he has any genius, understands the truth and unity of design, and knows that if he follows nature too closely and strictly copies life he is doing something unnatural. For his art doesn't allow him to bring all of nature into his piece, but only a part of it. But if his piece is to be beautiful and to carry truth, it must be

- a whole by itself, complete, independent, and yet as great and comprehensive as he can make it.

For this to be achieved, the particulars must defer to the general design: everything must be subservient to the main thing, namely a certain easiness of sight of the piece—a simple, clear, united view that would be broken and disturbed by

the expression of anything peculiar [see Glossary] or distinct.⁵

Nature's variety is such as to distinguish every natural thing by a peculiar basic character; and if this is strictly represented in a work of visual or literary art it will make the subject appear unlike anything else in the world. That is something a good poet or painter tried very hard to prevent. They hate minuteness, and are afraid of singularity, which would make their images or characters appear capricious and fantastical. It's true that a mere face-painter has little in common with the poet; like the mere historian, he copies what he sees, and minutely traces every feature and odd mark. But it is otherwise with the men of invention and design. Those geniuses [see Glossary] develop the idea of their work from the many objects of nature, not from a particular one. Thus the best artists are said to have been tireless in studying the best statues, regarding them as a better rule [here = 'as better models'] than the most perfect human bodies could provide. Similarly, some considerable wits have recommended the best poems as preferable to the best histories for lessons in the truth of characters and nature of mankind.

Don't think that I am pitching things too high. Although few artists confine themselves to these rules, few are un-

aware of them. Whatever allowances we may make for our immoral poets or other composers of clumsy and short-lived works, we know very well that the enduring pieces of good artists must be constructed in a more uniform way. Every sound work of theirs obeys those natural rules of proportion and truth. The creature of their brain must be like one formed by nature, with all its parts in the right proportions to one another. Otherwise, even the vulgar will criticize the work: they'll see that it doesn't make a satisfactory *whole*, and will regard its maker—however detailed and exact he is about particulars—to be in the main a mere bungler.

Such is **poetical** truth; and such is (if I may so call it) **graphical** or **plastic** truth. **Narrative** or **historical** truth must be highly estimable, especially when we consider how mankind, who have become so deeply interested in the subject, have suffered by the lack of clearness in it. It is a part of **moral** truth; to be a judge in one you need also to have judgment in the other. The morals, the character, and the genius of an author must be thoroughly considered; and the historian, i.e. the relater of things important to mankind, must earn our approval in many ways if we are to be bound to take anything on his authority—approval in respect of his judgment, candor, and disinterestedness. As for

⁵ [Shaftesbury has a long footnote here, in which he offers his own restatement of a passage in Aristotle's *Poetics*:] The beautiful or sublime in poetry and painting comes from the expression of greatness with order—i.e. exhibiting the work's main subject in the very largest proportions in which it can be viewed. For when it is gigantic, it is in a way out of sight, and can't be taken in in that simple and united view. And when on the other hand a piece is of the miniature kind—when it runs into the detail, and delicate delineation of every little particular—it is as it were invisible, for the same reason, namely that the whole thing can't be comprehended in one united view, so that the beauty is broken and lost by the necessary attraction of the eye to every small and subordinate part. In a work of poetry, memory must be paid the same respect as the eye is in painting. The dramatic kind is confined within the convenient and proper time of a spectacle. The epic kind is left more at large. Each work, however, must aim at vastness, and be as great and of as long duration as is possible, consistent with its main lines' being easy to grasp within one easy glance or retrospect of memory. And this is what the Philosopher [always referring to Aristotle] calls 'the beautiful'. That is the best I can do by way of translating the passage in question, but it's impossible to do justice to this treatise in English. . . . I'd like to add a remark of my own, which may interest scholars of sculpture and painting, namely: the greatest of the ancient as well as the modern artists were always inclined to follow this rule of the Philosopher; and when they erred it was on the side of •too large rather than •too detailed. Examples of this are provided by Michelangelo, the great beginner and founder among the moderns, and by Zeuxis, who had the same status among the ancients. . . .

critical truth, i.e. the judgment and determination of what commentators, translators, paraphrasers, grammarians, and others have delivered to us in a given text: in the midst of

- such variety of style,
- such different readings,
- such interpolations and corruptions in the originals,
- such mistakes of copyists, transcribers, editors,

and a hundred such events to which ancient books are subject, the critical truth becomes, a matter of high-level theorising, especially when you consider that even if the reader is an able linguist he must also get help from chronology, natural philosophy, geography, and other sciences.

Thus, many previous truths have to be examined and understood if we are to judge rightly regarding historical truth, and regarding the past actions and circumstances of mankind as delivered to us by ancient authors of different nations, ages, times, characters and interests. But some •moral and philosophical truths are so evident in themselves—matters of natural knowledge, fundamental reason, and common sense—that it would be easier to imagine half of mankind to have run mad and settled on precisely one species of folly than to accept anything that contradicted •them

I have mentioned this because some modern zealots seem to have no better knowledge of truth, and no better manner of judging it, than by counting noses. By this rule, if they can. . . produce a set of Lancashire noddles [= 'fools'], remote provincial 'thinkers', or little visionary crowds, to attest a story of a witch on a broomstick flying in the air, they triumph in the solid proof of their new marvel and cry 'Great is truth and it will prevail!'

•Religion is much indebted to these men of marvels, who in this *discerning* age want to set •her on the foot of popular tradition, and make •her sail in the same boat as village-tales

and gossiping stories of imps, goblins, and demoniacal pranks, invented to frighten children or provide work for common exorcists. . . .

And now, my friend, I see that it's time to put an end to these reflections. If I tried to expound things any further, I would risk being drawn out of my way of humour into a deep solemn treatment of these subjects. If you find that I have moralized in a tolerable manner, according to common sense and without spouting nonsense, I'll be satisfied with my performance, such as it is, without worrying about what disturbance I might give to some of today's formal censors whose discourses and writings have a different tone. I have taken the liberty, you see, to laugh sometimes; and if I have either laughed wrongly or been inappropriately serious, I can be content to be laughed at in my turn. And if on the other hand I am scolded, I can laugh at that too, and with fresh advantage to my cause. For although nothing could be *less* a laughing matter than the provoked rage, ill-will, and fury of certain zealous gentlemen, if they were still armed as they were known to be not long ago, the magistrate has recently taken care to clip their talons, so that there's nothing very terrible about going up against them. On the contrary, there is something comical in the case. [He compares these men with gargoyles on medieval churches: supposedly fierce and protective, actually funny and powerless. And then he signs off.]

* * * * *

There's an irresistible temptation to present a different take on the famous words *Dulce et decorum est* that Shaftesbury quotes on page 14 (expecting his readers to know what comes after them). It was the Latin poet Horace who wrote that it is

sweet and **fitting** to die for one's country—*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. Two thousand years later, the English poet Wilfrid Owen absorbed that into a stunning poem of his own: after describing in horrible detail a man choking to death after a gas attack, he tells a rabble-rousing journalist

that if he saw this for himself. . .

. . . you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.