Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*¹

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, was born in 1671 and grew up to become a life-long supporter of Whig causes. He published the three volumes of *Characteristics* anonymously in 1711, and the work immediately attracted wide attention. The first volume contains treatments of enthusiasm, wit and humor, and writing. The second volume, with its ‘Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit’ and the ‘The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody’, forms his most valuable contribution to the science of ethics. In the third volume he advances various ‘Miscellaneous Reflections,’ including defenses of his philosophical theories and essays on artistic and literary subjects. He died in Naples in 1713.

From its initial appearance, the *Characteristics* was seen as an important contribution to the science of ethics. Mandeville in later years attacked him, Hutcheson defended him, and Butler and Berkeley discussed him—not always with a perfect comprehension of his system. Its leading ideas are of the relation of parts to a whole. As the beauty of an external object consists in a certain harmony of its parts, so the beauty of a virtuous act lies in how it relates to the whole. In this way, morality cannot be adequately studied in the individual human being but in how we relate to all around us (particularly in this life). In this way, it is possible for moral goodness to be non-arbitrarily grounded in objective features of the world and for the moral agent to be attracted to virtue for its own sake, not merely out of self-interest.

Indeed, he often points out that the doctrine of future rewards and punishments contradicts his search for an ethic that is intrinsic to the design of the cosmos and humanity and is independent of religious prescription. In his view, the doctrine of future rewards and punishments reduced the spiritual orientation of the Christian to egoism, in which a Christian is coaxed to goodness through rational calculations of short- and long-term benefits.

Shaftesbury abandoned reliance on this doctrine and, indeed, on many defining features of Christianity, including sin, salvation and revelation, although he continued to endorse a significant role for a tolerant and charitable Church and the morally improving contributions of Christian traditions of benevolence. Instead, his ethic was grounded in ideas about cosmic intelligence and order which, though compatible with aspects of Christianity, were also easily detached from it.

In short, Shaftesbury thinks of moral judgment as self-reflection. First, we have motives, and then we reflect on those motives resulting in a feeling of moral approval or condemnation. The process is the same when evaluating other agents: we reflect on their motives and feel approval or condemnation. In Shaftesbury’s aesthetic language, the state of having the morally correct motives is the state of being “morally beautiful,” and the state of approving the morally correct motives upon reflection is the state of having “good moral taste.” Shaftesbury argues that the morally correct motives which constitute moral beauty turn out to be those motives which are aimed at the good of one’s society as a whole. This good is understood teleologically. Furthermore, Shaftesbury argues that both the ability to know the good of one’s society and the reflective approval of the motivation toward this good are innate capacities that must nevertheless be developed by proper socialization.

“An Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit”
Book 1, Part 1, Section 1

Religion and virtue appear in many respects so nearly related that they are generally presumed inseparable companions. And so willing we are to believe well of their union that we hardly allow it just to speak or even think of them apart. It may however be questioned whether the practice of the world in this respect be answerable to our speculation. It is certain that we sometimes meet with instances which seem to make against this general supposition. We have known people who, having the appearance of great zeal in religion, have yet wanted even the common affections of humanity and shown themselves extremely degenerate and

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corrupt. Others, again, who have paid little regard to religion and been considered as mere atheists, have yet been observed to practice the rules of morality and act in many cases with such good meaning and affection towards mankind as might seem to force an acknowledgment of their being virtuous. And, in general, we find mere moral principles of such weight that, in our dealings with men, we are seldom satisfied by the fullest assurance given us of their zeal in religion till we hear something further of their character. If we are told that a man is religious, we still ask, “What are his morals?” But, if we hear at first that he has honest moral principles and is a man of natural justice and good temper, we seldom think of the other question, “Whether he be religious and devout?”

This has given occasion to inquire what honesty or virtue is considered by itself, and in what manner it is influenced by religion, how far religion necessarily implies virtue, and whether it is a true saying that ‘it is impossible for an atheist to be virtuous or share any real degree of honesty or merit’?...

Part II, Section 3

Thus the several motions, inclinations, passions, dispositions and consequent carriage and behavior of creatures in the various parts of life, being in several views or perspectives represented to the mind, which readily discerns the good and ill towards the species or public, there arises a new trial or exercise of the heart, which must either rightly and soundly affect what is just and right and disaffect what is contrary or corruptly affect what is ill and disaffect what is worthy and good....

So that if a creature be generous, kind, constant, compassionate, yet if he cannot reflect on what he himself does or sees others do so as to take notice of what is worthy or honest and make that notice or conception of worth and honesty to be an object of his affection, he has not the character of being virtuous. For, thus and no otherwise, he is capable of having a sense of right or wrong, a sentiment or judgment of what is done through just, equal and good affection or the contrary....

Part III, Section 1

It will not surely be understood that by this is meant the taking away the notion of what is good or ill in the species or society. For of the reality of such a good and ill, no rational creature can possibly be insensible. Everyone discerns and owns a public interest and is conscious of what affects his fellowship or community. When we say, therefore, of a creature that ‘he has wholly lost the sense of right and wrong’, we suppose that, being able to discern the good and ill of his species, he has at the same time no concern for either nor any sense of excellency or baseness in any moral action relating to one or the other. So that except merely with respect to a private and narrowly confined self-good, it is supposed there is in such a creature no liking or dislike of manners, no admiration or love of anything as morally good nor hatred of anything as morally ill, be it ever so unnatural or deformed.

There is in reality no rational creature whatsoever who knows not that, when he voluntarily offends or does harm to anyone, he cannot fail to create an apprehension and fear of like harm and consequently a resentment and animosity in every creature who observes him. So that the offender must needs be conscious of being liable to such treatment from everyone as if he had in some degree offended all.

Thus offence and injury are always known as punishable by everyone, and equal behavior (which is therefore called merit) as rewardable and well-deserving from everyone. Of this even the wickedest creature living must have a sense. So that, if there be any further meaning in this sense of right and wrong, if in reality there be any sense of this kind which an absolute wicked creature has not, it must consist in a real antipathy or aversion to injustice or wrong and in a real affection or love towards equity and right for its own sake and on the account of its own natural beauty and worth.

It is impossible to suppose a mere sensible creature originally so ill-constituted and unnatural as that, from the moment he comes to be tried by sensible objects, he should have no one good passion towards his kind, no foundation either of pity, love, kindness or social affection. It is full as impossible to conceive that a rational creature, coming first to be tried by rational objects and receiving into his mind the images or representations of justice, generosity, gratitude or other virtue, should have no....

2 Cf. Pierre Bayle, Miscellaneous Reflections on the Comet Which Appeared in December 1680.
liking of these or dislike of their contraries, but be
found absolutely indifferent towards whatsoever is
presented to him of this sort. A soul, indeed, may
as well be without sense as without admiration in
the things of which it has any knowledge. Coming
therefore to a capacity of seeing and admiring in
this new way, it must needs find a beauty and a
deformity as well in actions, minds and tempers as
in figures, sounds or colors. If there be no real ami-
bleness or deformity in moral acts, there is at least
an imaginary one of full force. Though perhaps the
thing itself should not be allowed in nature, the
imagination or fancy of it must be allowed to be
from nature alone. Nor can anything besides art and
strong endeavor, with long practice and meditation,
overcome such a natural prevention or prepossession
of the mind in favor of this moral distinction.

Book II, Part 1, Section 1

We have found that, to deserve the name of good
or virtuous, a creature must have all his inclinations
and affections, his dispositions of mind and temper,
suitable and agreeing with the good of his kind or
of that system in which he is included and of which
he constitutes a part. To stand thus well affected
and to have one’s affections right and entire not
only in respect of oneself but of society and the
public: this is rectitude, integrity or virtue. And to
be wanting in any of these, or to have their contra-
ries, is depravity, corruption and vice.

It has been already shown that, in the passions
and affections of particular creatures, there is a con-
stant relation to the interest of a species or common
nature. This has been demonstrated in the case of
natural affection, parental kindness, zeal for pos-
terity, concern for the propagation and nurture of
the young, love of fellowship and company, com-
passion, mutual succor and the rest of this kind. Nor
will anyone deny that this affection of a creature
towards the good of the species or common nature
is as proper and natural to him as it is to any organ,
part or member of an animal body, or mere vege-
table, to work in its known course and regular way
of growth....

Part III, Section 3

Now as to the belief of a deity and how men are
influenced by it, we may consider, in the first place,
on what account men yield obedience and act in
conformity to such a supreme being. It must be
either in the way of his power, as presupposing
some disadvantage or benefit to accrue from him,
or in the way of his excellency and worth, as
thinking it the perfection of nature to imitate and
resemble him.

If, as in the first case, there be a belief or con-
ception of a deity who is considered only as power-
ful over his creature and enforcing obedience to his
absolute will by particular rewards and punish-
ments and if on this account, through hope merely
of reward or fear of punishment, the creature be
incited to do the good he hates or restrained from
doing the ill to which he is not otherwise in the least
degree averse, there is in this case, as has been
already shown, no virtue or goodness whatsoever.
The creature, notwithstanding his good conduct, is
intrinsically of as little worth as if he acted in his
natural way, when under no dread or terror of any
sort. There is no more of rectitude, piety or sanctity
in a creature thus reformed than there is meekness
or gentleness in a tiger strongly chained or inno-
cence and sobriety in a monkey under the discipline
of the whip. For, however orderly and well those
animals, or man himself upon like terms, may be
induced to act, while the will is neither gained nor
the inclination wrought upon, but awe alone pre-
vails and forces obedience, the obedience is servile,
and all which is done through it merely servile....

As to the second case, if there be a belief or con-
ception of a deity who is considered as worthy and
good and admired and reverenced as such, being
understood to have, besides mere power and know-
ledge, the highest excellence of nature, such as
renders him justly amiable to all and if in the man-
ner this sovereign and mighty being is represented,
or as he is historically described, there appears in
him a high and eminent regard to what is good and
excellent, a concern for the good of all and an af-
fec tion of benevolence and love towards the whole,
such an example must undoubtedly serve, as above
explained, to raise and increase the affection
towards virtue and help to submit and subdue all
other affections to that alone.

Nor is this good effected by example merely. For
where the theistical belief is entire and perfect,
there must be a steady opinion of the superintend-
ency of a supreme being, a witness and spectator of
human life, and conscious of whatsoever is felt or
acted in the universe, so that in the most perfect
recess or deepest solitude there must be One still
presumed remaining with us, whose presence
singly must be of more moment than that of the
most august assembly on earth. In such a presence
it is evident that as the shame of guilty actions must be the greatest of any, so must the honor be of well-doing, even under the unjust censure of a world. And in this case it is very apparent how conducing a perfect theism must be to virtue and how great deficiency there is in atheism.

What the fear of future punishment and hope of future reward, added to this belief, may further contribute towards virtue, we come now to consider more particularly. So much in the meanwhile may be gathered from what has been said above, that neither this fear nor hope can possibly be of the kind called good affections, such as are acknowledged the springs and sources of all actions truly good. Nor can this fear or hope, as above intimated, consist in reality with virtue or goodness, if it either stands as essential to any moral performance or as a considerable motive to any act, of which some better affection ought alone to have been a sufficient cause.

It may be considered withal that, in this religious sort of discipline, the principle of self-love, which is naturally so prevailing in us, being no way moderated or restrained but rather improved and made stronger every day by the exercise of the passions in a subject of more extended self-interest, there may be reason to apprehend lest the temper of this kind should extend itself in general through all the parts of life. For, if the habit be such as to occasion in every particular a stricter attention to self-good and private interest, it must insensibly diminish the affections towards public good or the interest of society and introduce a certain narrowness of spirit, which, as some pretend, is peculiarly observable in the devout persons and zealots of almost every religious persuasion.

This too must be confessed: that, if it be true piety to love God for his own sake, the over-solicitous regard to private good expected from him must of necessity prove a diminution of piety. For while God is beloved only as the cause of private good, he is no otherwise beloved than as any other instrument or means of pleasure by any vicious creature. Now the more there is of this violent affection towards private good, the less room is there for the other sort towards goodness itself or any good and deserving object, worthy of love and admiration for its own sake, such as God is universally acknowledged, or at least by the generality of civilized or refined worshippers.

It is in this respect that the strong desire and love of life may also prove an obstacle to piety as well as to virtue and public love. For the stronger this affection is in anyone, the less will he be able to have true resignation or submission to the rule and order of the Deity. And if that which he calls resignation depends only on the expectation of infinite retribution or reward, he discovers no more worth or virtue here than in any other bargain of interest....

But, notwithstanding the injury which the principle of virtue may possibly suffer by the increase of the selfish passion in the way we have been mentioning, it is certain, on the other side, that the principle of fear of future punishment and hope of future reward, how mercenary or servile soever it may be accounted, is yet in many circumstances a great advantage, security and support to virtue....

Thus, a person loving life for life’s sake and virtue not at all may, by the promise or hope of life and fear of death or other evil, be induced to practice virtue and even endeavor to be truly virtuous by a love of what he practices. Yet neither is this very endeavor to be esteemed a virtue. For though he may intend to be virtuous, he has not become so for having only intended or aimed at it through love of the reward. But as soon as he has come to have any affection towards what is morally good and can like or affect such good for its own sake, as good and amiable in itself, then is he in some degree good and virtuous, and not till then....

Now as to atheism, though it be plainly deficient and without remedy in the case of ill judgment on the happiness of virtue, yet it is not, indeed, of necessity the cause of any such ill judgment. For without an absolute assent to any hypothesis of theism, the advantages of virtue may possibly be seen and owned and a high opinion of it established in the mind. However, it must be confessed that the natural tendency of atheism is very different.

It is in a manner impossible to have any great opinion of the happiness of virtue without conceiving high thoughts of the satisfaction resulting from the generous admiration and love of it, and nothing beside the experience of such a love is likely to make this satisfaction credited. The chief ground and support therefore of this opinion of ‘happiness in virtue’ must arise from the powerful feeling of this generous moral affection and the knowledge of its power and strength. But this is certain, that it can
be no great strengthening to the moral affection, no great support to the pure love of goodness and virtue, to suppose there is neither goodness nor beauty in the whole itself nor any example or precedent of good affection in any superior being. Such a belief must tend rather to the weaning the affections from anything amiable or self-worthy and to the suppressing the very habit and familiar custom of admiring natural beauties or whatever in the order of things is according to just design, harmony and proportion. For how little disposed must a person be to love or admire anything as orderly in the universe who thinks the universe itself a pattern of disorder? How unapt to reverence or respect any particular subordinate beauty of a part, when even the whole itself is thought to want perfection and to be only a vast and infinite deformity?...

There is no creature, according to what has been already proved, who must not of necessity be ill in some degree by having any affection or aversion in a stronger degree than is suitable to his own private good or that of the system to which he is joined. For in either case the affection is ill and vicious. Now if a rational creature has that degree of aversion which is requisite to arm him against any particular misfortune and alarm him against the approach of any calamity, this is regular and well. But if after the misfortune has happened, his aversion continues still, and his passion rather grows upon him while he rages at the accident and exclaims against his private fortune or lot, this will be acknowledged both vicious in present and for the future, as it affects the temper and disturbs that easy course of the affections on which virtue and goodness so much depend. On the other side, the patient enduring of the calamity and the bearing up of the mind under it must be acknowledged immediately virtuous and preservative of virtue. Now, according to the hypothesis of those who exclude a general mind, it must be confessed there can nothing happen in the course of things to deserve either our admiration and love or our anger and abhorrence. However, as there can be no satisfaction at the best in thinking upon what atoms and chance produce, so upon disastrous occasions and under the circumstances of a calamitous and hard fortune, it is scarce possible to prevent a natural kind of abhorrence and spleen, which will be entertained and kept alive by the imagination of so perverse an order of things. But in another hypothesis, that of perfect theism, it is understood that ‘whatever the order of the world produces is in the main both just and good’. Therefore, in the course of things in this world, whatever hardship of events may seem to force from any rational creature a hard censure of his private condition or lot, he may by reflection nevertheless come to have patience and to acquiesce in it. Nor is this all. He may go further still in this reconciliation and, from the same principle, may make the lot itself an object of his good affection, while he strives to maintain this generous fealty and stands so well disposed towards the laws and government of his higher country.

Such an affection must needs create the highest constancy in any state of sufferance, and make us in the best manner support whatever hardships are to be endured for virtue’s sake. And as this affection must of necessity cause a greater acquiescence and complacency with respect to ill accidents, ill men and injuries, so of course it cannot fail of producing still a greater equality, gentleness and benignity in the temper. Consequently, the affection must be a truly good one, and a creature the more truly good and virtuous by possessing it. For whatsoever is the occasion or means of more affectionately uniting a rational creature to his part in society and causes him to prosecute the public good or interest of his species with more zeal and affection than ordinary is undoubtedly the cause of more than ordinary virtue in such a person.

This too is certain, that the admiration and love of order, harmony and proportion, in whatever kind, is naturally improving to the temper, advantageous to social affection, and highly assistant to virtue, which is itself no other than the love of order and beauty in society. In the meanest subjects of the world, the appearance of order gains upon the mind and draws the affection towards it. But if the order of the world itself appears just and beautiful, the admiration and esteem of order must run higher and more powerfully. It is so well disposed towards the laws and government of his higher country.

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