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A REALISED DISPOSITION: SHAFTESBURY ON THE NATURAL AFFECTIONS AND TASTE

Karl Axelsson, Uppsala universitet

Introduction

Shaftesbury is generally acknowledged for his impact on British and German aesthetic theory,¹ and in modern criticism he is of particular significance for the so-called “reconstructive approach,” which treats his concept of taste as a foil for subsequent notions of disinterestedness, in fact as a blueprint for later aesthetic theory.² Over the last two decades, such teleological historiography has been subjected to criticism, its deficiency being, as Arthur Danto suggests, its predisposition to “connect the great aestheticians with one another in a long dialogue” which is shaped by the tacit “assumption ... that with the right definition, everyone would at last agree and the dialogue [would] come to an end.”³ As a result, a general proclivity towards a linear history of aesthetics is one of the defining features of the reconstructive approach. One principal strategy for the many critics of such teleology is to highlight discontinuities and expose instances where eighteenth-century aesthetic categories were of temporal


relevance only. The question of how we ought to explain the complex interrelations between an aesthetic concept such as taste and the dynamics of what Lawrence E. Klein has called the “culture of politeness,” without dissolving the former into the latter, should nowadays be a matter of urgency to every philosopher of art tackling the assumed British originators of aesthetic theory.

One of the central aspects of Shaftesbury’s philosophy is its claim that human beings share a natural disposition to experience beauty. Based on his disapproval of John Locke’s objection to innate principles, Shaftesbury wishes to avoid the term “innate” and use the term “instinct” instead— it is “that which Nature teaches” (Moralists 340 [411]). As such, however, our instinct towards beauty relies on a cognitive practice by which we must obtain specific self-knowledge in order to realise the disposition towards natural taste. Improved knowledge of self, authenticated by what Shaftesbury refers to as “natural affections,” allows for nature and beauty to become, so to speak, ‘realised’ nature and beauty. One reason for the unabated relevance of Shaftesbury as a paradigmatic philosopher of the Enlightenment is that he persistently relates this realisation to a civic-minded approach. Self-knowledge and taste are not merely of personal interest. The refinement of our natural instinct for beauty coincides, throughout history, with our emotional proclivity towards other human beings and a specific set of propitious social conditions. According to Shaftesbury, “Late ENGLAND, since the Revolution,” is “better still than Old ENGLAND, by many a degree” (Miscellaneous Reflections 184-86 [151]), which means that the Whig in him believed that post-revolutionary Britain maintained the relevant civil liberties and was also tolerant enough to meet the needs of the above-

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7 See Shaftesbury to James Stanhope, 7 November 1709: “As for Innate Principles, which You mention, ’tis in my Opinion one of the childeshest Disputes that ever was. Well it is for our friend M’ Lock and other modern Philosophers of his Size, that they have so poor a Specter as the Ghost of Aristotle to fight with.” Another terminological adjustment is made in a letter to Michael Ainsworth (3 June 1709). There, Shaftesbury speaks of “innate” as “a Word [Locke] poorly plays upon,” identifying as the “right word, tho less usd” the term “connatural” he found in Benjamin Whichcote’s sermons (Ainsworth Correspondence 403). For discussion, see Daniel Carey, “Locke, Shaftesbury, and Innateness,” Locke Studies, 4 (2004), 13-45.
mentioned disposition, circumstances allowing the nation to enter an era of common sensibility and decorous taste. Rather than reconstructing Shaftesbury’s unsystematic account of taste as a link in the teleological progress of modern aesthetic theory, or analysing the temporality of taste as an ideological apparatus of Whig politics, I wish to argue for a more moderate approach between these extremes.

**Natural Affections and Soliloquy**

Shaftesbury categorises, in Book II of the *Inquiry*, three kinds of affections: (1) Natural affections which bring about the good of the public; (2) self-affections which produce the good of the private; and (3) unnatural affections which promote neither public nor private good (*Inquiry* 156 [87]). While our natural affections and self-affections can be virtuous or vicious, depending on their degree, the unnatural affections are altogether vicious. Shaftesbury disapproves of the idea that the “Interest of Particulars [is] directly opposite to that of the Publick in general” (*Inquiry* 148 [80]). Our natural affections relate to our species as well as to our social well-being, and Shaftesbury argues, in his overall scheme of the “Oeconomy of a particular Creature, or Species” (*Inquiry* 164 [91]), for a balance between the natural and self-affections. While the self-affections remain a great concern for Shaftesbury, he nevertheless tends to focus on how these are properly assimilated into the natural affections, identifying the due management of the latter as a task of the utmost importance: to have the natural affections balanced and directed “towards the Good of the Publick, is to have the chief Means and Power of Self-Enjoyment” (*Inquiry* 174 [98]). Rather than depending on transient sensual enjoyments, true happiness ultimately rests on those mental pleasures which are “either actually the very natural Affections themselves in their immediate Operation: Or they wholly in a manner proceed from them, and are no other than their Effects” (*Inquiry* 186 [101]).

However, while goodness is accessible to sensible creatures in general, virtue is a quality that makes humans unique, and in order to become virtuous we have to prove our ability to assess the natural affections. We must utilise a second-order affection (called “Reflex Affection”), which means agents should not simply allow the “outward Beings which offer themselves to the Sense [to become] the Objects of the Affection.” Rather, we are asked to let the “very Actions themselves, and the Affections of Pity, Kindness, Gratitude, and their Contrarys, being brought into the Mind by Reflection, become Objects” (*Inquiry* 66 [28]). With the support of reason, any agent will be “forc’d to receive

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8 See Shaftesbury’s famous repudiation of all systematic philosophy in *Soliloquy* (210 [290]). Regarding Shaftesbury’s aesthetic theory as a political project, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 31-37.

9 See the remark about “Instinct as that which [leads Man] to the good of Society or his Fellows” from the letter to Stanhope, 7 November 1709.
Reflections back into [the] Mind of what passes in it-self, and in the Affections, or Will; in short, of whatsoever relates to [our] Character, Conduct, or Behaviour towards [our] Fellow-Creatures, and Society” (*Inquiry* 210 [118]). The human mind “can let nothing escape its Censure” (*Inquiry* 68 [29]) and it possesses, for Shaftesbury, the complex capacity to feel the qualities of the affections themselves.

The self-reflective affections are important in Shaftesbury’s scheme for allowing the affections to be properly balanced. Our psychic capacities stipulate a certain collaboration in order to attain harmony of the mind and to avoid being merely a submissive recipient of instant sensual pleasures. Reason and judgement are expected to regulate the senses as well as the disclosure of taste. Though one of the protagonists of *The Moralists*, Theocles, observes that “No sooner the Eye opens upon *Figures*, the Ear to *Sounds*, than straight the *Beautiful* results, and *Grace* and *Harmony* are known and acknowledg’d” (*Moralists* 344 [414]), Shaftesbury does not seem to look upon such unfiltered receptivity as completely self-sufficient. While brutes have “*SENSE* only,” the “*Beauty* and *Good* [MAN] enjoys, is in a nobler way, and by the help of what is noblest, his *MIND* and *REASON*” (*Moralists* 358 [424-25]). Our capacity to reflect on the information provided by our senses imparts a certain dignity, and this is because the objects we prefer are different in quality from objects that are merely pleasing to the senses:

> For as the *riotous MIND*, captive to *Sense*, can never enter in competition, or contend for Beauty with the *virtuous MIND* of Reason’s Culture; so neither can the *Objects* which allure the former, compare with those which attract and charm the latter. (*Moralists* 360 [425])

Supervising the Italian painter Paolo de Matteis during the creative process which led to the different versions of *The Judgment of Hercules*, Shaftesbury concludes that “’Tis evident … from Reason itself, as well as from History and Experience, that nothing is more fatal, either to Painting, Architecture, or the other Arts, than this *false Relish*.” The reason for this is simply that such taste or relish is “govern’d rather by what immediately strikes the Sense, than by what consequentially and by Reflection pleases the Mind, and satisfyes the Thought and Reason” (*Notion* 136 [390]).

Regarding Shaftesbury’s perception of judgement, his claim in *Soliloquy*, that “*One* who aspires to the Character of a Man of Breeding and Politeness, is careful to form his Judgment of Arts and Sciences upon right Models of *Perfection*,” seems to imply that we are to regard judgement and taste as identical properties. However, judgement is actually *prior* to taste, and it is expected to process the impressions received by the senses into the proper conclusions. Shaftesbury stresses that a gentleman and virtuoso must apply judgement firmly when he “enquires which are the truest Pieces of Architecture, the best Remains of Statues, the best Paintings of a *RAPHAEL*, or a *CARACHE*.” Judgement allows for the persistency necessary for the development of the natural disposition into proper taste. Only proper judgement will enable the
senses to turn away from “false Taste” (Soliloquy 270 [338]). Such rejection is required in order for the human mind to operate naturally. Reason and judgement are expected to function in careful conjunction with the harmony of mind and emotions and thus guide the senses, a ubiquitous and active presence within the realisation of the natural disposition. Ultimately, Shaftesbury’s remarks in Soliloquy fall back on the argument advanced in the Inquiry, where the stability of the natural affections refers to the stability of the entire “inward Constitution,” and his claim that if our natural affections are “remov’d or weaken’d, the inward Part must necessarily suffer and be impair’d” (Inquiry 234 [134]).

Regardless of the fact that the prospects of realising the natural disposition might differ from individual to individual – in the Inquiry, Shaftesbury compares “the more perfect with the imperfect Natures” (238 [136]) – our affections presuppose a certain cognitive order. It is, as Shaftesbury states, “our own Thought which must restrain our Thinking” (Miscellaneous Reflections 350 [299]). For instance, the corollary of an unrestrained reign of fancy is, according to Shaftesbury, ultimately a dangerous relativism of taste. We are not expected to ascribe the (moral) pleasures of the mind to shifting and conceited external matters, but rather to keep such pleasures safely within the mind itself by referring to the absolute standard of morals as well as taste. Virtue should be determined by what Shaftesbury refers to as “real Satisfaction,” and rather than depending on “outward Subjects,” such as wealth or fame, we should place worth “where it is truest, in the Affections or Sentiments, in the governing Part and inward Character” and accordingly “have then the full Enjoyment of it within our power” (Miscellaneous Reflections 240 [198]). In conjunction with the moral realism which is most thoroughly advanced in The Moralists, this is how Shaftesbury evolves an aesthetic realism originating from the perceived fact that “in the very nature of Things there must of necessity be the Foundation of a right and wrong TASTE” (Soliloquy 268 [336]). Given the danger that “if FANCY be left Judg of any thing, she must be Judg of all,” Shaftesbury thought that “some Controuler or Manager” (Soliloquy 252 [322]) is needed in order to allow access to this absolute standard of taste and to avoid relativism. The cognitive order of the mind requires that “FANCY and I are not all one” and that it is the very “Disagreement [that] makes me my own” (Soliloquy 256 [325]). Therefore, the general task of the “known Province of Philosophy” (Soliloquy 202 [283]) is to evolve the prospect of a symmetry of the affections, and to allow reason and judgement to guide fancy.11

Leaving aside aesthetics ‘proper’ for a while, it will be expedient at this point to remember that the relation between the natural affections and taste finds

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10 See also Glauser, “Aesthetic Experience in Shaftesbury,” p. 37.
11 For the intellectual history of the term “fancy” and its grounding in the thought of Epictetus, see Patrick Müller, “Shaftesbury on the Psychoanalyst’s Couch: A Historicist Perspective on Gender and (Homo)Sexuality in Characteristicks and the Earl’s Private Writings,” Swift Studies, 25 (2010), 56-81 (pp. 71-72 and 75).
an analogy in the Earl’s ethics, that is, in the relation between the natural affections and virtue.\textsuperscript{12} The “Nature of VIRTUE” consisting “in a certain just Disposition, or proportionable Affection of a rational Creature towards the Moral Objects of Right and Wrong” (Inquiry 86 [40]), our “SENSE of Right and Wrong” is just “as natural to us as natural Affection it-self” (Inquiry 92 [44]). This is why “Insensibility towards moral Good or Ill implies a total Defect in natural Affection” (Inquiry 222 [125]). Our ability to ‘feel’ affections – to turn them into “Reflex Affection” – is essentially the natural moral sense: “a Sentiment or Judgment of what is done thro just, equal, and good Affection, or the contrary” (Inquiry 70 [31]). The moral sense is naturally well balanced and contributes to the perfection and good of the whole. In considering balanced natural affections, Shaftesbury also refers to the “INTIRE AFFECTION or INTEGRITY of Mind.” To establish such integrity of mind is “to live according to Nature, and the Dictates and Rules of supreme Wisdom,” and the Earl emphasises that “This is Morality, Justice, Piety, and natural Religion” (Inquiry 202 [113-14]). The foundations of true Christianity lie in the “Divine Excellence in Things” (Moralists 150 [274]). What Shaftesbury wishes to draw attention to here is that “Providence must be prov’d from what we see of Order in things present” (Moralists 154 [277]). The theological position advocated by Shaftesbury is represented by the “perfect THEIST,” who trusts “that every thing is govern’d, order’d, or regulated for the best, by a designing Principle, or Mind, necessarily good and permanent” (Inquiry 36 [11]).

Famously refuting Thomas Hobbes’s notion of psychological egoism and the Calvinist stance on total depravity where sin is ineluctable,\textsuperscript{13} Shaftesbury seeks to demonstrate that virtue must be disinterested and that, by “endeavour[ing] ‘That the Excellence of the Object, not the Reward or Punishment, shou’d be our Motive’” (Moralists 148 [273]), we are enabled to actualise our natural moral sense, and to apprehend that we are part of the cosmological harmony and the absolute, “Supreme and Sovereign BEAUTY” (Moralists 176 [294]). Shaftesbury had already criticized Hobbes in his first published work, the preface to the Select Sermons (1698) of the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote, and it is indeed telling that what he advances there is an argument about the emotions that is to be repeated throughout his


later philosophical writings, namely that the reality of the natural affections constitutes a rational argument against any view of human nature as self-centred. By means of our perfectly balanced social affections, we adopt a crucial role in a rational universe designed by the supreme artist, God, and we need to pursue our mind’s natural link to the Absolute Mind in order to be virtuous. The nucleus of Shaftesbury’s position is thus his emphasis on our natural affections and our capacity to act in a naturally virtuous way. Such a poised mind is intimately related to a ‘negative capability’: a well-bred mind which has been trained to exert its natural abilities will, or so Shaftesbury suggests, be truly “incapable of doing a rude or brutal Action” (Sensus Communis 104 [129]). To this we might add that such a mind is patently unable to develop a vulgar taste. If our ability to be virtuous requires the stability of the affections, so does our ability to realise the natural disposition of perceiving beauty. The natural affections are, then, ultimately the source of virtue as well as of taste: “BEAUTY … and GOOD” are “one and the same” (Moralists 324 [399]).

Furthermore, the quality of the affections is closely related to Shaftesbury’s perception of self-knowledge: “the Study of Human Affection cannot fail of leading me towards the Knowldg of Human Nature, and of MYSELF” (Soliloquy 218 [297]). We must endeavour to become “comprehensible to our-selves” (Soliloquy 202 [283]). Shaftesbury suggests a specific method for achieving such knowledge: that of soliloquy, the “self-discoursing Practice” (Soliloquy 54 [164]) as the means to produce a free agent: “a MIND, by knowing it-self, and its own proper Powers and Virtues, becomes free, and independent” (Miscellaneous Reflections 246 [205]). A caution any reader has to keep in mind when the Earl remarks that he seeks to “correct Manners and regulate Lives” (Miscellaneous Reflections 224 [187]) is that Shaftesbury wrote for a limited, identifiable audience, that is, for a gentlemanly readership. Such correction hinges on the fact that, although our natural disposition is a natural instinct, taste itself is, as we have observed, certainly not congenital. The possession of taste is the result of a challenging endeavour: “the individual must learn to develop his inclinations against the persistent resistance of such seductive powers as habit and fashion.”

Writing about Hobbes’s impact on ethics and religion, Shaftesbury remarks: “This is He who reckoning up the Passions, or Affections, by which Men are held together in Society, live in Peace, or have any Correspondence one with another, forgot to mention Kindness, Friendship, Sociableness, Love of Company and Converse, Natural Affection, or any thing of this kind” (Preface 50).


soliloquy is expected to result in a true comprehension of the self and its emotions: “Knowledge commences according to Shaftesbury with self-knowledge, which at the same time constitutes the only reliable knowledge.”\textsuperscript{17} By means of soliloquy, we are made able to “add the Wisdom of the Heart to the Task and Exercise of the Brain,” and by “settling Matters, in the first place, with [ourselves],” we can also use the resultant skills to the advantage of our species and of society, namely by “commanding [the] Audience, and establishing a good Taste” (Soliloquy 192-94 [277]).

However, such a didactic process is not necessarily or even straightforwardly concerned with shaping mentors who, in turn, are meant to teach citizens how to curb the emotions and acquire a good taste. We cannot be taught self-knowledge by a set of facts. Rather, “to bestow Wisdom, is to gain a Mastery which can’t so easily be allow’d us” (Soliloquy 42 [154]), that is, we can only master the mental habit requisite to the development of “two distinct Persons [pupil and preceptor]” (Soliloquy 46 [158]) by the “Regimen of Self-Practice” (Soliloquy 56 [167]) Shaftesbury subjected himself to in Askêmata. We must recognise that there is a “certain Knack or Legerdemain in Argument, by which we may safely proceed to the dangerous part of advising” (Soliloquy 42 [155]). Although philosophy, according to Shaftesbury, is the Vitae Dux, Virtutis Indagatrix,\textsuperscript{18} this legerdemain is not acquired as a set of moral and aesthetic values, but rather through the means of having the natural disposition awakened to their natural purpose (Soliloquy 220 [299]). Scholarly knowledge is therefore not the key to perfecting our natural disposition into taste.\textsuperscript{19} Soliloquy relates rather to the exclusive position of a poised mind and balanced natural affections, a circumstance which is, as we shall see, also valid when we turn to beauty and the artworks themselves.

### Beauty and Mind

As Philocles, the narrator of the \textit{Moralists}, is made aware of his conformity with the “unthinking World” and begins to meditate on his profound neglect of “Beauty it-self,” he finds himself engaged in an analysis of three hierarchically

\textsuperscript{17} My translation of Schmidt-Haberkamp, \textit{Die Kunst der Kritik}, p. 15: “Erkenntnis beginnt bei Shaftesbury mit Selbsterkenntnis, die zugleich das einzig zuverlässige Wissen darstellt.”


\textsuperscript{19} In fact, Shaftesbury voices great objections to such knowledge (see \textit{Sensus Communis} 38 [76]).
arranged degrees of beauty (Moralists 328 [402]). The lowest degree is “the Dead Forms,” matter and bodies, that is, which “have no forming Power, no Action, or Intelligence” (Moralists 334 [406]). Such dead forms possess no “Principle of Beauty” and require art in order to become beautiful: “the Art is that which beautifies” and “that which is beautify’d, is beautiful only by the accession of something beautifying” (Moralists 330 [404]). As with our natural disposition to experience beauty, dead forms hold a promise of completion, though as such they depend on art in order to become artworks. There are indeed some inconsistencies in Shaftesbury’s account of beauty, inconsistencies which he has no apparent intention of solving. However, what is pertinent to my argument is not whether Shaftesbury’s account contains logical loopholes, or whether it requires a reconstruction in order for us to make sense of his notion of art. 20 My focus is on the exclusive status he repeatedly ascribes to mind: although dead forms possess the capacity to be beautiful, they nevertheless require art in order to be artworks, and that is why art, ultimately, must rely on the intelligence of the human mind in order to see its own completion. Shaftesbury’s analysis of beauty reveals “that moral beauty is both a product of and perceived by the human mind” and “that it has a greater value and reality than any other kinds of beauty that humans enjoy, material, artistic, or speculative, and that it is a reflection of the beauty of the universal mind.” 21

The second degree of beauty consists of human beings – “the Forms which form” – which, by precisely the capacity of mind, furnish matter and bodies with the harmony of nature (Moralists 334 [406]). This degree involves, then, a “double Beauty,” since “here is both the Form (the Effect of Mind) and Mind it-self” (Moralists 334 [406]). As such, it is interrelated with the third order of beauty, “which forms not only such as we call mere Forms, but even the Forms which form” (Moralists 336 [408]). This is a superior degree of beauty, and might be characterised as ‘Absolute Beauty’. 22 The superiority of the third degree of beauty originates from the fact that “that which fashions even Minds themselves, contains in it-self all the Beautys fashion’d by those Minds; and is consequently the Principle, Source, and Fountain of all Beauty” (Moralists 336 [408]).

20 For instance, one might wonder how dead forms, which, needless to say, are part of God’s creation, can fail to be beautiful. Because Shaftesbury, although he separates art from dead forms, it being a principle of beauty, does not grant it the status of possessing mind and emotions, his scheme of beauty might appear ungainly. It does not make much sense to claim that art is an active principle of beauty, but one containing no intelligence. We could indeed argue that art holds a “status intermediate between beautified dead forms and the forming forms which are finite minds” (Glauser, “Aesthetic Experience in Shaftesbury,” p. 30).

21 Rivers, Reasont Grace, and Sentiment, p. 150.

The classification of beauty offers a clue to Shaftesbury’s sporadic lack of interest, at least throughout *Characteristicks*, in the particulars of artworks as such. Artworks are subordinated to mind: dead forms lack intelligence and affections, and when dead forms become works of art, they rely on the forming power of the human mind. However, this does not make artworks insignificant. Indeed, they relate to the universal mind of ‘Absolute Beauty’. But they do so because the human mind has entered into such a relationship. Accordingly, Shaftesbury’s notion of taste does not primarily refer to artworks, but to mind and the affections that it comprises. We can, according to the Earl, indeed “admire the *outward* Beautys” but, it seems, not without “recur[ring] instantly to the *inward*, which are the most real and essential, the most naturally affecting, and of the highest Pleasure, as well as Profit and Advantage” (*Miscellaneous Reflections* 224 [185]).

Given that Shaftesbury believes that the “most natural Beauty in the World is *Honesty, and Moral Truth*” (*Sensus Communis* 120 [142]), the essential value of creating and experiencing artworks lies in the opportunity to disclose the moral beauty of the natural affections. Hence the observation made by Theocles: “What is it you admire but *MIND*, or the Effect of *Mind? ’Tis Mind* alone which forms. All that is void of *Mind* is horrid: and *Matter* formless is *Deformity it-self*” (*Moralists* 332 [405]).

The development of the natural disposition into taste is naturally attuned to the harmony emanating from ‘Absolute Beauty’. Holding balanced affections, our minds are coherent with the beauty of a rational and stable universe. Shaftesbury adds some strong remarks here regarding our responsibility to develop the disposition into taste ‘proper’: “In so short a compass does that Learning and Knowledg lie, on which *Manners* and *Life* depend. ’Tis *We our-selves* that make our *TASTE*. If we resolve to have it *just*; ’tis in our power” (*Miscellaneous Reflections* 224 [186]). However, Shaftesbury does not perceive the harmony of the affections, and the development of the disposition into natural taste, as a matter of an individual’s private aesthetic education. Our natural affections are social affections by nature, and self-comprehension and true self-interest coincide with the benefit of the whole. Our minds require withdrawal, such as the practice of soliloquy, from quotidian matters, in order to interact properly with and reflect ‘Absolute Beauty’, and partake naturally in society: “Society it-self cannot be rightly enjoy’d without some Abstinence and separate Thought” (*Moralists* 80 [224]). Reaching a state of true self-knowledge and balanced natural affections prepares us for becoming effective members of polite society, and thus “the Sum of Philosophy is, To learn what is *just* in Society, and *beautiful* in Nature, and the Order of the World” (*Miscellaneous Reflections* 196 [161]).

The process by which we arrive at true self-knowledge culminates in “Affections *right* and *intire,”* and, as Shaftesbury suggests, “not only in respect of one’s self, but of Society and the Publick” (*Inquiry* 144 [77]) too. To pursue

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23 See also Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, p. 150.
an interest such as personal happiness, which is naturally good, is by necessity to pursue the interest and good of the harmonious whole (see Inquiry 314 [175]). Man’s “natural end is Society” and “to operate as is by Nature appointed him towards the Good of such his Society, or Whole, is in reality to pursue his own natural and proper GOOD” (Miscellaneous Reflections 268 [223]). The accomplished mind and the natural affections are “essential to the Health, Wholeness, or Integrity of the Creature,” contributing as they do “to the Welfare and Prosperity of that Whole or Species, to which he is by nature join’d” (Miscellaneous Reflections 268 [222]). Characteristically, a “real Honest Man, however plain or simple he appears, has that highest Species, Honesty it-self, in view,” and such a man naturally rejects “outward Forms or Symmetrys,” being instead “struck with that of inward Character, the Harmony and Numbers of the Heart, and Beauty of the Affections, which form the Manners and Conduct of a truly social Life” (Miscellaneous Reflections 60 [34]).

As we have observed, artworks are indeed the harmonious reflections of ‘Absolute Beauty’, but as such they are mediated by the natural affections of the human mind which are related to that source and epitome of beauty. Our mind and our affections allow us to interact with a universal mind. We should recall that Deity is, for Shaftesbury, immanent in nature (see Moralists 178 [295]), and the perfection of the emotions and dispositions is therefore determined by our participation in this divine nature. Our emotional participation in society is just as crucial, and “out of Society and Community [we] never did, or ever can subsist” (Moralists 210 [319]). A harmonious society is the natural state of the affections; it is here that natural taste is properly realised.

**Taste for Society**

A state in which our natural dispositions come to fruition is part of Shaftesbury’s view of a future Britain. At the same time, the failure to accomplish true self-knowledge, disregard for the natural affections, and, as a consequence, the lack of taste, is immediately related to the threat of dilapidated social conditions. According to John Brewer, the “Restoration court suffered from two overwhelming difficulties – public penury and private misconduct.” The “parlous state of royal finances” destabilised early eighteenth-century court culture, which would gradually become “only one of many sources of patronage.” In a similar vein, “church culture fell foul of religion” and by the early eighteenth century it was apparent that “royal and court power was extraordinarily attenuated” and that the English church “lacked the institutional presence enjoyed by Catholicism through much of Europe and by Lutheranism
in Sweden and Prussia.” Shaftesbury’s perspective on Britain and liberty after the revolution – the nation being on the verge of becoming “the Head and Chief of the European League” (Soliloquy 130 [222]) – revolves around this courtly and ecclesiastical void, and he exploits it in order to accentuate his view of taste. Although he prefers the “Days of Attick Elegance” (Soliloquy 144 [233]), and even if he is not yet content with British poetry and culture (see Soliloquy 122-24 [217]), it is vital to observe that Shaftesbury recognises that the instinctive disposition to taste is via the natural affections deeply entwined with the new domestic liberty emerging from the equilibrium between civil liberty, court, and church. Taste is thus not only dependent on our natural design to realise this disposition, but also on the interaction between our natural affections and a set of specific socio-cultural conditions.

Perfectly in tune with his view of the natural affections, Shaftesbury highlights that “A Publick Spirit can come only from a social Feeling or Sense of Partnership with Human Kind” (Sensus Communis 72 [106]). Our balanced natural affections allow us to participate in the community in a way which produces a thriving public domain, and Shaftesbury accordingly concludes, alluding to absolute monarchs and, one might add, by implication to the Stuart Pretender, that “Morality and good Government go together” and that “There is no real Love of Virtue, without the Knowledg of Public Good. And where Absolute Power is, there is no Publick” (Sensus Communis 72 [106-7]). Shaftesbury clearly considers British culture to be hampered by the threat of French universal monarchy (see Soliloquy 122 [216]); however, the prospect, and indeed the current state of affairs, is faced with surprising confidence. The Glorious Revolution, and the political removal of the threat of Catholicism epitomised by James II, begot a new sense of civil liberty. “Britons” ultimately had, according to Shaftesbury, a “Notion of a Publick, and a Constitution; how a Legislative, and how an Executive is model’d” (Sensus Communis 74 [108]). Britain was “now in an Age when Liberty is once again in its


25 On the ambivalence in Shaftesbury’s perception of British poets, see Soliloquy (122/124 [217]). While he accuses John Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, and Milton of continuing to use a style which has the Muses speak in “wretched Pun and Quibble,” and even blames a “latter Race” of poets for seeking a “false Sublime, with crowded Simile, and mix’d Metaphor” and thus gratifying the “unpractis’d Ear; which has not as yet had leisure to form it-self, and become truly musical,” Shaftesbury nevertheless claims that Fletcher, Jonson, Shakespeare, and Milton are part of general social progress, and that they have provided Britain with the “richest Oar.” Due to them, it is essentially less trying for forthcoming British poets to “find out the true Rhythmus, and harmonious Numbers, which alone can satisfy a just Judgment, and Muse-like Apprehension.”

26 In a letter to his friend Teresias, Shaftesbury takes pleasure in how “we are happily contrould by the Nature of our mix’d Government” (29 November 1706).
Ascendant” (*Soliloquy* 130 [222]). The position of rational criticism is deeply entrenched in the historical emergence of such domestic liberty, and as Shaftesbury states in *Letter concerning Enthusiasm*, “Never was there in our Nation a time known, when Folly and Extravagance of every kind were more sharply inspected, or more wittily ridicul’d” (*Letter concerning Enthusiasm* 316 [9]). This auspicious state of criticism is compulsory for a general prospering of taste, since a “legitimate and just TASTE can neither be begotten, made, conceiv’d or produc’d, without the antecedent Labour and Pains of CRITICISM” (*Miscellaneous Reflections* 202 [164-65]). It is by rational criticism that our self-knowledge evolves emotionally as well as socially: criticism allows for the natural social affections and dispositions to be completed.

According to Shaftesbury, the very idea of a regime or a constitution appears to exert an almost intuitive pull on our emotions: even in “Eastern Countrys, and many barbarous Nations,” the people’s love for their prince reveals “how natural an Affection there is towards Government and Order among Mankind.” While this “publick Principle” (*Sensus Communis* 74 [107-8]) may even attract us to despotic social communities and authorities, such a tendency remains, of course, a threat to our emotions as well as to polite society. Although Shaftesbury’s moral realism allows him to define ‘the good’ as an objective property, no matter the nature of the authorities or the public, the communal spirit nevertheless requires persistent care: “by a small mis-guidance of the Affection, a Lover of Mankind becomes a Ravager: A Hero and Deliverer becomes an Oppressor and Destroyer” (*Sensus Communis* 82 [113]). Since the “very Spirit of Faction, for the greatest part, seems to be no other than the Abuse or Irregularity of that social Love, and common Affection, which is natural to Mankind” (*Sensus Communis* 84 [114]), the necessary precautions against such misguidance of the emotions is found in a profound social harmony which reverberates with the beauty of the Deity.

It is such auspicious civic concord and social unity that Shaftesbury believes could be developed in Britain; a nation that is “exert[ing] her-self so resolutely in behalf of the common Cause, and that of her own Liberty, and happy Constitution” (*Letter concerning Design* 44 [398-99]). Accordingly, Shaftesbury also recognises that the Restoration period, “The long Reign of

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27 In his private writings, where there was less need for a programmatic political agenda, Shaftesbury was more cautious (see his letter to Teresias, 29 November 1706).
28 See also *Letter concerning Design* (44 [398]). Here, in a letter addressed to Lord Somers, Shaftesbury perceives, in a “kind of Spirit of Prophecy,” a “rising Genius of our Nation; That if we live to see a Peace any way answerable to that generous Spirit with which this Warr was begun, and carry’d on, for our own Liberty and that of EUROPE; the Figure which we are like to make abroad, and the Increase of Knowledge, Industry and Sense at home, will make united BRITAIN the principal Seat of Arts.”
29 For the significance of the concept in Shaftesbury, see Schmidt-Haberkamp, *Die Kunst der Kritik*.
Luxury and Pleasure under King Charles the second” (Letter concerning Design 44 [399]), ultimately impeded the realisation of the natural disposition into proper taste: “tis not the Nature of a Court (such as Courts generally are) to improve, but rather corrupt a Taste” (Letter concerning Design 50 [405]). However, when in post-1688 Britain the “Spirit of the Nation was grown more free,” the public also “rais’d [itself] an Ear, and Judgment not inferiour to the best now in the World” (Letter concerning Design 44 [399]). It is the very interaction between the “national Constitution, and legal Monarchy” of Britain, its “free Spirit,” and a refined judgment, that assures that “a right Taste prevails” (Letter concerning Design 50 [404]).

In fact, balanced natural affections and an accomplished natural disposition are expected to coincide with the natural harmony of society:

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 it-self no other than the Love of Order and Beauty in Society. (Inquiry 140 [75])

Affections and social conditions are ultimately indissoluble. The disposition to taste is a natural instinct, and while certain public principles occasionally allow our affections to be attracted to immoral social communities, Shaftesbury is not concerned with exceptional cases, at least not acutely so. Rather, he is often preoccupied with the national facets of taste, referring occasionally to the naturalness of “national taste” (Letter concerning Design 46 [402]), which he then associates with social harmony, setting it in opposition to the chaos associated with ‘Gothicism’.31

If self-knowledge and the ‘purged’ self are really indicative of perfectly balanced natural affections, the “Corruption of TASTE” (Miscellaneous Reflections 212 [172]) occurs when individuals fail to recall their true self, “chang[ing] their honest Measures, and sacrific[ing] their Cause and Friends to an imaginary private Interest” (Miscellaneous Reflections 208 [169-70]). When Shaftesbury mentions “a noted PATRIOT, and reputed Pillar of the religious Part of our Constitution” (that is, a Tory), and a “noted Friend to LIBERTY in Church and State” (that is, a Whig), in this context, he certainly thinks that the former runs the greater risk of falling into this trap. Shaftesbury’s illustration of the relevance of taste is not randomly picked. The liberties that had recently been gained were still hanging by a thread. An individual incapable of acquiring self-knowledge and of balancing the natural affections was simply unable to develop its natural dispositions into taste. While the “natural Affection of all Mankind towards moral Beauty and Perfection” postulates that we “have something estimable and worthy in respect of others of [our] Kind; and that [our] genuine, true, and natural SELF, is, as it ought to be, of real value in Society” (Soliloquy

31 An umbrella term which, in Shaftesbury, covers all sorts of ‘evils’ such as social discord, Hobbes’s perception of human nature, or the papacy; see, for example, Sensus Communis (54 [88-89]) and Soliloquy (128 [221-22]). See also Richard Woodfield, “The Freedom of Shaftesbury’s Classicism,” British Journal of Aesthetics, 15 (1975), 254-66.
198 [280]), this appears to be precisely what the champions of excessive self-interest have misplaced. These are no longer attracted by the real satisfaction arising from the harmony of mind and natural affections, which we recognised earlier as crucial to being virtuous, relying on precisely such “outward Subjects” (Miscellaneous Reflections 240 [198]) that ought to be rejected instead. In this way, the balance of the natural affections is also neglected. Echoing Theocles’ vision of pursuing real beauty, where the benefits of self-knowledge – “To know Ourselves, and what That is” – are naturally the same as “to advance our Worth, and real Self-Interest” (Moralists 362 [427]), such interest (which is compatible with the social nature of man) appears now to have been replaced by an inordinate private interest. The “interestedness” of self-affections is, if we apply Shaftesbury’s line of reasoning from the Inquiry (see 242-44 [139-40]), simply too intense, while natural affections are reduced, and accordingly the champions of excessive self-interest fail to display natural taste.32

Shaftesbury’s perception of taste brings into focus a question occasionally (and unsatisfactorily) dealt with in aesthetic research. If the harmony of the affections and the very realisation of the disposition for natural taste are persistently claimed by Shaftesbury himself to disclose a social quality, what is the real significance of this “social quality” for the aesthetcian? By focusing on similarities and differences with subsequent perceptions of taste, rather than analysing its time-bound properties, we run the risk of diminishing the relevance of this important question. While R. L. Brett argues that Shaftesbury advances the idea of a “special sense which can be identified with taste” (that is, a faculty of aesthetic judgement),33 Peter Kivy has opposed such a claim, pointing out that Shaftesbury “nowhere refers to taste in art as a ‘sense’ or ‘faculty’” and underlining that we are far afield from a “full-fledged aesthetic faculty.”34 Even though Kivy is right in reminding us that Shaftesbury did not regard taste as a special sense, these two opposing positions are still representative of how aesthetic research has at times gone astray in addressing the eighteenth-century debate on taste. The reason for such disorientation is that Shaftesbury’s position in the history of aesthetics is frequently taken to be relative to arguments about the putative autonomy of this faculty of aesthetic judgement. Indeed, such a position can be valuable, since it might disclose the eighteenth-century transformation from aesthetic instrumentalism to aesthetic autonomy. However, such an analysis, one concerned with the idea that taste is an autonomous faculty of aesthetic judgement which may or may not be consistent with subsequent notions, is liable to dispense with the specific temporal implications of the concept. Characteristically, then, Kivy is rather quiet about what Shaftesbury in

32 Shaftesbury refers there to “Home-Affections, which relate to the private Interest or separate Oeconomy of the Creature.” Such affections “relate to the private System, and constitute whatever we call Interestedneß or Self-Love.”
33 Brett, The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, p. 151.
fact suggested with his concept of taste. If we are to follow the narrative provided by Kivy, Shaftesbury is a “transitional figure in the history of aesthetics,” on the one hand observing the “Enlightenment quest for a subjective critical standard” of taste, and, on the other, submitting to the “Renaissance tradition of objectivity and reason in art.”\textsuperscript{35} While such observations might enhance our knowledge of how Shaftesbury relates to the past as well as to the future, we remain in the dark as to the significance of the Earl’s theory of taste in the context of the time in which he lived and wrote.

The underlying causes for ignoring these topical bearings of Shaftesbury’s notion of taste are plain to see. He does not exclusively treat of taste with regard to works of art; rather, he ascribes to taste and to the affections social, moral, and political values. This means that we are asked to adjust our conception as to what the study of aesthetics as an academic discipline should in fact encompass. The diachronic approach may be more convenient for a great number of scholars; however, if we really intend to fathom what Shaftesbury is envisioning when he talks about taste, we need to extend the scope to the synchronic context, which is indeed part and parcel of his notion of taste. The instinctive bias towards beauty may be common to all individuals, but it does not produce a shared judgement because taste as such is not congenital. Shaftesbury relates the realisation of the disposition to certain emotions and self-knowledge, and consequently to the systematic refinement of the instinct. Given that such refinement is subjected to specific social conditions, we are left with the following question: which conditions are prerequisite to instinctively appreciating beauty? And is this still an appropriate subject matter for aesthetic research, or is this the point at which sociologists should take over?

Characteristically, philosophers of art occasionally waver when approaching this crossroads. Kivy recognizes that taste must be produced, and that the question which aesthetic standards should inform our judgements must lead to a predictable answer: “reason is the judge, harmony the law.”\textsuperscript{36} Yet, because the massive philosophical project that unfolds when the natural disposition to experience beauty is related to the political contexts of early eighteenth-century Britain, it turns out that such an explanation is really begging the question. Glauser navigates into a similar impasse: he correctly maintains that “it is wrong to claim, as is often done, that aesthetic experience is always an immediate response in Shaftesbury,” arguing instead that “the whole approach to beauty leans on the hopeful promise of important progress in scientific, psychological and moral knowledge.”\textsuperscript{37} Naturally, such an observation is likely to challenge the aesthetic bias many scholars deem to be essential in validating the scientific relevance of their discipline. However, I am convinced that as philosophers of art we are expected to pursue all the different ramifications of

\textsuperscript{35} Kivy, \textit{The Seventh Sense}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{36} Kivy, \textit{The Seventh Sense}, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{37} Glauser, “Aesthetic Experience in Shaftesbury,” pp. 45, 35.
Shaftesbury’s theory, even when he relates taste to what is nowadays regarded as non-aesthetic ‘stuff’. If we are really determined to comprehend Shaftesbury’s perception of taste, rather than what today’s scholars (or Kant in the late eighteenth century) claim to be the relevant qualities of taste, the nexus between affections, taste, and social conditions remains an inescapable issue. Shaftesbury addresses taste as a distinct element of our natural emotions, which are furthermore intuitively attracted to society. The “main Springs” of the world’s “Clock-work” are “either [the] very natural Affections themselves, or a compound kind deriv’d from them” (Sensus Communis 84-86 [115-16]).

Does this imply that taste might be reduced to a reflex determined by social conditions? Is it possible to realise the natural disposition to apprehend beauty in a repressive society? Any categorical answers to such questions are likely to misinterpret the notion of taste. Though she is primarily concerned with Second Characters, Isabella Woldt captures the very essence of Shaftesbury’s line of reasoning: “The inclination to shape a civil government as a foundation for a free society is based on a natural feeling, and if a desire or feeling is natural, then a sense of community is too.”38 Shaftesbury wishes to elucidate a complex cyclical course of civilisation: both the realisation of natural dispositions and the status of our emotions are relative to the harmony within polite society. While the circumstances during the Restoration era were inconsistent with civil liberty, rational criticism, balanced affections, and ultimately taste itself, this begins to change in post-revolutionary Britain. Shaftesbury draws an analogy to Athenian society in which the enhancement of a polite taste was also a “real Reform of Taste and Humour in the Commonwealth or Government it-self,” going hand in glove with “an Increase of Liberty” (Soliloquy 162 [250]). Shaftesbury thus claims that taste ‘proper’ is inseparable from the harmonious order of polite societies. The natural affections can only flourish under the propitious, liberal social conditions outlined by Shaftesbury, and these are the proper circumstances the natural disposition requires in order to be transformed into an enduring, decorous taste.