

THE BOLDEST OF THE ENGLISH PHILOSOPHERS.

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“ONE of the boldest of the English philosophers”¹ is Voltaire’s description of that interesting figure, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, though it is probable that by boldness Voltaire meant not so much speculative originality as audacity in criticism of the Old and New Testaments, and that the touch *un peu gaillard* that the Electress of Hanover reprehended in the *Letter on Enthusiasm* was especially sympathetic to him.²

But Lord Shaftesbury was by no means only *un peu gaillard* in these matters, but one of the group of “moralists,” a man drunk with the idea of virtue. A great deal of the high feeling of his philosophy is due to his temperament, for his character led him to dislike the interested motives held out by Locke and popular opinion as a spur to the pursuit of virtue. He vindicates the “naturalness” of benevolent or altruistic conduct because such conduct was without doubt natural to him.

His life has therefore the interest of a commentary on his works. He was born February 26, 1671, at Exeter House in London, where his grandfather, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, the brilliant cabal minister of Charles the Second’s reign, lived. His father, who seems to have been delicate in health and unremarkable except for a handsome person, was married at the age of seventeen, his wife being chosen for him by Locke, the friend of the first Earl. The latter undertook to oversee his grandson’s education, and in order to give him the “quickest despatch” with the classics, placed with him Elizabeth Birch, a schoolmaster’s daughter, who could

¹This phrase is generally quoted as “the boldest of the English philosophers,” but Voltaire actually says, “l’un des plus hardis philosophes d’Angleterre,” *Œuvres*, Vol., XLIII, p. 235.

²*Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Life, Letters and Philosophical Regimen*, ed., Benjamin Rand, London, 1900, p. 256.

speaking Greek and Latin fluently. At the age of eleven the boy went to school, at first to a private school, then to Winchester, where he was "treated very indifferently" owing to the memory of his grandfather's opposition to King Charles and his less popular brother. The boy persuaded his father to let him travel, and from 1686 onward he spent a considerable time in an extended grand tour in Italy, Austria, Hungary and France, where he picked up the virtuosity or knowledge of what were called the polite arts, which was to stand him in good stead in the last years of his life at Naples. As a boy of eighteen he already writes like a convinced Whig of the Revolution, congratulating England on its escape from the "horriddest of all religions" and the Catholic James II; and he attributes the misery of Prague to the number of Jesuits there. "In Prague they reckon about 2000. I leave your lordship to reflect on the condition of this poor place under the swarm of such vermin, by the trial we have had lately of a few of these only amongst us."³

In 1689 he returned to England, and to a further five years of study. His seclusion was broken by his election as member for Poole, but the fatigue and overwork of the long sittings of the House of Commons and committees so impaired his health that he was forced to give up public life after 1698. It is characteristic of him that he promptly went for a year's retreat to Holland, where he lived as a student of physics, concealing his title of Lord Ashley during his father's lifetime. He had evidently less root in his country and class than his contemporaries. His prolonged tour isolated him, and he seems to have had few friends of his own class. He rated his own rank and riches lower than one would expect of a Whig nobleman. At a later period, alarmed at his expenses at his Dorset house of St. Giles's, he warns his steward, John Wheelock, that if economy is not established, "the consequences will be great indeed, when I tell you that I shall at last give over family and house and all, and determine never more to see St. Giles's nor keep up the house, but let it sink, discharge all my servants, let it to farm and so farewell. This is very serious and true. I would not have you think I am trifling; it is now past that time of my life. I do not reckon upon many years of life, but those remaining I will not pass in making myself a slave to a great house and family."

During his year in Holland he lodged with the rich Quaker merchant and book collector, Benjamin Furley, (where Locke had

³ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

lived for more than a year before the revolution of 1688), and lived in the society of men of letters and learning such as Le Clerc, the editor of the *Bibliothèque universelle*, and Pierre Bayle, afterwards the author of the *Dictionnaire universelle*. An imperfect edition of his *Inquiry after Virtue* was, during his stay, surreptitiously printed by Toland from a rough draft sketched when he was only twenty years of age. He at once bought up the edition before many copies were sold, and no copy has been found. This accident set him to work to correct and publish the *Inquiry* himself.

Soon after he returned to England he became Lord Shaftesbury on his father's death. In spite of his weak health he attended the House of Lords regularly from February 1701 until William the Third's death, but on the accession of Anne and in the changed political atmosphere of this reign, he "returned again to his retired way of living," and to Holland for a second stay from August 1703 to the same month of 1704. In London the "great smook" drove him to Chelsea, where he had a small house, and in 1706 forced him still further afield to Hampstead; and his infirm health led his friends to press him to marry. He took their advice, and with characteristic stoicism chose his wife by report, not by sight; his chief end, as he writes, being "the satisfaction of his friends" who thought his line worth preserving, his life worth nursing. His choice "for character only" turned out very successfully, for he found in spite of his previous reports that the lady was "a great beauty." A year or two afterwards, in 1711, finding his health still declining, he left England for the last time, in search of a warmer climate. Living for nearly two years, at Naples a broken imperfect half-life, "entertaining himself (as he writes) very busily with drawings, sketches, prints, medals and antiques," he died in the spring of 1713. His life, writes his son, would probably have been much longer "if he had not worn it out by great fatigues of body and mind, which was owing to his eager desire after knowledge as well as to his zeal to serve his country. For he was so intent upon pursuing his studies that he frequently spent not only the whole day, but the great part of the night besides in severe application, which confirmed the truth of Mr. Locke's observation on him that the sword was too sharp for the scabbard,"⁴—a curious parallel to Dryden's famous phrase of his grandfather's "fiery soul" fretting that pigmy body. An uneventful life compared with that grandfather's feverish political activity; its long years of study in

⁴Rough draft of a sketch of the life of the third Earl of Shaftesbury, quoted in Rand's book, p. xxix.

sharp contrast with its short course of forty-two years, yet from his letters we do not get Voltaire's impression that he was a most unhappy man.⁵

If virtue is its own reward, Shaftesbury must have had full measure. He was not only a moralist, but moral; a man of ardent character, carrying his belief in benevolence into practice, liberally helping a number of promising young men who were his *protégés*, with care and money. It is characteristic of him, in the days when the Whigs were not backward in begging posts for themselves and their friends, that the only place begged by Shaftesbury was a civil office for one of these young *protégés*, Micklethwayte, and that he allowed a small pension to Toland, even after Toland had surreptitiously published his papers.

It was not unusual for persons of quality to be painted in a queer travesty of classic costume, or to recline in marble effigy in wig, toga and sandals, in the family chapel or church. But in the case of Lord Shaftesbury, whose gown suggests some classic costume in its folds, the suggestion is not as meaningless as in the case of many of his contemporaries. His mind took the classic dye, and apart from that "modern antique" after Plato, *The Moralists*, in his rough memoranda, written for his own eye and not for the world, we seem to be listening to an incoherent Marcus Aurelius. He tried the modern world by the ancient, and found it very wanting. In particular the religious development of the modern world is uncongenial to him; and in exchange for this he gives us his own theory of the universe, which he managed to expound, somewhat circuitously, in the *Characteristics*, a collection published in 1711. The *Letter on Enthusiasm*⁶ gives his views on the religious movements. Germane to this paper, but with application to literary criticism, are the essay called *Sensus Communis*,⁷ and the *Soliloquy or Advice to an Author*, and in the last pages of this unlikely place some of his most audacious criticisms of Christian orthodoxy are hidden away. The *Essay on Virtue*⁸ states his views on morality, while the *Moralists* is a sort of rhetorical amplification or appendix, supplying the emotion and poetry of his scheme of things; the *Miscellaneous Reflections* are a commentary on these preceding papers, while in the *Choice of Hercules* he deviates into an esthetic

⁵ *Œuvres*, Vol. XLVII, p. 98: "Un homme très malheureux."

⁶ First published in 1708, at London, under the title *A letter concerning Enthusiasm to my Lord*. . . . (i. e., Lord Somers).

⁷ First published in 1709.

⁸ The essay had been published in an imperfect state in 1698.

discussion which has lost all interest to-day except in its bearings upon Lessing's *Laocoon*. These collected papers continued for a long time, as Macaulay says, to be "the gospel of romantic and sentimental unbelievers in this country, and on the Continent, where he had even greater influence than in his own country."⁹ He is the voice speaking to us in Pope's philosophical poems, in Butler's theology. All the ethical writers are related to him more or less directly, by sympathy or opposition.¹⁰

His system is optimism, which Voltaire, who recognized Shaftesbury's influence in spreading it in England, considered a gloomy one. "Man is a wretched being," Voltaire writes, "who has a few good hours, some minutes of pleasure and a long procession of painful days in his short life. Every one admits this and confesses it, and they are right in doing so. Those who cry out that all is well are charlatans. Shaftesbury, who brought this theory into fashion, was a very unhappy man."¹¹ But Shaftesbury was no charlatan, and was deeply enamoured of optimism and its harmonies. There is no evil in the world (to him) and the universal frame of things is enough to throw Theocles (the mouth-piece of this theory in *The Moralists*) into ecstasies of adoration, and set him rhapsodizing, though his prose hymns have lost their savor. The world is good, and the dark picture painted of it by divines is a libel; and they blaspheme it because in their zeal to miraculize everything they rest the proof of theology rather upon the interruptions to order than upon order itself.¹² The world, a complete whole in itself, does not require a supernatural revelation, which empties it of its own divinity in the interest of heaven. And most of all the face of man was blackened by the theological dogma of the corruption of human nature. Here Shaftesbury shows considerable originality in his bold defiance of utilitarianism, his belief that man was not so black as he was painted, in fact,

⁹"All the greatest spirits of that time, not only in England, but also Leibnitz, Voltaire, Diderot, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Wieland, and Herder, drew the strongest nourishment from him." Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte des 18ten Jahrhunderts*, Iter Theil, p. 188.

¹⁰ Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the 18th Century*, London, 1876, Vol. II, p. 18.

¹¹L'homme est un être très misérable, qui a quelques heures de relâche, quelques minutes de satisfaction, et un longue suite de jours de douleurs dans sa courte vie. Tout le monde l'avoue, tout le monde le dit, et on a raison. Ceux qui ont crié que tout est bien sont les charlatans. Shaftesbury qui mit ce conte à la mode était un homme très malheureux." *Œuvres*, Vol. XLVII, p. 98.

¹²*Moralists*, Part II, sect. 5.

Leslie Stephen's *Essays on Free Thinking and Plain Speaking*, London, 1907, p. 261.

not black at all, but possessed of a moral sense (a term of his own invention), and natural bent towards virtue. This moral sense is the same as the esthetic, the difference only lying in the objects to which they are applied. And thus the virtuous man is the virtuoso in morals, a man of taste in manners. Beauty and goodness are still one and the same with his Theocles.¹³ With such a philosophy, Shaftesbury could not fail to be in opposition to the church, though he professes his “steady *orthodoxy*, *resignation*, and entire *submission* to the truly *Christian* and *Catholic* doctrines of our Holy Church, *as by law established*,” with the emphasis of italics upon the last words. Of course the Roman Catholic Church abroad was the “horrider,” as he would express it, but even the innocuous established Church of England was not the shelter for “sensible men” like himself and his grandfather. It was something comparable to the College of Heralds, to which he compares it, and its divines no more venerable than Clarendon or Garter:

“Twould be somewhat hard, methinks, if Religion, *as by law established*, were not allowed the same privileges as Heraldry. . . . ’Tis agreed on all hands that particular persons may *design* or *paint*, in their private capacity, after what manner they think fit: but they must *blazon* only as the publick directs. Their *lyon* or *bear* must be figur’d as the science appoints, and their *supporters* and *crest* must be such as their wise and gallant ancestors have procur’d for ’em. No matter whether the shapes of these animals hold just proportion with nature. No matter tho’ different or contrary forms are join’d in one. That which is deny’d to *painters* or *poets*, is permitted to Heralds. *Naturalists* may, in their separate and distinct capacity, inquire, as they think fit, into the real existence and natural truth of things: but they must by no means dispute the authorized forms. *Mermaids* and *griffins* were the wonder of our forefathers; and as such deliver’d down to us by the authentick traditions and delineations above mentioned. We ought not so much as criticise the features or dimensions of a *Saracen’s* face, brought by our conquering ancestors from the holy wars; or pretend to call in question the figure or size of a *dragon*, on which the history of our national champion, and the establishment of a high *order* and dignity of the realm depends.

“But as worshipful as are the persons of the illustrious heralds Clarendon, Garter and the rest of the illustrious sustainers of British honour, and antiquity; ’tis to be hop’d that in a more civiliz’d age, such as the present we have the good fortune to live in,

¹³ *Miscellaneous Reflections*, 5, ch. 3

they will not attempt to strain their privileges to the same height as formerly. Having been reduc'd by law, or settled practice, from the power they once enjoy'd, they will not, 'tis presum'd, in defiance of the magistrate and civil power, erect anew their stages, and lists, and introduce the manner of civil combats, set us to tilt and tournament, and raise again those defiances and mortal frays, of which their order were once the chief managers and promoters."¹⁴

But the State Church has its uses as a national refrigerating machine, a method of keeping priestly vagaries within due bounds, and its orderliness was in pleasant contrast to the performances of the French prophets, those unfortunate refugees from the Cevennes, who were holding revivals in London and the country. His *Letter concerning Enthusiasm*¹⁵ may have had its origin in a personal dislike of its expression, for his son writes: "my father had perhaps a greater antipathy to enthusiasm than most persons, having seen many of the fatal consequences attending this deception in some people with whom he was particularly acquainted." He suggests that these prophets prefer persecution to ridicule, and it is by ridicule they are to be fought, making them the subject of "a puppet-show at Bart'lemy Fair" rather than an illumination at Smithfield. Ridicule was with him the test of truth, for truth can bear it, while it sticks only to the ridiculous, and in this he is followed by the French deists and Voltaire, and with both, the chief opportunity and temptation to batter the forts of orthodoxy was afforded by the Jews. That "cloudy people" aroused his sharp contempt for their "enthusiasm," and their ancient barbarities were to him so much "horrid depravity." He suggests that "the catastrophe of the original pair from whom the generations of mankind were propagated" are matters "abstrusely revealed and with a resemblance to mythology." Ironical deference to the Established Church was a convenient weapon for dealing with a theology when no other weapons were at hand; and he goes so far as to question "whether those sacred books ascribed to the divine legislator of the Jews, and which treat of his death, burial, and succession, as well of his life and actions, are strictly to be understood as coming from the immediate pen of that holy founder, or rather from some other inspir'd hand, guided by the same influencing spirit."¹⁶

¹⁴ *The Soliloquy*, Part 3, sect. 3.

¹⁵ According to Shaftesbury "enthusiasm" is to be contrasted with inspiration. "Inspiration is a real feeling of the Divine presence and enthusiasm a false one." *Letter concerning Enthusiasm*, sect. 7.

¹⁶ *Miscellaneous Reflections*, Vol. V, ch. I.

Even when writing avowedly as a literary critic, his examples of subjects below or unsuitable for poetic treatment are all taken from Scripture history. If David had the character of being after the pattern of the Almighty, he was not a king after Shaftesbury's own heart, nor a subject for art. Again, he writes: "In mere poetry and the pieces of wit and literature, there is a liberty of thought and easiness of humour indulg'd to us, in which perhaps we are not so well able to contemplate the divine judgments, to see clearly into the picture of those *ways* which are declar'd to be so far from *our ways*, and above our highest thoughts or understandings. . . . In such a situation of mind we can hardly endure to see *heathen* treated as heathen; and the *faithful* made the executioners of divine wrath."¹⁷

The Jewish God has created his people in his own image, and is an instance of the effect of a bad deity upon his worshippers.¹⁸ To him, in short, revealed religion was, as to the Greeks, foolishness; for Shaftesbury was on the side of the ancients, one who had turned their philosophy into sap—a stoic born out of due time.

Very prominent both in his works and his letters is his feeling that religion was unnatural, or, as he terms it, "super-natural." "Religion and gallantry have been wonderfully dressed up in latter days. The ancients were very scanty in the first, and so impolite as to know nothing of the latter. No wonder, indeed, since they stick to simple nature, which has been improved so much since that time. For Christianity is supernatural religion, and gallantry supernatural love. It is a wonderfully hard matter to deal with supernatural things."¹⁹

In quoting from Shaftesbury, the clearest and sprightliest runnings of his somewhat undistinguished style have been chosen; for he is, in the mass, indeed, very unreadable, not from the fine-gentlemanliness that has unfairly been objected to him,²⁰ but from a lack of individuality. He might be any of the anonymous or initialled contributors to the early numbers of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The style is not the man, but the age. He differs from

¹⁷ *The Soliloquy*, Part 3, sect. 3.

¹⁸ *Enquiry concerning Virtue and Merit*, Book I, Part II, sect. 2.

¹⁹ *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Life, Letters and Philosophical Regimen*, p. 338.

²⁰ Charles Lamb describes his style as "lordly" and "inflated": "he seems to have written with his coronet on and his earl's mantle before him," while Fowler hears "affectation" and "a falsetto note." It is only in Germany that his style was appreciated, Hermann Hettner saying of him: "His charms are ever fresh. A new-born Hellenism, or divine cultus of beauty presented itself before his inspired soul," etc.

his contemporaries by a very tedious parade of "wit and humor," in place of the pedantic and scholastic treatment which he deprecates; a parade of the language of the man of fashion and the virtuoso that is reminiscent of the practice of a Roman Catholic Cardinal, who sedulously picked up modern slang to trick out his conversations with the children of this world. Even more uncongenial to us to-day is the impression he gives of writing for a ring of superior people, a dilettante club of amateurs of philosophy, who have all trodden classic ground; and will have nothing to do with the vulgar, from their cool latitudes of contemplative good humour and indifference.²¹ In Shaftesbury there was doubtless a wish to draw to himself a circle of polite readers, but if his set read him the more willingly in the early years of the eighteenth century for his digressions and illustrations, his humor and wit, we are inclined to-day to lose patience with his lack of method. Voltaire, with his incomparable feeling for style, sums up this weakness in his saying that "the English do not know when to hold their tongues; their books are too long. Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury would have taught the world much, if they had not drowned the truth in books which weary readers with the best will in the world; yet they are very useful to us all the same—*cependant il y a beaucoup de profit à faire avec eux.*"²²

²¹ He writes of the "mixed satirical ways of raillery and irony so fashionable in our nation, which can be hardly brought to attend to any writing, or consider anything as witty, able or ingenious which has not this turn." *Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Life, Letters and Philosophical Regimen*, p. 504

²² "Les Anglais sont des bavards; leurs livres sont trop longs. Bolingbroke, Shaftesbury auraient éclairé le genre humain, s'ils n'avaient pas noyé la vérité dans des livres qui lassent la patience des gens les mieux intentionnés; cependant il y a beaucoup de profit à faire avec eux." *Œuvres*, Vol. 57, p. 661.