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## Shaftesbury and the Stoic Roots of Modern Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** Rather than reading Shaftesbury in anticipation of later forms of disinterestedness, this essay seeks to unpack the larger significance of his aesthetics by tracing his ideas back to their ancient sources. This essay looks to the venerable tradition of world contemplation. It argues that Shaftesbury advances a specifically Stoic model of world contemplation in *The Moralists*. The text's principal concern is not with this or that beautiful object but with the whole of which it and the viewer are indivisibly a part; its aim is not so much to account for how we perceive beauty as to foster a characteristically Stoic orientation toward the world, one in which we overcome our egocentric view of things and align ourselves with the natural workings of the world or universe in its entirety. Far from being 'autonomous' from the rest of life, the Stoic world contemplation Shaftesbury advocates entails a robust affirmation of existence, clear-eyed gratitude for being part of the universe, whatever the challenges and however fleeting our time in it may be.

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Shaftesbury holds an uneasy place in our accounts of the origins of modern aesthetics. He is considered to be a pioneer of modern aesthetic theory, a progenitor of what Paul Guyer and Timothy Costelloe call 'philosophical aesthetics', but at the same time he is seen as not quite modern enough.<sup>1</sup> Jerome Stolnitz, for example, famously credited Shaftesbury with helping to 'establish the autonomy of the aesthetic', while conceding that his 'Idealist' metaphysics prevented him from fully appreciating or embracing his own discovery.<sup>2</sup> In Peter Kivy's estimation, he is both the 'real founder' of British aesthetics and a 'Neoplatonist, a philosophical reactionary'.<sup>3</sup> More recently,

and equably, Costelloe finds in the author's writings 'original contributions' to and 'founding themes' of the tradition that followed, even as his thought increasingly came to be seen as an 'oddity, a nod back' to antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

The trick to making this conspicuously classical thinker one of us is to focus as much as possible on these themes and contributions, picking out those passages that initiate, advance or in some way anticipate later aesthetic concepts. Shaftesbury's key contribution here has long been understood to center on the idea of disinterestedness, a distinguishing feature of modern aesthetic theory and for some a *sine qua non* of aesthetics itself.<sup>5</sup> According to Stolnitz's well-known account, which identifies Shaftesbury as the first to bring attention to the concept, aesthetic disinterestedness represents not just a 'falling away of self-concern', but a special mode of perception that 'does not relate the object to any purposes that outrun the act of perception itself'.<sup>6</sup> An end in itself in this strong sense, disinterestedness is thought to isolate aesthetic value from all other values and concerns, whether practical, cognitive, moral, cosmological or existential.<sup>7</sup>

I want to suggest that Shaftesbury's distinction to being among the first of the moderns, however asterisked, has come at the expense of a fuller understanding of his philosophical project and the classical tradition on which it draws. Here I align myself with recent critics of the 'teleological narrative' that locates the beginnings of 'modern aesthetic autonomy' in early eighteenth-century Britain and reads its theorists through the lens of the later tradition.<sup>8</sup>

The teleological account is especially harmful to a holistic, ethically-oriented thinker like Shaftesbury. What we see as the 'aesthetic' parts of *The Moralists*, Shaftesbury's landmark work of aesthetic theory, are woven into larger discussions of nature, divinity, human flourishing, the problem of evil, and the moral composition of the universe. From start to finish the dialogue pursues the broad, inclusive question of 'what real Good is', as Philocles puts it, which Shaftesbury, like his classical forebears, understood to be a practical rather than a theoretical problem. His aim, Michael Gill observes, 'was to urge his readers to live in a certain way, not to convince scholars to believe one thing or another on any speculative matter'.<sup>9</sup> Deploring what he saw as the narrowing of modern thought, Shaftesbury championed philosophy as it was classically practiced, above all, by figures like Socrates, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, hoping to restore it to its 'antient Title, of Guide of life'.<sup>10</sup> There is a particular irony, then, in trying to pick out from his writings a set of technical formulations regarding disinterested pleasure and autotelic perception. It is to read him not just anachronistically and in piecemeal fashion but to judge him by the very standards he rejected.

Rather than reading Shaftesbury in anticipation of later forms of disinterestedness, this essay seeks to unpack the larger significance of his aesthetics by tracing his ideas back to their ancient sources. Scholars generally comprehend "'aesthetics" before aesthetics', to use Costelloe's phrase, to originate

in classical investigations of beauty and theoretically-minded discussions of the arts.<sup>11</sup> But as we work to dislodge the teleological narrative, it is also important to expand our sense of the relevant *prehistory* of the discipline, looking beyond those concepts and practices that are most readily assimilated to post-Kantian philosophical aesthetics. Indeed, we need to bracket our assumptions about what aesthetics is and follow the evidence where it leads, even into territory that may appear to us to be ‘non-aesthetic’.<sup>12</sup> In Shaftesbury’s case – and perhaps not only in Shaftesbury’s case – this means attending to the venerable tradition of world contemplation, which begins with ancient philosophy’s belief, as described by Pierre Hadot, that ‘what gives meaning and value to human life is the contemplation of nature’.<sup>13</sup>

In a wide range of classical texts, we find thinkers turning to the environing world in awe and reverence, with many claiming that this is in fact what we were born to do. Plutarch, for example, posits that ‘the universe is a most holy temple and most worthy of a god; into it man is introduced through birth as a spectator’.<sup>14</sup> And Longinus, whose influence on eighteenth-century aesthetics is well known, writes that nature ‘brought us into this life and into the whole universe as into a great celebration, to be spectators of her whole performance’.<sup>15</sup> This long and eclectic tradition, notably reinvigorated in seventeenth-century Britain, comprises a rich body of reflections on the value and significance of our contemplative experience of the world.<sup>16</sup>

## I.

No ancient school placed greater importance on world contemplation than the Stoics, and, as I will demonstrate in what follows, it is a specifically Stoic form of world contemplation that Shaftesbury puts forward in *The Moralists*. The text’s principal concern is not with this or that beautiful object but with the whole of which it and the viewer are indivisibly a part; its aim is not so much to account for how we perceive beauty as to foster a characteristically Stoic orientation toward the world, one in which we overcome our egocentric view of things and align ourselves with the natural workings of the world or universe in its entirety. Needless to say, this attitude is not one of indifference or cool detachment. The Stoic world contemplation Shaftesbury advocates – far from being ‘autonomous’ from the rest of life – entails a robust affirmation of existence, clear-eyed gratitude for being part of the universe, whatever the challenges and however fleeting our time in it may be.

Shaftesbury’s attachment to Stoic philosophy is well known. A footnote to the biographical entry on the third Earl in Thomas Birch’s *General Dictionary, Historical and Critical* (1734-41), likely written by Shaftesbury’s nephew James Harris, himself an accomplished classicist, tells us that among the texts ‘he most admired, and carried always with him, were the moral works of Xenophon, Horace, the Commentaries and Enchiridion of Epictetus

as published by Arrian, and Marcus Antonius'.<sup>17</sup> Shaftesbury's allegiances are especially evident in the *Askêmata*, the private notebooks he kept primarily between 1698 and 1704 during his two sojourns in Holland, which Benjamin Rand first published in 1900 under the title *Philosophical Regimen*. Written as reminders of key principles and exhortations to live up to those principles, much like Marcus Aurelius' own *Meditations*, the *Askêmata* teems with Stoic citations, above all to Marcus and to Epictetus, whom Shaftesbury refers to as a 'divine man'.<sup>18</sup> Rand characterised the notebooks as perhaps the clearest 'expression of stoicism since the days of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius', a judgment confirmed more recently by Shaftesbury's biographer, Robert Voitle, who finds in them 'the finest examples of purely Stoic thought since Marcus Aurelius wrote down his own meditations'.<sup>19</sup> While they may be less explicit than in the *Askêmata*, Stoic themes and ideas also infuse the *Characteristicks*, which takes the image for its frontispiece – a ray of sunlight falling upon a bowl of water in the foreground, a serene and waveless bay in the background – from metaphors found in the pages of Shaftesbury's two favourite Stoics.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars have examined these resonances in illuminating detail, shedding light on a host of key Shaftesburian ideas, from the author's framing of philosophy itself as a practical art of living to his concepts of cosmic order, natural sociability, moral realism, virtue, and self-fashioning.<sup>21</sup> For the most part, however, this work has not extended to Shaftesbury's role as a founder of modern aesthetics – this despite the fact that his Stoicism is also on abundant display in *The Moralists*, his preeminently *aesthetic* text. Among its many and unmistakable references to Stoic ideas: the concepts of natural sociability (2.179), world citizenship (2.105) and the 'universal Conflagration' (2.213); a belief in the decisiveness of 'Opinion' (2.233); the theory of an animating force in nature, a mixture of breath and fire that the Greeks called *pneuma* and Shaftesbury describes as a 'soft, invisible, and vital Flame' (2.212); the idea that the universe is 'One Intire Thing' (2.195) held together by a 'Sympathy of Parts' (2.196), that it is divinely ordered and indeed *inspired* by the divine (2.207); the proposition that the best life a human can live is one in accordance with nature (2.242), which is to say, one in which the individual wills what the universe itself wills (2.201).

This relative lacuna in the scholarship is perhaps due to the fact that while Shaftesbury may be regarded a Stoic in ethics, he is generally understood to be a Platonist (or Neoplatonist) in aesthetics, as evidenced by commentators from Stolnitz to Kivy, Townsend, Costelloe and Guyer.<sup>22</sup> In proposing a Stoic reading of *The Moralists*, I do not mean to deny the presence of Platonist ideas in the text or to somehow pit Stoicism against Platonism. But I do maintain that these Platonist elements operate within a larger Stoic framework.<sup>23</sup> Shaftesbury's concern is not with the transcendent One but with the Stoic Whole, and the contemplation he espouses doesn't lead us to

a higher world of Forms but attunes us to the ‘Nature’ of our present world, which for the Stoics is the only world there is.<sup>24</sup> Theocles offers a convenient summation toward the end of the dialogue:

‘Can you not call to mind what we resolv’d concerning Nature? Can any thing be more desirable than to follow her? Or is it not by this Freedom from our Passions and low Interests, that we are reconcil’d to the goodly Order of the Universe; that we harmonize with Nature; and live in Friendship both with God and Man?’ (2.242).

To understand this aspect of Shaftesbury’s thought, we need to look back to the Stoic tradition of world contemplation on which it draws.

## II.

Like other ancient writers and thinkers, the Stoics gazed upon the world in reverential appreciation. They too claimed we were born for such contemplation, which they understood in terms of a *telos* or calling, something we *ought* to do. In a well-known passage of *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero has Balbus, his spokesperson for Stoicism, declare that humans ‘came into existence for the purpose of contemplating and imitating the world.’<sup>25</sup> Epictetus proposes that ‘god has introduced man into the world as a spectator of himself and of his works.’<sup>26</sup> And Seneca maintains that nature has ‘brought us into being to view the mighty spectacle.’<sup>27</sup> We can understand this, in part, as a debt we owe nature or nature’s creator. ‘What service to God is there in this contemplation?’ Seneca asks. His answer: ‘That the greatness of his work be not without witness.’<sup>28</sup>

Seneca’s well-known contention that accepting ‘a favour gladly is to have repaid it’ is directly relevant here: ‘are you denying that the vast expanse of earth wide open before you is a favour?’<sup>29</sup> Stoics begin to discharge this debt through their joyful appreciation of the world, which is itself a form of tribute and thanksgiving. In his *Hymn to Zeus*, for example, Cleanthes seeks to ‘repay’ the creator by ‘for ever singing of [his] works, as it befits mortals to do.’<sup>30</sup> While the Stoic of popular imagination may be cold and affectless, flesh-and-blood Stoics rhapsodised the cosmos, extolling the whole of existence. We were not brought here to censure the world, Epictetus asserts, but, like a ‘grateful’ guest at a festival, ‘to applaud it, and view it with reverence, and sing its praises.’<sup>31</sup> To do anything less would be a sign of ingratitude.

Beyond demonstrating gratitude and appreciation, world contemplation was also considered integral to the core Stoic project of following nature. As a component of Stoic physics, one of the three interrelated branches of Stoic philosophy, it was a principal means by which Stoics sought to align themselves with the natural workings of the universe. ‘The aim of this type of exercise’, John Sellars explains, ‘is to train one’s desires and aversions, to

accustom oneself to desire whatever happens, to bring one's will into harmony with the will of the cosmos'.<sup>32</sup> World contemplation, then, is not only natural for us in the sense that it is itself a vital human end – 'part of what we are *for*', as Brad Inwood puts it – but because it enables us to pursue this larger project.<sup>33</sup>

To return to Epictetus' earlier claim: 'god has introduced man into the world as a spectator of himself and of his works; and not only as a spectator, but an interpreter of them. It is therefore shameful that man should begin and end where irrational creatures do. He ought rather to begin there, but to end where nature itself has fixed our end; and that is in contemplation and understanding and a way of life in harmony with nature'.<sup>34</sup> Rather than being an end in itself, as it is for Aristotle and Stolnitz, contemplation is also a means toward this further end: it is how a Stoic follows nature. Through 'contemplating' the world we deepen our 'understanding' of its inner workings, which, in turn, helps us lead lives that are 'in harmony with nature'. What Epictetus describes here are not so much discreet steps as an ongoing process of attuning oneself to the whole of nature, internalising and patterning oneself on its order. To repeat Cicero's otherwise puzzling phrase, we 'came into existence for the purpose of contemplating and imitating the world'.

The ultimate value of world contemplation is that it enables us to overcome our limited view of things and align ourselves with the cosmos as a whole. According to Hadot, this 'consists in re-placing oneself within the context of the cosmic All, and in becoming aware of human existence as being a part, one that must conform to the will of the Whole'.<sup>35</sup> Both he and Inwood describe this process as simultaneously humbling and ennobling. It is humbling in so far as we recognise ourselves to be vanishingly small beings in the vast expanse of time and space; and it is ennobling in so far as we feel a sense of kinship with this larger system, a connection to it, which, for the sage, takes the form of a powerful identification. Consider this passage from Marcus Aurelius:

'But it is now high time that you realized what kind of a universe this is of which you form a part, and from what governor of that universe you exist as an emanation; and that your time here is strictly limited, and, unless you make use of it to clear the fog from your mind, the moment will be gone, as you are gone, and never be yours again'.<sup>36</sup>

The world Marcus contemplates is one of Heraclitan flux and change, in which all things are continuously coming into and passing out of being, including Marcus himself. Loss and pain are inescapable. Yet he also recognises himself to be 'part' of the universe, an 'emanation' of the reason that pervades and governs it. The central challenge of Stoicism is to affirm this universe and everything that happens, not because of how things are for you (a part), but because the universe itself (the whole) couldn't be better than it is. Each



time we contemplate the world we rehearse and recommit ourselves to this task. In Hadot's terms, we locate ourselves within the 'cosmic All' and align our wills with the 'will of the Whole.' Marcus neatly captures this attitude in what Hadot calls his 'prayer to the World': 'All that is in accord with you is in accord with me, O World!'<sup>37</sup> For the Stoics, this is what it means to follow nature.

### III.

Shaftesbury elaborates the same model of world contemplation in *The Moralists*. To see how it works in detail let us turn to the extended account we find in part three when Philocles joins his friend Theocles, as appointed, for his morning walk outside his country home. The two arrive at 'the most beautiful part' of a nearby hill, just at dawn, and, with the countryside spread out before them, Theocles begins his 'Meditation' (2.193). Given the dialogue's status as a founding text of modern aesthetics, we might expect him here to frame the scene, picking out a particularly beautiful object or vista to analyse or describe; or, alternatively, we might expect him to speculate about how or why it is that gazing upon certain objects produces in us a certain kind of pleasure. He does neither. Rather than instructing Philocles on the principles of composition or the mechanics of taste, Theocles launches into an impassioned apostrophe to 'Nature's Order' – a 'celestial Hymn' in the manner of Cleanthes – in which he praises the surrounding countryside for providing 'a happy Leisure and Retreat for Man; who, made for Contemplation, and to search his own and other Natures, may here best meditate the Cause of Things' (2.193).<sup>38</sup> Though the passage draws on a longstanding opposition between city and country, it ultimately doesn't value one portion of the world over another. The advantage of their present location is not that it is more beautiful (or innocent) than the town but that it contains fewer things to distract them from the 'Contemplation' humans were made for. And the focus of this contemplation, the text makes clear, is not individual works of nature but the natural world or universe in its entirety.<sup>39</sup>

For Shaftesbury, of course, it is the 'Whole' that matters and 'the part is of value only to the extent that it participates in it'.<sup>40</sup> But we must distinguish between how the part/whole relationship functions with respect to art objects and how it functions with respect to the world. Because artists cannot 'bring All Nature' into a work but 'a Part only', Shaftesbury writes in *Soliloquy*, they should endeavour to make that part 'a Whole' in itself, 'compleat, independent, and withal as great and comprehensive' as possible (1.89). The idea that a successful work of art is a consonant, organic, autonomous whole would become a key tenet of modern aesthetics. But the part/whole relationship works differently in the case of the world or universe in its entirety, which can never be an object of direct perception.

This is why Theocles doesn't try to frame or compose the scene before him, analysing it as if it were an artwork: the whole he's searching for can't be grasped in a perceptual Gestalt. Nevertheless, through gazing upon part of the world Theocles does indeed *contemplate* the world as a whole. As Hadot observes, this kind of contemplation was quite prevalent in classical philosophy. He describes it like this: 'in considering a partial aspect of the world, contemplation discovers the totality of the world, going beyond the landscape glimpsed at a given moment, and transcending it on the way to a representation of totality which surpasses every visible object'.<sup>41</sup> Never given in perception, the whole is intuited in contemplation. Again and again in *The Moralists*, we find this synecdochal movement from part to whole, this reaching out for the larger system. In the present case, Theocles' meditation moves from the nature before him to 'Nature' in general, from this corner of the world to the 'World' as a whole, his apostrophes growing more general as he salutes 'Ye Fields and Woods' in the first paragraph, 'O glorious Nature!' in the second, and 'O *Sovereign MIND!*' in the fourth. To borrow Philocles's language from earlier in the dialogue, he is not satisfied with the 'Beauty of a Part' but seeks the 'just and wise Administration' of '*the Whole*' (2.120-121).

As with the Stoics, the universe Theocles contemplates is more than the sum of its physical parts – it includes the complex interconnectedness of those parts, the principle by which it is itself an entity as opposed to being merely an aggregate of separate entities, and the order or intelligence characterising its collective operations. When Theocles pauses his 'divine Song' to check in with the spellbound Philocles, he is keen to establish that the 'Universe' is 'One Intire Thing', that 'All hangs together, as *of a Piece*' (2.195). If this is the case, he reasons, then there is something 'which makes it One' (2.195), a '*uniting Principle*' (2.200) constituting it as one universe the way a single tree is one tree, or, more specifically, a '*Self-principle*' (2.204) analogous to the way an individual person is one self. This is a favourite theme of Marcus Aurelius. 'Constantly think of the universe as a single living being,' he writes, 'comprised of a single substance and a single soul.'<sup>42</sup> And again: 'For there is one universe made up of all that is, and one god who pervades all things, and one substance and one law, and one reason common to all intelligent creatures. . . .'<sup>43</sup>

Shaftesbury refers to this principle by a variety of names, each with its own specific shade of meaning, including 'Nature's Order', the '*Order of the UNIVERSE*', the '*Sovereign MIND*', the '*Guardian-DEITY and Inspirer*', the 'mighty GENIUS', and the '*Original SOUL*'. Guyer notes that it is ultimately this 'divine mind', and not physical objects, we 'know and admire in *all* perception of beauty, that with which our own mind harmonizes'.<sup>44</sup> This is certainly Shaftesbury's position. But I'd like to suggest that it is not as otherworldly (or Neoplatonist) as it sounds. While Shaftesbury clearly privileges mind over physical things, as do the Stoics, it must be stressed that he, again like the Stoics, doesn't place mind above or beyond or outside



our world. It inheres in our world: ‘diffusive, vital in all, inspiriting *the Whole*’ (2.207), it gives our world its specific character, making it what it is. Shaftesbury’s terms for this principle are lofty – and, to his contemporaries, provocatively deist in their vagueness – but what they seek to describe are the ordinary workings of our universe, the common course of things, what it is tempting to think of simply as reality. Rather than maligning existence for not measuring up to something higher (as an ‘Idealist’ might), Shaftesbury makes the actual universe his moral touchstone. Just as ‘every *particular Nature*’ is ‘constantly and unerringly true to it-self, and certain to produce only what is good for it-self’, Theocles posits, the same can be said of ‘the *general-one*, The NATURE *of the Whole*’, which, in pursuing its ‘own advantage and good’, works for the ‘*Good of All* in general’. Here we come to the crux of Stoic ethics: ‘And what is for the good of all in general, is *Just* and *Good*’ (2.202). There is no higher moral authority, nothing to transcend *to*.<sup>45</sup> As Cicero puts it, nothing is better than the world.<sup>46</sup>

#### IV.

But to fully grasp this justice and goodness, Shaftesbury suggests, we must overcome our own egocentrism and the spiritual myopia it engenders. In Hadot’s terms, we must recognise that we ourselves are merely parts of the larger whole. The primacy of the whole over the parts, in other words, pertains even to the ‘part’ doing the contemplating. This is one of the principal lessons of *The Moralists*. ‘What is it then shou’d so disturb our Views of *Nature*’, Theocles asks, ‘as to destroy that Unity of Design and Order of a *Mind*, which otherwise wou’d be so apparent?’ His answer: our own self-centeredness, as individuals and as a species. ‘All is delightful, amiable, rejoicing, except with relation to *Man* only’, he exclaims, channeling the self-centered perspective.

‘Here the Calamity and Ill arises; and hence the Ruin of this goodly Frame. All perishes on this account; and the whole Order of the Universe . . . is here o’erthrown, and lost by this one View; in which we refer all things to our-selves: submitting the Interest of *the Whole* to the Good and Interest of so small a *Part*’ (2.164).<sup>47</sup>

Blinkered by ego- and anthropocentrism, we get things exactly wrong, subjecting the ‘Whole’ to the ‘Part’ instead of the other way around. We put ourselves before the world and, as a result, we condemn what we should praise. Marcus likens such estrangement to becoming an ‘abscess’ on the body of the universe (14, 29). Shaftesbury depicts it as the actual toppling of the cosmic ‘Order’, the ‘Ruin of this goodly Frame’. It is only by letting go of our egocentric view of things, he insists, that we can truly appreciate the unity and harmony of the whole. In doing so, we recognise that nature is ‘as wise and provident’ in its most terrible ‘Productions’ as in its ‘goodliest

Works', indeed, that it is precisely upon such '*Contrarietys*' that the '*universal Concord* is establish'd' (2.121). With this *concordia discors* in mind, even things that appear 'contrary to human Nature' raise our 'Admiration' of '*Divine Wisdom*': 'Disorder becomes regular; Corruption wholesome; and Poisons . . . prove healing and beneficial' (2.217). From this cosmic perspective, all 'Ills' are imaginary, the mistaken judgments of partial minds.<sup>48</sup>

The ultimate aim of Shaftesburian world contemplation, like the Stoic version on which it draws, is to shake off one's limited view of things and attune oneself to the natural order of the universe. As we begin to understand ourselves as parts of the larger whole, we gain a new perspective on our lives and experience a softening of the boundary between self and world. Theocles describes this in the same humbling/ennobling terms as Hadot and Inwood. After having 'sally'd forth into the wide Expanse' and then returned 'within *my-self*', he reports, he is 'struck with the Sense of this so narrow Being, and of the Fulness of that Immense-one'; at the same time, he is buoyed by a feeling of identification with the mind that has formed him and which it is 'the peculiar Dignity' of his 'Nature' to 'know and contemplate' (2:194). Recognising that 'this Self of mine' was 'drawn out, and copy'd' from 'the *Great-one* of the World', he continues, 'I endeavour to be really *one* with it, and conformable to it, as far as I am able' (2.201). In affective terms, we can understand this as the oceanic feeling of being connected to something larger than oneself, what Hadot describes as an 'almost mystical feeling of belonging to the cosmic Whole'.<sup>49</sup> In traditional aesthetic terms, we know it as a version of the sublime. It is important to recognise, however, that what Shaftesbury is describing is not a passive, end-in-itself experience. Theocles endeavours to be one with the world, to be 'conformable to it', to accommodate himself to and model himself on the order he contemplates.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, he is cultivating the attitude of Marcus' 'prayer to the World': 'All that is in accord with you is in accord with me, O World!' This is the final *telos* of Stoic world contemplation and the cornerstone of Stoic imperturbability: the sage wills the world to be what it is and for its events to unfold as they inexorably must. As Epictetus puts it, 'Do not ask things to happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go smoothly'.<sup>51</sup> And here is Marcus' celebrated formulation: 'the universe loves to create whatever is to be; so I will say to the universe, "Your love is my love too"'.<sup>52</sup> Shaftesbury returns to this idea repeatedly in his work. In the *Askêmata*, he writes that true wisdom requires us to learn 'how to submit all of [our] affections to the rule and government of the whole' and 'how to accompany with [our] whole mind that supreme and perfect mind and reason of the universe'.<sup>53</sup> He declares in *Soliloquy* that the 'sublimest' parts of philosophy concern the 'Laws of Nature', the 'Order of the Universe', and the 'Justice of accompanying this amiable Administration' (1.195). And in

*Miscellaneous Reflections*, he speaks of the ‘generous Surrender of [the] Mind to whatever happens from that Supreme CAUSE, or ORDER of Things’ (3.137).

As I have been arguing, this is also the final end of Theocles’s world contemplation. More than simply admiring the ‘just and wise Administration’ of ‘*the Whole*’, he seeks to accompany it, to use Shaftesbury’s term from *Soliloquy*, or as Theocles himself explains, he ‘co-operates with it’, striving ‘to will according to the best of Wills’ (2.201). Like Marcus and Epictetus, he aligns himself with the cosmic order, acceding to the natural course of things. We should ‘be pleas’d and rejoice at what happens’, he tells Philocles, ‘knowing *whence* it comes, and to *what Perfection* it contributes’ (2.202). For Theocles, as for his Stoic mentors, this is the path to a good life.<sup>54</sup> The ‘*particular MIND*’, he maintains, ‘shou’d seek its Happiness in conformity with the general-one, and endeavour to resemble it in its highest Simplicity and Excellence’ (2.201). The world contemplation he advocates aims at and facilitates these ends.

## V.

This attitude, it should be clear by now, extends well beyond the ‘act of perception itself’. Shaftesburian world contemplation concerns life as a whole, our being in the world, how a person should live.<sup>55</sup> The closing pages of the text, which turn more directly to the topics of happiness and virtue, make this explicit. But this has been Shaftesbury’s project all along. Through contemplating the universe, Theocles gears into its underlying order, ‘laying within himself the lasting and sure Foundations of Order, Peace, and Concord’. He thereby becomes the ‘*Architect of his own Life and Fortune*’ (2.238). For Theocles, as for the Stoics, the best human life is a life of virtue, which is also a life according to reason and a life according to nature. These are all ways of saying the same thing: a life that is in tune with the fundamental workings of the universe. As I begin to wrap up this essay, I’d like to look at how this attitude structures or informs our sense of what life is, giving urgency and poignancy to our fleeting time in the world.

Here, too, Shaftesbury finds inspiration in the Stoics. He shows himself to be particularly indebted to this passage from Epictetus, which foregrounds the existential stakes of world contemplation by combining the metaphor of the world theater with another classical trope: life is a pageant or festival. Given its impact on Shaftesbury, it is worth quoting at some length:

Was it not he who brought you here? Was it not he who showed you the light? . . . And as what did he bring you here? Was it not as a mortal? Was it not as one who would live, with a little portion of flesh, upon this earth, and behold his governance and take part with him, for a short time, in his pageant and his festival? Are you not willing, then, for the time that is granted to you, to behold

his pageant and his solemn assembly, and then, when he leads you out, will you not pass on your way, after paying him obeisance and offering him thanksgiving for what you have heard and what you have seen? . . . But the festival is over. Leave it and depart like a grateful and modest person; make room for others.

Now consider this passage from the *Askêmata*:

To what further time wouldst thou live? Hadst thou seen enough? Is not once seeing enough? How often wouldst thou be spectator? how long a guest? Where is the modesty of this? where the respect, the observance, duty, gratitude towards the master of the feast? Enough, then. Rise and give thanks. – Pass on, move. You have seen. Let others see. At night always thus. I have been admitted to the spectacle, I have seen, I have applauded. It is enough.

Shaftesbury's debts to Epictetus are clear. We find the same plaiting of the 'spectator' and 'guest' metaphors, the same feelings of reverence, celebration, and gratitude, the same embrace of mortality, the same giving of thanks and making room for others. Like Epictetus, he tells himself that what matters is not the number of days he is granted but the quality of attention he brings to the world. Shaftesbury encapsulates the entire project in a challenge – 'Is not *once seeing* enough?' – a juxtaposing of the cosmic and the finite that anticipates Rilke: '*Once* for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too, / just once. And never again.'<sup>56</sup>

Shaftesbury returns to this idea in *The Moralists*. The passage occurs just after Theocles has made his case for the fundamental unity and goodness of the universe. It is a passing moment in the text, perhaps easy to overlook, but it is among the most lyrical and evocative in all of the *Characteristicks*:

The temporary Beings quit their borrow'd Forms, and yield their elementary Substances to New-Comers. Call'd, in their several turns, to Life, they view the Light, and viewing pass; that others too may be Spectators of the goodly Scene, and greater numbers still enjoy the Privilege of Nature. (2.205)

We are called into the world to 'view the Light', to be 'Spectators of the goodly Scene'; we enjoy our turn and in a moment exit, allowing others to do the same. To be alive is to be in and of the world, to be alive *to* the world. And when our time is up, we are physically reabsorbed back into the universe, resupplying it with the materials of life. 'New Forms arise: and when the old dissolve, the Matter whence they were compos'd is not left useless . . .' (2.205-206).<sup>57</sup> There is no clamoring here for transcendence or eternity. Instead, we find a generous surrender of the mind to the natural workings of the universe, even those aspects that seem most contrary to human nature. When the end

comes, as Theocles had told Philocles earlier in the dialogue, the important thing is not whether life be of ‘fewer or more Years’, but that you are ‘satisfy’d with what you have liv’d’ and ‘rise a thankful Guest’ (2.142).

## VI.

To read Shaftesbury in these terms is to broaden our conception of what modern aesthetics is a modern version of. Its prehistory reaches back not just to ancient discussions of beauty and the arts, but to the equally illustrious tradition of world contemplation. The Stoics, for whom the practice was especially important, placed world contemplation at the center of living a full and flourishing life. Not only is the practice profoundly satisfying in itself, they maintained, but it enables us to gear into the natural order of the cosmos, tuning ourselves to it, aligning our desires with its ineluctable workings. Stoics understood this to be the best life a person can live, a life in accord with nature. As I have sought to demonstrate, this is precisely the project Shaftesbury lays out in *The Moralists*. My primary goal has been to reframe the way we think about the origins of modern aesthetics by tracing Shaftesbury’s ideas back to their hidden sources. But this reframing might also invite us to reconsider his place in the tradition that comes *after* him. Rather than viewing Shaftesbury as the unwitting founder of the disinterested school of philosophical aesthetics, it might be more useful to see him as a forerunner of its many and distinguished dissidents, those who refuse to cloister the aesthetic from everything else that matters to us.<sup>58</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Guyer and Costelloe use the term, in part, to signal their modern disciplinary understanding of the subject. See Guyer 2018, 2 and Costelloe 2013, ix-x.

<sup>2</sup>Stolnitz 1961a, 100-101.

<sup>3</sup>Kivy 2003, 11.

<sup>4</sup>Costelloe 2013, 19.

<sup>5</sup>See Stolnitz 1961a and 1961b. Guyer and Costelloe consider disinterestedness to be among Shaftesbury’s most significant contributions to modern aesthetics, even as Guyer holds that the concept itself is not as significant as it is often taken to be (Guyer 2018, 30; Costelloe 2013, 20). For literary treatments of Shaftesbury’s disinterestedness, see Paulson 1996, 23-47 and Valihora 2010, 90-107. For persuasive critiques of Stolnitz, see Townsend 1982,

Rind 2002, Glauser 2002, and Axelsson 2019.

<sup>6</sup>Stolnitz 1961b, 107-108 and Stolnitz 1961a, 134.

<sup>7</sup>In Kant’s extraordinary claim, disinterestedness demands that we remain ‘indifferent’ to the very existence of the thing contemplated (Kant 1987, 46).

<sup>8</sup>Axelsson, Flodin, and Pirholt 2021, 1. For other recent works that challenge the still-dominant narrative, see Axelsson 2019 and Grote 2019.

<sup>9</sup>Gill 2018, 111-12.

<sup>10</sup>Shaftesbury 2001, Volume 1, 184. Hereafter cited parenthetically by volume and page number. As Klein notes, Shaftesbury opposed ‘the encroachments of science and the reorientation of philosophy around epistemology’ (Klein 1994, 29).

For influential studies of the practical, therapeutic orientation of classical philosophy, see Nussbaum 1994 and Hadot 1995. For Shaftesbury's classical orientation, see Klein 1994, Jaffro 1999, Amir 2015, and Sellars 2016.

<sup>11</sup>Costelloe 2013, 3.

<sup>12</sup>I take this term from Axelsson, Flodin, and Pirholt, who welcome the move in recent scholarship toward a more 'dialectical understanding of the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy', one in which, 'from our contemporary standpoint, non-aesthetic concerns are continuously regarded as informing aesthetic experience, and vice versa' (Axelsson, Flodin, and Pirholt 2021, 2).

<sup>13</sup>Hadot 2002, 210. Hadot's influence on the present essay will become clear in what follows.

<sup>14</sup>Plutarch 1939, 239.

<sup>15</sup>Longinus 1991, 47.

<sup>16</sup>For more on the seventeenth-century discourse of world contemplation and an analysis of how it informed Addison's aesthetic theory, see Norton 2020.

<sup>17</sup>Birch 1734-41, vol. 9, 186. The author bases this claim on the evidence of Shaftesbury's annotations in books found in his library. For a more recent study of the author's extant books – one that confirms the General Dictionary's assessment – see Collis 2016.

<sup>18</sup>Shaftesbury 1900, 21.

<sup>19</sup>Rand 1900, xii, Voitle 1984, 135.

<sup>20</sup>For the standard account of Shaftesbury's illustrations, see Paknadel 1974.

<sup>21</sup>This literature is vast. See for example, Rand 1900, Tiffany 1923, Aldridge 1951, Voitle 1984, Klein 1994, Darwell 1995, Jaffro 1999, Carey 2006, Brooke 2012, Boyson 2013, Gatti 2014, Derhmann 2014, Collis 2016, Sellars 2016, and Axelsson 2019.

<sup>22</sup>See Stolnitz 1961b, 112; Kivy 2003, 6; Townsend 1982, 206-207; Costelloe 2013, 12; Guyer 2018, 34.

<sup>23</sup>While there is no scholarly consensus on the relationship between Stoic and Platonist ideas in Shaftesbury's thought, compelling arguments for the primacy of Stoicism can be found in Tiffany 1923, Aldridge 1951, Gatti 2014, and Derhmann

2014.

<sup>24</sup>Tatarkiewicz points out that the Stoics 'ascribed to the real world the reason, perfection and beauty, which Plato had perceived only in ideal Forms' (Tatarkiewicz 1970, 186). Hadot puts it this way: '*Physis* or nature, which, for the Platonists and the Aristotelians, was only a small part – and the lowest part at that – of the whole of reality, becomes all of reality' for the Stoics (Hadot 1998, 79).

<sup>25</sup>Cicero 1951, 159.

<sup>26</sup>Epictetus 1995, 17.

<sup>27</sup>Seneca 1995, 176.

<sup>28</sup>Seneca 1995, 175.

<sup>29</sup>Seneca 1995, 237, 277.

<sup>30</sup>Cleanthes, 'Hymn to Zeus.' In Long and Sedley 1987, 327.

<sup>31</sup>Epictetus 1995, 237, 238.

<sup>32</sup>Sellars 2003, 137.

<sup>33</sup>Inwood 2009, 214.

<sup>34</sup>Epictetus 1995, 17. See also Seneca: 'So I live according to Nature if I devote myself wholly to her, if I marvel at her and worship her. Nature wished me to do both – to act and to be free for contemplation' (Seneca 1995, 177).

<sup>35</sup>Hadot 1998, 99.

<sup>36</sup>Aurelius 2011, 11.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in Hadot 1998, 143.

<sup>38</sup>As Shaftesbury suggests in *Inquiry*, this order cannot be 'contemplated without Extasy and Rapture'; like the Stoics, he muses such 'Passion' may not only be 'just' but 'absolutely due and requisite in every rational Creature' (2.43-44). For a stylistic reading of Theocles' rhapsody, see Rogers 1972.

<sup>39</sup>Axelsson notes: 'Rather than paving the way for a modern aesthetic disinterestedness where the agent's perception terminates upon the aesthetic object, [Shaftesbury] is preoccupied with our natural moral and emotional engagement and immersion in the *Whole* (both in the form of natural society and nature designed by the Deity, and in the form of individual works of art)' (Axelsson 2019, 31).

<sup>40</sup>Costelloe 2013, 15.

<sup>41</sup>Hadot 1995, 261.

<sup>42</sup>Aurelius 2011, 31.

<sup>43</sup>Aurelius 2011, 59.



<sup>44</sup>Guyer 2018, 43. For a specifically Stoic reading of Shaftesbury's concept of 'mind', see Gatti 2014, 68.

<sup>45</sup>Gatti makes a parallel argument about 'beauty': 'for the Neoplatonist true beauty is not in the world, but elsewhere, in an ideal realm, whereas for the Stoics it is already in the world, and as "real" beauty, not merely a pale and defective reflection of an intelligible archetype' (Gatti 2014, 71).

<sup>46</sup>Cicero 1951, 141.

<sup>47</sup>The notion that the universe as a whole is just and good may strike some readers as glib and Pollyannaish. But Shaftesbury is not denying that we will experience loss and suffering and hardship in life; we most certainly will. The challenge of Stoicism, as noted above, is to affirm the workings of the universe as a whole *independently of one's personal situation or fate*. For a similar take on Shaftesbury's 'optimism', see Voitle 148. Cf. Aldridge who suggests a benevolent universe would *preclude* the need for Stoic austerity (Aldridge 1951, 342).

<sup>48</sup>For an illuminating treatment of this issue, see Müller 2010.

<sup>49</sup>Hadot 1998, 230.

<sup>50</sup>'The prevailing symbolism of Shaftesbury', Tiffany explains, 'is that of the Stoic whole, and of harmony, in the sense of cooperation of the individual with the whole. A man becomes a part of the whole by subordinating himself to it, becoming like it' (Tiffany 1923, 644-45).

<sup>51</sup>Epicetus 1995, 290.

<sup>52</sup>Marcus Aurelius 2011, 98. For the argument that it is 'disinterested love rather than disinterested pleasure' that characterises aesthetic experience for Shaftesbury, see Glauser 2002, 50.

<sup>53</sup>Shaftesbury 1900, 6.

<sup>54</sup>Taylor, who sees Shaftesbury as foremost a Stoic, says this well: 'The high-

est good for humans is to love and take joy in the whole course of the world' (Taylor 1989, 251). It should be noted that Stolnitz himself recognises this aspect of Shaftesbury's thought. As he rather dejectedly observes, Shaftesbury's 'philosophy is essentially a celebration of the surpassing goodness of the world-order' (Stolnitz 1961b, 104).

<sup>55</sup>Scholars have long recognised this seeming paradox in Shaftesburian 'disinterestedness'. 'Rather than opposing interested and disinterested judgment', Townsend explains, 'Shaftesbury uses disinterested judgments as evidence that we have a true interest to be discovered beneath the shifting ground of pleasure and fancy' (Townsend 1987, 299). Guyer points out that though our pleasure in beauty may be 'independent of any self-interested desire for personal use and possession', this does not mean that it is 'not connected to other human interests at all. On the contrary, in Shaftesbury's view, our pleasure in beauty is directly connected with our deepest intellectual and moral interests' (Guyer 2018, 37). According to Axelsson, Flodin, and Pirholt, Shaftesbury connects 'disinterestedness to a higher (non-selfish) interest: namely, the moral interest in a reconciliation with nature' (Axelsson, Flodin, and Pirholt 2021, 6). The Stoic discourse of world contemplation provides a detailed account of why this is the case.

<sup>56</sup>Rilke 2009, 55.

<sup>57</sup>Shaftesbury appears to be drawing on Marcus' claim that nature 'transforms into herself everything within her that seems to be decaying and growing old and useless, and out of these very things creates other new things in their place' (Marcus Aurelius 2011, 79).

<sup>58</sup>For a more extreme position, see Arregui and Arnau 1994.

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