

Gill, Michael B. *A Philosophy of Beauty: Shaftesbury on Nature, Virtue, and Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022, 238 pp.

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Michael B. Gill's *A Philosophy of Beauty: Shaftesbury on Nature, Virtue, and Art* focuses on Shaftesbury's thinking about nature, religion, morality, and art. This beautifully and engagingly written book is insightful for scholars and general readers alike, and invites readers to explore the philosophical issues that arise from Shaftesbury's philosophy. Gill not only shows how Shaftesbury's ideas were revolutionary at the turn of the eighteenth century but also how they remain relevant today. Shaftesbury's major work, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, was one of the most influential books published during the first half of the eighteenth century. According to Gill, "[i]t played a momentous role in turning European thought away from the negative and toward the positive—in nature, religion, morality, and art" (1). Although *Characteristicks* serves as a major source, Gill also engages with numerous other published and unpublished writings by Shaftesbury. *A Philosophy of Beauty* is divided into five chapters which focus respectively on nature and God, virtue, art, painting, and writing.

Chapter 1 examines Shaftesbury's thinking about nature and God. Gill brings to light Shaftesbury's deep appreciation of nature and his love of original wilderness.¹ Shaftesbury's attitude towards wild nature stands in stark contrast to views held by his contemporaries. For instance, Thomas Burnet, so Gill argues, sees wilderness as a sign of deformity caused by human sin which destroyed the initial beauty of the Earth. John Locke regards uncultivated wild land as wasted and does not care about the aesthetic beauty of wild nature. The beauty of nature features

¹ For instance, see Shaftesbury, C 2.217. References to Shaftesbury (2001 [1711]) are cited in the text as "C" followed by volume and page number.

centrally in Shaftesbury's religious views. He argues that theism is preferable to both atheism and daemonism. Shaftesbury's argument for the existence of God is a version of the argument from design, which is based on empirical observations of order, unity, and harmony in the world. Shaftesbury regards it as unlikely that the world's remarkable order is a random accident and infers that it presupposes an intelligent designing mind. As Gill remarks, Shaftesbury believes that religion should be both emotional and rational. For Shaftesbury emotion and rationality can be reconciled by cultivating a positive attitude towards nature and Gill proposes that Shaftesbury's concept of beauty is key to this. As Gill explains, "[t]o be beautiful, according to Shaftesbury, is to possess 'Unity of Design' (C 1.89). A beautiful thing is beautiful because all its parts 'concur *in one*' (C 2.161), because it has the 'Character of *Unity*' (C 3.229), because it is 'a *Single Piece*' (C 3.214)" (37). Shaftesbury saw beauty even in areas where others may not expect to find beauty. As Gill notes, he "was a keen observer of the beauty of waste" (52) and was fascinated by processes of decomposition and change. Gill ends the chapter with reflections on what might happen if Shaftesbury encounters Darwin's theory of evolution. This issue is worth exploring, because Shaftesbury's argument for the existence of an intelligent designing mind assumes that there are only two options for explaining the order of the world, namely randomness or the existence of an intelligent designing mind. According to Gill, Darwin's theory of evolution offers a further explanation and makes it possible to see the order of the world as "the results of evolution" (56), but he remains ambivalent as to whether Shaftesbury's philosophy can accommodate Darwin's theory.

In chapter 2, titled "Virtue," Gill turns to Shaftesbury's moral philosophy. Gill shows how Shaftesbury's idea of moral beauty, which he first developed in *The Moralists*, evolved from his earlier idea of a moral sense, which he presented in the 1699 edition of the *Inquiry*. The moral sense, as Shaftesbury introduced it in the early *Inquiry*, "approved of virtue and disapproved of vice" (65). This account "did not give conceptual priority to the positive or the negative" (65). Gill highlights that "[w]ith the development of moral beauty, however, Shaftesbury makes the positive fundamental, aligning himself decisively with the positivity of Plato and Aristotle and against the negativity of Calvin and Hobbes" (65). Just as we can have positive responses to nature or works of art, Shaftesbury believes that we can also have positive responses to a person's character. As Gill puts it, for Shaftesbury "[v]irtue is a kind of beauty, and, as a kind of beauty, it attracts" (65). Gill argues that Shaftesbury understands moral beauty in terms of integrity. "Integrity is the property of being one, of wholeness" (67). A morally beautiful person shows integrity in two respects: "within the virtuous person, and between the virtuous person and the rest of humanity" (68). Gill draws attention to two obstacles that Shaftesbury's account

of moral beauty faces, namely egoism and partiality. According to Gill, Shaftesbury regards Hobbesian egoism as “bad psychology” (73) and believes that it is wrong to assume that humans are by nature selfish egoists. “Shaftesbury’s most significant attack on egoism,” so Gill, “comes in his discussion of the ‘herding Principle’ (C 1.70)” (73). The herding principle concerns “the innate desire of a creature to associate with members of its own species” (73). However, this leads to a further problem, namely partiality, as the herding principle “leads us not only to love those in our narrow circle but also to hate those outside it” (79). Partiality is an obstacle to becoming fully virtuous, because a “fully virtuous person is one who works for the good of all. Essential to virtue is impartiality” (78). Shaftesbury criticizes partiality, and believes that we can work to overcome partiality, which will enable us to become true lovers of humanity. One distinctive feature of Shaftesbury’s moral philosophy—in contrast to the philosophical views developed by Hutcheson and Hume, who clearly build on Shaftesbury’s philosophy—is that “Shaftesbury placed more emphasis on first-personal efforts to improve one’s character” (84). Shaftesbury believes that a person should become an “*Architect of his own Life*” or a “self-improving Artist” (C 2.238). Like an artist works on “Stone or Marble” (C 2.238), one should work on one’s own character and “treat one’s self as a work of art” (84) and “aim to impart unity to one’s character” (90). Gill then turns to a further question and asks why one should be moral, according to Shaftesbury, and work so hard on improving one’s character. Gill shows how “Shaftesbury’s thinking about this question evolved” (92) from the early 1699 edition of the *Inquiry* to *The Moralists* and was further developed in *Sensus Communis* and *Soliloquy*. As part of this discussion, Gill helpfully elucidates a famous claim that Shaftesbury introduces in *The Moralists*, namely that beauty and good are one and the same (see C 2.223, 2.232, 2.235).

Chapter 3 focuses on art and examines the question of whether art for Shaftesbury has merely instrumental value insofar as it is a means to virtue—as defenders of the instrumentalist interpretation hold—or whether artistic beauty is also valuable for its own sake—as defenders of the non-instrumentalist interpretation argue. Gill compares both interpretations and shows that there is textual evidence for each. He concludes the chapter by proposing a reconciling view, which combines aspects of these two interpretations. According to Gill, appreciation of the beauty of things is non-instrumentally good insofar as “it can make life better” (140) and it “can also be instrumentally good, in that it can promote the higher good of virtue” (140). Since moral beauty is also non-instrumentally good, moral and artistic beauty can be in tension with each other. In such cases, Gill maintains, “moral beauty is categorically superior” (140). Moreover, there may be cases where artistic beauty does not promote virtue and instead detracts from it. In such cases, “it’s a mistake to indulge in the former” (140).

Chapter 4 zooms in on a specific form of art, namely painting, and discusses a particular genre of painting called “history painting.” As Gill explains, for Shaftesbury beautiful “art of every type must have unity of design” (143). Additionally some works of art represent morally significant conduct. Such art must not only have unity of design but it must further “convey accurately the true nature of virtue and vice” (143). History painting belongs to the latter type of art. This genre of painting was well-established during Shaftesbury’s day. “History paintings were larger-than-life representations of stories from mythology, the Bible, and the ancient world. [...] Their purpose was to convey the message or moral of the stories” (143). Shaftesbury collaborated with the Italian painter Paolo de Matteis. The best known history painting that Shaftesbury commissioned de Matteis to execute is a depiction of the ancient story of Hercules at the crossroads, who has to make a choice between following the path of vice or virtue. Shaftesbury prepared detailed notes for the artist (see C 3.211–39), which show how deeply he thought about the design of artwork. For example, he emphasizes the importance of the formal unity of a painting and believes that a painting should be kept as simple as possible and not contain unnecessary decorative details that distract from the core moral message. Gill shows how the paintings by various other artists violate Shaftesbury’s criteria for beautiful artwork. Although de Matteis’ depiction of the *Choice of Hercules* comes closer to meeting Shaftesbury’s criteria, Gill raises doubts whether it lives up to Shaftesbury’s vision and, indeed, whether history painting is a good medium for conveying a moral message to twenty-first century viewers. Instead, Gill proposes that “[t]he artform that ... comes closest to Shaftesbury’s conception of history painting is moviemaking, especially moviemaking of the mid-twentieth century” (163).

Chapter 5 turns to another form of art that can and should inspire virtue, namely writing. Shaftesbury was dissatisfied with writing not just by philosophers but also by writers of memoirs and essays. His work *Soliloquy: or, Advice to an Author* is addressed to authors, particularly those “who advise us how to live” (170), and offers “meta-advice” (170) about “the *Way and Manner of Advising*” (C 1.98). Shaftesbury believes that bad writing can be remedied by soliloquy, namely “by practicing intensive self-reflection” (176). He recommends that philosophers engage in Stoic exercises that enable them to examine their passions and eradicate false beliefs. Memoirists and essayists are already focused on themselves, but, according to Shaftesbury, they have a mistaken conception of what “it means to write about their true selves” (178). They are wrong to assume that “publishing ideas in the form in which they initially occur is more authentic [...] than elegant revision” (178). Shaftesbury and the writers he criticizes disagree whether one’s true self finds expression in writings that remain unrevised or whether a true self needs to be developed through soliloquy and through revising and refining one’s writing. Shaftesbury’s position may

appear paradoxical, as Gill acknowledges, due to his “assertion that we need to exert ‘*Force on Nature*’ in order to ‘become *natural*’ (C 1.208)” (180). To explain Shaftesbury’s view that the revised is more natural than the unrevised and that we have to work on ourselves to become natural, Gill turns to Shaftesbury’s teleological conception of nature.

Gill concludes his book with brief reflections on the criticism Shaftesbury’s thought faced during the eighteenth century, for instance by Berkeley, Astell, Balguy, and others. One common charge was that Shaftesbury was privileged and out of touch with ordinary working people. Gill acknowledges that there is some truth to the accusation, but also notes that “Shaftesbury’s critics do not emerge as the greater champions of working people” (186). Moreover, Shaftesbury interacted with working people by managing “his tenancies, his farmland, his gardens, his houses. And in his writing, Shaftesbury rates the working people as morally superior to the economically privileged” (186). In contrast to numerous other eighteenth-century moralists, Shaftesbury does not regard reward or punishment as a prerequisite for morality and believes, so Gill, that everyone can become virtuous or a lover of humanity.

Gill’s book approaches Shaftesbury’s philosophy from the perspective of beauty. Since unity is a feature of beauty for Shaftesbury, it is not surprising that the theme of unity is present throughout the book. Shaftesbury does not merely see nature as a unified system, but he also engages in normative projects that aim towards unity, commissions artworks that are meant to display unity, and aims to organize his own writings into a unified whole. In all these areas, we can ask whether unity is initially or originally given or something that needs to be cultivated and developed. As far as the natural world is concerned, Gill argues that Shaftesbury prefers untouched wild nature to formal “princely Gardens” (C 2.220). By contrast, Shaftesbury believes that human characters need to be cultivated and developed. Likewise, he believes that writing requires revision and refinement. Indeed, as mentioned above, for Shaftesbury it becomes natural through the process of revision and refinement.

At this stage one may wonder whether Shaftesbury’s philosophy is as systematic and unified as he aspires it to be, or as Gill portrays it. Why did Shaftesbury believe that a person’s character should be cultivated and improved, and that writing should be revised and refined, but preferred to leave nature in its wild state and leave it uncultivated? This question arises, because there are at least two other options. First, one could argue that not only nature, but also human characters and writings should be left in their wild, original, or initial state and not managed or cultivated in any ways. Second, one could argue that nature as well as human characters and writings should be cultivated, improved, or refined. I believe that we can find an answer as to why Shaftesbury preferred his view to these other options by turning to his teleological views,

which Gill acknowledges in various places. For Shaftesbury, humans have a particular telos or purpose, namely to promote not only the well-being of their fellow human beings, but also to contribute to the goodness of the universe as a whole. By contrast, wild nature is already beautiful in Shaftesbury's view and not in need of further improvement. Nevertheless, Shaftesbury's teleological views can be challenged and perhaps further consideration can be given to the question whether Shaftesbury's unified system has a solid foundation or is based on idiosyncratic teleology.

I would like to turn to a further issue, namely the question how far Shaftesbury would be prepared to take his appreciation of the original wilderness of nature. Gill emphasizes Shaftesbury's love for the original wilds and proposes that "Shaftesbury's attitude toward nature was like ours" (23) and not like Locke's or Burnet's. I believe that matters become more complex when we consider not only the beauty of wild and untouched nature, but also normative calls for rewilding land that has been used for agriculture (or other purposes) for decades or centuries. As Gill mentions, Shaftesbury owned an estate and "was particularly attentive to how farming on his property was done, with a keen interest in land usage and horticulture" (7). This makes it unlikely that he would have toyed with the idea of giving up his farm land that fed his family and servants for rewilding. Taken to the extreme, today's calls for rewilding projects may demand that land that has been used for farming for long periods of time may be restored to its original wild beauty, even if this comes at the price of food shortages. I doubt that Shaftesbury would endorse such extreme views and the issues may be more nuanced than Gill portrays them.

Gill's insightful and carefully researched book is the ideal source for anyone interested in Shaftesbury's philosophy. I expect that it will advance scholarship for many years to come and help revive Shaftesbury's ideas.

Bibliography

Shaftesbury, A. A. Cooper, Third Earl of. 2001 [1711]. *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Ed. D. J. den Uyl. 3 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.