

Shaftesbury on Liberty and Self-Mastery

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that Shaftesbury's thinking about liberty is best understood in terms of self-mastery. To examine his understanding of liberty, I turn to a painting that he commissioned on the ancient theme of the choice of Hercules and the notes that he prepared for the artist. Questions of human choice are also present in the so-called story of an amour, which addresses the difficulties of controlling human passions. Jaffro distinguishes three notions of self-control that are present in the story of an amour. Although I agree with many aspects of Jaffro's interpretation, I question his conclusion that self-control in the Stoic sense is best reserved for 'moral heroes.' I propose an alternative developmental interpretation, according to which all human beings are on an intellectual journey aimed at personal and moral improvement. My interpretation takes seriously that for Shaftesbury philosophy is meant to be practical and help improve our lives. I end by arguing that rather than trying to situate Shaftesbury's concept of liberty within debates among compatibilists and incompatibilists it is more promising to understand it in terms of self-mastery and thus regard it as a version of positive liberty.

Keywords: Shaftesbury, liberty, positive liberty, self-mastery, self-control, personal development

1. Introduction

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), emphasises throughout his philosophical works that philosophy is meant to be practical; it should help us improve our lives and develop our character.¹ In contrast to many of his predecessors and contemporaries he does not show interest in writing theoretical treatises or essays. Instead his major work *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*², which is a collection of his mature works, invites his readers to acquire self-knowledge, to reflect on who they are, how they can improve their character and live a more virtuous life. Moreover, it invites readers to examine what happiness and the good is, how they can best attain it, and what their place is in the order of the universe as a whole. Shaftesbury's works are practical not merely in the sense that he prioritises philosophical topics that are of practical significance, but further they are practical in a more immediate sense: they are meant to be transformative for readers and meant to offer “self-help” (Garrett 2013, Renz 2017).

Given that Shaftesbury's approach to philosophy differs from the works of many of his predecessors and contemporaries, it becomes understandable that he does not offer a detailed and systematic treatment of liberty, unlike other philosophers of his day who engage with the topic. Nevertheless, questions of liberty are present in his works, especially in parts where he reflects on questions of human choice. The aim of this paper is to offer an improved interpretation of Shaftesbury's account of liberty, which—as I argue—is best understood in terms of self-mastery. In order to illuminate his thinking about liberty, it will be important to examine his views on issues concerning human choice and human agency more generally.

¹ For further discussion, see Gill (2018) and Sellars (2016).

² References are to Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (2001 [1711]), *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. D. den Uyl (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), 3 vols., hereafter “*Characteristicks*.” The individual works in the three volumes of this edition are ordered as in the original 1711 and 1714 editions. Additionally references to the passages in Shaftesbury (1999), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions Times*, ed. L. E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) will be given. *Characteristicks* is a collection of Shaftesbury's mature works. Individual works of the collection will be abbreviated and cited as follows:

LE: *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (in vol. 1 of the 1711 ed.)

SC: *Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend* (in vol. 1 of the 1711 ed.)

S: *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author* (in vol. 1 of the 1711 ed.)

I: *An Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit* (in vol. 2 of the 1711 ed.)

M: *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody* (in vol. 2 of the 1711 ed.)

MR: *Miscellaneous Reflections on the said Treatises, and other critical Subjects* (in vol. 3 of the 1711 ed.)

JH: *A Notion of the Historical Draught of Tablulature of the Judgment of Hercules* (in vol. 3 of the 1714 ed.)

C: Klein's edition of *Characteristics*.

In 1711 Shaftesbury starts preparing a second illustrated edition of *Characteristicks*. Moreover, he prepares several treatises on aesthetics, which he intended to include in the unfinished work *Second Characters*.³ In 1711 he commissions a painting from the artist Paolo de Matteis on the ancient theme of the choice of Hercules, which brings together major themes of his philosophy. Since the painting and ancient story help illustrate major aspects of Shaftesbury's moral thinking and provide insight into how humans should approach a choice between pleasure and virtue, I start by analysing the painting and the instructions that Shaftesbury prepared for the artist (section 2). Next, I turn to another story on the theme of human choice, namely the so-called story of an amour, which illustrates the difficulties of controlling human passions (section 3). Laurent Jaffro (2014) offers a helpful interpretation that distinguishes three notions of self-control that are at play in the story (section 4). First, there is the naïve belief that one's will is entirely free and that one has full control over the passions. Second, one can pursue an avoidance strategy, which means that one controls passions by avoiding confrontation with their object. Third, the story revives the Stoic practice of "self-discourse," which encourages individuals to look inward. During this self-examination they will start to question their passions and thereby gain control over them. Although I agree with much of Jaffro's interpretation, I have reservations about the conclusion that he draws from story. According to Jaffro, self-control in the Stoic sense is best reserved for moral heroes such as Hercules, while ordinary people whose rationality tends to be weak are better advised to pursue the avoidance strategy, because it "lies within reach and its success is guaranteed." (Jaffro 2014, 163) I argue that Shaftesbury's writings leave scope for an alternative interpretation, which I call "developmental interpretation" (section 5). I propose that the encounter of beauty or erotic love, and more generally enthusiasm, is a phase of an intellectual journey. This means that the story has an educational purpose and is meant to help us acquire better self-knowledge, which in turn is a prerequisite for character development. On the basis of these considerations I ask how Shaftesbury's concept of liberty can best be understood. I argue that rather than trying to situate Shaftesbury within the debates between compatibilists and incompatibilists, it is more plausible that Shaftesbury regards liberty as self-mastery, and thus his account of liberty can be seen as a version of positive liberty (section 6).

2. The Choice of Hercules

³ Shaftesbury intended *Second Characters* to include *A Letter concerning Design*, *A Notion of the Historical Draught of Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*, *Appendix concerning the Embleme of Cebes*, and the unfinished *Plasticks, or the Original, Progress, & Power of Designatory Art*. See Shaftesbury (1981–, vol. I,5). For helpful further discussion, see Dehrmann (2014).

One ancient story that speaks to many themes that are central in Shaftesbury's philosophy is the story concerning Hercules's choice between virtue and pleasure. This story can be traced back to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, II.i.27–41. In *Memorabilia* the character Prodicus tells the tale of a young man Heracles⁴ who has just reached the age of independence and is reflecting on the life choices ahead of him, namely whether to pursue the path of virtue or the path of vice. As he deliberates which path to choose, two women appear representing virtue (arête) and pleasure or vice (kakia). Each of them tries to persuade Heracles to follow their path, but ultimately virtue wins.

In 1711 Shaftesbury commissions a painting from the artist Paolo de Matteis on the ancient theme of the choice of Hercules and writes detailed instructions for the artist describing the main characters and the composition of the art work (JH 3:213–239). In 1712 de Matteis completed an oil painting on canvas, which is now in the possession of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Additionally, Simon Gribelin produced an engraving of de Matteis's painting, which is reproduced below.⁵

Shaftesbury is well aware that an artist who intends to depict the story concerning Hercules's choice faces the challenge that a painting can only depict one instant in time, while the deliberative process that Hercules undergoes and which ultimately results in his choice to follow the path of virtue takes place over an extended period of time (JH I, 3:215–219). According to Shaftesbury, the story includes four different periods of time: (i) the period “when the two Goddesses, VIRTUE and PLEASURE, accost HERCULES” (JH I, 3:215), (ii) the period “when they are enter'd on their Dispute” (JH I, 3:215), (iii) the period “when their Dispute is already far advanc'd, and VIRTUE seems to gain her Cause” (JH I, 3:215), and (iv) “the time when HERCULES is intirely won by Virtue” (JH I, 3:216). Which of these periods of time should an artist focus on? For Shaftesbury it is clear that the third period is best suited to capture the deliberative process which eventually leads to Hercules's choice in favour of virtue. The problem with the first two periods is that they leave open whether Hercules will prefer virtue or pleasure. Shaftesbury is convinced that moral truth can be found and thus believes that the right choice is to pursue virtue.⁶ Depicting the fourth period of time would leave no room “to represent his Agony, or inward

⁴ The Greek name ‘Heracles’ is translated into Latin as ‘Hercules’.

⁵ Gribelin was tasked by Shaftesbury to compose engravings for the second edition of *Characteristicks*. Shaftesbury intended to publish *Judgement of Hercules* in a separate work on aesthetics, but after his death in 1713 it was included in volume 3 of the second edition of *Characteristicks*, published in 1714. Gribelin's engraving of *The Choice of Hercules* was reproduced in the second edition below the title. For further details, see Paknadel (1974).

⁶ For further discussion, see Boeker (2018), Gill (2018), Jaffro (2014).

Conflict, which indeed makes the principal Action *here*’ (JH I, 3:216). Thus, Shaftesbury claims that only the third period of time

can serve to express *the grand Event*, or consequent *Resolution* of HERCULES, and the *Choice* he actually made of a Life full of Toil and Hardship under the conduct of VIRTUE, for the deliverances of Mankind from Tyranny and Oppression. And ’tis to such a *Piece*, or *Tablature*, as represents this Issue of the Balance, in our pondering Hero, that we may justly give the Title of *the Decision or Judgement* of HERCULES. (JH I, 3:215–216)



Figure 1: Simon Gribelin (after Paolo de Matteis), *The Choice of Hercules*; In Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 3 (London: 1714).

Although for Shaftesbury there is ultimately only one right choice, namely to follow the path of virtue, *The Choice of Hercules* clearly depicts that neither the choice nor the path of virtue ahead of Hercules is easy. Virtue and Pleasure try to pull Hercules in different directions and it takes time

and reflection to resolve the inner conflict. While Pleasure is still trying to pull him back, Virtue is pointing towards a rocky and steep path leading up a mountain.⁷

3. The Story of an Amour

In his work *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author* Shaftesbury recites the story of a young lover, or—as he calls it—“the Story of an Amour” (S I.2, 1:110–115, C 80–83).⁸ This story is one of the few places in in Shaftesbury’s works where he explicitly discusses the notion of liberty. Before I turn to the details of the story, I want to begin with a few remarks concerning the broader context and the aims and scope of *Soliloquy*. *Soliloquy* is the third work included in volume 1 of *Characteristicks*. It is preceded by *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* and *Sensus Communis; an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*. This arrangement is not accidental, but rather it illustrates different phases of personal and intellectual development. Enthusiasm for Shaftesbury includes both erotic love and naïve forms of religion. Indeed, some of Shaftesbury’s considerations concerning erotic love can be read as metaphors for enthusiasm more generally (Jaffro 2014, 162–163). According to Shaftesbury, the various forms of enthusiasm are all accompanied by melancholy. He writes:

Be it *Love* or *Religion* (for there are Enthusiasms in both) nothing can put a stop to the growing mischief of either, till the Melancholy be remov’d, and the Mind at liberty to hear what can be said against the Ridiculousness of an Extreme in either way. (LE II, 1:9; C 9)

It is worth noting that Shaftesbury uses medical metaphors to describe enthusiasm. For instance, he regards enthusiasm as “infectious” and calls it a “disease” (LE II, 1:11, VI, 1:28, 32, VII, 1:35; C 10, 23, 26, 28). This intimates that he draws on a long medical tradition, tracing back to ancient sources, according to which, enthusiasm is seen as a symptom of the disease of melancholy.⁹ According to Shaftesbury, enthusiasm can find expression in various forms of ecstasies, superstition, or fanaticism; it is “wonderfully powerful and extensive” (LE VII, 1:34; C 27) due to the strength of the passions that arise in a state of enthusiasm, which may be “Horror, Delight, Confusion, Fear, Admiration, or whatever Passions [that] belongs to it” (LE VII, 1:34; C 27).

⁷ Further analysis of de’ Matteis’s painting can be found in Woldt (2014, 140–143).

⁸ According to Jaffro (2014), the story is an adaption of a story from Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*. See Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, V.i.1–18, VI.i.31–41. Shaftesbury modernises the story and neither uses the names found in the ancient version nor includes a reference to Xenophon.

⁹ For helpful further discussion, see Heyd (1995, 44–71, 214–219).

Wit and humour provide a first external remedy and help us step back and overcome enthusiasm. In addition to external criticism, *Soliloquy* offers resources that equip readers with strategies for internal criticism (Jaffro 2014, 160). *Soliloquy* is written as an inner self-discourse that offers an invitation, literally addressed to authors, but metaphorically to all readers, to turn inwards, to acquire self-knowledge with the aim of improving themselves and their character.

On this basis, let us turn to the story of an amour. The story involves a virtuous young prince who is fighting a war against a tyrant, a young nobleman who serves in the camp of the prince, and a captured beautiful princess who is separated from her husband due to war. After the princess has been captured the young nobleman is the first to discover her and is astonished by her outstanding beauty. He reports her story to the prince and proposes that he meets her. However, the prince refuses to see the beautiful princess, since he is well aware that beauty and love will distract him from his duties. This response surprises the young nobleman, who is convinced that he can control his passions and make voluntary decisions, since he believes that the will is entirely free.

The prince cautions him that, as love develops and increases over time, liberty vanishes and is replaced by constraint:

“How comes it then,” reply’d the Prince, “that if we are thus Masters of our Choice, and free at first to admire and love where we approve, we cannot afterwards as well cease to love whenever we see cause? This latter *Liberty* you will hardly defend. For I doubt not, you have heard of many, who tho they were us’d to set the highest value upon *Liberty* before they lov’d, yet afterwards were *necessitated* to serve in the most abject manner: finding themselves constrain’d and bound by a stronger Chain than any of Iron, or Adamant.” (S I.2, 1:112; C 81)

Despite the cautioning words, the young nobleman remains confident that beauty will not distract him from doing his duty. He is then tasked to take good care of the princess and they both show great moral appreciation for each other. He admires her “Generosity of Soul” (S I.2, 1:113; C 82) and she is enormously grateful and shows “on every occasion a real Concern for his Interest” (S I.2, 1:113; C 82). Although the nobleman is reluctant to admit it at first, he falls in love with her and over time his sexual desire grows. As the attempts of the princess fail to persuade the young man to stop his sexual advances, she seeks protection from the prince. Once the young man’s inappropriate behaviour and breach of trust have become public, he falls into deep melancholy and sees little hope that he will ever be forgiven, let alone be able to forgive himself. Yet the prince

asks to speak to the young man alone. Rather than punishing the young man, the prince is well aware of how much he has already suffered and shows him a way forward. Based on his own experience, the prince is well aware of “the Power of Love” and acknowledges that he is “no otherwise safe my-self, than by keeping out of the way of *Beauty*.” (S I.2, 1:114; C 82) Indeed the prince admits that it was his fault to give the young man an “impracticable Task and hard Adventure, which no-one yet was ever strong enough to accomplish.” (S I.2, 1:114; C 82) The prince recommends that the young man takes time off, looks inwards, and advances his self-understanding. Upon his return, the young man reports to the prince:

“well am I now satisfy’d, that I have in reality within me *two distinct separate Souls*. This Lesson of Philosophy I have learnt from that villanous Sophister LOVE. For ’tis impossible to believe, that having one and the same Soul, it shou’d be actually both Good and Bad, passionate for Virtue and Vice, desirous of Contrarys. No. There must of necessity be *Two*: and when *the Good* prevails, ’tis then we act handsomly; when *the Ill*, then basely and villanously. Such was my Case. For lately *the Ill* Soul was wholly Master. But now *the Good* prevails, by your assistance; and I am plainly a new Creature, with quite another *Apprehension*, another *Reason*, another *WILL*.” (S I.2, 1:115; C 83)

4. Jaffro’s Interpretation

Laurent Jaffro (2014) offers a very helpful analysis and interpretation of the story of an amour. He brings to the forefront three different notions of self-control that are implicit in the story:

- (1) Naïve belief in free will: the young nobleman at the beginning of the story “has the naïve belief that the will is entirely free and can directly dominate the passions, and this leads him to risk his morality and integrity in a direct confrontation.” (Jaffro 2014, 162)
- (2) Avoidance strategy: the prince, who is well aware of “human Frailty” (S I.2, 1:114; C 82), adopts this strategy and “indirectly and negatively controls his passions by avoiding a confrontation with their objects.” (Jaffro 2014, 162)
- (3) “[R]evival of Stoic ‘self-discourse’ (or Socratic ‘self-understanding’): passions should be questioned in order that the implicit judgements they consist of be made explicit and thus lose their seductive power. Here, again, the control of passions is indirect, but in a manner that differs from [the] ‘avoidance strategy’, which consists in the control over external

circumstances. It is a control of passion through the control of judgement.” (Jaffro 2014, 162)

According to Jaffro, the lesson of the story is that ordinary human beings are best advised to follow the avoidance strategy, because it “lies within reach and its success is guaranteed.” (Jaffro 2014, 163) Rather than prematurely assuming that one is capable of Stoic self-discourse, it is better to acknowledge the power of the passions. Otherwise, if one prematurely engages in Stoic self-discourse, one can easily fall back into naïve forms of enthusiasm. Thus, Jaffro concludes that “[i]t might be wiser to reserve soliloquy for moral heroes (such as Hercules).” (Jaffro 2014, 163)

Although I agree with much of Jaffro’s interpretation, I worry that it opens too strong a gap between ordinary human beings, on the one hand, and “moral heroes,” on the other hand. More precisely, I worry that by emphasising that moral perfection is out of reach or difficult to attain for ordinary human beings, Shaftesbury’s philosophical project of providing practical resources for improving one’s life and character is significantly diminished. Following the avoidance strategy reduces naïve enthusiasm, but it does not aspire to offer ordinary human beings a path towards moral perfection. To be clear, given Jaffro’s interpretation, Shaftesbury still offers practical advice, but the advice is different in kind depending on whether one is an ordinary human being or a moral hero.

As Jaffro portrays Hercules and other moral heroes, they are sages, or philosophers, who have reached or are capable of moral perfection. This portrayal of Hercules neglects the agony that he experiences and the struggle that he goes through when he has to decide between the life of virtue or the life of pleasure. As shown above, Shaftesbury notes in *Judgment of Hercules* that the story can be divided into four different periods of time. Shaftesbury suggests that the painting should focus on the third period when Hercules starts to be inclined to follow the path of virtue but has not yet made an ultimate choice. By describing Hercules as a moral hero, Jaffro shifts the focus towards the final period of the process. While for Shaftesbury it is important to express that even those who ultimately reach moral perfection experience agony and inner conflicts along their way towards moral perfections, this aspect of Shaftesbury’s presentation moves to the background in Jaffro’s interpretation.

In the following, I propose that Shaftesbury’s text leaves room for a developmental interpretation, according to which moral perfection is not restricted to an elite class of moral heroes, but in principle can be attained by anyone who is willing to acquire true self-understanding and engage with the right kind of practice. So far not many have reached moral perfection, but I

suggest that Shaftesbury invites his readers to enter a path that aims towards it. If this path is rightly followed, the risk of falling back into naïve forms of enthusiasm can be avoided.

5. A Developmental Interpretation

Instead of drawing a strong contrast between ordinary human beings and moral heroes, I propose that, according to Shaftesbury, all human beings are on a developmental journey, which enables them to go through different phases of personal, intellectual, and moral development. Some of the phases are intellectually demanding and require a strong will to succeed with the project of personal and moral development. Some humans progress quicker than others from one phase to another and those who do not practice hard enough will not reach the more advanced and more demanding phases. I will now outline possible phases of Shaftesburean personal development. The order in which I present the phases strikes me as a plausible progression and follows roughly the arrangement of the different works in *Characteristicks*.¹⁰ However, I do not intend to imply that every human being goes through all the phases in order in which I present them.

First, an individual may find themselves in a state of *enthusiasm*, in which they are governed by their passions. For instance, they may be overcome by erotic love, or drawn towards fanatic religious beliefs and practices. Enthusiasm often involves various forms of ecstasies, superstition, or fanaticism. In such a state the individual is governed by passions and rarely has the desire or power to step out by themselves.

While enthusiasm occupies their life, wit and humour can expose the ridiculousness of enthusiasm (LE II–IV, 1:6–24; C 7–20). This means that exposure to *external criticism* in the form of wit or humour can be a second phase in an individual's developmental journey. Good humour makes fun of enthusiasm and creates space to laugh about it, but does not suppress or prohibit it. For Shaftesbury, good humour is a more effective remedy than direct interventions through laws that intend to suppress the various forms of enthusiasm. Any attempt to externally regulate or prohibit forms of enthusiasm or superstition could have the opposite effect and fuel them. For instance, if a religious sect or drug is made illegal, the legal intervention can make it more tempting to join or try it. Instead Shaftesbury believes that we can learn from the ancients: If all forms of

¹⁰ Since Shaftesbury intended to publish *Judgement of Hercules* in a work on aesthetics rather than in *Characteristicks*, I will not say much about it in this section and rather focus on the works that are included in the first edition of *Characteristicks*. Nevertheless, I believe that *Judgement of Hercules* offers additional support for this reading, as mentioned in section 4, and I return to it at the end of this section and in section 6 below.

enthusiasm and superstition are tolerated, then philosophy will also be free to flourish and can counterbalance superstition (LE II, 1:12; C 11). The crucial point for Shaftesbury is that humour can only intervene effectively if freedom of thought and expression are guaranteed. This means that, if there are no constraints for exposing enthusiasm and laughing at it, then reason and learning can counterbalance enthusiasm (LE II, 1:12–13; C 11–12).

After enthusiasm has been criticised externally by wit and humour, the individual is invited to look inwards, to enter into an inner self-discourse, and to improve their self-understanding and character. This next phase of *internal criticism* is intellectually demanding and requires strength and self-discipline. At the beginning of *Soliloquy* Shaftesbury proposes “to consider of this *Affair*, as a Case of SURGERY” (S I.1, 1:98; C 71) The metaphor of surgery brings to light the challenge in the present case. Surgery, as Shaftesbury acknowledges, commonly involves a patient and a surgeon. However, can one be both doctor and patient? Following ancient philosophers Shaftesbury believes that when we truly introspect we will discover within ourselves a division into two souls (S I.1, 1:72, I.2, 1:106–107, 115; C 72, 77, 83):

This was, among the Antients, that celebrated *Delphick* Inscription, RECOGNIZE YOUR-SELF: which was as much as to say, *Divide your-self*, or *Be TWO*. For if the Division were rightly made, all *within* wou’d of course, they thought, be rightly understood, and prudently manag’d. Such Confidence they had in this Home-*Dialect* of SOLILOQUY. (S I.2, 1:107; C 77)

Shaftesbury regards the relationship between the two souls as analogous to the relationship between teacher and pupil, adviser and advisee, or doctor and patient (S I.1, 1:100, I.2, 1:106; C 72, 77). Initially the individual is likely to be weak, in the sense that they are passive rather than active, and in need of advice. However, as Shaftesbury notes, through the practice of soliloquy the individual is meant to become more active and acquire a will:

We hope, however, that by our Method of Practice, and the help of the grand *Arcanum*, which we have profess’d to reveal, this *Regimen* or *Discipline of the Fancys* may not in the end prove so severe or mortifying as is imagin’d. We hope also that our *Patient* (for such we naturally suppose our *Reader*) will consider duly with himself, that what he endures in this Operation is for no inconsiderable End: since ’tis to gain him *a Will*, and insure him *a certain Resolution*; by which he shall know where to find himself; be sure of his own Meaning and Design; and as to all his Desires, Opinions, and Inclinations, be warranted *one and the*

same Person to day as yesterday, and to morrow as to day. (S I.2, 1:116; C 84)

This passage proposes that a patient can be transformed and become more active and gain a will, which enables them to set firm and steadfast goals or ends, which Shaftesbury also calls “Resolution.”¹¹ However, one may wonder whether this transformative process is consistent with the lesson of the story of an amour.¹² Soliloquy has led the young nobleman to realise that he has within himself two souls, a good soul and an ill soul, which “must of necessity be *Two*” (S I.2, 1:115; C83). Moreover, the young nobleman claims to be “a new Creature, with quite another *Apprehension*, another *Reason*, another *WILL*.” (S I.2, 1:115; C 83) I believe that we can render the transformative process, on the one hand, consistent with the lesson drawn by the young nobleman, on the other hand, if we clarify the relationship between the human being as a whole and the two souls. The transformative process described in S I.2, 1:116 (C 84) concerns the transformation of a human being from a predominantly passive being to an active creature, while the young nobleman claims that good is necessarily different from bad, and that the good soul is distinct from the bad soul. Although the Delphic inscription does not explicitly identify one of the souls as good and the other as the ill soul, Shaftesbury regards one of the souls as the “*better Self*,” or “*nobler Self*,” and speaks of “[o]ur *real* and *genuine Self*” (S III.1, 1:115; C126). This intimates that he regards one of the souls as superior to the other, and thus one can be said to be good and the other ill. However, Shaftesbury’s claim that good is distinct from ill, does not conflict with the transformation that human being can undergo. During the transformative process, the ill soul loses influence and the human being comes closer to realising the “true self,” or good soul. Although the ill soul is distinct from the good soul, their influence can be altered, and thus transformation is possible. If this is correct, then it suggests that Shaftesbury neither identifies being an agent with being a human being as a whole, nor with the true self, but rather the more a human being approximates the true self, the more it *becomes an agent*. This suggests that agency is something to be developed. Shaftesbury’s text does not ultimately settle whether he understands the division into two souls in metaphysical or epistemic terms.¹³ In any case, introspection serves therapeutic purposes and helps an individual to gain self-understanding and become more active by developing a will.

Gaining genuine self-understanding is an important step of the developmental journey that Shaftesbury envisions, yet it does not by itself guarantee moral perfection. To further advance

¹¹ For further discussion regarding Shaftesbury’s focus on the will in his account of selfhood, see Winkler (2000). See also Darwall (1995, 205–206).

¹² I thank Peter Kail for drawing my attention to this issue.

¹³ For further discussion, see Boeker (2018).

one's moral character the return to the social realm is important. Internal reflection is not sufficient for moral improvement since Shaftesbury argues that philosophy should be practical and manifest itself in actions. This means that one cannot be virtuous without living a virtuous life. One risk of spending too much time reflecting in solitude can be that one becomes too self-focused and thereby self-interest can grow.¹⁴ However, never stepping back from the business of social life is not ideal either, as Theocles—one of the dialogue partners in *The Moralists*—remarks: “Society itself cannot be rightly enjoy'd without some Abstinence and separate Thought. All grows insipid, dull, and tiresom, without the help of some Intervals of Retirement.” (M II.1, 2:127; C 249) Thus, Shaftesbury believes that it is important to properly balance time spent in solitude and life in society.

I want to propose that a further phase of the developmental journey concerns the *improvement of one's moral character*. In particular, this phase aims at developing the character of a genuine friend, or love of humanity. Since this is a social process, Shaftesbury switches the genre from a soliloquy to a dialogue. His work *The Moralists* invites the reader to follow the journey of Philocles—the narrator of the dialogue. Philocles is presented as a mundane person who aspires to learn about goodness and who seeks happiness. However, he is also aware of “human Frailty” (M II.1, 2:136; C 256) and sensitive to the struggles and difficulties that can make it hard to reach moral perfection. Along his journey Philocles is guided by Theocles who is a well-educated gentleman and portrayed as a “Heroick GENIUS” (M II.1, 2:126; C 248). In reaction to Theocles's proposal that it is important to step back from social life and spend time reflecting in solitude, Philocles remarks that it would follow that lasting happiness could not be found, because all “Enjoyment wears out to [sic] soon; and growing painful, is diverted by some *other* thing; and that again by some *other*; and so on. ... And thus there can be no *Good* which is regular or constant.” (M II.1, 2:127; C 249) In response, Theocles points out that Philocles's considerations invoke the maxim ““That *Nothing can be good but what is constant.*”” (M II.1, 2:128; C 249) However, rather than assuming that it is hopeless to find constant good, Theocles invites Philocles to follow him in the search for constant good. As they wander through the countryside, Theocles challenges Philocles's assumption that the good can be identified with all or some pleasures. Instead, he urges Philocles to seek intellectual forms of enjoyment and proposes that genuine friendship is a candidate for the

¹⁴ Shaftesbury reflects on these issues in *Soliloquy* I.3 in the contexts of remarks regarding different genres that authors can choose. He contrasts memoirs, in which the author is at the centre of the work, with the genre of dialogue: “For here *the Author* is annihilated; and *the Reader* being in no way apply'd to, stands for Nobody. The self-interesting Partys both vanish at once.” (S I.3, 1:125; C 90) In that respect *The Moralists*, which is a work written in dialogue form supplements *Soliloquy*.

constant good that they are seeking:

Answer me, PHILOCLES, you who are such a Judge of *Beauty*, and have so good a *Taste* of Pleasure; is there any thing you admire, so fair as *Friendship*? or any thing so charming as a *generous Action*? What wou'd it be therefore, if all Life were in reality but one continu'd Friendship, and cou'd be made one such intire Act? Here surely wou'd be that *fix'd* and *constant* GOOD you sought. Or wou'd you look for any thing beyond? (M II.1, 2:135; C 254–255)

For Theocles genuine friendship involves being a friend of mankind, or love of humanity. To support this view he invites Philocles to consider someone who claims to be friends with a single individual but shows no concern or affection for society. They agree that this person is not a friend in the strict moral sense, and certainly not a friend of humanity (M II.1, 2:135–136; C 255).

Although Philocles is eager to learn from Theocles, he is pulled back down to earth, and self-doubts whether he is capable of loving humanity in the abstract start to occupy him:

I told THEOCLES, going along, that I fear'd I shou'd never make a good *Friend* or *Lover* after his way. As for a plain natural Love of *one single* Person in either Sex, I cou'd compass it, I thought, well enough; but this *complex universal* sort was beyond my reach. I cou'd love the Individual, but not the Species. This was too mysterious; too metaphysical an Object for me. In short, I cou'd love nothing of which I had not some sensible material Image. (M II.1, 2:137; C 256)

Since Shaftesbury is well aware that moral development and improvement are not always straightforward, but rather can be challenging—as is illustrated by Philocles's doubts—I suggest that *self-doubts concerning the possibility of attaining moral perfection* can be seen as another phase of the developmental journey.

Despite Philocles's doubts Theocles convinces Philocles to continue the journey. This leads to a final phase of the developmental journal, which focuses on *understanding one's place in the order of the universe* (M II.4, III.1). Both friends walk up a hill and as they reach the top of the hill Theocles reflects on the beauty of nature that surrounds them and an individual's place in the universe. Theocles, who holds strong teleological views, believes not only that all kinds of beings such as trees or human persons have an end and that all their parts are arranged such that they form a whole, but also that the universe itself is a whole. In particular, he argues that individual

selves are “copy’d from another principal and *original* SELF (the Great-one of the World)” (M III.1, 2:201; C 304) and that individual selves are striving to resemble the self of the universe and act in conformity with it. Theocles claims:

I consider, That as there is *one* general Mass, *one* Body of the Whole; so to this Body there is *an Order*, to this *Order* a MIND: That to this *general* MIND each particular-one must have relation; as being of like Substance, (as much as we can understand of *Substance*) alike active upon Body, original to Motion and Order; alike simple, uncompounded, individual; of like Energy, Effect, and Operation; and more like still, if it co-operates with it to general Good, and strives *to will* according to the best of Wills. So that it cannot surely but seem natural, “That the *particular* MIND shou’d seek its Happiness in conformity with the *general-one*, and endeavour to resemble it in its highest Simplicity and Excellence.” (M III.1, 2:201; C 304)

Theocles believes that beauty is present throughout the universe, which in turn convinces him that the order and beauty of the universe originate from a universal designing mind (M II.4, 2:159–164; C 272–276). Moreover, Theocles argues that beauty and goodness coincide, namely that “there is no real *Good* beside *the Enjoyment of Beauty*” and “no real Enjoyment of Beauty beside what is *Good*” (M III.2, 2:235; C 330).¹⁵ In light of the identification of goodness and beauty the practical project of improving one’s life is not merely a moral project, but can at the same time be regarded as the creation of a work of art.¹⁶ Shaftesbury uses the metaphor of architecture to corroborate this point:¹⁷

And thus, O PHILOCLES! may we improve and become Artists in the kind; learning “To know *Our-selves*, and what *That* is, which by improving, we may be sure to advance our Worth, and real Self-Interest.” ... but he, *He* only, is the *wise* and *able* Man, who with a slight regard to these Things, applies himself to cultivate another Soil, builds in a different Matter from that of Stone or Marble; and having righter Models in his Eye, becomes in truth the *Architect of his own Life and Fortune*; by laying within himself the lasting and sure Foundations of *Order, Peace, and Concord*. (M III.2, 2:238; C 332)

¹⁵ See also M III.2, 2:223; C 320 and Gill (2018).

¹⁶ For excellent further discussion, see Gill (2018).

¹⁷ Other passages where Shaftesbury invokes the metaphor of architecture include SC IV.2, 1:85; C 62–63; S I.3, 1:129; C 93; S III.3, 1:217–218; C 157–158; I II.i.1, 2:78; C 215; M III.2, 2:228; C 323–324; MR III.1, 3:82–83; C 395–396.

Having introduced the developmental interpretation and outlined different phases of the developmental journey, I now want to highlight advantages of my interpretation by contrasting it with Jaffro's interpretation. If Jaffro is right that most ordinary human beings are best advised to follow the avoidance strategy, then they would not progress beyond the second phase of the developmental journey. There is no doubt that the subsequent phases, which focus on inner self-discourse, moral improvement, and understanding one's place in the universe are intellectually demanding and not everyone will progress through all the different developmental phases. However, rather than excluding ordinary human beings from the more intellectually demanding parts of the journey, Shaftesbury's *The Moralists* is a dialogue between an ordinary human being, Philocles, and a moral hero, Theocles. At the beginning Philocles struggles to understand morality other than in terms of pleasure, but gradually, guided by Theocles, he learns about more intellectual approaches to happiness. Thus, I take it that Shaftesbury would argue that not only "moral heroes" should seek moral perfection, but also ordinary human beings such as Philocles should aim for moral improvement.

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Shaftesbury in *Soliloquy* addresses all readers. For instance, in the passage, cited above, Shaftesbury explicitly says that "we naturally suppose *our Reader*" to be "our Patient" (S I.2, 1:116; C 84). Even if we take into consideration that *Soliloquy* addresses in the first instance authors in the literal sense, and only metaphorically all readers, I think it is plausible to say that Shaftesbury tries to reach a wider audience than a small elite group that will successfully reach moral perfection and believes that all readers would benefit from the practice of soliloquy.¹⁸

Moreover, my interpretation takes seriously Shaftesbury's view that philosophy is meant to be practical. According to Shaftesbury, philosophy is meant "to refine our Spirits, improve our Understandings, or mend our Manners" (S III.1, 1:179; C 129).¹⁹ Since personal development and character improvement is at the heart of the developmental interpretation, my interpretation squarely accommodates Shaftesbury's philosophical project. By contrast, Jaffro's interpretation puts more emphasis on the limitations of character improvement.

Finally, it is worth noting that Shaftesbury proposes in *The Judgment of Hercules* that the commissioned painting could be given "the Title of *The Education, as the Choice or Judgment of*

¹⁸ Of course, not all human beings of Shaftesbury's day were literate, let alone had the time to read Shaftesbury's work. However, the reason why some human beings were prevented from pursuing self-improvement in the way Shaftesbury recommends it lies in external social, political, and economic circumstances.

¹⁹ These ideas are further developed in an entry on improvement in Shaftesbury's *Askêmata* (2011, II,6:314–319). *Askêmata* is a collection of Shaftesbury's private notebooks, which document his own soliloquies.

HERCULES.” (JH I, 3:215) The fact that Shaftesbury regards the story as an educational process offers additional support for the developmental interpretation. During the second period, each goddess tries to make her case. The goddess of pleasure tries to tempt him to enter the life of pleasure, or enthusiasm. Hercules is pulled in different directions; “he is interested, divided, and in doubt” (JH I, 3:215). At this stage, he not only witnesses how each goddess criticises the other, but also introspects and realises his own inner division. During the third period of time, he is more “agitated,” but he still “agonizes,” and is “torn by contrary Passions”; “and with all his Strength of Reason [he] endeavours to overcome himself” (JH I, 3:215). This shows that Hercules is not born as a “moral hero,” but rather following a long and difficult educational process he has acquired the strength to follow the path of virtue.

6. Liberty

Having analysed stories in Shaftesbury’s works that focus on the theme of choice and self-control, it remains to examine how we can best understand his concept of liberty.²⁰ This is the task to which I turn now.

Isabella Woldt (2014) proposes that Shaftesbury’s position implies a compatibilist conception of freedom, meaning that individuals have the ability to act freely even if the universe is fully determined. For Shaftesbury nature, the cosmos, or the universe²¹ form a whole and compose a harmonious system.²² For Woldt this intimates that Shaftesbury is committed to determinism (Woldt 2014, 143–145). A compatibilist accepts that there is freedom of action, but accepts that our choices are determined by the laws of nature.

Even if it is the case that nature is determined, I have doubts whether there is sufficient textual evidence for ascribing to Shaftesbury the view that human choices are governed by the laws of nature. Alternatively, Shaftesbury’s text leaves open the possibility that although nature is determined, human choices are not. If this is correct, then human minds will not be governed by the laws of nature, but rather can be subject to self-determination, which in turn can be seen as an important precondition for personal and intellectual development.²³ The challenge now is to

²⁰ In the following I will use the terms ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ interchangeably.

²¹ Shaftesbury uses these expressions interchangeably.

²² See S I.3, 129–130; C 93; M II.4, 2:159–164, III.1, 2:200–201, III.3, 2:242; C 273–276, 303–304, 334. For further discussion, see Grean (1967, 89).

²³ Shaftesbury argues that “there is a strange Simplicity in this YOU and ME” (M III.1, 2:197; C 301) and that a self or human mind is a substance (M III.1, 2:198; C 302). On this basis, Thiel (2011, 241–242) claims that Shaftesbury accepts that minds are immaterial. Although I am less

explain how human choices and actions are integrated in a harmoniously ordered universe. Shaftesbury, through the voice of Theocles, expresses strong teleological beliefs that the universe and all its individuals and parts have a purpose. More precisely, the worry is whether free human choice can be reconciled with Shaftesbury's teleological beliefs. Following Stanley Grean (1967) I believe that it can. The clue is that humans who make choices that conflict with the ends of nature will experience setbacks when they attempt to act in accordance with such choices. This means that nature will push them to alter their choices if they attempt to act against the order of nature, but human beings need not be deprived of choice or the ability to act otherwise. Grean writes:

The ends of human life are predetermined, even if our choices are not, so we had better concentrate on changing ourselves, which is possible, rather than attempting to change the order of Nature, which is not possible. *True* freedom, for Shaftesbury as for the idealists in general, is realized only through the harmony of the individual will and the divine will. True freedom is not license—it is not the ability to think or do *anything* you please. It is a life *of* principle, not *without* principle. (Grean 1967, 90)

In this passage Grean makes an important further observation: Although Shaftesbury can accept that human choices are not determined, Grean emphasises that for Shaftesbury liberty does not concern indifference, meaning that an individual can choose among available options however they please, but rather the choices they make should be principled.²⁴

The important point is that Shaftesbury believes in moral truth and therefore he believes that there is one morally correct choice. However, the view that moral truth fixes morally correct human choices should not be confounded with metaphysical determinism, namely the view that the laws of nature govern or determine all states of affairs, including human choices. Thus I believe that Woldt is too quick in attributing determinism and compatibilism to Shaftesbury and overlooks that there could be two different kinds of necessity at play in Shaftesbury's philosophy. While nature or the cosmos is governed by natural necessity, namely the laws of nature, the human intellect, if properly developed, is capable of understanding moral truth and thus moral truth can

confident than Thiel that Shaftesbury is committed to the view that minds are immaterial, his works are consistent with it. Such an immaterialist interpretation provides resources for arguing that human minds are not governed by the laws of nature.

²⁴ See M II.2, 2:142–144; C 260–61.

be seen as “necessitating” human choices, but the necessity involved is a form of moral necessity, which does not have to be reducible to natural necessity.²⁵

Although I have argued that Shaftesbury’s text offers resources for an alternative interpretation to the compatibilist interpretation proposed by Woldt, I do not think that there is sufficient textual evidence for claiming that Shaftesbury rejects compatibilism. Despite my critical comments I acknowledge that his remarks on freedom can be understood as consistent with compatibilism. Instead of trying to situate Shaftesbury among the various compatibilist and incompatibilist positions, I believe that Shaftesbury would likely show limited interest in metaphysical debates between compatibilists and incompatibilists, because they are speculative debates of limited practical value. To properly understand Shaftesbury’s concept of freedom I suggest that we should shift the focus and turn to philosophical traditions that associate liberty with self-mastery.

It is worth examining whether the distinction between positive and negative liberty, which has become influential in political and social philosophy, at least since the publication of Isaiah Berlin’s essay “Two Concepts of Liberty” (Berlin 2002 [1958]), offers more promising resources for understanding Shaftesbury’s concept of liberty.²⁶ Negative liberty, according to Berlin, is absence of interference of others (Berlin 2002 [1958], 169–178). For instance, if someone coerces another person to do something or enslaves them, then the coerced or enslaved person is unfree to the degree that they are prevented from doing what they could otherwise do. Liberty in the

²⁵ Benjamin Whichcote argues in his *Select Sermons*, which Shaftesbury edited, for distinguishing between natural principles and moral duties (Whichcote 1698, 214–217). According to Whichcote, anything that happens on the basis of natural principles is necessary and does not leave room for liberty. “Whereas, on the other hand, those Rules, or Means, which are most proper for the attaining of this End, about which we have a Liberty of Acting; to which, Men are to be induc’d in a *Moral Way*, by such kind of Motives or Arguments as are in themselves sufficient to convince the Reason; *these* I call *Moral Duties*: DUTIES, as deriving their Obligation from their Conducibility to their promoting of our chief End; and, MORAL as depending upon Moral Motives.” (Whichcote 1698, 216) This shows that Shaftesbury through Whichcote’s work was familiar with a distinction between natural necessity and another kind of necessity that stems from moral obligation. Thus, we should take the interpretation outlined above seriously as an alternative to Woldt’s compatibilist interpretation. For further helpful discussion on how Shaftesbury builds on ideas from Whichcote’s sermons, see Uehlein (2017).

²⁶ Although I believe the distinction is helpful for illuminating Shaftesbury’s thinking about liberty, I do not want to suggest that the distinction between positive and negative liberty is exhaustive. Indeed Pettit (1997) offers convincing arguments that there is scope for a third concept of liberty, which understands liberty as non-domination. Pettit calls this third concept ‘republican liberty’. Additionally, Broad and Detlefsen (2017) argue that the distinction between positive and negative liberty does not properly capture the concerns of women and the practical constraints that often diminish their liberty. Broad and Detlefsen show that female perspectives offer alternative approaches to liberty that can be empowering for women.

positive sense goes beyond negative liberty and concerns an individual's wish to become their own master (Berlin 2002 [1958], 178–181). This includes making their own decisions, being motivated by reasons and their own goals, being an agent, who actively makes their own decisions and is able to realise them (Berlin 2002 [1958], 178).

On the basis of this distinction, I propose that Shaftesbury's concept of liberty can be understood as a version of positive liberty and will discuss in a moment in what sense he understands self-mastery and how it shapes his thinking about liberty. Before I turn to his understanding of self-mastery, it is worth noting that negative liberty also plays a role in the developmental interpretation that I have outlined above. As we have seen, Shaftesbury argues that external criticism, often delivered in the form of wit or humour, is important for helping individuals to see the ridiculousness and limitations of a life driven by enthusiasm. He emphasises that, in order for such external criticism to be effective, freedom of thought and expression has to be guaranteed. The freedom at issue is best understood as absence of external interference with regard to thought and expression and is thus a version of negative liberty. However, as individuals progress on their developmental journey beyond the second phase, the theme of self-mastery becomes more central.

This brings me to the question of how Shaftesbury understands self-mastery. One option is that self-mastery concerns inner criticism through soliloquy, or inner self-discourse; in other words, the proposal is that self-mastery focuses on the third phase of the intellectual journey described in the previous section. In particular, it can be argued that the division into two souls is central for self-mastery and self-mastery can be said to consist in the better or nobler soul gaining authority and governing the lower soul. On this reading, self-mastery can be understood as higher order reflection on first-order appetites, desires, and other passions.

One may worry that this reading is not strictly speaking a form of *self*-mastery, but rather one soul masters another. More importantly, if the division into two souls is a prerequisite for self-mastery, then the interpretation cannot easily accommodate that ultimately soliloquy is meant to overcome the division and the influence of the lower soul is meant to vanish. In other words, one aim of soliloquy is to turn patients into agents and help them “gain ... *a Will*” (S I.2, 1:116; C 84). During this process in which patients become agents the human being as a whole starts to approximate the better soul. Furthermore, the developmental journey does not end with the third phase that focuses on *inner criticism*, but rather soliloquy prepares individuals for more intellectual forms of moral character development. Thus, I want to propose that rather than restricting self-mastery to the third phase and explaining it in terms of the division into two souls, namely the

better soul's governing power over the other soul, self-mastery for Shaftesbury begins with soliloquy, but also includes the subsequent phases of personal development.

Although soliloquy, namely inner self-discourse and retreat from the social world, plays an important role in Shaftesbury's philosophy, for him the retreat from social life is merely temporary. Indeed, as I have shown above, return to social life is essential for the improvement of one's moral character. He argues, through the voice of Theocles, that genuine character improvement involves concern for society, namely seeking "with enlarg'd affection . . . *the Good of Mankind*" (M I.3, 2:120; C 244); thus it involves concern for the whole of humanity.²⁷ Furthermore, he sees moral improvement as a way of obtaining liberty (M II.2, 2:142–144; C 260–261). For instance, in *The Moralists*, Theocles observes that if temperance guides one's actions and decisions, other virtues will likely follow:

Let us once gain this simple plain-look'd *Virtue* [temperance], and see whether the more shining *Virtues* will not follow. See what that *Country of the Mind* will produce, when by the wholesom Laws of this Legislatress it has obtain'd its *Liberty!* (M II.2, 2:142; C 260)

Living virtuously makes it possible to overcome "lawless Rule of Lust and Passion" (M II.2, 2:143; C 260), which Shaftesbury calls the "Triumph" of liberty.²⁸

Miscellaneous Reflections—a work which offers Shaftesbury's reflections on the philosophical ideas that he develops in volumes 1 and 2 of *Characteristicks*—offers perhaps the strongest textual support that he understands liberty in terms of self-mastery:

Thus at last a MIND, by knowing *it-self*, and its own proper Powers and Virtues, becomes *free*, and independent. It sees its Hindrances and Obstructions, and finds they are wholly from *it-self*, and from *Opinions wrong-conceiv'd*. The more it conquers in this respect, (be it in the least particular) the more it is its own *Master*, feels its own *natural LIBERTY*, and congratulates with it-self on its own *Advancement* and *Prosperity*. (MR IV.1, 3:125; C 425)

Shaftesbury's language is informative: he speaks of "becom[ing] *free*," rather than being free. Moreover, being—or perhaps better becoming—one's own master is a matter of degrees, a matter

²⁷ See M I.3 2:120–121; C 243–244; II.1, 2:135–138; C254–157; II.4, 2:174–180; C 283–288; III.2, 2:237; C 331. Sociability is also an important theme in Shaftesbury's *Inquiry*.

²⁸ For further discussion, including background on an engraving, entitled "The Triumph of Liberty", that Shaftesbury commissioned as frontispiece for the second volume of the second edition of *Characteristicks*, see Paknadel (1974), Woldt (2014, 134–140).

of personal “*Advancement*.” All these claims fit squarely with the developmental interpretation and suggest that self-mastery is a gradual process; the more an individual becomes their own master, the freer they become.

I hope to have shown that there is good textual evidence for interpreting Shaftesbury’s account of liberty in terms of self-mastery. Moreover, I believe that for him self-mastery is not restricted to inner self-government through soliloquy, but rather soliloquy is merely the beginning of a developmental journey, which is intellectually demanding. On this reading, humans *become* moral agents and their own masters, and thereby they *become* free.

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