

# Shaftesbury on Persons, Personal Identity and Character Development

Ruth Boeker

University College Dublin

**Penultimate version. Please cite published version.**

**Published in *Philosophy Compass* 13/1 (2018): e12471**

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/phc3.12471>

## ABSTRACT

Shaftesbury's major work *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* was one of the most influential English works in the eighteenth century. This paper focuses on his contributions to debates about persons and personal identity and shows that Shaftesbury regards metaphysical questions of personal identity as closely connected with normative questions of character development. I argue that he is willing to accept that persons are substances and that he takes their continued existence for granted. He sees the need to supplement metaphysical debates of personal identity and believes that we have to turn to the character that is realized by a substance if we want to understand who we are. For Shaftesbury persons have a particular character, can act, and govern themselves. I propose that Shaftesbury's approach to persons has a developmental dimension, which is meant to encourage personal development and improvement of character. The developmental dimension can be understood as an intellectual journey that invites us to search for our true self, to develop our character, and to seek happiness, which ultimately involves understanding our place as persons in the order of the universe. I show that my developmental interpretation is preferable to other existing interpretations.

Keywords: Third Earl of Shaftesbury, person, personal identity, moral self, character, happiness, substance

## 1. Introduction

The works of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, were enormously influential in eighteenth century Britain.<sup>1</sup> His *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* is a collection of his mature works, which was “first published in 1711, [and] was [besides Locke’s *Two Treatises*] “the most reprinted book in English in that century.”<sup>2</sup> Yet more research needs to be done to rediscover Shaftesbury’s philosophical significance. For Shaftesbury philosophy is meant to “to refine our Spirits, improve our Understandings, or mend our Manners.” (S III.1, 1:179; C 129) He emphasizes that philosophy should have an ethical or practical dimension, it should guide our intellectual and moral development, and thereby our search for happiness and the good.<sup>3</sup> In a passage that nicely summarizes the central themes of his philosophy, he states:

To *philosophize*, in a just Signification, is but to carry *Good-breeding* a step higher. For the Accomplishment of Breeding is, To learn whatever is *decent* in Company, or *beautiful* in Arts; and the Sum of Philosophy is, To learn what is *just* in Society, and *beautiful* in Nature, and the Order of the World. (MR III.1, 3:99; C 407)

In this paper I will focus on Shaftesbury’s contributions to debates about persons and personal identity and we will see how his moral views shape his thinking about persons and personal identity. Moreover, we will see that personal development culminates in understanding the order of the world and our place in it.

---

<sup>1</sup> More information about Shaftesbury’s life and works can be found in Gill (2016a); Klein (2004); McAteer (2011); Milton (2010); Yaffe (2002).

<sup>2</sup> den Uyl (2001, vii). References to *Characteristicks* are to Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (2001), *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. D. den Uyl (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), 3 vols., hereafter “*Characteristicks*.” 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:

S: *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*

M: *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody*

MR: *Miscellaneous Reflections on the said Treatises, and other critical Subjects*

C: Klein’s edition of *Characteristics*.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion see Gill (2016a); Purviance (2004); Winkler (2000).

Shaftesbury's remarks about persons and personal identity are scattered throughout his works.<sup>4</sup> Within *Characteristicks* we find relevant remarks in *Soliloquy*, *The Moralists*, and *Miscellaneous Reflections*. *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author* is written as an inner dialogue; it literally addresses authors, but metaphorically it is an invitation to everyone to improve their character and manners. *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody* is a dialogue, narrated from the perspective of Philocles. In the passages relevant for our purposes Philocles interacts with Theocles and both dialogue partners are devoted to the search of happiness and the good. Theocles is portrayed as a highly educated, intellectual genius, who devotes his life to the study of the arts, culture and morality.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Theocles, Philocles takes a sceptical stance, and often brings the dialogue back down to earth. *Miscellaneous Reflections* was originally published as volume 3 of the three volumes edition of *Characteristicks* and contains reflections on the philosophical ideas developed in the first two volumes.

One challenge that every interpreter of Shaftesbury faces is that Shaftesbury's discussion of persons and personal identity is scattered throughout *Characteristicks*, often developed in dialogue form, both inner and proper dialogues, and the proposed notions of self or person tend to be challenged as the dialogue progresses. This makes it hard to identify Shaftesbury's considered views. Instead of treating this as a limitation of Shaftesbury's view, I believe that interpreters still have to fully appreciate the developmental dimension of Shaftesbury's discussion. His philosophy is meant to be practical and to encourage personal improvement and character development. He would regard traditional metaphysical approaches that aim to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions of personal identity as limited and static, because they do not help us to improve our lives. Shaftesbury's discussion of persons and personal identity goes beyond the metaphysical project, though—as we will see—does not entirely eliminate it either. I want to propose that his approach involves a developmental dimension and that through the dialogue form Shaftesbury invites his readers to be part of an intellectual journey—a journey that invites us to search for our true self, to develop our character, to seek happiness, which for Shaftesbury—speaking through the voice of Theocles—involves understanding our place as persons in the order of the universe (section 2). Next I will outline existing interpretations in the literature and argue why my interpretation is preferable (section 3). I will end by reflecting on the significance of Shaftesbury's contributions to debates about persons and personal identity (section 4).

---

<sup>4</sup> Relevant texts and passages include S I.1–2, III.1; C 70–85, 125–135; M II.1, II.4, III.1; C 247–257, 272–288, 296–316; MR IV; C 419–433. See also Shaftesbury (1900).

<sup>5</sup> See Shaftesbury, M II.1, 2:126; C 248. See also Gill (2010).

## 2. Shaftesbury's developmental approach to persons

Let us examine more closely the developmental dimension of Shaftesbury's approach to persons. Personal development is not something static. It is not a fixed state, in which one either is or is not. Rather it is an ongoing process that takes place over time and can involve several phases. The individual phases help us to progress in our personal development, or they enable us to look from new perspectives at questions such as who we really are and how we can improve our character and lives. As we progress from one phase to another we come a step closer towards realizing our true self. When I speak of the developmental dimension of Shaftesbury's approach to persons I mean a gradual process that enables personal growth and development and aims at the realization of one's true self. I will show in the following that a developmental dimension in this sense can be found in Shaftesbury's philosophy.

Although Shaftesbury does not explicitly use the language of "phases" I believe that this term provides a helpful tool to reconstruct how various passages in which he speaks about self, persons and personal identity, and which at first appear unconnected, can be integrated into a coherent view about personal development.<sup>6</sup> In the following I will outline one possible sequence of phases that a Shaftesburean approach to personal development could have. Let me emphasize that the order is one among many possible sequences. All of the conceptions of self that I present in the following are discussed by Shaftesbury throughout *Characteristicks*, but there is no single text that presents all of them, let alone in the order in which I present them.

Before I turn to Shaftesbury's positive proposals, I want to put aside the views that he criticizes. He rejects bodily views of personal identity. Matter constantly changes and any theory in terms of matter or bodily appearances would not have the constancy that we assume a self or person to have.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Shaftesbury does not explicitly distinguish the terms 'person,' 'human being,' 'self,' and 'soul,' but he also does not equate all of them and argues that there can be two souls/persons in a human being/self. Relevant passages include the following: "I have in reality within me *two distinct separate Souls*" (S I.2, 1:115; C 83), "our doctrine of *Two Persons* in one individual *Self*" (S I.2, 1:115; C 83) Note, though, that he also speaks of a "*natural SELF*," a "*better SELF*," or "*nobler Self*," and "[o]ur *real and genuine SELF*" (S III.1, 1:174–175; C 126), which suggests that he does not sharply distinguish the terms 'person' and 'self.' In the following I use the terms 'self' and 'person' interchangeably.

<sup>7</sup> See Shaftesbury, S III.1, 1:176; C 127; M II.1, 2:143, III.1, 2:196–197; C 254, 300–301.

He regards Descartes's famous *cogito*—the claim that I exist while I am thinking—as trivial and uninformative. According to Shaftesbury, Descartes does not properly address the important questions, namely “the Question is, “What constitutes the WE or I?” And, “Whether the I of this instant, be the same with that of any instant preceding or to come.”” (MR IV.1, 3:118; C 420).

Furthermore, Shaftesbury offers several arguments to show that memory or consciousness is neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity, which target Lockean views of personal identity.<sup>8</sup> It is not necessary, Shaftesbury argues, because persons can continue to exist and continue to be concerned in their past or future even if they have lost memories of their previous thoughts or actions.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Shaftesbury argues that memory is not sufficient for personal identity. One reason he offers is that memory can be false.<sup>10</sup> A second reason concerns an example of someone who during travel in foreign countries radically changed their character, but can still remember their former experiences, beliefs, and values.<sup>11</sup> Shaftesbury's negative arguments reveal that he assumes personal identity to have a certain stability that cannot be found in fleeting matter or fleeting psychological states.

We are now ready to turn to Shaftesbury's positive views and give a reconstruction of the different phases of personal development. In light of his arguments that a person can continue to exist despite changes of outer bodily appearance, it is plausible that we have to turn inward.

You have probably been in situations where inner voices pull you in different directions. For instance, part of you may want to stay in bed all day and watch movies, while another part reminds you of your long-term higher goals and convinces you that it is important to get

---

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Thiel (2011, 177–180) and Winkler (2000, 6–8). Locke (1975) in chapter xxvii of Book II of his *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* argues that personal identity consists in sameness of consciousness. Many Locke scholars agree that Locke's notion of sameness of consciousness cannot be reduced to memory; they include Atherton (1983); Matthews (1977); Strawson (2011); Thiel (2011); Weinberg (2016). Stuart (2013) is an exception. Thiel (2011) criticizes Shaftesbury for failing to properly “grasp Locke's distinctions between consciousness and memory and between man and person” (177–178). Thiel's observation is correct, but I doubt that Shaftesbury would have entirely retracted his arguments had he better understood the nuances of Locke's view, because Shaftesbury's arguments do not replace a memory view of personal identity with a more sophisticated view of consciousness, but rather are grounded in Shaftesbury's moral views and tend to emphasize the importance developing a stable character.

<sup>9</sup> See Shaftesbury, M II.1, 2:133–134; C 253–254.

<sup>10</sup> See Shaftesbury, MR IV.1, 118; C420–421.

<sup>11</sup> See Shaftesbury, S III.1, 1:176; C 127. We will return to the example and consider it more closely in the following.

up and study to reach long-term happiness. Shaftesbury believes that it is important to acquire self-knowledge as it can help improve our manners. For instance, if you start to examine what inner desires or inclinations explain your struggle to get out of bed, you can use these insights to change your manners. As Shaftesbury emphasizes in *Soliloquy*, self-knowledge is fundamental for any other inquiry. Following ancient philosophers, he encourages his readers to turn inward with the aim of discovering their true self:

This was among the Antients, that celebrated *Delphick* Inscription, RECOGNIZE YOURSELF: 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 believes that when we properly introspect and reflect on who we are, we will realize that there are two persons within one human being. He uses the metaphor of surgery to illustrate the relation between the two persons: one is patient and the other agent. We can also think of the relation between the two persons in analogy to the relation between pupil and teacher, or between advisee and advisor.<sup>12</sup> According to Shaftesbury, the better or nobler self, which is one of the persons within ourselves, has a certain authority and is meant to guide the other base or lower self.<sup>13</sup> Let us call this inward directed, introspective self-examination the first phase of a Shaftesburean search for self.

One reason why Shaftesbury criticized Cartesian views is that they do not properly engage with the question of what constitutes a person. In phase one this question has not yet been addressed and hence the search needs to continue and offer a further positive characterization of the constitution of a person. Shaftesbury invites us to consider the changes that a close and intimate friend could undergo while sick and travelling in foreign countries. On the one hand, he acknowledges that there could be outer changes of bodily appearances, but he argues that a person can endure such changes.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, there can be inner alterations of beliefs, characters, and manners and if they radically change then—so Shaftesbury suggests—a person is not any longer the same, even if they are still able to remember their former experiences.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Shaftesbury, S I.1, 1:97–100 I.2, 1:106–107; C 70–72, 77.

<sup>13</sup> See Shaftesbury, S I.2, 1:106; C 77.

<sup>14</sup> See Shaftesbury, S III.1, 176; C 127.

But shou'd a like Face and Figure of a Friend return to us with Thoughts and Humours of a strange and foreign Turn, with Passions, Affections, and Opinions wholly different from any thing we had formerly known; we shou'd say in earnest, and with the greatest Amazement and Concern, that this was *another Creature*, and not *the Friend* whom we once knew familiarly. Nor shou'd we in reality attempt any renewal of Acquaintance or Correspondence with such a Person, though perhaps he might preserve his Memory the faint Marks or Tokens of former Transactions which had pass'd between us. (S III.1, 1:176; C 127)

First, Shaftesbury here makes an epistemological point that it would be difficult to recognize a former friend after they have radically changed their character. Additionally, he seems to draw a metaphysical conclusion, namely that “this was *another Creature*.” The insight that we gain during this second phase is that a person should be identified, epistemically, and arguably also metaphysically, with a stable character. Yet it is worth noting that it is not clear how far Shaftesbury wants to take these conclusions. As the text continues he reminds us how little we know about ourselves and writes:<sup>15</sup>

When a Revolution of this kind, tho not so total, happens at any time in a Character; when the Passion or Humour of a known Person changes remarkably from what it once was; 'tis to *Philosophy* we then appeal. (S III.1, 1:176; C 127)

Let us pause to consider the worry that phases one and two can be in tension with each other. If we take seriously that a person will not any longer be the same person after radical changes of character, then one may worry that this proposal undermines the efforts of phase one, which presupposes that the base or lower self has the possibility of changing their character. Does this apparent tension undermine Shaftesbury's project? I do not think so. Instead it can reinforce how important it is that the base self listens to the better self and aims to approximate the better self. Only if the base self approximates the better self can others encounter our better character. Since the base self will have more stability when it approximates the better self, we have a further incentive for taking the guidance of the better

---

<sup>15</sup> Further discussion of the role of self-knowledge in Shaftesbury can be found in Renz (2017).

self seriously, as this will likely make friendships more stable and prevent scenarios such as the one described in the story of the traveller.

Having suggested that a person is identified with a stable character, the question remains whether it is important to cultivate a particular character. This question is the focus of a third phase. For Shaftesbury the cultivation and development of character is intimately tied to his larger philosophical project, namely, the search for happiness and the good. In *The Moralists* Part II, section 1, the friends Philocles and Theocles meet in the country and their path is devoted to the search for happiness. Theocles proposes ““That *Nothing can be good but what is constant*”” (M II.1, 2:128; C 249) and claims that we can find greatest stability in genuine continued friendship:

this Pleasure [of friendship] is more debauching than any other. Never did any Soul do good, but it came readier to do the same again, with more Enjoyment. Never was Love, or Gratitude, or Bounty practis'd but with increasing Joy, which made the Practiser still more in love with the fair Act. (M II.1, 2:135; C 254)

Genuine friendship, as Theocles understands it, is love of humanity; it is not the love of a particular individual, but rather love of mankind.<sup>16</sup>

How is pursuit of happiness and the good related to our search for self? We would not be able to acquire true happiness, if we lacked the virtues of a true friend of humanity. In so far as we aim to become a person that lives an intellectually satisfying and good life, it will not be sufficient to have any stable character, but rather it will be important to develop the character of a genuine friend.

However, are we able to be friends of humanity? Philocles intervenes and worries that it is too demanding to love humanity in the abstract and beyond the capacities of the ordinary person:

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)

---

<sup>16</sup> See Shaftesbury, M II.1, 2:127–139; C 249–257.

Philocles's doubts invite us to enter a fourth phase where we step back from abstract and highly intellectual reflections and return to worldly interactions with individual persons, whom we can meet, see, hear, touch, and whose company we can enjoy. Philocles's struggle to follow Theocles's proposal illustrates how far removed the position that Theocles aspires to is from ordinary experience. Indeed, it seems inaccessible to most people. Theocles belongs to a small elite circle of upper class gentlemen, which only those who had the privilege to enjoy the finest education can enter.<sup>17</sup> Philocles's doubts make explicit that many people lack the intellectual resources that equip them for highly abstract love of humanity. They also show us how hard and intellectually demanding it can be to devote one's life to happiness and character development and to fully realize one's true self.

Nevertheless, Theocles and Philocles are not yet drawn back to ordinary life and continue their intellectual journey. In a fifth phase, guided by Theocles, we enter theoretical and cosmological reflections on the self of the universe.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above, for Shaftesbury one of the aims of philosophy is to understand the order of the world<sup>19</sup> and he develops this point in the following reflections between Theocles and Philocles.

Theocles suggests that the order, unity, and coherence in nature presuppose an underlying system or whole. After reflections on the identity of trees, the two friends start to wonder whether there is a genuine boundary between different persons, say between you and me, or whether we are all part of one universe.<sup>20</sup> According to Theocles, "there is a strange Simplicity in this YOU and ME, that in reality they shou'd still be *one and the same*, when neither *one* Atom of Body, *one* Passion, nor *one* Thought remains the same." (M III.1, 2:197; C301) Modes or accidents cannot explain the simplicity and, hence, both take for granted that persons are substances, though Philocles adds: "But for anything further relating to this Question, you know my Sceptick Principles: I determine neither way." (M III.1, 2:198; C 302). Individual minds are fascinating systems; they enable us to think, imagine and act. Could it be a matter of pure chance that there are many individual intelligent systems (or individual selves) or are they all part of a larger system? Theocles is convinced that there is a larger whole, or a self of nature, and 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). Similarly as a human mind creates order and unity and governs different parts of the human body, the universal mind of the world creates

---

<sup>17</sup> See Gill (2010, 20).

<sup>18</sup> See Shaftesbury, M II.4, III.1; C 272–288, 296–316.

<sup>19</sup> See Shaftesbury, MR III.1, 3:99; C 407.

<sup>20</sup> See Shaftesbury, M III.1, 2:195–201; C 299–304.

unity and order in nature and among individual selves. This insight leads us to “endeavour to be really one with [the self of the world], and conformable with it, as far as [we are] able.” (M III.1, 2:201; C 304) Once we understand our place in the order of the universe, a “*particular* MIND should 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; C304)

Then the dialogue turns to other topics and ends abruptly: “BY this time we found ourselves insensibly got home. Our *Philosophy* ended and we return’d to common Affairs of Life.” (M III.3, 2:247; C 338)<sup>21</sup> This concluding remark of *The Moralists* can be seen as further recognition that the elite intellectual views advocated by Theocles are far removed from ordinary life.

### 3. Interpretive questions revisited

Having suggested that Shaftesbury’s approach to persons has a developmental dimension, it is time to consider how the interpretation that I have given above can supplement existing interpretations and help answer problems raised in the literature. Here I will focus on the following questions that have been raised by interpreters of Shaftesbury’s account of persons and personal identity:

- (i) To what extent is Shaftesbury’s approach to persons and personal identity ethical or practical, and to what extent is it metaphysical?
- (ii) Does Shaftesbury make contributions to the traditional problem of personal identity?
- (iii) Are questions of character development connected with questions of personal identity, or are these separate issues?

Although there is relatively little discussion of Shaftesbury’s approach to persons and personal identity in the secondary literature, a few prominent and rather different interpretations have emerged and it is worth outlining their key contributions.

Susan Purviance (2004, 2006) argues that Shaftesbury offers a “moral, not metaphysical” (2004, 161; 2006, 58) approach to self. She takes seriously that for Shaftesbury philosophy is meant to be practical and emphasizes that a self’s struggle of achieving unity is an ongoing

---

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion see Gill (2016b).

project of life that aims at personal integrity. Shaftesbury's *Soliloquy* is an important source for Purviance's interpretation. She draws particularly on the views that Shaftesbury develops during phase one of my reconstruction above. According to Purviance, the dialogic nature of Shaftesbury's approach to self is significant, because the inner dialogue enables us to resolve tensions and thereby strive towards personal integrity. It is often acknowledged that accounts of personal identity involve a unity relation that creates unity at a time and over time. The interesting feature of Purviance's interpretation is her proposal to understand the unity relation in terms of integrity.

Kenneth Winkler (2000) also emphasizes the practical or ethical dimension of Shaftesbury's approach to self. According to Winkler, "Shaftesbury [is] a critic of Locke inclined to locate personal identity not in the understanding, but in the will." (5) The will is a seat of active principles that enable us to judge, reach resolutions, act, and govern ourselves.<sup>22</sup> Winkler's reading draws on themes from *Soliloquy*, where the nobler self takes an active guiding role:

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)

Although Winkler and Purviance both highlight the practical aspects of Shaftesbury's view, Winkler adopts a more critical attitude. He asks whether Shaftesbury while turning away from speculative metaphysics has failed to properly engage with the metaphysical problem of personal identity.<sup>23</sup> Winkler asks further whether the simplicity of self that is discussed in *The Moralists*<sup>24</sup> (phase five) can be reconciled with the complexities of a still to be perfected self that is meant to be guided by our better or nobler self presented in *Soliloquy* (phase one).<sup>25</sup>

Udo Thiel's interpretation (2011, 177–180, 240–247) is in part a critical response to Winkler. Although Thiel acknowledges that "there is an obvious 'ethical orientation' in Shaftesbury's account" (241), Thiel emphasizes the metaphysical aspects of Shaftesbury's

---

<sup>22</sup> See Winkler (2000, 9, 11, 14).

<sup>23</sup> See Winkler (2000, 5, 12).

<sup>24</sup> See Shaftesbury, M III.1, 2:196–198; C 300–302.

<sup>25</sup> See Winkler (2000, 12–14).

view and argues that “the view that the soul is a simple and immaterial substance forms an essential part of Shaftesbury’s account of personal identity.” (241)<sup>26</sup> Thiel’s interpretation focuses on *The Moralists* (phase five). According to Thiel, Shaftesbury—through the voice of Theocles—offers cosmological arguments for the existence of a universal mind of the world.<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to illustrate the doctrine of a universal mind the discussion turns to the identity and individuation of persons. Thiel summarizes, “[q]uite unlike Locke, Shaftesbury falls back on the notion of a simple mind as that which guarantees personal identity through time.” (245)

So far we have seen that the answers to the question to what extent Shaftesbury’s approach to persons and personal is moral or metaphysical divide interpreters. However, are the proposals genuinely competing interpretations or can they be reconciled? In support of the latter Laurent Jaffro (2014) argues that in Shaftesbury metaphysical questions of personal identity are directly connected with what Jaffro calls “normative identity”:

I suggest that we differentiate between a normative sense of ‘being oneself’ or ‘remaining the same person’, and the metaphysical sense, that is, personal identity. The normative sense is that of constancy of the will: under favourable conditions, I do now just what I have decided to do, and I will do tomorrow what I decide now. If I suffer from weakness of will, then I am not always myself in the normative sense of being myself, although I am myself in the metaphysical sense: I do not lose my personal identity. ... Shaftesbury directly connects personal identity and normative identity. (2014, 158)

Jaffro (2008, 153–154; 2014, 155–159) offers a helpful elucidation of Shaftesbury’s conception of the will. Shaftesbury develops a Stoic intellectualist position, according to which the will is intelligent or rational. This means that when we are faced with a choice between two options, say *A* and *B*, and we believe that *A* is better than *B*, then—in so far as we are rational—we must always choose *A*. According to Jaffro, “for Shaftesbury the ultimate basis of moral identity, constancy, or integrity lies in our access to the permanence and stability of truth. ... If we do not do our best to have true evaluative judgements then we will lack normative identity.” (2014, 158)

---

<sup>26</sup> Thiel does not engage with Purviance’s interpretation, but I take it that he would disagree with her claim that Shaftesbury’s view is “moral, not metaphysical” (2004, 161; 2006, 58).

<sup>27</sup> See Shaftesbury, M II.4, III.1.

To return to the first of our three questions, I believe that Thiel and Jaffro are right that metaphysical themes are relevant for understanding Shaftesbury's approach to persons and personal identity. Purviance offers an insightful understanding of the ethical and practical phases of Shaftesbury's approach, but neglects that ethical perfection for Shaftesbury involves, or strives towards, understanding our place in the order of the universe (phase five) and thus a moral life will eventually lead to metaphysical reflections. For this reason, ethics cannot be sharply separated from metaphysics in Shaftesbury's philosophy and we should reject a *purely* "moral, not metaphysical" interpretation of Shaftesbury's approach to self as proposed by Purviance.<sup>28</sup>

The further question is whether Shaftesbury's contribution to debates about personal identity is simply a traditional immaterial substance view, as Thiel argues, or whether Shaftesbury connects metaphysical questions of personal identity with normative or ethical questions, as Jaffro proposes. As we have seen (during phase five) Theocles and Philocles agree that a self is a substance (M III.1, 2:197–198; C 301–302). In his *Miscellaneous Reflections*, after having questioned metaphysical debates about personal identity, including the Lockean proposal to understand personal identity in terms of consciousness, Shaftesbury "declare[s] that for my own part, I take my Being *upon Trust*." (MR IV.1, 3:118; C 421) These passages intimate that Shaftesbury accepts that a self is a substance and that he takes our continued existence for granted. It is not far to infer that in response to the metaphysical question of what makes a person the same over time, Shaftesbury would be willing to accept that a person continues to exist in virtue of the continued existence of an underlying substance.

Yet he makes clear that if we purely focus on the metaphysical questions we will "be at a loss still about [ourselves]" (M III.1, 2:199; C 302). For Shaftesbury we take our continued existence for granted, because this presupposition enables us to be devoted to ethics and practical matters. We find evidence for this both in *The Moralists* and in *Miscellaneous Reflections*. After the metaphysical remarks (discussed in the previous paragraph) Shaftesbury quickly returns to moral and practical issues and he emphasizes the active governing role of minds or persons:

And of this *Mind*'tis enough to say, "... That it superintends and manages its own *Imaginations, Appearances, Fancys*; correcting, working, and modelling these, as it finds good;

---

<sup>28</sup> Yet Shaftesbury can still be said to be critical of *purely speculative* metaphysics, or "super-speculative philosophy" (S III.1, 1:181; C 131), namely metaphysical questions that are entirely unconnected with questions of happiness and the good.

and adorning and accomplishing, the best it can, this composite Order of Body and Understanding.” Such a MIND and governing Part, I know there is somewhere in the World. (M III.1, 2:199; C 302)

Mean while, there is no Impediment, Hinderance, or Suspension of *Action*, on account of these wonderfully refin’d *Speculations*. Argument and Debate go on still. Conduct is settled. Rules and Measures are given out, and receiv’d. Nor do we scruple to act as resolutely upon the mere Supposition that *we are*, as if we had effectually prov’d it a thousand times, to the full satisfaction of our *Metaphysical* or *Pyrrhonian* Antagonist.

This to me appears sufficient Ground for a *Moralist*. Nor do I ask more, when I undertake to prove the reality of VIRTUE and MORALS. (MR IV.1, 3:119; C 421)

The fact that Shaftesbury immediately moves from metaphysical discussions concerning the ontological status of persons to ethics and practical questions of self-government, gives a hint that Shaftesbury considers metaphysical questions of personal identity as closely connected with ethical or practical questions, as Jaffro argues. Moreover the passage from *Soliloquy* I.2, 1:116 (C 84), cited above in support of Winkler’s interpretation, shows that the will by playing an active governing role, ensures that one is the same person over time.<sup>29</sup> This means for Shaftesbury there is not merely an underlying substance that grounds personal identity, but we play an active role in developing our character and creating the person who we are.

The picture that has emerged so far is that Shaftesbury accepts the existence of an underlying substance and that he takes the continued existence of persons for granted. If asked the traditional metaphysical question of what makes a person the same over time, he will likely respond that a person continues to exist in virtue of the continued existence of the underlying substance. However, we can expect that he will add that this view is incomplete and needs to be supplemented. Persons are not just empty vessels, but rather persons have a will, can act, and have a particular character, and as persons we should focus on developing a

---

<sup>29</sup> Additional textual support that for Shaftesbury metaphysical questions of personal identity are connected with ethical and practical questions can be found in his criticism and response to the Cartesian *cogito* and a Lockean account of personal identity. See Shaftesbury S III.1, 1:176; C127; MR IV.1, 2:118; C 420–421. Had Shaftesbury meant to separate metaphysical questions of personal identity from ethical and practical questions he should have criticized the Lockean account of personal identity by arguing for a substance account of personal identity. Instead Shaftesbury aims to overcome the shortcomings of the Lockean view by drawing attention to the importance of developing a stable character.

stable moral character. This suggests that Shaftesbury would find it alienating to talk about persons as substances without also considering the character that is realized by the substance.

Jaffro proposes that for Shaftesbury personal identity in the metaphysical sense is directly connected with what he calls normative identity. Is normative identity in Jaffro's sense the same as the developmental dimension that I outlined above? I believe that my interpretation has the potential to challenge Jaffro's understanding of normative selfhood. According to Jaffro, normative selfhood, which is realized by true normative judgements, or at least aims towards truth, is a "very ambitious conception of selfhood" (2014, 159), because only highly intellectual and rational individuals are capable of achieving it. However, does the developmental approach require that in order to be a self or person one must have already reached a state of intellectual perfection?

In contrast to Jaffro's interpretation, my developmental approach makes it possible to regard moral improvement and character development as an ongoing project of life. My interpretation focuses on the process of striving towards perfection, rather than a state of intellectual perfection. We have seen that phases three and five are intellectually very demanding and that not everyone is able to reach them. Jaffro's interpretation excludes those who have not yet reached a deep understanding of moral truth. This means it excludes those who have not yet reached phases three and five. My developmental interpretation does not have this consequence and includes as persons everyone who is on an intellectual journey anywhere between phases one through five (and possibly in a different order). A developmental interpretation can take seriously Shaftesbury's view that philosophy is meant to be practical. The inner dialogue form of *Soliloquy* strengthens the invitation to the reader to enter into an inner dialogue with oneself, to listen to the advice of one's better self with the aim of improving one's character and achieving moral integrity. Shaftesbury is aware that this can be a long and difficult process. Rather than being fixated on an intellectual state of perfection, *Soliloquy* focuses on the intellectual and developmental journey. In this sense Shaftesbury's philosophy is practical. Similarly, the dialogue form of *The Moralists* offers support for a developmental interpretation. Theocles represents an elite character who is close to reaching highest intellectual perfection. Yet Philocles reminds us of the struggles of such an intellectual journey. It is precisely the back and forth between Philocles and Theocles, between mundane and intellectual views, that turns the project of seeking moral integrity and happiness into a developmental one.

#### 4. Shaftesbury's significance

Has Shaftesbury advanced debates about persons and personal identity? In the interest of philosophical clarity one may prefer to separate the metaphysical question of personal identity, namely the question of what the necessary and sufficient conditions are that make a person the same over time, from moral or normative questions of character development. Anyone who favours such a distinction is likely to be disappointed by the lack of originality of Shaftesbury's contributions to the former question. The textual evidence, however, suggests that Shaftesbury sees the two questions more closely connected. It may be fair to say that Shaftesbury does not solely address the traditional problem of personal identity and thus has shifted the discourse. Certainly, he has supplemented the metaphysical questions. For him the insight that "I AM" will prompt us to turn to the normative question "WHO and WHAT *I ought to be*" (MR IV.1, 3:119; C 421). I suggested that for Shaftesbury the underlying metaphysics of persons and personal identity is supplemented by a developmental project, which invites persons to enter an intellectual journey and to strive to improve their character, to seek happiness, and to understand their place in the order of the universe.

#### Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at at the Victorian Postgraduate Philosophy Workshop at the University of Melbourne in October 2016, the 2017 Dutch Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy in Groningen, the 2017 annual conference of the British Society for the History of Philosophy in Sheffield, and at the Work in Progress Seminar of the School of Philosophy at University College Dublin in April 2017. I would like to thank all my audiences for helpful feedback. Additionally, I would like to thank Jan-Erik Jones, Kenneth Pearce, Lisa Shapiro, and my anonymous referee for constructive and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Karen Green, Udo Thiel, Margaret Watkins, and Kenneth Winkler for conversations about Shaftesbury and feedback on related work.

#### Works Cited

Atherton, M. (1983). Locke's Theory of Personal Identity. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 8(1), 273–293. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1983.tb00470.x>

- den Uyl, D. J. (2001). Foreword to *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. In A. A. Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Vol. 1, pp. vii–xii). Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Gill, M. B. (2010). From Cambridge Platonism to Scottish Sentimentalism. *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 8(1), 13–31. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/E1479665109000487>
- Gill, M. B. (2016a). Lord Shaftesbury [Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury]. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 ed.). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shaftesbury/>.
- Gill, M. B. (2016b). Love of Humanity in Shaftesbury's Moralists. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 24, 1117–1135. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1198303>
- Jaffro, L. (2008). Shaftesbury on the 'Natural Secretion' and Philosophical Personae. *Intellectual History Review*, 18(3), 349–359. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496970802319235>
- Jaffro, L. (2014). Cyrus' Strategy: Shaftesbury on Human Frailty and the Will. In P. Müller (Ed.), *New Ages, New Opinions: Shaftesbury in his World and Today* (pp. 153–165). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Klein, L. E. (2004). Cooper, Anthony Ashley, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online 2016 ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6209>.
- Locke, J. (1975). *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Matthews, E. (1977). Descartes and Locke on the Concept of a Person. *The Locke Newsletter*, 8, 9–34.
- McAteer, J. (2011). Shaftesbury. In J. Fieser & B. Dowden (Eds.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/shaftes/>.
- Milton, J. R. (2010). The Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). In S.-J. Savonius-Wroth, P. Schuurman, & J. Walmsley (Eds.), *The Continuum Companion to Locke* (pp. 109–113). London and New York: Continuum.
- Purviance, S. M. (2004). Shaftesbury on Self as a Practice. *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 2(2), 154–163. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/jsp.2004.2.2.154>
- Purviance, S. M. (2006). Personal Identity and Mutiplicity in Shaftesbury, Hume, and Reid In B. Penas Ibáñez & M. C. López Sáenz (Eds.), *Interculturalism: Between Identity and Diversity* (pp. 47–62). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Renz, U. (2017). Socratic Self-Knowledge in Early Modern Philosophy. In U. Renz (Ed.), *Self-knowledge: A History* (pp. 146–163). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shaftesbury, A. A. Cooper, Third Earl of. (1900). *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury*. London and New York: Swan Sonnenschein.
- Shaftesbury, A. A. Cooper, Third Earl of. (1999). *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. L. E. Klein (Ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shaftesbury, A. A. Cooper, Third Earl of. (2001). *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. D. J. den Uyl (Ed.). 3 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Strawson, G. (2011). *Locke on Personal Identity: Consciousness and Concernment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stuart, M. (2013). *Locke's Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Thiel, U. (2011). *The Early Modern Subject: Self-consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weinberg, S. (2016). *Consciousness in Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Winkler, K. P. (2000). “All Is Revolution in Us”: Personal Identity in Shaftesbury and Hume. *Hume Studies*, 26(1), 3–40. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hms.2011.0311>
- Yaffe, G. (2002). Earl of Shaftesbury. In S. Nadler (Ed.), *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy* (pp. 425–436). Malden, MA: Blackwell.