



ART AND ETHICAL CRITICISM
EDITED BY GARRY L. HAGBERG

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Art and Ethical Criticism

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CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors	vii
Foreword	xi
<i>Garry L. Hagberg</i>	
Part I: Historical Foundations	1
1 Is Ethical Criticism a Problem? A Historical Perspective	3
<i>Paul Guyer</i>	
Part II: Conceptions of Ethical Content	33
2 Narrative and the Ethical Life	35
<i>Noël Carroll</i>	
3 A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction	63
<i>Joshua Landy</i>	
4 Empathy, Expression, and What Artworks Have to Teach	95
<i>Mitchell Green</i>	
Part III: Literature and Moral Responsibility	123
5 “Solid Objects,” Solid Objections: On Virginia Woolf and Philosophy	125
<i>Paisley Livingston</i>	
6 Disgrace: Bernard Williams and J. M. Coetzee	144
<i>Catherine Wilson</i>	

7	Facing Death Together: Camus's <i>The Plague</i> <i>Robert C. Solomon</i>	163
Part IV: Visual Art, Artifacts, and the Ethical Response		185
8	Staying in Touch <i>Carolyn Korsmeyer</i>	187
9	Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and the Ethical Dimensions of Photography <i>David Davies</i>	211
10	Ethical Judgments in Museums <i>Ivan Gaskell</i>	229
Part V: Music and Moral Relations		243
11	<i>Così</i> 's Canon Quartet <i>Stephen Davies</i>	245
12	Jazz Improvisation and Ethical Interaction: A Sketch of the Connections <i>Garry L. Hagberg</i>	259
	Index	286

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FOREWORD

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously delivered early in his philosophical life the gnomic utterance “Ethics and aesthetics are one.” That, as stated, is perhaps too general a claim to be judged true or false. The proof would of course be in the particulars (as indeed Wittgenstein was to go on to show in his later philosophical work). And it is just such particulars into which the authors in this collection descend (it should be said, for most of them, without any part of Wittgenstein’s philosophy in tow).

Ethical criticism – the task of elucidating the ethical content of the arts, the character and viability of our ethical responses to them, and the nature of the moral benefit provided by a serious engagement with literature, the visual arts, and music – is pursued here under five headings. They are: (Part I) the historical precedents and groundings of the very idea of ethical criticism (Guyer); (Part II) ways of describing ethical content in the arts and the ways in which that content is delivered (Carroll, Landy, Green); (Part III) demonstrations of the value of literary case-studies – in these discussions Virginia Woolf, J. M. Coetzee, and Albert Camus – for moral understanding (Livingston, Wilson, Solomon); (Part IV) distinct ethical issues that arise in connection with our viewing and handling of visual art, artifacts, photography, and architecture (Korsmeyer, D. Davies, Gaskell); and (Part V) the significance of – and some of the telling complexities of – moral relations as they are both depicted and exemplified in music and its performance (S. Davies, Hagberg).

Taken together, the essays offered herein show that ethics and aesthetics aren’t in any generic sense one – but nor are they two. These explorations suggest, rather, that the connections between art and morality are, as an intricate web or complex network of relations, more intricate, complex, subtle, and indeed more interesting, than any over-generalized account of *the* relation could accommodate. And, taken together,

they show that it is within particularized contexts of usage that our aesthetic descriptions, and our ethically resonant aesthetic predicates in particular, assume the precise meanings they do – it is here that such words *work*. (It was J. L. Austin who gave us the sometimes fair remark that over-generalization would be an occupational hazard in philosophy if it weren't the occupation.)

Because this volume is the work of a dozen pairs of hands, with the authors working from their individual philosophical “backstories,” a close reading will show that they do not agree on all points; a few of these are matters of substance and many are matters of emphasis. For a collection devoted to a descent into the instructive particularities and contextually nuanced details of aesthetics-ethics connections, this is just as it should be: each author casts certain issues, considerations, concerns, and interests into higher relief while backgrounding others. It is hoped that the collection, taken *in toto* as a kind of conceptual mosaic, will afford both an enriching multifaceted view and an awareness of the significance of fairly wide-ranging particular cases that might escape full articulation in the hands of a single author. Such, in any case, was the editorial aspiration motivating the project, and I am extremely grateful to each of the contributors for responding to the invitation to participate in the undertaking with such alacrity and enthusiasm.

I am also very grateful to Berys Gaut and Dom Lopes, who invited the volume for their series and who provided expert advice in the formative stage, and to Jeff Dean at Blackwell, for doing so much to make this book a reality. Jeanette McDonald at Bard College has once again proved invaluable in assembling and preparing the manuscript, and we are all indebted to Claire Creffield for her meticulous and sensitive copy-editing.

I would also like to express how saddened we all were to learn, as this book was in preparation, of the death of Bob Solomon. His contribution displays his rare combination of acute discernment, cultural breadth, and profound human concern that we will all very much miss. The contributors and I are of one mind in wishing to dedicate our collective work in this volume to his memory.

G. H.

Part I

Historical Foundations

I

IS ETHICAL CRITICISM A PROBLEM? A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Paul Guyer

1 Is There a Problem about Ethical Criticism?

In recent discussion, the question whether “ethical criticism” of art is possible and appropriate has been understood as the question whether ethical merits or flaws in works of art, but especially the latter, are themselves also aesthetic merits or flaws of those works, again typically the latter, or only merits or flaws of those works considered from some non-aesthetic point of view, not *qua* works of art.¹ Noël Carroll has written that “philosophers from Plato through Hume supposed that the pertinence of ethical criticism to art was unproblematic. It is only since the late eighteenth century that the view took hold that the aesthetic realm and the ethical realm are each absolutely autonomous from the other.”² This correctly assumes that there cannot even be a question about whether an ethical criticism of a work is also an aesthetic criticism unless the ethical and the aesthetic are considered to be separate dimensions of value in our experience and its objects, and suggests that the separation between the ethical and the aesthetic that underlies the contemporary discussion was made only in the late eighteenth century. Presumably Carroll supposes that the decisive event that made this separation in the late eighteenth century was Kant’s insistence in his 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that judgments of taste are disinterested, while moral judgments express the interest of pure practical reason. What I want to argue here is that while the idea of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment may have been an eighteenth-century innovation, it was only later adapters of the idea, in the late nineteenth century and again in the second half of the twentieth century, who thought that it makes ethical criticism of works

of art problematic; neither Kant himself nor those of his predecessors who first introduced the idea of the disinterestedness of judgments of beauty, namely Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and Francis Hutcheson, thought that the disinterestedness of judgments of taste in general precluded the centrality of ethical issues to works of art in particular, and thus the appropriateness of ethical criticism of such works. Moreover, I believe, they were right to think that there is no problem about ethical criticism, although I will not attempt to defend this position independently. Carroll himself does so quite ably.

Before turning to details, two comments are in order. First, it may be useful to distinguish between two different issues that have been central both in eighteenth-century discussions of the relations between art and morality and in recent discussions, although they have not always been distinguished. One of these issues is what has come to be called the issue of ethical criticism; the other is what might be called, adopting an eighteenth-century term, the issue of aesthetic education. The former is the question of whether an ethical dimension can be essential to a work of art *qua* work of art, so that an ethical criticism of the work is also an aesthetic criticism of it, not an independent criticism. The second is the question of whether the experience of works of art and the cultivation of the skills and sensibilities necessary to the full and proper appreciation and enjoyment of (at least some kinds of) works of arts is advantageous for the development of moral sensitivity, judgment, or even commitment, thus whether aesthetic education makes a contribution to moral development. In the most general terms, the former question is thus whether the ethical makes a contribution to the aesthetic, and the latter is whether the aesthetic makes a contribution to the ethical. Both of these questions were extensively discussed in the eighteenth century, and both have figured in the recent discussion of the relation between aesthetics and morality as well.³ But because of the focus of the present volume, my discussion in this paper will focus on the topic of ethical criticism rather than aesthetic education.

My second preliminary point is that although the idea of the disinterestedness of judgments of taste and therefore of a significant distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical was certainly one major development in eighteenth-century aesthetics, that century was a period of intense activity in aesthetics, with a wide array of theories on offer, and the line of thought that leads from Hutcheson to Kant – or more precisely, from Hutcheson to one element emphasized in Kant's initial analysis of pure judgments of taste in general, but hardly mentioned in his analysis of the creation and reception of works of fine art in particular, a distinction that

will become important as I proceed – was hardly the only approach in eighteenth-century aesthetics or even the predominant one. On many eighteenth-century accounts of art and our experience of it, ethical criticism would have seemed even less problematic than I will argue it was for Kant and other theorists of disinterestedness. For many eighteenth-century theorists, art was defined as the communication of truths and emotions, and in particular morally significant truths and emotions, through media accessible to our senses and imaginations, and our enjoyment of art was essentially connected to our appreciation of both the form and the content of such communication. On theories such as this, there could be no question that ethical criticism is apposite to the criticism of art *qua* art.

2 The Sensible Representation of the Moral

I will briefly illustrate this kind of aesthetic theory, which if anything was the dominant kind of theory in the eighteenth century, before turning to the theories emphasizing disinterestedness, which have seemed to recent writers to create a problem about ethical criticism.

German aesthetics before Kant was dominated by Wolffians, including Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Georg Friedrich Meier, Moses Mendelssohn, and Johann Georg Sulzer. Christian Wolff himself did not use the term “aesthetic” – that would be introduced by Baumgarten in 1735⁴ – but ascribed the pleasure of what we would call aesthetic response to the sensible, or clear but indistinct, cognition of perfection; the aesthetic qualities of an object, conversely, would be its perfections insofar as they are suitable for sensible cognition and are so perceived. Thus, “Beauty consists in the perfection of a thing, insofar as it is suitable for producing pleasure in us” by means of the sensory cognition of that perfection.⁵ Wolff defined perfection, very abstractly, as the harmony or concordance of the parts of an object with one another and with the aim of an object.⁶ In the case of representational arts such as painting, the aim of the object is representation, and the perfection of representation is similarity,⁷ but what is represented should also be a perfection, and moral perfections are certainly among the perfections that can be represented by such art. In this case, the moral significance of what is represented thus makes an essential contribution to the overall perfection of the object, and ethical criticism of the content of the work of art would be part of the criticism of it as a work of art. Baumgarten placed greater emphasis than Wolff on the perfection of the representation itself rather than of the represented content when he transformed Wolff’s formula that beauty is the sensible

cognition of perfection into the definition of beauty as “the perfection of sensible cognition as such.”⁸ But Baumgarten’s enumeration of the specific perfections of representational art include not only such formal features as “wealth,” “truth,” “clarity,” and “liveliness” (*ubertas, veritas, claritas, and vita cognitionis*), but also “magnitude” (*magnitudo*), which is typically the *moral* magnitude of that which is represented. Baumgarten made it clear that art typically represents morally significant content in a number of passages in his classroom lectures on the *Aesthetica*. He said that “Everything that we are to think beautifully must be aesthetically great . . . For this it is requisite that the objects of thought be great, and then that the thoughts of the object be made equal or proportionate, and that finally both not be without important consequences, but must rather be fruitful and touching.”⁹ Even more explicitly, he said that “nothing can be beautiful that is not moral, because insofar as I would think beautifully I must think morally and virtuously.”¹⁰ Likewise, Baumgarten’s disciple Meier said that “For a sensible representation to enjoy the greatest possible beauty,” it must have formal merits such as “wealth,” and thus for example “A beautiful cognition must represent a great variety in a single image,” but it must also possess “The magnitude of cognition, the noble, the sublime, etc. For the sake of this beauty sensible cognition must not only represent great, suitable, important, noble objects, and so on, but must represent them in a way that is suitable and proportionate to their magnitude.”¹¹ This makes it clear that both the moral quality of what is represented by a work of art and the way in which it is represented contribute to the beauty of the work, and thus that criticism of the moral content of a work is just as much a part of the criticism of it as a work of art as is criticism of the way in which the content is presented.

Moses Mendelssohn’s aesthetics of “mixed emotions,” developed in the later 1750s, thus at the same time as the work of Meier’s just cited, remains within the same general framework. Mendelssohn recognized the possibility of beautiful representations of morally negative or disturbing content, because he held that the activity of representing is itself an “affirmative determination of the soul” and thus something we take pleasure in, so that while

We cannot perceive a good action without approving it, without feeling inside a certain enjoyment of it, nor can we perceive an evil action without disapproving of the action itself and being disgusted by it[, y]et recognizing an evil action and disapproving it are affirmative features of the soul, expressions of the mental powers in knowing and desiring, and

elements of perfection which, in this connection, must be gratifying and enjoyable . . . [Thus,] considered as a representation, a picture within us that engages the soul's capacities of knowing and desiring, the representation of what is evil is itself an element of the soul's perfection and brings with it something quite pleasant that we by no means would prefer not to feel than to feel.¹²

Thus for Mendelssohn the fact that the content of art typically has moral significance does not mean that beautiful art can represent only what is morally good. But the moral status of the content interacts with the more formal merits of the artistic representation in forming our overall response, and certainly the moral demerits of the work can outweigh its other merits; thus moral assessment of the content of a work is certainly relevant to the assessment of its beauty or aesthetic merit as a whole.

Johann Georg Sulzer also recognized that art aims to produce pleasure both by setting our cognitive powers into activity through the formal features of its object and by arousing our deepest feelings. Thus he wrote that "the essence" of art "consists in the fact that it impresses the objects of our representation with sensible force, its end is the lively affection of our minds, and in its application it aims at the elevation of the spirit and the heart," and that "The fine arts also use their charms in order to draw our attention to the good and to affect us with love for it. Only through this application does it become important to the human race and deserve the attention of the wise and the support of regents."¹³ Sulzer recognized that the arts could "affect us with love for" the good through their depiction of the ugly, including the morally ugly, as well as through their depiction of the good,¹⁴ and thus like Mendelssohn he did not assume that morally valuable art can represent only what is morally valuable. But he firmly held that the vivification of our moral sentiments is a proper, indeed perhaps the central, aim of fine art as such, and thus that moral criticism of the effect of a work is a proper part of the criticism of it as a work of art.

These writers represented the mainstream of German aesthetics before Kant, and for all of them ethical criticism was clearly part of the criticism of art as such, not a separate and alternative form of criticism. None of them emphasized or even discussed the idea of the disinterestedness of judgments of taste. Kant would introduce that idea to German aesthetic discourse, having appropriated it from British aesthetics. Even so, we will see, he did not take the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment to make ethical criticism entirely separate from the criticism of art as such. Before we turn to Kant and other theorists of disinterestedness, however, let us

take a brief look at exemplary French and British writers for whom, like the Germans we have just considered, it was patent that the affection of our moral feelings was central to the aims of art and thus that ethical criticism was part and parcel of aesthetic judgment.

Among the major contributors to aesthetics in eighteenth-century France, Denis Diderot is an interesting case, because some of his theoretical writings espouse what could be the basis for a separation between ethical and aesthetical values in works of art that is, however, clearly belied by his own extensive critical practice. In his essay on beauty in the *Encyclopédie*, published in 1752, Diderot locates our sense of beauty in the contemplation of such formal properties as “order, relation, arrangement, symmetry, propriety, impropriety, etc.,” and says that “I therefore term ‘beautiful,’ independently of my existence, everything that contains the power of awakening the notion of relation in my mind.”¹⁵ If “beauty” stands in for a general category of aesthetic qualities, this seems to limit such qualities to formal qualities of objects that are not obviously moral in nature. And if such relations as “propriety” and “impropriety” might seem to be moral in nature, thereby immediately subtending the ethical under the aesthetic category of beauty, Diderot seems explicitly to reject such a supposition by clearly separating a moral species of beauty from other, properly aesthetic, species of beauty. Thus he writes:

Either we consider the relations apparent in men’s actions, and we have *moral beauty*; or in works of literature, and we have *literary beauty*; or in musical compositions, and we have *musical beauty*; or in the works of nature; and we have *natural beauty*; or in the mechanical creations of man, and we have the *beauty of artifice*; or in the likenesses provided by works of art or of nature, and we have *imitative beauty*.¹⁶

This suggests that while there might be grounds for distinguishing among literary, musical, natural, artificial, and imitative beauty, they are all genuinely aesthetic sorts of beauty, while moral beauty is something else altogether. Further, Diderot seems to lend support to such a position when he illustrates his conception of “propriety” as a relation in a specific work of art, Pierre Corneille’s play *Horace*. His argument is that our response to the beauty of a character’s action or statement is not a direct response to his expression of a moral quality, but rather a response to the “propriety” or relation *between* the agent’s moral character and his manner of expression. Thus, the beauty of propriety does not seem to be ethical, but rather aesthetic, and our pleasure in it seems to be independent of a purely moral judgment.

However, in his more mature critical practice, Diderot strongly suggests that it is an aim of art *qua* art to arouse our emotions by appealing to our moral sensibilities, and thus that it would be an entirely apposite criticism of a work of art as such that it in some way expressed a morally defective rather than appropriate moral attitude or quality: that would directly interfere with its goal as a work of art. Thus in an essay “On Dramatic Poetry” from 1758, he writes that

The poet, the novelist, and the actor make their way into our hearts by indirect means. They touch our souls all the more strongly and the more surely because we are relaxed, because we offer ourselves to the blow. The sufferings with which they move me are imaginary, I agree, but they move me all the same. Every line rouses an impulse of concern in me for the misfortunes of virtue and moves me to expend my tears on them. What could be more pernicious than an art that instilled in me a feeling of complicity with an evil man? But, by the same token, what art could be more precious than the one that imperceptibly makes me feel concern for the fate of a good man, that draws me out of the quiet and comfortable situation I myself enjoy in order to accompany him . . . ?¹⁷

And in the “Notes on Painting” appended to his review of the Salon of 1765, he says that “One should inscribe over the door of one’s studio: Here the unfortunate will find eyes that will weep for them. To make virtue attractive, vice odious, and ridicule effective: such is the project every upstanding man who takes up the pen, the brush, or the chisel should make his own.”¹⁸ Both of these statements suggest that the arousal of morally significant and appropriate emotions by the vivid and engaging depiction of characters is an essential aim of art, and thus that the criticism that a work of art “that instilled in me a feeling of complicity with an evil man” is “pernicious” is an entirely proper judgment of it *as a work of art*, not an independent judgment of the object under some non-aesthetic category. However Diderot’s abstract definition of beauty should be understood, he seems far from seeing ethical criticism of art as alternative to aesthetic criticism of it.

Among writers on aesthetics in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, the most influential was no doubt Henry Home, Lord Kames, the Scottish lawyer who published *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* in 1751 and the *Elements of Criticism* in 1762, a book that remained continuously in print well into the nineteenth century and was quickly translated into other European languages. (I will return to the earlier British writers Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in Section 3 below.) The 1751 *Essays* contain an important criticism of Hutcheson’s and Hume’s attempt to

found all of moral philosophy on our natural approbation of benevolence, among other riches, but its interest here is its initial chapter on “Our Attachment to Objects of Distress,” Kames’s contribution to the great eighteenth-century debate about the paradox of our pleasure in tragedy. Kames’s argument here is based on the premise “that naturally we have a strong desire to be acquainted with the history of others. We judge of their actions, approve or disapprove, condemn or acquit; and in this the busy mind has a wonderful delight.”¹⁹ The pleasure that we take in judging of the actions and, as it turns out, the feelings of others, is central to our experience of art as well, because “whatever may be the physical cause, one thing is evident, that [the] aptitude of the mind of man to receive impressions from feigned as well as from real objects, contributes to the noblest purposes of life.”²⁰ Thus, not only history but also novels and plays are “the most universal and favourite entertainments,” because in them we “enter deep into the concerns” and “partake of [the] joys and distresses” of other human beings. In particular tragedy, a “feigned history,” “imitation or representation of human characters and actions,” “commonly makes a stronger impression than what is real; because, if it be a work of genius, incidents will be chosen to make the deepest impressions; and will be so conducted as to keep the mind in continual suspense and agitation, beyond what commonly happens in real life.”²¹ We enjoy this, according to Kames, because the experience of even painful events, whether real or feigned, as in art, is not itself necessarily painful:

Thus the moral affections, even such of them as produce pain, are none of them attended with any degree of aversion . . . Sympathy in particular attaches us to an object in distress so powerfully as even to overbalance self-love, which would make us fly from it. Sympathy accordingly, though a painful passion, is attractive; and in affording relief, the gratification of the passion is not a little pleasant.²²

Because of this fact, “tragedy is allowed to seize the mind with all the different charms which arise from the exercise of the social passions,”²³ and indeed the *point* of tragedy as a paradigmatic form of art is precisely to so “seize the mind.” Anything about a tragedy that would stand in the way of our sympathetic response to its characters, including anything morally inappropriate in their depiction, would thus block the intended effect of the tragedy, as a work of art, and an ethical criticism of the characters and actions of the tragedy would thus be an aesthetic criticism of it.

Kames's theory of art in the *Elements of Criticism* is based on the premises that "A man while awake is conscious of a continued train of perceptions and ideas passing in his mind,"²⁴ that "we are framed by nature to relish order and connection" in such trains of perceptions and ideas,²⁵ and that "Every work of art that is conformable to the natural course of our ideas, is so far agreeable; and every work of art that reverses that course, is so far disagreeable."²⁶ Our pleasure in art is based in the way that our experience of it facilitates, or, as the earlier discussion of tragedy suggests, intensifies, this natural course of ideas and perceptions in the mind. This does not mean that works of art must necessarily represent or imitate the order of objects and events in nature, but that the flow of our ideas and perceptions in *response* to works of art must be natural in the appropriate sense. Kames then argues that central, if indeed not foremost, among the "ideas and perceptions" that are to be put into a natural flow by works of arts are our emotions and passions, and thus that it is central to the success of art that it arouse these responses and let or make them flow in a natural way. "Passions, as all the world knows, are moved by fiction as well as truth" even though man is a creature "so remarkably addicted to truth and reality."²⁷ Kames does not see a paradox here that needs to be resolved, but an empirically obvious fact about human nature. His theory is that verbal descriptions as well as pictorial representations can produce "ideal presence," or sensory imagery so rich and yet distinct "that I perceive the thing as a spectator; and as existing in my presence; which means not that I am really a spectator, but only that I conceive myself to be a spectator, and have a perception of the object similar to what a real spectator hath."²⁸ And since perceptions can lead directly to emotions and passions, that means that ideal presence can produce emotions and passions just as forceful as those created by the perception of real objects. Ideal presence, in turn, can be created by "speech, by writing, or by painting," because "A lively and accurate description of an important event, raises in me ideas no less distinct than if I had originally been an eye-witness; I am insensibly transformed into a spectator; and have an impression that every incident is passing in my presence." And "in idea we perceive persons acting and suffering, precisely as in an original survey: if our sympathy be engaged by the latter, it must also in some degree be engaged by the former, especially if the distinctness of ideal presence approach to that of real presence."²⁹ Whatever in a work of art would prevent the engagement of our emotions, then, would be a defect in it as a work of art. If moral defects in the characters depicted or in the expression of an author's attitude toward such characters would stand in the way of such engagement of our emotions, that would be an artistic

failure in the work, something standing in the way of the work's achieving that which makes art valuable for us. An ethical criticism of a work of art is therefore a criticism of it as a work of art.

3 The Theory of Disinterestedness

For a large number of writers who are very much in the mainstream of eighteenth-century aesthetics, then, art aims to engage our emotions and passions, and anything that would stand in the way of that engagement would be an artistic failure. For such writers, ethical criticism, that is, criticism of the ethical attitudes depicted or expressed in a work, would not be independent of aesthetic criticism, because the flaws so criticized would prevent the work from having the effect that is central to its value as art. The mainstream of eighteenth-century aesthetics cannot be seen as anticipating the rigid separation between aesthetic and ethical domains on which the more recent assumption that there may be a problem about ethical criticism has been based. Let us now consider whether the theorists of disinterestedness who have been so central to recent conceptions of eighteenth-century aesthetics actually raise a problem about ethical criticism of the arts.

The identification of disinterestedness as a criterion of the aesthetic has been traced back to Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury.³⁰ In a famous passage in "The Moralists," first published in 1709 and then included in his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* in 1711, Shaftesbury wrote that the idea that one should require "the *Property* or *Possession* of the Land" for "*Enjoyment* of the Prospect" of, for example, "this delicious *Vale* we see beneath us" is "absurd," that the idea that "the *Beauty* of . . . *Trees*" is connected to "some certain relish by which [their] *Acorns* or *Berrys* . . . become as palatable as the *Figs* or *Peaches* of the Garden" is "sordidly luxurious," and that the "set of eager *Desires*, *Wishes* and *Hopes*" that "certain powerful FORMS in *Human Kind*" draw after themselves are in "no-way suitable . . . to your rational and refin'd Contemplation of *Beauty*."³¹ Shaftesbury did not actually apply the term "disinterested" to the "contemplation of beauty" that he distinguished in these ways from those pleasures that are dependent upon possession and use or consumption of their objects. He did, however, use the term "disinterestedness" in another of his writings, namely "Sensus communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor," also first published in 1709, in order to contrast a "mercenary" and self-regarding attitude in which moral rules are observed only for fear of punishment or hope

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