The argument of Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* was shaped by its author for a particular polemical purpose, that of demonstrating the incompatibility of the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful. This article shows that the conjunction of ‘sublime’ and ‘beautiful’ into a single collocation was identified during the first half of the eighteenth century with the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury. In *Characteristicks*, Shaftesbury used the phrase to translate the Roman idea of *honestum* (the honourable), which he in turn identified with the Platonic concept of *to kalov* (the morally beautiful). A succession of writers, including Frances Hutcheson, Richard Fiddes, and Thomas Birch, considered this concept of the ‘sublime and beautiful’ as central to Shaftesbury’s moral Idealism. A second group of controversialists, including Bernard Mandeville and John Brown, thought the phrase typical of everything that was inaccurate and spurious in his philosophy. It is proposed that Burke originally conceived the *Philosophical Enquiry* as an intervention in this argument on the side of Brown and Mandeville. Burke intended finally to purge moral discourse of such aesthetic terms as ‘beauty’, ‘proportion’, ‘congruity’, and ‘perfection’—but made the odd choice of doing so by writing a treatise of aesthetics. Burke's complicated rhetorical motives for obscuring his proper controversial intentions are considered in the conclusion.

I. The Collocation ‘Sublime and Beautiful’

David Hume’s taste in eloquence was for the strong stuff. He wanted modern orators to stir up their audiences into violent passions and ‘elevated conceptions’, to carry away their jealousies and doubts in ‘a torrent of [the] sublime and pathetic’.1 So when he told Adam Smith about a young ‘Irish gentleman, who wrote lately a very pretty Treatise on the Sublime’, his words were certainly facetious. And this the author of the treatise, Edmund Burke, would have understood, for he had insisted throughout his book upon the absolute foreignness

of small, pretty things from the realm of the sublime. Hume's jibe also gets at a
quality in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and
Beautiful* that has always caused problems of interpretation for the book's editors
and commentators: its extraordinary discretion, its reluctance to name and to
generate free the writers it sets out to refute—'pretty' in so far as it is
scrupulously uncontroversial. Burke acknowledges those writers with whom he
differs on points of detail, such as John Locke and Jean-Baptiste Dubos, but he
controverses only indirectly the idealists, deists, and proponents of 'moral beauty'
with whom he disagrees more profoundly. It is this discursive reticence that
explains the silence of those editors and commentators over an allusion that lies
in the very title of Burke's treatise. The topic of 'sublimity' was a popular one
among eighteenth-century critics and aestheticians, the topic of 'beauty' no less
so, but before Burke, only one major writer had brought these two words together
into the single collocation 'sublime and beautiful'. At its root, Burke's
*Philosophical Enquiry* is a rebuke to this earlier writer.

Without an understanding of Burke's crucial allusion to the earlier writer, the
*Philosophical Enquiry* can be neither properly contextualized nor fully understood.
Burke signals the importance of the allusion at several points within the text.
In the preface to the 1757 first edition, he locates the origins of his project in his
perception that ideas of the sublime and of the beautiful 'were frequently
confounded; and that both were indiscriminately applied to things greatly differ-
ning, and sometimes to natures directly opposite'. Later he contends that ideas of
the sublime and of the beautiful 'stand on foundations so different, that it is hard,
I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject'.
When the career of his argument obliges him to a qualification on this point,
Burke demands, 'If the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are sometimes
found united, does this prove, that they are the same, does it prove, that they
are any way allied? His language is insistent, as though the reader must
acknowledge that the republic of letters is pervaded by this particular abuse of
terms. The 'sublime and beautiful', having become entangled with one another,
must be distinguished and contrasted before the nature of either can be under-
stood. The placing of these 'frequently confounded' words in the title of the

1954), 51.
3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and
4 For a historical and critical summary see J. Lamb, 'The Sublime', in H. B. Nisbet and
C. Rawson (edd.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, iv: *The Eighteenth Century*
*Journal of the History of Ideas*, 22 (1961), 185–204.
viii. 66–7: 'It is necessary that we should separate what they confound'.
6 *Philosophical Enquiry*, 1, 114, 124.
Philosophical Enquiry into . . . the Sublime and Beautiful (note the lack of a definite article before the word ‘beautiful’, which somehow tilts it towards ‘sublime’), and the centrality of their distinction to the structure of its argument, both indicate that the fundamental purpose of the treatise was to refute those writers who treated them as synonyms, or at least, to caution those who combined them as a collocation. The very reluctance of Burke to name the perpetrators of this apparently egregious error suggests that he expected them to be recognized by the reader.

Indeed, the writer who first brought together the terms ‘sublime and beautiful’ did so in one of the most popular and controversial philosophical books of the eighteenth century. Burke was referring to the third earl of Shaftesbury and his Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (1711, revised 1714; Burke owned a copy of the 1727 fourth edition). The following passage occurs near the beginning of the second volume of the Characteristicks:

The Mind, which is Spectator or Auditor of other Minds, cannot be without its Eye and Ear; so as to discern Proportion, distinguish Sound, and scan each Sentiment or Thought which comes before it. It can let nothing escape its Censure. It feels the Soft and the Harsh, the Agreeable and Disagreeable in the Affections, and finds a Fool and Fair, a Harmonious and Dissonant, as really and truly here as in any musical Numbers or in the outward Forms and Representations of sensible Things. Nor can it withhold its Admiration and Ecstacy; its Aversion and Sorn, any more in what relates to one than to the other of these Subjects. So that to deny the common and natural Sense of a SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL in Things, will appear an Affectation merely, to any-one who considers duly of this affair.7

This passage is not one of those examined routinely by Shaftesbury’s modern commentators, but it had the greatest importance for his eighteenth-century followers. Shaftesbury’s final sentence brings together the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ in what is almost certainly for Burke the primary instance of their conjunction in a single phrase or device. In order to consider fully the range of controversial and appreciative readings with which this passage was complicated by the time Burke started writing the Philosophical Enquiry, it needs to be examined from two perspectives: first, from its position within the text of Shaftesbury’s Characteristicks as a whole; second, from the controversial context of the writings of Shaftesbury’s admirers and detractors.

The passage occurs at an early point in ‘An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit’, the relatively methodical and compact essay that occupies, along with its more expansive and rhapsodic partner ‘The Moralists’, the second of the three volumes of Shaftesbury’s Characteristicks. The ‘Inquiry’ is dedicated to the systematic exposition of a foundation for ethics that does not have its origin

7 Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, 3 vols. (1727), ii. 29.
in religious thought. As we shall see, the paragraph quoted above was sometimes excerpted as a sort of summary of the ‘Inquiry’, a function to which it is ill suited. It does not represent Shaftesbury’s movement of his argument concerning the objects of the ‘moral sense’ from aesthetic particulars to universal wholes, or of the analogy between, at one level, common and natural affections (like those felt towards quotidian fairness and foulness) and, at another, the ‘Extasy and Rapture’ of the theist as he contemplates the ‘Divine Order’. More usefully, however, the passage marks the very point at which Shaftesbury first broke off the terms ‘proportion’, ‘harmony’, and ‘beauty’ from aesthetic discourse, and began exploring their potential for his ethical thought. The importance of the aesthetic analogy in this passage is that it adumbrates Shaftesbury’s conception of the irresistible and constant activity of the moral sense. The moral sense is as incapable of withholding its judgement of ‘the Agreeable and Disagreeable’ in other minds as the eye is of viewing beauty or deformity without ‘Aversion and Scorn’. Its operations are ineluctable, immediate, working prior to all habitual or customary responses. This point is further emphasized by Shaftesbury’s reference (marked above by the asterisk) to a similar passage in ‘The Moralists’, which reads: ‘How is it possible therefore not to own “That as these Distinctions have their Foundation in Nature, the discernment itself is Natural and from NATURE alone?”’ However corrupt a human heart may be, Shaftesbury insists, it cannot help recognizing and responding with admiration to the phenomena of beauty, harmony, and goodness, these being external, natural, real phenomena.

A second footnote (marked above by a dagger) is intended to clarify the conspicuously capitalized phrase ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’. A first reference points towards a passage in ‘Sensus Communis’ where this now familiar ‘secret charm or force of nature’ is seen in its civic setting, forcing citizens ‘willingly or unwillingly towards Public Good’. A second reference to the second ‘Miscellany’ (printed in the last volume of Characteristicks) is more revealing:

Nor is thorow Honesty, in his [Shaftesbury’s own] hypothesis, any other than Zeal or Passion moving strongly upon the Species or View of the DECORUM and SUBLIME of Actions. Others may pursue different Forms and fix their Eye on different Species, as all Men do on one or other. The real honest Man, however plain or simple he appears, has that highest Species, Honesty itself, in view, and instead of outward Forms or Symmetries, is struck by that inward character, the Harmony and Numbers of the Heart and Beauty of the Affections, which form the Manners and Conduct of a truly social Life.

9 Characteristicks, ii. 75.
10 Ibid. 415–19.
11 Ibid. i. 90–3.
12 Ibid. iii. 34.
Shaftesbury is not only making a simple analogy between the aesthetic (‘SUBLIME’) and moral (‘DECORUM’) impulses here. He is also saying that the ‘honest’ or morally accomplished person will have developed a taste for the ‘Beauty of the Affections’ that is at once an extension and a refinement of the common human attraction to outward beauty. The visual language (‘fix their eye’, ‘Honesty itself in view’) makes an ironic contrast with Shaftesbury’s obscure, ‘inward’ idealism. The asterisk between ‘pursue’ and ‘different’ refers to a further footnote, which reads ‘The Honestum, Pulchrum, το καλόν, πρεπον. Earlier (in ‘Sensus Communis’, while examining a passage from Aristotle’s Poetics) Shaftesbury had translated το καλόν as ‘the Beautiful, or the Sublime’, but he now diverts the reader on to yet another crucial, long footnote at the end of the third ‘Miscellany’, where το καλόν is identified strongly with the Latin honestum (the moral, the honourable). 13 This footnote indicates that Shaftesbury’s usage of the word ‘honesty’ in the above passage is latinate, intended as a translation of honestum. Here he also quotes directly from a classical text upon which his idea of ‘the HONESTUM, the PULCHRUM, το καλόν’ is based, Cicero’s De Finibus. 14 During a famous critique of Epicurus, Cicero proposes that by honestum ‘we understand that which is of such a nature that, though devoid of all utility, it can justly be commended in and for itself, apart from any profit or reward’. 15 The word honestum is poorly served by formal definitions, Cicero continues, and should be sought instead in the common moral sense of mankind, and in the disinterested actions of persons of high character. Shaftesbury’s rather unhelpful comment on the passage is that it is ‘A Mystery’.

This impossible muddle of reference, self-reference, and interwoven annotation makes it just clear enough that Shaftesbury does not distinguish between the capitalized pairings of words, ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’, ‘DECORUM and SUBLIME of Actions’, and ‘HONESTUM and PULCHRUM’. It seems that each of these collocations represents a different aspect of the ambiguous semantic relationship between the Greek το καλόν (the morally beautiful), and the Latin word used by Cicero to translate it, honestum (the moral, the honourable). Shaftesbury’s English idea of το καλόν/honestum is distinctive because he again complicates the Greek/Latin correspondence by adding to it a third set of terms, pulchrum and venustum. At the end of the long footnote that contains the

13 Ibid. i. 143 and n.; Aristotle, Poetics, 7.
14 Characteristicks, iii. 182 n. ff.
De Finibus quotation, Shaftesbury provides more diversionary footnotes to further passages (from ‘Sensus Communis’ and ‘Soliloquy’) where it is affirmed that ‘The Venustum, the Honestum, the Decorum of Things will force its way’, and that, if a literary author ‘knows not this VENUS, these GRACES, nor was ever struck with the Beauty, the Decorum of this inward kind, he can neither paint advantageously after the Life, nor in a feigned Subject’.

The visual language recalls another well-known passage from Book II of De Finibus, albeit one to which Shaftesbury makes no direct reference: ‘The sense of sight, says Plato, is the keenest sense we possess, yet our eyes cannot behold Wisdom; could we see her, what passionate love would she awaken?’ The passage anticipates Shaftesbury’s characteristic blend of gallantry and enthusiastic metaphysics, and as a dedicated Platonist he is certain to have known it. It is typical of Shaftesbury’s intellectual evasiveness that he refers to the earlier, less relevant passage from De Finibus instead. We can at least be confident in concluding that Shaftesbury coined the phrase ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ as part of his strategy for translating the Greek καλον and the Latin honestum into a single concept. As such, the phrase ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ is designed to evoke (all at once) the sensual, moral, aesthetic, and metaphysical aspects of those words.

But Shaftesbury uses the word ‘sublime’ in this positive sense only when it is qualified by the word ‘beautiful’. By comparison, in ‘Soliloquy’ the word ‘sublime’ (understood for once in its more familiar rhetorical and Longinian sense) is a mode proper only to cultures at a primitive stage of their cultural evolution. It is marked by bombast and affectation: ‘the Miraculous, the Pompous, or what we generally call the SUBLIME’. It is associated with uncultivated enthusiasm, superstition, and an infantilism proper only to Asian slavery:

_Astonishment_ is of all other Passions the easiest rais’d in raw and unexperienced Mankind. Children in their earliest Infancy are entertain’d in this manner... And the fine Sights of the Indians are enormous Figures, various odd and glaring Colours, and whatever of that sort is amazingly beheld, with a kind of Horrour and Consternation.

Contrary to Longinus, Shaftesbury believes that the sublime (in eloquence or literature) can offer nothing of value to the civilized, disciplined citizen of a free country. It is worth noting at this point that Edmund Burke’s positive definition of the sublime in the _Philosophical Enquiry_ closely approximates Shaftesbury’s...

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16 Characteristicks i. 138–9, 336–8.

17 Cicero, De Finibus, II. xi. 52; Plato, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus, trans. H. N. Fowler (Cambridge, Mass., 1914), Phaedrus, 250D.


The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. Burke also accommodates instances of astonishment in children, its function in primitive religion, and its manifestation in colour, into the theoretical foundation for his standard of the sublime. But for Shaftesbury, the vulnerability of slavish sensibilities to astonishment and horror could have no purpose in a polite, liberal society. For Burke, by contrast, a capacity for astonishment is an inalienable part of the human passions, and of religious life.

II. The Controversy over Shaftesbury

Shaftesbury’s followers were not put off by the considerable obscurity of his meaning in the idea of the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’. The first echoes we hear of it are in the last of Joseph Addison’s series of Spectator papers on Milton (no. 369), in which he concludes that ‘I have endeavoured to shew how some Passages [of Paradise Lost] are Beautiful by being Sublime, other by being Soft, others by being Natural’. Addison categorizes the sublime as one of three qualities of poetic beauty, thus bringing those ‘frequently confounded’ aesthetic terms into precisely the sort of relationship that Burke was to deplore. The earliest direct references to Shaftesbury on the ‘sublime and beautiful’ were collected in the important article that Thomas Birch (the Whig historian and biographer of Archbishop Tillotson) writes on Shaftesbury for the Bayleian General Dictionary, Historical and Critical. The paragraph dealing with ‘the common and natural Sense of a SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL in Things’ is printed in a long footnote as an illustration of the greater argument of the ‘Inquiry’. Birch comments on it briefly (extra information for the footnotes was provided by James Harris, Shaftesbury’s nephew) with regard to the paragraph’s controversial handling by the hostile Bernard Mandeville, and by the sympathetic Francis Hutcheson and Richard Fiddes. Bernard Mandeville devotes his ‘Search into the Nature of Society’, which first appeared in the 1723 third edition of the Fable of the Bees

20 Philosophical Enquiry, 57 [II. i].
21 Ibid. 165, 59, 81–2.
23 The Spectator ed. D. F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), iii. 392. Addison’s sentence also resembles the definition of ‘the Grand Gusto’ offered by Roger de Piles in The Art of Painting, and the Lives of the Painters (1706), 19: ‘Tis by this that ordinary Things are made Beautiful, and the Beautiful, Sublime and Wonderful; for in Painting, the grand Gusto, the Sublime, and the Marvellous are one and the same thing.’
(Burke owned the 1732 sixth edition), to an attack upon Shaftesbury’s moral idealism. He singles out the formulation ‘pulchrum & honestum, the το καλον’ that the Ancients have talk’d of so much’, as a sort of refrain with which to remind the reader of Shaftesbury’s obscurity. It is important to stress Mandeville’s advertising of the enigmatic phrase. Previously hidden in footnotes to the ‘Miscellanies’, in 1723 Mandeville exposes ‘pulchrum & honestum, the το καλον’ to the full glare of criticism. Mandeville describes the pursuit of the ‘pulchrum & honestum’, quite flatly, as a ‘Wild-Goose-Chace’, the idea itself as a metaphysical conception, tendentiously universal, hopelessly incapable of registering how various civil societies will ‘warp [human] Nature’ into different moral forms. The weight of Mandeville’s argument is directed against Shaftesbury’s dictum that virtue and vice are permanent realities, the same in all countries at all times. Moreover, any philosopher foolish enough to offer his followers the prospect of attaining virtue without self-denial opens up ‘a vast Inlet to Hypocrisy, which being once made habitual, we must not only deceive others, but likewise become altogether unknown to our selves.’

Of Shaftesbury’s early followers, it is the Oxford high church divine Richard Fiddes who engages most promptly with Mandeville’s satirical assault (Francis Hutcheson, by contrast, was to wait another twenty-five years before answering Mandeville27). In the long preface to his compendious General Treatise of Morality (1724), Fiddes faithfully reiterates Shaftesbury’s teaching that the apprehension of ‘the Beautiful and the Honest, both in Morality and the Works of Nature and Art, is within the reach of all sound understandings, and that a man might ‘likewise govern himself, by his Reason’, with the same readiness.28 By beauty, Fiddes understands ‘a just Contexture and Proportion of Parts’, and maintains that this internal rectitude exists independently of common judgement and opinion. He explains variations in ideas of beauty from country to country (the foundation of Mandeville’s attack on Shaftesbury’s universalism) by distinguishing his (and Shaftesbury’s) realist sense of that word from Mandeville’s vulgar usage, i.e. one based upon the identification of ‘any Irregularity or Defect, and Affectation, or Artifice’ with real beauty: ‘this is all the work of Imagination’, Fiddes writes, not of disinterested perception.29 As he answers Mandeville’s objections to Shaftesbury’s doctrine of the ‘pulchrum & honestum, the το καλον’, Fiddes traces the path of

27 See Francis Hutcheson, Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees (1750), 7: ‘hence it is that the old notions of natural affections, and kind instincts, the sensus communis, the decorum, and honestum, are almost banished out of our books of morals’.
29 Ibid., p. xlv.
internal references in the Characteristicks back from the footnotes in the ‘Miscellanies’ to the original passage in the ‘Inquiry’ that deals with the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’, and which he judges to be the definitive ‘Illustration of moral Virtue from sensible Objects’. He quotes it in full. The most valuable service that Fiddes does for eighteenth-century Shaftesburians, however, is that he explains the phrase ‘s sublime and beautiful’ by referring to a comparatively accessible and well-known passage from near the beginning of Cicero’s De Officiis (rather than the obscure passage from De Finibus chosen by Shaftesbury). No other animal has a sense of the beauty, loveliness, and harmony (‘pulchritudinem, venustatem, convenientiam’) of the visible world, writes Cicero, and this sense corresponds by analogy with the capacity of the human spirit for beauty, consistency, and order (‘pulchritudinem, constantiam, ordinem’) — it is from these elements that honestum is forged and fashioned.30 Like Shaftesbury, Fiddes refers to Cicero in order to show what he means by the keyword honestum, which he translates as ‘moral Honesty’, but unlike Shaftesbury he wishes to make it clear that the connection between the idea of order in sensible objects, and the beauty of order in metaphysics, is only a consequential analogy, not a kind of moral proof.31 By identifying this more accessible Ciceronian source for the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ paragraph, Fiddes can at once excuse the apparent obscurity of the passage, and show that it should be valued primarily for its eloquence and literary sophistication: ‘this noble Writer has improved his Illustration of moral Virtue from sensible Objects, beyond the Roman orator himself’.32

By dwelling upon these primarily rhetorical issues, Fiddes draws out a latent theme in the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ passage itself: its concern with the nature of the mind’s receptivity (‘Nor can it withhold its Admiration and Ecstasy, its Aversion and Scorn . . .’); with those conditions, moral and aesthetic, where the subject is irresistibly over-persuaded; and with what that capacity for persuasion can tell the philosopher about human nature. Towards the end of An Inquiry concerning Moral Good and Evil Francis Hutcheson uses a closely related rhetorical question (‘must Men know the Schemes of the Moralists and Politicians, or the Art of Rhetoric, to be capable of being persuaded?’) to demonstrate [that] there is some Sense of Morality antecedent to Instruction, or metaphysical Arguments proving the private Interest of the Person who is persuaded.33 The power of the

31 Fiddes, General Treatise of Morality, 14.
32 Ibid., p. xxxiv; cf. Characteristicks, iii. 182 n., after the quotation from Cicero’s De Finibus: ‘Our Author [i.e. Shaftesbury himself], on the other side, having little of the Orator, and less of the Constraint of Formality belonging to some graver Characters, can be more familiar on this occasion.’
rhetorical arts thus provides important evidence of the reality of the moral sense. By emphasizing the eloquence and originality with which Shaftesbury made his ‘illustration’ of the circumstances of moral virtue, however, Fiddes invites Shaftesbury’s controversial opponents to look even more carefully at the language and rhetoric that his master had employed.

It is a mark of the continuing importance of Shaftesbury to Hanoverian letters that this invitation was so eagerly accepted over a quarter of a century later by John Brown, whose Essays on the Characteristicks were published in 1751 (Burke owned the fourth edition of 1755). Brown was a minor canon at Carlisle when William Warburton, author of The Divine Legation of Moses (1737–41) and later bishop of Gloucester, encouraged him to undertake his anti-Shaftesburian project (Brown went on to produce many poems, plays, sermons, and tracts, the most successful of which was his Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times).34 In the second of the Essays Brown quotes the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ paragraph from Shaftesbury’s ‘Inquiry’ in full, alongside passages from Samuel Clarke’s Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God (1705) and William Woolaston’s Religion of Nature Delineated (1722), thus laying out the three most authoritative contemporary attempts to fix ‘the Criterion of Virtue’—the first according to ‘the Sublime and Beautiful of Things: The Second, the Fitness, Reasons and Relations of Things: The Third, the Truth of Things’.

Having argued that all three fail to bring any properly ‘determinate’ idea of what the word ‘Virtue’ might mean, he notes that their respective attempts at definition were ‘little more than direct Transcriptions of what the old Greek philosophers, and Tully after them, have said on the same Subject.’36 He considers Shaftesbury to be the most egregious propagator of such ‘loose Talk and ambiguous Expression’. Referring directly to the phrase ‘natural sense of the Sublime and Beautiful in Things’, Brown demands:

—Now, what new Idea do we gain from this pompous Definition? Have we not the same general Idea from the Word Virtue, as from the more diffused Expression of the Sublime and Beautiful of Things?…They are all general Names, relative to something which is yet unknown, and which is no more explained by the pretended Definition, than by the Word which is attempted to be defined…To say, therefore, that Virtue consists in acting according to the fair, the handsome, the sublime, the beautiful, the decent, the moral Objects of Right and Wrong, is really no more than ringing Changes upon Words.37

While the specifics of Brown’s charge here—that Shaftesbury’s multiplication of figurative terms diffuses his definition of the word ‘Virtue’ where it is intended

36 Ibid. 122–3 n., referring to James Harris’s Three Treatises as an example of how this impressionistic use of language ‘infects’ contemporary writers on morality.
to whittle the idea down, or rather to refine it through a variety of figurative perspectives—are more fully realized than those of Mandeville, their general idiom is conventionally Lockean. Like Burke, Brown was devoted to Locke, and the above passage is an example of the pervasive influence of Chapter 9, Book III of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Here Locke points out that ‘the precise real Essence of the Things moral Words stand for, may be perfectly known’, those essences having nothing external to the Mind for archetypes. He proposed that only the ‘Negligence or Perverseness of Mankind’ caused the meaning of moral Words to be less precise than the terms of natural philosophy.38

Brown’s critique also owes much to George Berkeley’s attack on Shaftesbury in his dialogue *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher* (1732). Berkeley considered the instability of innate moral impulse—that ‘very uncertain guide in Morals’—when unsupported by the prospect of future rewards and punishments, to be the greatest weakness of Shaftesbury’s philosophy. Regarding the minute philosophers’ supposed ‘ravishment’ by their moral sense of the ‘sublime and beautiful of things’, the orthodox Euphranor drily objects that ‘Alciphron, I must needs say, is too Sublime and Aenigmatical upon a point, which of all others ought to be the most clearly understood.’39 In the third dialogue, Alciphron gets himself into a muddle about the idea of ‘honour’, and Euphranor supplies him with a learned explanation of the ‘Honestum or το καλὸν’—to which Alciphron objects that moral beauty ‘is of so peculiar and abstracted a nature, something so subtle, fine and fugatious, that it will not bear being handled and inspected’.40

People of sensibility were still falling into these sorts of confusion when Henry Mackenzie wrote of Harley, in *The Man of Feeling* (1771), that ‘his notions of the *kalon*, or beautiful, were not always to be defined, nor indeed such as the world would always assent to, though we could define them’.41 By renewing Berkeley’s charge against Shaftesbury of ‘ringing Changes upon Words’, of persistent terminological obfuscation, Brown places the burden of explanation for his obscurity on the noble writer’s followers, those who continued to employ such terms as ‘the *Sublime and Beautiful of Things*’.38

38 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 516–17 [III. xi. 15–17]; for Brown’s Lockeanism, see his letter to William Gilpin, 12 Feb. 1741–2, Bod. MSS Eng. Misc. c. 389, fo. 59r: ‘Pray is Mr. Locke in any credit at Oxford? If it be not quite heterodox to be suspected of having any correspondence with him, (once, I know, it was) I should think that an hour or two every day might be spent with him to as much Advantage as with the said Burgesdicius’—the latter a Dutch logician also much resented by the young Burke (*Correspondence*, i. 7–9).

39 George Berkeley, *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher, in seven dialogues*, 2 vols. (1732), i. 170.

40 Ibid. 102–5. At i. 100 Berkeley puts Cicero’s words into Alciphron’s mouth: ‘And as this Beauty is found in the shape and form of corporeal things; so also is there analogous to it a Beauty of another kind, an order, a symmetry, a comeliness in the moral world.’

This was a burden they found uncomfortable. In *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744) the patriot poet and physician Mark Akenside asserts that the human, mind is source of all sublimity (‘The living fountain in itself contains | Of beauteous and sublime . . .’), but by 1772 a more cautious Akenside has heavily revised these lines, the beauteous and sublime becoming divine, rather than human, attributes. The Baptist controversialist Charles Bulkley, a more loyal Shaftesburian and unlikely champion of the *Characteristicks* during the 1750s, replies to Brown’s criticism in his second *Vindication of My Lord Shaftesbury* (1752; an earlier volume of 1751 defended Shaftesbury on ridicule), but hardly clarifies what the noble author meant by ‘Things’. After printing out (once more) Shaftesbury’s ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ passage, Bulkley asks:

Now is it not apparent from the above-cited passages, that kind and generous affections are the qualities which the noble author denominates virtuous? When therefore virtue is represented as the sublime and beautiful of things, is it not evident that these kind and generous affections are the things spoken of? And thus, there is exactly the same difference between virtue and the beautiful of things, as there is between beauty and the subject, in which it inheres.

It is worth noting that it is the conjunction of sublimity and beauty that Bulkley has no means of explaining. The word ‘sublimity’ causes him particular problems, perhaps due to its Longinian connotations with an overbearingly forceful pathos, and its consequent incompatibility with the ‘kind and generous affections’ by which Bulkley would define ‘Virtue’. This may explain why the word ‘sublime’ has slipped out of the third cadence here, leaving ‘beautiful’ to do all the work on ‘virtue’. One remembers how overdetermined the term ‘sublime’ had been by Shaftesbury’s network of footnote references, and by dropping the word altogether from his final equation, Bulkley does what little he can to simplify the key-phrase ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’. Shaftesbury claimed, without irony, to have carried the ‘refined manner and accurate SIMPLICITY of the Antients’ to a height unique among modern authors. He only excused his failure to unite his ‘Philosophy in one solid and uniform Body’ on account of the wandering attentions and fear of pedantry that he anticipated from ‘Men of any Note or Fashion’, the polite audience that he sought. But it was precisely the want of accuracy or perspicuity displayed by his famous metaphysical key-phrase, ‘the SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL in Things’, that dismayed his critics, and embarrassed his followers.


44 Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, iii. 286; see Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 112 ff.
III. Burke on ‘the Sublime and Beautiful’

Edmund Burke redressed the problems of accuracy and complication in these received ideas of the ‘sublime and beautiful’ with such thoroughness that they shaped the structure of the *Philosophical Enquiry*. His preoccupation with accuracy in philosophical language operates at three different points in the text, and in three different ways: first, during his discussion of another Shaftesburian term, ‘Taste’, in the introduction that he appended to the second edition of the treatise in 1759; second, in direct refutation of Shaftesburian applications of aesthetic terms to moral discourses, during the third section (concerning ‘Beauty’) of the treatise; and third, during his concluding discussion of ideas and referentiality with regard to the functioning of words.

At the first of these points, during his introductory essay ‘On Taste’, Burke largely reconfigures a term that Shaftesbury had done much to extend and valorize. The Shaftesburian idea of ‘taste’ is explained most fully in Chapter 2 of the third ‘Miscellany’, towards the end of which appears the long Ciceronian footnote on *honestum* and *pulchrum* discussed above (although Shaftesbury also has conspicuous employments for the word in ‘Soliloquy’ and ‘The Moralists’). The idea of ‘taste’ or ‘relish’ constitutes an important part of Shaftesbury’s analogy between the aesthetic and moral faculties, and one that is apt to the functioning of those faculties in the sphere of polite society: in politics, it is ‘not merely what we call principle but a taste which governs Men’, and it is precisely an overdeveloped taste for the lower beauties (*objets d’art*, but also ‘equipages, titles and ribbons’) that is most liable to corruption. Every virtuoso acknowledges that good taste, far from being innate, must be acquired through constant cultivation, ‘the antecedent Labour and pains of criticism’. Shaftesbury hopes that he can make the pursuit of the higher beauties, the sublime and beautiful in things, as attractive as the pursuit of the lower ones, while at the same time emphasizing the enormous difficulties and disciplines involved in the development of a fine moral sense. Not much of this elaborate usage of the word ‘taste’ survives in the *Philosophical Enquiry*, except negatively, in Burke’s trenchant disapproval of its application to anything other than judgements of works of the imagination and the elegant arts:

> The term *Taste*, like all other figurative terms, is not extremely accurate: the thing which we understand by it, is far from a simple and determinate idea in the minds of most men, and it is therefore liable to uncertainty and confusion.

The rejection of figurative extensions of aesthetic terms is crucial to Burke’s search for ‘grounded and certain principles’ upon which to build his standard

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45 *Characteristics*, i. 336 ff., ii. 401–2.
46 Ibid. iii. 164–5.
of taste, as it is throughout the main body of the *Philosophical Enquiry*. It was Shaftesbury who initiated the figurative usages of which Burke complains. At the beginning of any useful theory of taste, according to Burke, there must be a coherent science of man and woman, and proper to this science is the accurate observation of the passions, which ‘by force of natural sympathy’ can be felt and understood universally. The observation of morality, on the other hand, must begin with the specifics of the ‘manners, the characters, the actions, and designs of men’, and as such does not allow generalization. This issue of the universality of aesthetic standards is a crucial element in Burke’s response to Shaftesbury.

The second point at which the problem of accuracy in philosophical language occurs is in the chapter ‘On Beauty’, and here Burke’s fundamental objection to the Shaftesburian distortion of aesthetic terms in moral discourse can be seen more clearly. Burke describes the use of beauty to provide a standard of virtue as a ‘confounding’ of conceptions, ‘giving rise to an infinite deal of whimsical theory’. There is an ordering of errors here: first, aesthetic language was employed upon ideas of virtue, and from this original confusion arose further abuses of moral language, such as ‘the affixing the name of beauty to proportion, congruity and perfection, as well as to qualities of things yet more remote from our natural ideas of it’. Burke nowhere explains how the ‘confounding’ of moral and aesthetic language leads so directly to this new language of ‘proportion, congruity and perfection’—apparently he assumes the reader’s familiarity with all these terms, and their origins. They are prominent in the text of the *Characteristicks*. Burke reinforced his sceptical treatment of ‘How far the idea of Beauty may be applied to Virtue’ by amplifying these points with an extra sentence added to this paragraph in the second edition of 1759:

This loose and inaccurate manner of speaking, has therefore misled us both in the theory of taste and of morals; and induced us to remove the science of our duties from their proper basis, (our reason, our relations, and our necessities,) to rest it upon foundations altogether visionary and unsubstantial.

The three words in Burke’s parenthesis, ‘reason, relations, necessities’, are of particular interest, since together they constitute a formulation that is familiar from Samuel Clarke’s first volume of Boyle lectures, *A Demonstration of the Being*.

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48 *Philosophical Enquiry*, 12, 14, 33, and, especially, 91: ‘men are used to talk of beauty in a figurative manner, that is to say, in a manner extremely uncertain, and indeterminate’.
49 Ibid. 22–3 [‘On Taste’].
50 Ibid. 112 [III. xi].
51 Ibid.
52 See e.g. the passage in the third miscellany shortly before Shaftesbury’s footnote on ‘Honestum and Pulchrum’: ‘Even in the imitative or designing arts, to which our author so often refers, the truth or beauty of every figure or statue is measured from the perfection of nature in her just adapting of every limb and proportion . . .’. *Characteristicks*, iii. 181–2.
53 *Philosophical Enquiry*, 112 [III. xi].
and Attributes of God (1705), a text that John Brown had ranked alongside the Characteristicks. Clarke argued that the true basis of moral obligation lies in the apprehension, primarily by reason, of what will allow the ‘Conformity of our Actions, with certain eternal and immutable Relations and Differences of Things,’ and that this function of moral reason operates prior both to the expectation of future rewards and punishments, and to consideration of the ‘positive Institution’ of the law. Burke’s allusion to Clarke is fleeting, and he makes a significant change to the application of his words. By writing of our relations and our necessities, rather than of the relations and necessities of things, he strips the Clarkean language of its ideal, metaphysical dimension, and instead emphasizes the particularities of individual agency. Burke’s own views on the origins of moral obligation are not at issue in the Philosophical Enquiry. By this Clarkean allusion he is, however, betraying a fundamental motive for establishing the terms ‘sublime’ and ‘beautiful’ upon firm philosophical foundations in aesthetic discourse, so that those words will not be employed in such a ‘loose and inaccurate manner’ by polite moralists.

It is in the fifth and concluding section of the Philosophical Enquiry, ‘On Words’, that the original anti-Shaftesburian polemical purpose of the treatise leaves its most evident traces. The final section sits awkwardly with the rest of the book. In his last paragraph Burke makes an apology to readers who had expected a proper treatment of the sublime and beautiful in poetry, excusing himself on the grounds that the topic had been ‘often and well handled already’. His purpose had not been to criticize the sublime and beautiful in any particular art, but to lay down principles for the establishment of their standard. A long passage grafted onto the second edition (which presents verse from Virgil, Homer, Spenser, and Lucretius as evidence for the superior force that variety of sublime poetry which does not raise clear or sensible images) indicates his abiding consciousness of the section’s discontinuity with the rest of the treatise. Burke’s argument in the fifth section is that words excite the passions of their auditors by means altogether different, and above all more efficient, than those which operate directly through the senses. It is clear that the origins of this insight lay in meditation upon the function of what he calls ‘compound abstract words’ in moral and political discourse, the major spheres of their application:

As compositions, they [compound abstract words] are not real essences, and hardly cause, I think, any real ideas. No body, I believe, immediately on hearing the sounds, virtue, liberty, or honour, conceives any precise notion of the particular modes of action and thinking, together with the mixt and simple ideas, and the several relations of them for which these words are substituted; neither has he any general idea, compounded of them;

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54 Samuel Clarke, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God (1705), 45, 50, 255–8.
55 Philosophical Enquiry, 176 [V. vii].
56 Ibid. 170–2 [V. v].
for if he had, then some of those particular ones, though indistinct perhaps, and confused, might come soon to be perceived.\textsuperscript{57}

Burke’s contention is that human responses to these words operate entirely through habit, and have no correspondence with simple or original ideas: ‘The sounds being often used without reference to any particular occasion, and carrying still their first impressions, they at last utterly lose their connection with the particular occasions that gave rise to them.’\textsuperscript{58} When compound abstract words are put together ‘without any rational view, or in such a manner that they do not rightly agree with one another’ (one immediately remembers the ‘confounding’ of ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ here) the result is ‘bombast’, a style which must be guarded against by author and audience alike.

On the other hand, Burke suggests, the arbitrary relation that these words have with concrete images and ideas also allows for a complexity of combination, and so an affective richness, that the more accurate referentiality of mere images does not admit. The influence that words have over passions is intensified by the efficiency with which they give access, through sympathy, to the passions of other people; by the deep impressions that their frequent employment (we hear the words ‘war, death, famine’ far more often than we could encounter such phenomena) leave upon the imagination; and by the diversity of ideas that can be thus combined.\textsuperscript{59}

The purpose of the \textit{Philosophical Enquiry} had been to trace ideas of the sublime and the beautiful back to their simple concrete sources, back to immediate sensory impressions, thus breaking their false association with other words and concepts. The fifth section of the treatise, with its counter-intuitive argument that words generally operate without evoking real ideas in the mind of speaker or hearer, considerably complicates (and perhaps adds a touch of paradox to) Burke’s much-emphasized imperative of accuracy, mainly by exploring the state of uncertainty in which words actually thrive. Section 5 is a theoretical appendix to the treatise, and as such it reveals that the \textit{Philosophical Enquiry} is fundamentally about a problem in language: if we don’t examine the ‘connection with particular occasions that gave rise’ to our understanding of such familiar words ‘as virtue, honour, persuasion, magistrate, and the like’, then the force of these words will always stifle their proper meanings for us. But Burke is also saying that the power of these words, the force and movement that they retain, is somehow dependent upon the loss of their original connections, and their transformation into mere receptacles of sensibility.


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Philosophical Enquiry}, 165 [V. iii].

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 173–4 [V. vii].
The *Philosophical Enquiry* ends with a statement that its purpose has been to lay down principles and to define standards for the sublime and beautiful, and not to consider, in the manner of criticism, the history of their artistic employment. But Burke's original concern with accuracy and power in philosophical language indicates his more profound preoccupation with practical, rhetorical issues, with how language should be employed to persuade and to move. As such, the *Philosophical Enquiry* retains the characteristics of a rhetorical treatise, the principal purpose of which is to distinguish affective and descriptive modes of language. His theory that words move us through passions associated with real objects, without representing those objects to the imagination, seems (as he acknowledges) counter-intuitive, because we do not sufficiently distinguish, in our observations upon language, between a clear expression, and a strong expression. These are frequently confounded with each other, though they are in reality extremely different. The former regards the understanding; the other describes it as it is felt... We yield to sympathy, what we refuse to description... Then, by the contagion of our passions, we catch a fire already kindled in another, which probably might never have been struck out by the object described.60

This kind of emphasis on the crucial rhetorical importance of sympathy is entirely commonplace in the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition.61 But it is invariably elaborated through theories of enargia—that is, the evocation, representation, or description of a visual scene in the most powerfully vivid manner, as though the audience were presented with a real image.62 Burke's complete inversion of the theory of enargia—his contention that the power of verbal imagery is defined precisely by its mimetic dysfunctionality, by its failure to reproduce visual impressions accurately—is highly suggestive and original, so much so that the aesthetic and physiological discussions which made up the bulk of the *Philosophical Enquiry* seem to have been conceived largely as preparations for this concluding linguistic insight.

And yet this is not the primary purpose of the treatise. The rhetorical theory of the *Philosophical Enquiry* is everywhere concerned with simplifying the reader's idea of the reception of the sublime and beautiful, with emphasizing the economy
of the human passions. This emphasis serves Burke’s belief in the ultimately religious purpose of the affections, and their ultimately providential actiology:

Whenever the wisdom of our Creator intended that we should be affected by any thing, he did not confide the execution of his design to the languid and precarious operation of our reason; but he endued it with powers and properties that prevent the understanding, and even the will, which seizing upon the senses and imagination, captivate the soul before the understanding is ready either to join with them or to oppose them.63

The revisions and additions that Burke made to the *Philosophical Enquiry* in its second edition of 1759 do much to obscure the centrality of these essentially rhetorical issues (the way affective objects can seize ‘upon senses and imagination’; the anticipation of the defences of reason). The insertion of the introductory essay ‘On Taste’ diminishes the importance of the first section of the treatise, the conclusion to which (section xix) gives a far more valuable summary of Burke’s intentions. These passions deserve analysis for three reasons: first, because ‘the more accurately we search into the human mind, the stronger traces we everywhere find of his wisdom who made it’; second, because a solid theoretical understanding of the economy of the passions is necessary ‘for all who would affect them upon solid and sure principles’, that is, for all who would employ them for rhetorical purposes (Burke deals most largely with this reason); and third, because art itself, or the criticism of art, cannot provide an independent standard, and therefore cannot form the basis for an adequate set of rules, for the making of that art.64 The concluding section of Chapter III (‘The Sublime and Beautiful Compared’, xxvii) ended, in the 1757 first edition, with an unmistakably rhetorical summary of the radical distinction between the sublime and beautiful that echoes the second of these reasons: ‘They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure... a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions’.65

In the 1759 edition, these words were followed by a grudging concession that some objects might combine the two qualities, an interpolation that completely alters the original emphasis of Burke’s words. But the traces of these technical, rhetorical issues remain in Burke’s text.

**IV. Text, Context, and Strategy in the *Philosophical Enquiry***

In recent years critics of Burke have become increasingly doubtful about the usefulness of employing the aesthetics of the *Philosophical Enquiry* as a tool for explaining the rhetoric of his later political writings. The physiological description of the sublime’s natural effects upon human passions, and the ‘standard’ of

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63 *Philosophical Enquiry*, 107 [III. vii].
64 Ibid. 52–4 [I. xix].
65 Ibid. 124 [III. xxvii].
those effects propounded in Burke's treatise, have (as Ronald Paulson recognizes) little in common with the more familiar 'sublime as a rhetorician's tool' of Longinus—an observation which itself begs the question of how applicable the Longinian model is to Burke's mature rhetoric. F. P. Lock has twice advocated a more 'cautious' approach to the tracing of links between the treatise and the Reflections. Tom Furniss, author of the most fully argued monograph to attempt such connections, acknowledges 'both a logical and an ideological contradiction within the very structure and context of both the aesthetics and politics', and argues that the energy of Burke's writing derives from the effort of containing those contradictions. In the preceding sections I have taken what is a more direct approach to the question of what the Philosophical Enquiry can tell us about the rhetoric of Edmund Burke. Rather than read it as a textbook of aesthetics, or as a fully fledged manual of rhetoric, I have considered the polemical nature of the treatise and its context within a tradition of anti-Shaftesburian controversy. This reading makes sense of the treatise as a rhetorical act in its own right, with its own complicated and original means of out-maneuvering a controversial opponent. Burke aimed to establish a link between the vicious inaccuracy of Shaftesbury's critical language and the bad faith of his thinking, and this attempt suggests how thoroughly Burke's controversial techniques involved rhetorical theory with moral polemic. But above all, the Philosophical Enquiry is the first important example of Burke's rhetoric, rather than an anticipation of his subsequent rhetorical practice.

The extent to which the Shaftesburian contexts proposed for the Philosophical Enquiry above might alter received readings and understanding of the treatise remains to be considered. There are three important problems with the text of the Philosophical Enquiry to which these contexts draw our attention. First, it is apparent that Burke's treatise needs to be understood better in terms of the culture of intellectual partisanship to which it belongs—a culture which may provide the key to the politics of the treatise. Second, the evidence that Burke scored over, revised, and obscured earlier versions of the Philosophical Enquiry suggests an unrecognized textual instability (and intellectual insecurity) behind the authoritative façade of the treatise. Third, Burke's oblique polemical strategies, and particularly his anti-deist agenda, indicate that the Philosophical Enquiry has much more in common with the author's earliest publication with the Dodsley brothers, A Vindication of Natural Society (1756), than has been acknowledged. By way of conclusion, I shall consider these problems in turn.

First, a Shaftesburian reading of the *Philosophical Enquiry* reveals the polemical core of the treatise, but confuses the issue of Burke's partisanship within the world of letters—as may well have been the author's intention. We can learn only so much of Burke's basic intellectual allegiances by associating him with anti-Shaftesburians like Bishop Berkeley (against whose writings he once drafted a systematic refutation), Mandeville (who made no discernible impression on his writing), or John Brown (whose *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* Burke was to dismiss in *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*). Moreover, if the project of the *Philosophical Enquiry* began as a rejection of Shaftesbury's moral philosophy, the later stages of its composition had shifted it into the realm of aesthetic and critical discourse. The Shaftesburian phrase ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ appears in the very title of the book, and Shaftesbury’s philosophical idiom is everywhere rejected with contempt—and yet none of Burke's reviewers or correspondents commented upon this. Burke’s childhood friend Richard Shackleton spotted a related link between the title of Burke's treatise and that of Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (compare Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime*...), and their mutual friend William Dennis privately endorsed Shackleton's sense of the book's fundamental opposition to the philosophy of Shaftesbury’s greatest intellectual descendant. By basing ethics upon ‘the Beauty, Order, fitness and Rectitude of Actions’, Dennis wrote to Shackleton, Hutcheson’s moral writing ‘indirectly saps Religion by representing Virtue independent of it’. Dennis’s four key-words can be associated with the notorious deist Shaftesbury (in terms of their aggressive secularism) much more closely than with Hutcheson, who was comparatively cautious about the religious implications of his moral writings. If Burke was dismayed at the ‘confounding’ of moral and aesthetic terminology, at the ‘figurative’ appropriation of the word ‘taste’, and at the uncertain power of the ‘whimsical theory’ that such abuses have occasioned, then this dismay was directed at Hutcheson as well as at Shaftesbury.

In short, even the most curious contemporary readers found only ambiguous evidence for the identity of Burke’s literary opponents, the objects of his censure. So perhaps it makes more sense to consider which of Burke’s contemporaries produced work that is identifiable with the *Philosophical Enquiry*. His scrupulous separation of the ‘frequently confounded’ terms sublime and beautiful is most directly and easily identifiable with John Brown’s rejection of Shaftesbury’s ‘loose Talk and ambiguous Expression’. And in the case of both Burke and of

69 Dennis to Shackleton, Mar. 1758, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Osborne Files 10.213, quoted in Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 100, which also identifies Dennis’s words with Shaftesbury.
Brown, it was John Locke who provided the model for their critique. One measure of the extraordinary resonance that Locke’s writing on linguistic accuracy had during the 1750s, however, is that Laurence Sterne also drew upon it for that crux of the comedy of *Tristram Shandy* (reviewed in Burke’s 1760 *Annual Register*), the ‘obscurity and confusion’ of Uncle Toby’s brain: ‘What it [Toby’s confusion] did arise from, I have hinted above, and a fertile source of obscurity it is,—and ever will be,—and that is the unsteady use of words which have perplexed the clearest and most exalted understandings.’ The relish with which Sterne gathered ‘words of little meaning, and as indeterminate a sense’ to make a ‘pudder and racket’ in Uncle Toby’s cerebrum owes much to the language with which Locke expressed his astonishment at the impositions of metaphysical discourse: ‘When it is considered’, wrote Locke, ‘what a pudder is made about *Essences*, and how much all sorts of Knowledge, Discourse, Conversation, are pester’d and disorder’d by the careless, confused Use and Application of Words, it will, perhaps, be thought worth while thoroughly to lay [the subject] open.’

Burke did his best to lay the subject open, and in doing so aligned himself with the broad outline of a conservative, consensus Lockeanism. This was a more moderate version, one might say, of the position from which William Warburton attacked Shaftesbury’s intellectual betrayal of Locke (who had been his schoolmaster) in the ‘Dedication to the Free-Thinkers’ that sat at the head of his *Divine Legation*. In short, Burke was following the literary fashion, and it is typical of the *Philosophical Enquiry* that this timeliness only contributes to its elusiveness.

The polemical purpose of the treatise remains so obscure because Burke designed it to be so. The *Philosophical Enquiry* must have started life as a direct refutation of Shaftesbury, but it outgrew (perhaps because of the curious particularity of Burke’s inductive method, his diligent search for illustration and example) its origins in the controversial mode. The apparently lengthy gestation of the book would support this theory. Burke wrote in 1757 that ‘it is four years now since this enquiry was finished’, and peppered the text with illustrations to theories discovered ‘Since I wrote these papers.’ After these untraceable pre-publication alterations, Burke expanded his book considerably for the second edition of 1759, thus changing the orientation of its argument once more. This was an unstable text, and it is possible that the Shaftesburian connection with the phrase ‘sublime and beautiful’ is nothing more than a contextual fossil embedded within the intellectual strata of Burke’s ‘enquiry’. And yet the specificity and

71 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 438 [III. v. 16].
73 *Philosophical Enquiry*, 2, 168.
prominence of that connection in the title, theme, and structure of the *Philosophical Enquiry* require explanation. One can point to a variety of external considerations that might have led Burke to play down the controversial origins of his work: the notorious elusiveness of the *Characteristics*, a book too slippery for direct refutation; the impoliteness and pedantry associated with controversial literature, especially on religious themes; the superior status of a self-contained, internally coherent treatise; the over-familiarity of Shaftesburian idioms in mid-eighteenth-century aesthetics—these considerations will have combined to influence Burke’s preparation of his treatise.

However, they offer little insight into the positive rhetorical energies of Burke’s writing. Is it not possible that Burke always had his Shaftesburian themes in mind, and that he assumed the allusion to the ‘SUBLIME and BEAUTIFUL’ in his title would be enough to alert those of his more attentive readers to his fundamental controversial purpose? Burke had made this kind of assumption in his first full-scale publication, the enigmatic *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756)—indeed, one cannot get a true sense of Burke’s early literary proclivities without comparing his two books of the 1750s. At its publication, the *Vindication* left its readership divided. On the one hand, there were those who half-understood its oblique satirical design, and had heard something of its attribution to ‘an ingenious young gentleman, a student at the Temple’. On the other, there were readers who followed certain textual hints, and took it to be an authentic fugitive paper of Viscount Bolingbroke, whose *Works* had been published with pomp by his executor David Mallett, and received with scandal, in 1754.

So the original problem posed by the *Vindication* was: is it authentic? Burke settled the question in a preface to the second edition of 1757, in which he explained his ‘Design’ of showing how the subversion of ‘authority in matters of religion’ for which he held Bolingbroke responsible could be extended *ad absurdum*, to authority in government: ‘there [was] no Reason to conceal the Design of it any longer’—especially since concealment and dissimulation of heterodox theology was a theme of what was now openly declared to be a satire. But those who thought the *Vindication*

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74 *Critical Review*, 1 (June 1756), 420; for the reviewer Thomas Francklin, see D. Roper, ‘Smollett’s “Four Gentlemen”: The First Contributors to the *Critical Review*’, *RES* 10 (1959), 38–44; *Monthly Review*, 15 (July 1756), 18–22.


76 *Writings and Speeches*, i. 134; see M. N. Rothbard, ‘A Note on Burke’s *Vindication of Natural Society*’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (1958), 114–18, for an unironic reading; in 1858 the *Vindication* was reprinted with this unironic purpose in mind: ‘Burke’s denial of the legitimacy of his own mental offspring is, however, more barefaced . . . because, instead of attempting a logical refutation of all he had said before (which he knew was impossible), he took a shorter and easier mode of shirking the difficulty; he coolly pretended that his “Vindication” was simply a piece of irony’: *The Inherent Evils of State Governments Demonstrated; being a Reprint of Edmund Burke’s Celebrated Essay, entitled ‘A Vindication of Natural Society’* (1858), preface A2.
a genuine piece of St Johniana, and saw only one level of concealment in the text, were in many ways more sensitive readers than those who detected the imposition. For Burke meant his imitation to be plausible. He had attempted to evolve a satirical strategy suited specifically to attacking Lord Bolingbroke, a deist philosopher felt to be at once unanswerable and unworthy of a direct refutation.\textsuperscript{77} The \textit{Vindication} was less an answer to Bolingbroke than a burlesque exercise in sophistry, a rhetorical experiment to see how far an ‘absurd’ argument could be pushed while the pastiche remained plausible. The \textit{Philosophical Enquiry} was a contrastingly sober and direct affair; where the \textit{Vindication} was oblique, periphrastic, and negative, the \textit{Philosophical Enquiry} proposed a systematic thesis by a thorough, inductive method. And yet it is natural to group the two pieces together, and not only by virtue of their contemporaneity. The \textit{Vindication} was designed to suggest the vicious political analogue to Bolingbroke’s irreligious philosophy. The \textit{Philosophical Enquiry}, when read as a refutation of Shaftesbury, was similarly anti-deistic, and fitted the argument from design to illustrate a positive theory of civil society: ‘as our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight.’\textsuperscript{78} But above all, his two earliest publications show Burke to have been an essentially secretive writer, biased always towards obliqueness, fastidiously keeping things hidden from his reader. It remains to be seen what secrets may be concealed in the shadow of the blaze of his mature eloquence.

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\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Philosophical Enquiry}, 46 [I. xiv].