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“A sensible Kind of Madness”: The Limits of Enthusiasm in Shaftesbury and  
Kant

I.

In 17th and 18th century philosophical discourse, “Enthusiasm” signifies an especially menacing political threat. At that time, the followers of religious mass movements were called “enthusiasts.” In his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), Shaftesbury explains its danger. For Shaftesbury, enthusiasm is contagious. Progressing from one person to the next, there is soon an uncontrollable mob:

“WE may with good reason call every Passion *Pannick* which is rais’d in a Multitude, and convey’d by Aspect, or as it were by Contact or Sympathy. Thus popular Fury may be call’d *Pannick*, when the Rage of the People, as we have sometimes known, has put them beyond themselves; especially where Religion has to do. And in this state their very Looks are infectious. The Fury flies from Face to Face: and the Disease is no sooner seen than caught.”

An analogy for society is thus the human body, and the exaltation of masses is nothing more than social *fever*. Every fear in human history can be linked to fanaticism – “Bloodshed, Wars, Persecutions and Devastations” – may be understood as a *pathology of the community*, as an infection of the “Body-politick”. Even this short description informs us of the strong relation between Shaftesbury and the Platonian characterization of enthusiasm in his dialogue *Ion*. Shaftesbury

and Plato agree about the essence of enthusiasm, especially in two main points: first, that the exaltation of the enthusiasts brings them “beyond-themselves”, and second, the astounding speed with which exaltation reproduces itself. The difference between Shaftesbury and Plato lies in their evaluation of the phenomenon. Plato characterizes enthusiasm as a “divine madness” – a mania inspired by a god or a poet –, whereas Shaftesbury foregrounds its dangerous role as a political threat.

What cure may heal this fever? Shaftesbury rejects any form of repression or violence, because they might further inflame the fury of the enthusiasts. In the Polis of the antiquity, Shaftesbury writes, only the acuteness of wit and the mockery could suppress the spread of enthusiasm: “Whilst some Sects, such as the *Pythagorean* and latter *Platonick*, join’d in with the Superstition and Enthusiasm of the Times; the *Epicurean*, the *Academick*, and others, were allow’d to use all the Force of Wit and Raillery against it. And thus matters were happily ballanc’d.”

For Shaftesbury, “Wit” and “Raillery” are the only powerful means against fanaticism. In his demand for “good humour”, Shaftesbury employs all possible meanings of ‘humour’ in early 18th-century English: body liquids, ‘fancy’, ‘mood’, ‘state of mind’, ‘wit’, ‘humor’ (in the modern sense). But good humour alone could not succeed against enthusiasm, if enthusiasm itself did not have the potential of being ridiculous. Enthusiasm, as a visible activity, initially seems absurd: “For the Bodys of the Prophets, in their State of Prophecy, being not in their own power, but (as they say themselves) mere passive Organs, actuated by an exterior Force, have nothing natural, or resembling real Life, in any of their Sounds or Motions: so that how aukardly soever a Puppet-Show may imitate other Actions, it must needs represent this Passion to the Life.” In the act of receiving his prophecies, the body of the prophet does not only resemble a lifeless doll; he actually *transforms* himself into a puppet manipulated by god.

Enthusiasm can thus be forged: one can quite easily simulate the enthusiastic rapture either out of self-deception or in order to mock those who believe it. There is a ‘real’ and a ‘false’ enthusiasm, the false being this fictionalized or phony version. This distinction is not easy to make. The proximity of the enthusiast to God, the “being-in-God” (which literally means “enthusiasm”),

could also be produced by a phantom, a chimera of god, a *merely imagined god*. For Shaftesbury, enthusiasm comes under the suspicion of deception and dissimulation. Shaftesbury refers to the tradition of the call of the muses as an example for a clearly imitable and imitated enthusiasm: “IT has been an establish’d Custom for Poets, at the entrance of their Work, to adress themselves to some *Muse*: and this Practice of the Antients has gain’d so much Repute, that even in our days we find it almost constantly imitated.”

Enthusiasm has been, since its inception, accompanied by its imitation. It is the task of the critical philosopher to distinguish between these ‘true’ and ‘false’ enthusiasms. Every enthusiastic exaltation *feels* like a rapture induced by God himself. But what if it is merely a phantom or a product of the imagination encouraging this state of enthusiasm? Since the possibility of self-deception is inherent to the structure of enthusiasm, the subjective experience of the enthusiast *cannot* be relied on to accurately determine if it is ‘real’. The enthusiast Theokles in Shaftesbury’s novel *The Moralists* (1709) seems to be confused about the nature and source of his own raptures: “Now, PHILOCLES, said he, (starting as out of a Dream) how has it been with me in my Fit? Seem’d it a sensible kind of Madness, like those Transports which are permitted to our Poets? or was it downright Raving?”

Following the difference between ‘real’ and ‘false’ enthusiasm – or between “a sensible kind of Madness” and “downright Raving” –, Shaftesbury distinguishes between *good* “Inspiration” and *dangerous* “Enthusiasm”. “THE only thing, my Lord”, Shaftesbury writes,

“I wou’d infer from all this, is, that ENTHUSIASM is wonderfully powerful and extensive; that it is a matter of nice Judgment, and the hardest thing in the world to know fully and distinctly; since even *Atheism* is not exempt from it. [...] Nor can Divine Inspiration, by its outward Marks, be easily distinguish’d from it. For Inspiration is a *real* feeling of the Divine Presence, and Enthusiasm a false one.”

But how can one distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘false’ enthusiasm, if the virtue and power of enthusiasm is, according to Shaftesbury, the power to evoke enthusiasm in *other people*? Besides the “spontaneous” enthusiasm, “there is a sort of Enthusiasm of second hand”, Shaftesbury writes. Only by this enthusiasm “of second hand”, a *mass* enthusiasm becomes possible. This is what renders enthusiasm a political threat.

If the possibility of imitation of enthusiasm is exactly the condition of its own potential and power, then it is necessarily impossible to distinguish between the “real” and “false” feelings of a divine presence. The distinction proves to be as *necessary* as it is *impossible*. Shaftesbury writes about his distinction:

“But the Passion they raise is much alike. For when the Mind is taken up in Vision, and fixes its viewer either on any real Object, or mere Specter of Divinity; when it sees, or thinks it sees any thing prodigious, and more than human; its Horrour, Delight, Confusion, Fear, Admiration, or whatever Passion belongs to it [...] will have something vast, *immane*, and (as Painters say) *beyond Life*. And this is what gave occasion to the name of *Fanaticism*, as it was us’d by the Antients in its original Sense, for an *Apparition* transporting the Mind.”

Enthusiasm “transports” the mind, it moves it, carries it along, transmits it. Thus, enthusiasm is – in its ‘false’ form as well as in its ‘true’ form – a transmissive power, which *moves* the mind and can be understood as a significant means of communication. In the 18th century, enthusiasm was repeatedly criticized for its “unsociability”, but for Shaftesbury, it was the *principal foundation* of social behavior. Shaftesbury writes:

“So that *Inspiration* may be justly call’d *Divine* ENTHUSIASM: For the Word it self signifies *Divine Presence*, and was made use of by the Philosopher whom the earliest Christian Fathers call’d *Divine*, to express whatever was sublime in human Passions. This was the spirit he allotted to *Heroes*, *Statesmen*, *Poets*, *Orators*, *Musicians*, and even *Philosophers* themselves. Nor can

we, of our own accord, forbear ascribing to a noble Enthusiasm, whatever is greatly perform'd by any of *These*.”

By ascribing all the great works of all Heroes, Statesmen, Poets, and Artists to a “sensible madness”, Shaftesbury cites a traditional *topos* regarding the fine line separating a *genius* from a *madman*. Although he is greatly concerned with artificial enthusiasm, Shaftesbury insists on a *genuine* divine presence. Only this presence, holds Shaftesbury, can drive people to perform great thoughts and works.

## II.

Kant’s interest in enthusiasm is evident in all his work. Already in the early “Essay on the Sickness of the Head” (1764), Kant began to speak of enthusiasm. Kant writes: “He who becomes more heated through a moral sentiment as a principle – more than others thought possible”, is called a “Phantast”. This “ambiguous appearance of phantasy”, Kant writes, “is *enthusiasm*, and nothing great in the world has been done without it.” This sentence virtually quotes *verbatim* Shaftesbury’s assertion, it is only enthusiasm that evokes, “whatever is greatly perform’d”.

In Kant’s texts, the difficulty of enthusiasm’s ambiguity – which worried Shaftesbury – seems to be alleviated. Kant attempts to solve the problem by distinguishing between *Enthusiasmus* and *Schwärmerei*. This is a quite original distinction. Both words were synonymic in 18th century German, and *Schwärmerei* is the common translation to German of the english term *enthusiasm*. For Kant however, the words are opposites. As opposites, the dichotomous features of enthusiasm discussed by Shaftesbury can be recognized in Kant’s argument.

*Schwärmerei* is, as Kant describes, a dangerous political madness. The “fanatic”, Kant writes,

“is actually a lunatic with a supposed unmediated inspiration and great intimacy with the powers of heaven. Human nature knows no more

dangerous delusion. If the eruption is fresh; if the betrayed man is talented; and if the crowd is well prepared to absorb the force of fermentation [*Gärungsmittel*], even a whole nation can suffer ecstasy.”

The *Schwärmer* hears *the voice of God*. Through this supposed unmediated experience, he becomes one with God’s voice. Whereas the *Schwärmer* confuses his own subjectivity with that of the divine presence, the enthusiast, Kant clarifies, acts under the influence of a “moral sentiment”.

While Shaftesbury suggests the disparity between *dangerous* “enthusiasm” and *good* “inspiration” is the same as between real and false inspiration, Kant discerns two different *sources* of inspiration. The *Schwärmer* reacts on a *feeling* (of a supposed unmediated sensuous experience), but the *enthusiast* reacts on a *moral principle*. Kant draws this distinction explicitly in a footnote to his essay *Observations on the feelings of Beauty and the Sublime*. In his later essay, “Raising the Tone of Philosophy”, Kant accordingly discriminates between hearing a “voice of *emotion*” and the “voice of *reason*”.

But can this distinction truly be successful? Kant claims that enthusiasm can come into being “without the imagination of a supranatural community”. The enthusiast is, nevertheless, influenced by his imagination. In fact, enthusiasm can be compared to the state of a completely uninhibited and unrestrained imagination. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines enthusiasm as an “Idea of Good with a heightened state of emotion”. This state of emotion, of course, has to be activated by the imagination. Kant writes: “In enthusiasm, as an affection, the imagination is unbridled.” It thus follows that the “unbridledness” of the imagination, within the context of the sublime, does not come from a power to perceive the ideal and intangible in a sensuous way (like in the *Schwärmerei*). Instead, it recedes from any representation. It therefore points to the unrepresentable, to *ideal* entities, such as the “Idea” of the “Good”.

For Kant, enthusiasm is a paradox. It is a state of mind, which is defined by the imagination going beyond its limits. The imagination convinces the mind of an Idea that cannot take on any physical, sensuous shape. However, it is *precisely* this *loss* that incites the imagination to become the *medium of reason itself*.

While enthusiasm for Shaftesbury represents a “sensible kind of Madness”, it becomes for Kant the *madness of reason*. It is a madness *caused* by reason itself. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant observes that enthusiasm and *Schwärmerei* overlap: enthusiasm always borders on being a *Sickness of the head*, on being pure madness.

Like the *Schwärmerei*, enthusiasm is a deviation from “common sense”. In the state of exaltation, while surrendered to the Idea of Good by an unbridled imagination, the enthusiast *resembles the madman*. Neither *Schwärmerei* nor enthusiasm heeds the rational structures of the mind. Enthusiasm transverses all borders of finiteness. It ends up at the *infinity of reason*.

A confusion concerning the similarity between *Schwärmerei* and enthusiasm remains. Both phenomena are caused by the imagination transcending all borders of sensuousness, leaving behind any need for physicality. *Schwärmerei* is hearing “voices of emotion.” Enthusiasm is hearing the “voice of reason.” Knowing how rigorous Kant’s philosophy is, how can he allow himself to tell the difference between the two?

Kant tries to solve this problem by introducing the distinction between “positive” and “negative” representations. Positive representation is just the normal sensuous experience, but a visual experience of ideas can, according to Kant, only be a “dreaming according to principles (rational raving).” The representation of the enthusiastic rapture, however, doesn’t imagine a visual shape of the ideal object, it is a merely “negative” representation. A “negative representation” *does not* represent an object. Instead, it is a symbol of the unattainability of the object.

Enthusiasm’s paradox, then, is that “negative” representation represents an object, *which can never be represented*. Kant mentions an example out of the “Jewish Law” (the hebrew bible). It reads: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc.” “Negative” representation negates itself and is further constrained by self-contradiction. In his enthusiasm, he seems to have forgotten that he already said that. And so, few pages later, he writes: “Perhaps there has never been a more sublime utterance, or a thought more sublimely expressed, than the well-known inscription upon the Temple of Isis (Mother Nature): ‘I am all that is, and that

was, and that shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from before my face'.” The “I” does not present itself, and cannot be seen or understood in any way. “Negative representation” is constrained to self-negation and self-contradiction. The “voice of reason” is thus necessarily a *silent* voice: the only thing it *can* utter is its own muteness. Every enthusiastic moment of rapture must both obey and perpetrate the rule of “negative” representation. The border between enthusiasm and Schwärmerei remains blurred.