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Introduction to a Treatise on Affectation

Translated by Paul Vincent Spade
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Translator’s Foreword


Numerals in square brackets are page numbers to the Danish edition. Other expressions in square brackets are my own interventions, either to disambiguate a pronoun or else for clarity. I have broken up long paragraphs into shorter ones. All footnotes are my own.
Introduction to a Treatise on Affectation

In the reflections communicated here, the author has tried to clarify the concept of affectation. But as a not completely superficial reader will easily become aware, that is not what constitutes [the author’s] chief interest. It has been his main task to go through the most common phenomena of affectation, both in human life generally and in the age particularly. He who has no taste for this kind of moral natural-descriptions is therefore given timely warning to skip over these pages.

Those who put no value in any other thought than one in which all concepts are brought forth from nothing by an immanent development will naturally insist that the concept treated here should appear as the result of a speculative system indicated in advance. But if they have not ceased to follow along with us, in accordance with the warning already given, they are asked to abandon their demand, since it is taken to be inappropriate here to give the ground-plan of a temple [merely] in order to find a hole in it for a poor church mouse. All their theoretical and practical concepts really amount to one [391] concept, since they surely would have determined the concept [of affectation] treated here within the same boundaries as will be suggested in the following.

The other class of readers, whose individual concepts have led a more independent existence, each by itself, and have arranged themselves more in the form of an archipelago, will probably find a place for these reflections in one or another group. In the opposite case, [the reflections here] could well provide that bit of a tremor in the ocean of their thought whereby a little island can emerge and last for a half hour’s time.

Various deep-minded men in our time serve [these latter people], in writings and conversations, with the word “truth,” which they seem to take in such a sense that they indicate by it everything that is respectable in human life. On the other hand, they condemn so many kinds of unreasonable states of mind as un-truth or indeed [as] an intrinsic lie that one is naturally made to raise the question whether truth for them is merely one of morality’s essential sides, or whether all

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1 In line 6.
2 That is, if they cannot find a place for the notion of affectation developed here among the concepts they already have.
3 I translate sædlig, Sædligheden and related words by forms of “moral” or “morality.” I translate moralsk and related words by forms of “ethical.” On two occasions below, this policy requires Immoralitet to be gracelessly translated as “unethicalness.” Although in German philoso-
morality’s conditions are united in it, or whether it is a specific virtue alongside other virtues. Many who make use of this concept in aphoristic utterances seem not quite to have any account of this [question], and there is scarcely any systematic writing in which this way of looking at things is carried through so that the indeterminate concept that hovers here can be taken to have its adequate presentation in it.

Among the shorter inventories one now and then finds of the various ethical principles that have been advanced in the history of practical philosophy, one could be tempted to believe that the Englishman Wollaston had precisely understood ethical perfection as truth. But by reading his own work one does not find in it the view we are talking about here. Neither is there found any working out of it in Ammon’s ethical system, although on examining his chapter on the principle of ethics one will be made to think so.

A human being’s life has one kind of truth when he follows his natural desire without pretense; he has a higher truth when he has attained virtue (in the ancient sense of the word), so that he still gets the content of his actions from his natural inclinations, but has won such control over them that he maintains a certain moderation in their satisfaction. The life of the person who with purely rational autonomy determines all his intentions has a yet higher level of personal truth. (It does not have to be proved here that this cannot happen by a merely subjective thinking, but [only] in such a way that the subject recognizes, as a work of the same reason that is his will’s proper truth, the rational order that without his cooperation is in his development in existence.) Finally, to the extent that a human being’s pure self-determination is the will sanctified by religion, he acts in perfect harmony with the whole world of reason—that is, what ought to be—and his life cannot attain a higher truth. But this truth is nothing else than morality, and all deviation from it is immorality. Affectation is certainly a kind of this immorality. But we have to determine more closely what place it occupies in this larger circle.

The human being who has affectation in his life does not to that extent determine himself with perfect ethical freedom; his actions do not have their source in the true self that is his free moral will. His will is determined by one or

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4 The reference seems to be to the view of “truth” as indicating everything respectable in human life. See line 26 above.
5 William Wollaston (1659–1724), the author of The Religion of Nature Delineated (1722).
6 Presumably this is the view that “all morality’s conditions are united in [the word ‘truth’],” the second of the three alternatives listed in lines 29–31.
7 Christoff Friedrich von Ammon (1766–1850), German philosopher and theologian. Ammon looked for a middle ground between “rationalism” and “supernaturalism,” holding that there must be a “rational supernaturalism” that gradually developed Christian doctrine in accordance with the advance of knowledge and science. I have not identified the particular chapter referred to here.
another merely natural purpose by which he is made to depict an alien\textsuperscript{8} person or to take on a false role he is not assigned in life.

It belongs in the first place, then, to affectation’s essence that it is falsehood.\textsuperscript{9} But not [just] any falsehood is affectation. He who, with clear consciousness that he is lying or dissembling, makes himself guilty of lying or dissimulation does not show any affectation. We are by no means hereby saying that affectation is any slighter vice than dissimulation accompanied by clear consciousness. In what follows, it will turn out that one degree of affectation presupposes less unethicalness than [does] methodical dissimulation, while in another degree there is shown greater unethicalness.

Affectation then is not unblended falsehood, but always has an admixture of self-deception. For it lies in the concept of affectation that the person strives to be what he cannot be. But he cannot strive for it without fancying to himself at least for a while that he can be it. But entirely innocent self-deception, which is without any falsehood,\textsuperscript{10} can just as little be called affectation, so that the two given components—falsehood and self-deception—always are found combined in affectation.

(It ought to be a superfluous remark [to say] that entirely involuntary movements cannot possibly be counted as affectation, and that consequently abnormal reactions that on account of the mental life’s lack of control over the bodily not infrequently [394] escape a human being completely against his will must be excluded [from affectation]. Yet it is not infrequently that one hears such unnatural and inadequate manifestations of the inner life labeled with the name ‘affectation’. (We are thinking here in the first place of all the outward movements that, on the basis of organic defect, do not stand in the relation to the person’s representations, thoughts and feelings they would stand in if the body were in its normal state. Examples of these are clumsy movements of individual limbs, involuntary muscle-twitches, errors in speech, and so on, which together the rabble count as affectation.

(Under the same rubric belong a number of abortive reactions that are just as innocent in kind, although even reasonable people not infrequently pass a judgment of condemnation on them. Among them one can count every disproportionate manifestation of feeling that becomes disproportionate because the person either continually or under certain circumstances lacks the ability to find the appropriate expression for his mood. Such mistakes can just as little be counted among ethical defects as a foreigner’s words when he from lack of fluency with the language happens to make use of improper or offensive remarks. A human being of low standing, who is not used to finding himself in society with people of rank, often bows too deeply, not because he wants to display great veneration but

\textsuperscript{8}“Alien” (Danish \textit{fremmed}) and related words are to be understood in the sense of “not one’s own” (compare the term “alienation’). The notion of being a non-citizen is of course not involved here, much less the notion of being an extraterrestrial.

\textsuperscript{9}Understand “falsehood” in this discussion in contrast to the various levels of “truth” discussed in lines 43–56.

\textsuperscript{10}See n. 9 above.
because he does not have the customary skill at estimating the angle of inclination accurately.

(In a conversation, he who remarks that he involuntarily happened to express himself too harshly and strongly toward another, will sometimes make his offense good again, but because his blood has now once [395] got out of equilibrium, he displays a good will that is not entirely meant, even though the unfortunate correction can have its source in striving to show his true heart. 

(Not everything in a human’s reactions that in this way are not contained at all in the subject’s preceding representations of them can be called affectation. In such cases a human only succumbs to a struggle with nature’s necessity, insofar as the external organs refuse to obey his free will’s commands.)

If we treat the degrees of affectation according to their greater or lesser connection with the subject’s character, then [the subject] has the least possible share of [affectation] when [the affectation] is struggling against the tendency of the will but in the individual moment escapes the human being because his virtue has not become proficient. Such a manifestation of affectation stands in the same relation to the affectation that has become a habit as [a state of] drunkenness does to impenance, and there is scarcely any mortal who does not, at least in youth, sometimes make himself guilty of small, half-involuntary dishonesties of this kind.

If there is anyone who from the very beginning of his development so preserves his independence that he even avoids the form of affectation that lies near the borders of love-worthiness, so that he for example, never forces himself, out of a wish to agree completely with a boyfriend or girlfriend, to sympathize with them more then he is able, then he must certainly have by nature a very strongly marked individuality. But whether he therefore has the most favorable temperament is another question. His talent for preserving his individuality pure and free of irrelevant fillers can also have its origin in an egoistic propensity to confine himself merely to his own thoughts and [in] a lack of ability to open his mind to alien influence.

He who is not in a position to give himself all at once to others in such a way that for a while he remains at one with them, goes out of himself and loses himself in an alien circle of consciousness, can surely by his holding back save himself from being overcome by any spiritual power. But the individuality that can be rescued only in this way always remains extremely one-sided and poor. Spiritual perfection, just like physical growth, can only be advanced by the individual’s regularly mixing together with what is alien to him and apparently sacrificing his self in order, enriched, to turn back home again to himself.

11 The preceding five paragraphs are all a single parenthetical paragraph in the Danish.
12 That is, succeeds in overcoming the will and breaking through anyway.
13 The word is dem, which is plural, even though, like the English, the Danish requires the singular.
14 Conjecturing Tilsætninger for the edition’s Tilsætniner.
15 indeslutte sig. The expression is related to Kierkegaard’s Indesluttedhed, which the Hong's translate as “inclosing reserve.” In ordinary Danish it means merely “reserve” or “reticence.”
But it can indeed certainly happen that an able-minded youth can turn back to himself from such a fruitful self-forgetfulness, where he has let someone else command the course of his thought with the appearance of notions and feelings that are repudiated by his own true ego but that he forces on himself in order to enjoy the charming pleasure of sympathy. The manifestations of affectation that result in this way could often become precisely the basis for a strengthening of the personal life’s truth, insofar as he who has inadvertently overstepped his personality’s boundary because of dissatisfaction with himself is brought to a clearer consciousness of what he feels, wants and knows, and to stronger self-propulsion in similar circumstances. He who has been on this side of the border now is first rightly acquainted with where the border is.

Such a transient manifestation of affectation that has its source in a force that dazzles feeling, which a human being by subsequent reflection denies of himself as something that does not belong to his essence, and which he is on guard against in the future, is a lesser fault than actually lying. (Momentary affectation.)

A higher degree of affectation takes place with him who has acquired a habit for a certain kind of false manifestations insofar as he imagines himself to have certain purposes, interests or inclinations because he for one or another external reason wishes to have them. For instance, when one from vanity lies himself into love for one or another art he has no sense for, or when relatives and friends of a fanatic pass for being like-minded with him, although his fervor is foreign to their hearts and under altered circumstances would pass away on its own. The possibility of self-deception here depends on the logical consistency with which the acquired role is pursued. But the center that supports such a sphere of representation falls outside the subject himself.

This second degree of affectation is in an ethical respect not at all less imputable than the lie or representation accompanied by clear consciousness. For the fact that it is not brought to full consciousness merely comes from the fact that the person in question does not want to bring it to consciousness. This is mentioned because a highly incorrect concept of this has come into circulation, inasmuch as a lot of people believe there lies in self-deception enough justification, or at least excuse, even for open vileness—a view the incorrectness of which is easily seen when one pursues it to some of its undeniable consequences.

It follows from this, you see, that one should be able to push his falsehood so far that it becomes honesty again, and that he who lies so long that he himself believes his fabricated stories should to this degree become better, because his lie is transformed into self-deception. According to this way of looking at things, a judge could also in all innocence let himself be bribed, since he merely had to bring himself by means of sophisms to believe that his benefactor was right.

The persuasion cannot be very profound that has its origin in inclination. This already appears from the fact that the effect in general does not last longer than its cause. It is not improbable that he who finds a literary work bad, because he thinks his enemy has written it, will find it very good if he finds out that his friend is the author of it. But that in the first case he found it bad was surely not
any innocent mistake, no matter how much self-deception there was in it. For one ought to follow his inclinations against reason and truth just as little in his assumptions as in his actions.

Under this second degree of affectation a human being takes a false element up into himself and distorts his personality, so that its expressions do not cohere with his real self. To the extent that he thus has a double interior—a real one that is suppressed, and an apparent one that he wants to hold good for [both] himself and others—he leads in the final analysis only an apparent-life. (*Established affectation.*)

The last mentioned [kind of] affectation can yet, even where it is pushed furthest of all, allow that the person has an enduring appearance of inward coherence, both for the subject himself and for others. But there can be such an appearance of consistency only momentarily in the third and worst degree of affectation. That takes place where a human being does not have one or another feigned trait in his character, where he does not have the habit of a determinate [399] kind of affectation, but has a proficiency in affectation in general, which now assumes this, now that determinate form.

This vileness approaches more or less, according to its greater or lesser development, to complete untruth in personal life. If a human being could reach its culmination-point, then there would not be any lasting nucleus in his thinking and willing. Rather he would form for himself in each moment of his life a temporary personality, [only] to annul it in the next. He would indeed, like some animals, generally shift colors according to his surroundings and to that extent be the passive product of his conditions. But since this is only one of the affectation’s forms, its course would not be able to let itself be calculated according to the simple rule that he should resemble his surroundings, since affectation can also appear in a striving in his conduct to represent the peculiar, the unusual.

No one can succeed in this perfect lie in the inner life. But if anyone could, it would be an ethical suicide whereby a human being completely annihilated himself as a distinctive figure in the ethical world. (*Changing affectation.*)