

**Poul Martin Møller**

**Introduction to a Treatise on  
Affectation**

**Translated by Paul Vincent Spade  
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## Translator's Foreword

Translated from Poul Martin Møller, *Inledning til en Afhandling om Affektationen*, in *Poul Møller: Skrifter i Udvalg*, Vilh. Andersen, ed., ("Danmarks Nationallitteratur," Poul Tuxen, gen. ed.; Copenhagen: Gad, 1930), vol. II, pp. 390–99. The article dates from 1837.

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,<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> [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 untruth 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<sup>3</sup> essential sides, or whether all

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<sup>1</sup> In line 6 .

<sup>2</sup> That is, if they cannot find a place for the notion of affectation developed here among the concepts they already have.

<sup>3</sup> 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-

30 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 system-  
 atic writing in which this way of looking at things<sup>4</sup> is carried through so that the  
 indeterminate concept that hovers here can be taken to have its adequate presenta-  
 35 tion in it.

Among the shorter inventories one now and then finds of the various ethi-  
 cal principles that have been advanced in the history of practical philosophy, one  
 could be tempted to believe that the Englishman Wollaston<sup>5</sup> had precisely under-  
 stood [392] ethical perfection as truth.<sup>6</sup> But by reading his own work one does not  
 40 find in it the view we are talking about here. Neither is there found any working  
 out of it in Ammon's ethical system,<sup>7</sup> 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 de-  
 sire without pretense; he has a higher truth when he has attained virtue (in the an-  
 45 cient 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 cer-  
 tain moderation in their satisfaction. The life of the person who with purely ra-  
 tional 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 sub-  
 50 jective 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 [even] with-  
 out 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  
 55 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 im-  
 morality. 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 de-  
 60 termine himself with perfect ethical [393] 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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phy of this period, the distinction between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität* is often significant, Møller does not seem to basing anything important on the distinction here.

<sup>4</sup> The reference seems to be to the view of "truth" as indicating everything respectable in human life. See line 26 above.

<sup>5</sup> William Wollaston (1659–1724), the author of *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1722).

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> person or to take on a false role he is not assigned in life.

65 It belongs in the first place, then, to affectation's essence that it is falsehood.<sup>9</sup> 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  
70 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  
75 least for a while that he can be it. But entirely innocent self-deception, which is without any falsehood,<sup>10</sup> 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  
80 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 'af-  
85 fection'.

(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  
90 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  
95 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  
100 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

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<sup>8</sup> "Alien" (Danish *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.

<sup>9</sup> Understand "falsehood" in this discussion in contrast to the various levels of "truth" discussed in lines 43–56.

<sup>10</sup> See n. 9 above.

because he does not have the customary skill at estimating the angle of inclination accurately.

105 (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.

110 (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.)<sup>11</sup>

115 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<sup>12</sup> 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 intemperance, and there is scarcely any mortal who does not, at least in  
120 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  
125 of a wish to agree completely with a boyfriend or girlfriend, to sympathize with them<sup>13</sup> more than 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<sup>14</sup> can also have its [396] origin in an egoistic propensity to  
130 confine himself<sup>15</sup> merely to his own thoughts and [in] a lack of ability to open his mind to alien influence.

135 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.

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<sup>11</sup> The preceding five paragraphs are all a single parenthetical paragraph in the Danish.

<sup>12</sup> That is, succeeds in overcoming the will and breaking through anyway.

<sup>13</sup> The word is *dem*, which is plural, even though, like the English, the Danish requires the singular.

<sup>14</sup> Conjecturing *Tilsætninger* for the edition's *Tilsætninger*.

<sup>15</sup> *indeslutte sig*. The expression is related to Kierkegaard's *Indeslutthed*, which the Hongs translate as "inclosing reserve." In ordinary Danish it means merely "reserve" or "reticence."

140 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 feel-  
 ings 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  
 145 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  
 150 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 him-  
 self as something [397] that does not belong to his essence, and which [he] is on  
 guard against in the future, is a lesser fault than actual lying. (*Momentary affecta-*  
 155 *tion.*)

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 ex-  
 ternal reason wishes to have them. For instance, when one from vanity lies him-  
 160 self 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  
 165 of representation falls outside the subject himself.

This second degree of affectation is in an ethical respect not at all less im-  
 putable 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 men-  
 170 tioned because a highly incorrect concept of this has come into circulation, inas-  
 much 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 easi-  
 ly 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  
 175 so far that it becomes honesty again, and that he who lies so long that he himself  
 believes his fabricated stories should to this [398] 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  
 180 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  
 185 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.

190 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.*)

195 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  
200 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  
205 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  
210 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.

215 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.*)