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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury

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Abstract

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), is unarguably among those authors who contributed most fundamentally to defining the concept of ‘sociability’ for thinkers in both Great Britain and the Continent. He understood sociability both as a natural human impulse and as a disciplinary practice for cultivating this ‘natural affection,’ which grounded virtue and human flourishing. The almost all-encompassing importance of the term links it to other seminal ideas in Shaftesbury's thought, such as politeness, toleration, liberty, and cosmopolitanism. Given the influence of the Earl's thought across Europe, any account of the decidedly British contribution to Enlightenment ‘sociability’ must remain incomplete

without an understanding of his extended treatment of the term.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), fundamentally shaped the concept of sociability for thinkers in both Great Britain and the Continent. The concept lay at the core of his philosophy of life and permeates his published writings. He understood sociability both as a natural human impulse and as a disciplinary practice for cultivating this 'natural affection,' which grounded virtue and human flourishing. The almost all-encompassing importance of the term links it to other seminal ideas in Shaftesbury's thought, such as politeness, toleration, liberty, and cosmopolitanism. To grasp the scope of his contribution to theories of sociability, it is vital to illuminate the causes for his interest in the idea as well as its significance within the wider scope of his philosophy, particularly his ethical and political thought.

The first traces of the concept can be found in the young Lord's early private writings. In September 1694, he accosted his former tutor John Locke as follows: 'If there bee any one [...] who cannot see y^t hee himself is a Rationall & Sociable Creature by his nature, & has an End to w^{ch} he should refer his slightest actions; Such a one is indeed wanting of knowledg' (*Correspondence*, 202).¹ Such lines were inspired by Shaftesbury's profound humanist classicism, one he imbibed from his childhood. Locke, by all means the most significant English philosopher of the late seventeenth century, had, as part of the household of the First Earl of Shaftesbury, quite naturally become the boy's tutor. Growing up, Lord Ashley witnessed the forced exile (to Holland) and later imprisonment in the Tower of his notorious Whig grandfather, who remained an unflinching champion of the Protestant succession until his death in Amsterdam. The first Earl's funeral took place on the boy's twelfth birthday at the family's ancestral seat in Wimborne St. Giles in 1683. Consequently, he was exposed to the dangers that politico-theological faction could inflict on the individual from his earliest youth, an aspect which later came to fundamentally inform his concept of sociability. Moreover, from the start, the intellectual legacy of his grandfather most certainly put a strain on his own political career. In 1695, Shaftesbury was elected a member of the House of Commons. Although temperamentally a Whig, Shaftesbury prided himself in avoiding strict partisanship, at times criticizing his own party for its practices (*Correspondence*, 207-8). At that time, following his calling in London, he made the acquaintance of several freethinkers (a group of writers he was, to his own dismay, later often associated with), among them the eccentric maverick John Toland (who is said to have clandestinely published the manuscript of the Earl's own *Inquiry* in 1698).²

In fact, 1698 is the year in which Shaftesbury's thinking begins to crystalize. In August of that year he began his journal of philosophical reflections and exercises, the *Askêmata*, with the heading 'Natural Affection' (*Askêmata*, 71). Based on his reading of, pre-eminently, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, Shaftesbury culled a vision of profound, divinely ordained cosmic harmony, a harmony that could be paralleled in human society through a proper understanding and implementation of the concept of sociability. In the same year, Shaftesbury published his first work, an edited collection of *Select Sermons* by the Latitudinarian-minded

Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote. In the eminently practical writings of 'the Preacher of Good-nature', the Earl found corresponding theological ideas in defense of 'Kindness, Friendship, Sociableness, Love of Company and Converse, Natural Affection' as the foundation of virtue, genuine religion, and happiness (*Preface* 58 and 50). Amalgamating such Stoic and Latitudinarian influences, Shaftesbury sees 'sociability [as] part of the divinely ordained plan for mankind'.³ In fact, to become sociable is the *telos* of human life. 'True Learning', therefore, fundamentally involved the study of how 'to be Sociable & Good towards all men' (*Correspondence*, 204).

The Earl's *Askêmata*-notebooks are, apart from the fact that several passages would later appear in his published writings, significant for the practical appeal sociability held for Shaftesbury: it was part of his philosophy of life. In the notebooks, he pried into the innermost recesses of his mind, investigating the applicability of his philosophical ideas to his society, and seeking to balance the need for autonomy and personal integrity with the claims of sociability and respect for others.⁴ These introspective meditations were informed by two prolonged sojourns to Holland (1698-99, 1703-1704), where Shaftesbury would consult the extensive library of the renowned Quaker merchant Benjamin Furly and converse with several intellectual heavyweights, among them Pierre Bayle and Pierre Coste. As meditative and meandering as the notebooks may be, the focus of the Earl's thought became now even clearer: how to harmonize his cherished, albeit theoretical ideals with his practical calling as a Whig politician and public figure.

At times drawing heavily on his notebooks, Shaftesbury spelled out, gradually developed, and ultimately refined his philosophy in the texts that were published from 1698 to 1710 and then collected in the three volumes of *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711 and 1714). Having inherited the Earldom upon his father's death in 1699, he became a member of the House of Lords until his ultimate retirement from active politics (due to ill health) in 1702. From that point onward, the pen became his political weapon. He conceptualized a cultural politics that sought to transform British society both ethically and politically. Against the self-interested individual theorized by [Thomas Hobbes](#) and Locke, Shaftesbury insisted on intrinsic human sociability: 'If *Eating* and *Drinking* be natural, *Herding* is so too. If any *Appetite* or *Sense* be natural, the *Sense of Fellowship* is the same' (*Sensus Communis*, 78 [1.69]). To deny this 'associating Inclination' is, for Shaftesbury, to deny the capacity of humans to act virtuously. This is precisely what he found in Locke's arguments against innate ideas, which he thought undermined any 'natural affection [...] any Trace or Idea' of right and wrong as '*naturally imprinted on Human Minds*' (*Ainsworth Correspondence* 404). Likewise, in Locke's effort to motivate moral behavior by appealing to rewards and punishments meted out by God, Shaftesbury saw not virtue but craven, fearful self-interest: 'nothing which naturally drew us to the Love of what was without or beyond 'our-selves' (*Sensus Communis* 56 [1.57]). In the *Preface* to Whichcote's sermons, those who 'exploded the Principle of Good-nature' or 'Publick-spiritedness' are said to have 'made War (if I may say so) even on Vertue it self' (56). Such ethical theories not only ignored the benevolent impulses of human nature but also corrupted them.

For the Earl, this mistakenly self-interested understanding of 'virtue' linked Locke and Hobbes to High Church Anglican Tories. Appeals to the fear of God's punishment led, Shaftesbury claimed, to a distortion of humans' understanding of the divine and of themselves, with destructive political effects. He consequently identified such practices as zealous effusions of modern priestcraft. To maintain ecclesiastical power, the Church relied upon solemnity, gravity, and formalism to command 'Reverence and Awe', all of which Shaftesbury sums up in the word 'Imposture' (*Sensus Communis*, 34-36 [1.48]). These oppressive religious practices and forms of expression cripple our natural affections and capacity for rationality, leading to persecution and violence: 'the melancholy way of treating Religion is that which, according to my Apprehension, renders it so tragical, and is the occasion of its acting in reality such dismal Tragedys in the World' (*Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, 346 [1.20]). To counter such manipulative 'melancholy' and its tragic consequences, Shaftesbury opposes the 'fierce unsociable way of modern Zealots' (*The Moralists*, 72 [2.124]) with the disciplinary practices of sociability.⁵

Above all, this meant the practice of polite conversation and manners. Shaftesbury believed that the pleasure of such conversations would strengthen our natural social affections while improving our characters: 'We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of *amicable Collision*' (*Sensus Communis*, 22 [1.42]). Politeness, moreover, not only refined sociability but also promoted reason. 'A Freedom of Raillery' in such conversations, Shaftesbury famously contends, would promote the good humor that serious reasoning required (*Sensus Communis*, 29-30 [1.45]). For it is precisely the practice of wit that could puncture the 'Gravity' that 'is of the very essence of imposture' (*Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, 11 [1.8]). Emphasizing this social dimension of rationality and the need to cultivate it, Shaftesbury contends, 'Tis the Habit alone of Reasoning, which can make a Reasoner' (*Sensus Communis*, 29-30 [1.45]). Indeed, rational sociability is 'an *ability*, a discursive technique that requires constant training and exercise in order to be properly practised' (Müller 210). While Shaftesbury limited such polite conversations to the 'Liberty of the Club, and of that sort of Freedom which is taken amongst *Gentlemen and Friends*' (*Sensus Communis*, 36 [1.48]), he also promoted cultural criticism in a public sphere (See Klein 1994, 198; and Müller 211). As a character in *The Moralists* proclaims, philosophy should be brought out of 'Colleges and Cells' and onto the 'publick Stage' (24 [2.105]). As cultural practices that expressed, nurtured, and shaped a natural sociability, politeness and criticism thus connected ethics and politics.

While none of his texts can be ignored for properly understanding Shaftesbury's self-referencing thought, *The Moralists* (1709), first privately printed in 1704 as *The Sociable Enthusiast*, is of paramount importance for understanding his cultural politics. In composing *The Moralists*, Shaftesbury relied most heavily on *Askêmata*. Not so much drawing on (although implying) the political implications of sociability, it outlines the cultural technique that the Earl regarded as the proper method to hone sociable feelings: the dialogue. In conjunction with two paintings (rife with references to classical thought) that Shaftesbury commissioned the German expatriate John Closterman to prepare, *The Moralists* shows how far sociability is portrayed as 'a see-sawing between introspection through retirement and polite conversation' (Müller 211). In fact, this was Shaftesbury's ideal of the (Whig) public figure as a philosopher-statesman meant to guarantee political stability by fostering the

'Passion or Affection towards Society'.⁶ Indeed, the Earl's campaign against the dogmatic 'imposture' practiced by the Tory institutions of church and court even extends to his own writing style. Shaftesbury came to reject the style of his early *Inquiry* 'as authored by 'a plain Dogmatist, a Formalist, and Man of Method' (*Miscellaneous Reflections*, 166 [3.84]), which led him to write the rest of *Characteristicks* in such 'sociable' forms as the letter, dialogue, or commentary (Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 48).

Unsurprisingly, given its title, *Sensus Communis* is one of the seminal texts that contains the kernel of the Earl's ethico-political theory. There are several synonyms for sociability as *sensus communis* in his text of the same name, for example 'publick Spirit [...] social Feeling or *Sense of Partnership* with Human Kind' (72 [1.67]). He traces its terminology back to commentators of Horace, Seneca, and Cicero, such as Isaac and Meric Casaubon, Claudius Salmasius, or Thomas Gataker. In these humanist editions of classical writers, Shaftesbury eventually found a political interpretation of sociability that appealed to him (*Ainsworth Correspondence*, 378). Given this context, then, 'the concept of sociability [...] was a catalyst through which [Shaftesbury] interpreted classical philosophy to filter its true wisdom' (Müller 217). However, as usual in Shaftesbury, there is more than initially meets the eye. In fact, Hans-Georg Gadamer identified the passage above as one of the *loci classici* that helped shape the modern idea of sociability, ultimately derived from Marcus Aurelius's term *koinonoesune*. As Gadamer points out, this is ultimately a 'social virtue';⁷ indeed, it helped Shaftesbury draw a comparison between the refined cultures of the Greek Polis and Roman Republic as opposed to the degenerate Roman Empire, a contrast that he used to promote his vision of Whig liberty and culture for post-1688 Britain in *Characteristicks*.

In this most eclectic of philosophical works, sociability is not just part and parcel of Shaftesbury's moral and political philosophy, but, against the background of the ideologically charged War of the Spanish Succession, also an important adjunct to his now much more pronounced political partisanship: a sociable, tolerant commonwealth is associated with a cultured Whig (and Protestant) rule, whereas the Torys' (Catholic) alternative appears to be an absolutist vision of intellectual oppression and social unrest. Although Shaftesbury was not as outspoken in his criticism of [Thomas Hobbes](#)'s moral philosophy as secondary literature often makes us believe, his rejection of the Sage of Malmesbury's moral psychology and the politics it supported was a case in point. Psychological egoism, Shaftesbury argued, was based on unsound premises since 'Tis ridiculous to say, there is any Obligation on Man to act sociably [...] in a form'd Government; and not in that which is commonly call'd *the State of Nature*' (*Sensus Communis*, 76 [1.68-9]). For the Earl, Hobbes's theory of humankind's natural unsociability ultimately opened the door, also temperamentally, for the 'poisonous Principles' of that 'most malignant party',⁸ the Tories, whose absolutist political theory and flirtation with Roman Catholicism could only lead to a dogmatic '*total* Apostacy from all Candour, Equity, Trust, Sociableness, or Friendship' (*Inquiry*, 150 [2.48]); in short, to Jacobitism.

The Earl's theory of sociability was, then, fundamentally part of an agenda meant to achieve lasting political stability in the aftermath of the Civil War. With the War of the Spanish Succession raging on the Continent, Shaftesbury saw Catholicism on the rise and therefore an

urgent need to provide a solid philosophical justification of what he regarded as the Glorious Revolution's achievements, which were not least part of his grandfather's legacy. When he asserts in *Sensus Communis* that 'Tis the height of Sociableness to be [...] friendly and communicative' (56 [1.57]), he seeks to ensure a political order that was, then, *not* artificial but based on a natural *sensus communis*. Based on such natural affections, Shaftesbury even aspires to a stable social order that extends from one's immediate relations, to the 'club', the nation, and finally to all of humanity: 'To love the Publick, to study universal Good, and to promote the Interest of the whole World, as far as lies within our power, is surely the Height of Goodness, and makes that Temper which we call *Divine*' (*Letter concerning Enthusiasm*, 352 [1.23]). The concept informs not only his ethical and political theory but also his understanding of religion, the self, philosophy, aesthetics, writing, history, and culture. Consequently, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury is, more than any other Enlightenment figure, associated with sociability. Obviously, Pierre Coste thought of *Sensus Communis* as Shaftesbury's seminal work; to help disseminate the Earl's views on sociability throughout Europe, he translated the treatise and had it published in 1710.⁹ [David Hume](#) praises Shaftesbury, among others, for beginning 'to put the science of man on a new footing,'¹⁰ and the transformative power of his thinking roiled both Great Britain and the Continent. In Bernard Mandeville's satirical *Fable of the Bees* (1714), the Earl found an antagonist who contended for the origin of sociability in humanity's natural egoism rather than its innate altruism, famously declaring that 'two Systems cannot be more opposite than his Lordship's and mine.'¹¹ Francis Hutcheson took up Shaftesbury's cause in his *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), highlighting his development of a 'moral sense' theory. While it is notoriously difficult to gauge Shaftesbury's impact on later writers and intellectual traditions, he has been widely read throughout the eighteenth century and beyond, and the legacy of his insistence on humanity's natural benevolent sociability has been traced throughout the texts of numerous thinkers.¹² In short: any history of sociability must remain incomplete without a close look at Shaftesbury, for the profundity and complexity with which he embedded the term in his thought seems to be unparalleled throughout its conceptual history.

1. All references to Shaftesbury's writings will be to the Standard Edition: Complete Works, Correspondence and German Translation, eds. Christine Jackson-Holzberg et. al. (Stuttgart - Bad Canstatt, 1981-2021) and will give a short title of the treatise and use the SE pagination, with the corresponding volume and page numbers from the Liberty Fund edition of *Characteristicks* (based on the 1732 edition) shown in square brackets. The treatises are: *Letter concerning Enthusiasm* (SE I 1); *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (SE I 3); *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody* and *The Sociable Enthusiast* (SE II 1); *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue* (both the 1698 and later versions; SE II 2); *Preface to Select Sermons of Dr Whichcot* and *Ainsworth Correspondence* (SE II 4); *Askêmata* (II 6); *Correspondence 1683-1700* (SE III 1).

2. See Ainsworth Correspondence 406.

3. Patrick Müller, 'Reshaping the Leviathan: A Commonwealth Built around Sociable Encounters in Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*', in Sebastian Domsch and Mascha Hansen (ed.), *British Sociability in the European Enlightenment: Cultural Practices and Personal Encounters* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), pp. 203-22 (217).

4. Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 76-80. Shaftesbury even erected a so-called 'Philosopher's Tower' on the family's estate (several hundred yards removed from the ancestral seat) which probably enabled him to retire for philosophical introspection.

5. See Lawrence E. Klein, 'Shaftesbury, Politeness and the Politics of Religion', in N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner (ed.), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 283-301 (296).

6. Lord Shaftesbury to James Stanhope, November 7 (1709), TNA: PRO 30/24/22/7, fol. 491.
 7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsburg, 2013), p. 23.
 8. From a letter to Lord Somer, 30 March 1711. Quoted in Klein 1994, 152.
 9. https://www.angam.phil.fau.de/fields/enst/lit/shaftesbury/reading-room/watching-shaftesbury-read/#collapse_0, (accessed 18 June 2022).
 10. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 5
 11. *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis, 1988 [1924]), 2 vols, i. 324.
 12. See William E. Alderman, 'Bibliographical Evidence of the Vogue of Shaftesbury in the Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* (vol. 21, 1924), p. 57-70.
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[Characteristicks, of men, manners, opinions, times, 1711](#)
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