

# SHAFTESBURY ON SELFISHNESS AND PARTISANSHIP

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*Abstract:* In the Introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume credits “my Lord Shaftesbury” as one of the “philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing.” I describe aspects of Shaftesbury’s philosophy that justify the credit Hume gives him. I focus on Shaftesbury’s refutation of psychological egoism, his examination of partiality, and his views on how to promote impartial virtue. I also discuss Shaftesbury’s political commitments, and raise questions about recent interpretations that have taken his *Characteristicks* to be a polemic, partisan text.

KEY WORDS: Shaftesbury, egoism, partisanship

In the Introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume credits “my Lord Shaftesbury” as one of the “philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing.”<sup>1</sup> My goal here is to describe some of the aspects of Shaftesbury’s writing that justify the credit Hume gives him. I will focus on Shaftesbury’s exploration of two obstacles to virtue (in Sections II and III). My hope is that an examination of these aspects will suggest that Hume’s assessment—of Shaftesbury as an astute philosopher of human nature—is more apt than that of some later eighteenth-century British thinkers who came to disregard him (Section I), and than that of some recent commentators who have classified him more narrowly as a partisan writer (Section IV).

## I. THE RISE AND FALL OF SHAFTESBURY’S INFLUENCE

Shaftesbury was one of the most influential British philosophers of the first half of the eighteenth century. He published *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* in 1711, and then significantly revised it for a second edition that appeared in 1714 (a year after his death). In the decades that followed, the book was one of the giants of the philosophical scene.<sup>2</sup> Mandeville (in 1723), Balguy (in 1726), and Berkeley (in 1732) all wrote books largely devoted to refuting Shaftesbury’s views of human nature and religion. Hutcheson’s first major publication (in 1725) was titled *An Inquiry into the original of our ideas of*

<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Shaftesbury, the third Earl; Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, with A Notion of the Historical Draught, or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules and a Letter Concerning Design*, in three volumes (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001 [1711 and 1714]). I will refer to this book in the body of the text as ‘C’ with volume number followed by page number.

*beauty and virtue; in two treatises. In which the principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain'd and Defended, against the Author of the Fable of the Bees.* A host of other writers also published refutations and defenses of Shaftesbury in this period. James Harris suggests that reading Shaftesbury was perhaps the single most important event of Hume's early intellectual life.<sup>3</sup> Isabel Rivers maintains that Shaftesbury was "the key influence on Scottish moral philosophy in the 1720s and 30's."<sup>4</sup> Den Uyl says that Shaftesbury was "second only to Locke in terms of influence during the eighteenth century."<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the 1750s, however, English-speaking philosophers seemed largely to have moved on.<sup>6</sup> Adam Smith is a representative example. Smith was Hutcheson's student and Hume's friend, and he certainly read *Characteristicks*. But in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Shaftesbury's name appears only once in passing, despite the considerable overlap between the topics Smith and Shaftesbury address.<sup>7</sup> Smith did discuss Shaftesbury in his university lectures on rhetoric. But there Smith is critical to the point of dismissiveness, using Shaftesbury as an example of stylistic failure. Shaftesbury, Smith says, is a "much inferior" writer.<sup>8</sup> His style leads him "frequently into a dungeon of metaphorical obscurity."<sup>9</sup> His modes of expression "often become so obscure that their meaning is not to be discovered without great attention and being altogether awake."<sup>10</sup> Sometimes Shaftesbury "designs to banter and laugh at his adversary," but he seldom manages to pull it off: "he hardly ever makes us laugh, only in two places in the whole *characteristicks*."<sup>11</sup> Other times Shaftesbury "is disposed to be in a Rapture," but with no greater success, his attempts "always unbounded, overstretcht, and unsupported by the appearance of Reason."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>3</sup> James A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 44–46.

<sup>4</sup> Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780 – Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 241.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Den Uyl, "Shaftesbury and the Problem of Modern Virtue," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998): 275.

<sup>6</sup> Shaftesbury's reception in continental Europe was different, with his reputation there (especially in Germany) continuing to rise throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Frederick Uehlein, Angelica Baum, and Vilem Murdock, "Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury," in Holzhey and Murdoch, eds., *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie: Die Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Volume 1 (Basel: Schwabe, 2004), 51–89; and Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982 [1759]), 241. The most comprehensive and penetrating discussion of the philosophical relationship between Shaftesbury and Smith of which I am aware is James R. Otteson, "Shaftesbury's Evolutionary Morality and its Influence on Adam Smith," *Adam Smith Review* 4 (2008): 106–131. See also Den Uyl, "Shaftesbury and the Problem of Modern Virtue," 314–16.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1985), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 61.

Smith's disdain for Shaftesbury's style might point to an explanation of the decline of Shaftesbury's influence.<sup>13</sup> *Characteristicks* has six parts. One of them, the earliest Shaftesbury wrote, has the form of a straight-ahead philosophical inquiry. But the other five are written in a manner very different from Locke's *Essay*, Berkeley's *Principles*, Hume's *Treatise*, Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, or most of the other canonical works of the period.<sup>14</sup> Those other five parts have strong first-personal voices, but the narrators are not Shaftesbury himself.<sup>15</sup> They are all characters, each with his own stories and moods and quirks. Each adopts his own form: personal letter, advice-giving, dialogue, "miscellaneous" essay. Each deploys rhetorical gambits, anecdotes, digressions, and (not-amusing-to-Smith) jokes. And none of them is systematic. The miscellanean says that he will refrain from attempting "to unite his Philosophy in one solid and uniform Body, nor carry on his Argument in one continu'd Chain or Thred" (C 3.176). The letter-writer says, "But here (my Friend!) you must not expect that I shou'd draw you up a formal *Scheme* of the *Passions* ... 'Twou'd be out of the Genius and Compass of such a letter as this" (C 1.73). The advice-giver says, "The most ingenious way of becoming foolish, is *by a System*" (C 1.180). It's not hard to imagine that Smith wasn't the only one who found this kind of writing uncondusive to clear philosophical reasoning.

By the nineteenth century Shaftesbury had drifted far from the center of English-speaking philosophy. Bentham mentions Shaftesbury only twice (so far as I can tell) in his vast corpus, and both references are minimal. Mill mentions him only three times (so far as I can tell) in his vast corpus, and those references are also minimal, brief references in the context of reviewing the work of others. Mill's disregard of Shaftesbury is particularly noteworthy because Shaftesbury has much to say that bears on positions Mill would later advance. Shaftesbury argues that there are distinct species of pleasures, some elevated and some "hoggish" (C 2.129), which Mill seems to echo in his discussion of higher and lower (or "swine"-like) pleasures. Shaftesbury defends freedom of speech in terms that are strikingly similar to Mill's marketplace-of-ideas arguments in chapter two of *On Liberty*.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For more on Shaftesbury's style and how it affected the reception of *Characteristicks*, see Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, 86–87, 99–101, 113–14, 151–52. See also Den Uyl, "Shaftesbury and the Problem of Modern Virtue," 276–78.

<sup>14</sup> But Shaftesbury certainly wasn't alone in writing philosophy in literary style. Other examples include Berkeley's *Alciphron* and Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, as well as the work of Jonathan Swift.

<sup>15</sup> See C 3.192. For discussion of Shaftesbury's use of different narrative voices, see Den Uyl, "Shaftesbury and the Problem of Modern Virtue," 279–82; David Marshall, *The Figure of the Theatre in Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 9–53, 58, 60–62); Laurent Jaffro, "Shaftesbury on the 'Natural Secretion' and Philosophical Personae," *Intellectual History* 18 (2008): 49–59; and Michael Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66–73.

<sup>16</sup> See also C 1.7, 1.13, 1.42–48, 3.65. For discussion of Shaftesbury's views on freedom of speech, see Otteson, "Shaftesbury's Evolutionary Morality and its Influence on Adam Smith," *passim*; Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 195–212; and Den Uyl, "Shaftesbury and the Problem of Modern Virtue," 314.

And, perhaps most centrally, Shaftesbury contends that virtue consists of impartial love for humanity as a whole, which we might have expected to be of interest to a Utilitarian like Mill.

## II. SHAFTESBURY ON EGOISM

To be virtuous, according to Shaftesbury, is to “love the Publick, to study universal Good, and to promote the Interest of the whole World, as far as lies within our power” (C 1.37). Shaftesburean virtue consists of impartial care for the “publick Interest” (C 2.31), of an “equal, just and universal Friendship” with all humankind (C 2.137).

One of the terms Shaftesbury uses to describe virtue is *sensus communis*. He takes the term from a line in Juvenal: “*Rarus enim fermè Sensus communis in illâ*,” which is translated as: “Rare is common sense in men of that rank” (C 1.65). He explains, however, that it’s misleading to translate *sensus communis* as “common sense.” Common sense is often taken to refer to sound judgment, intelligence, understanding. But Juvenal isn’t insulting the intelligence of the upper classes. What Juvenal thinks is rare among them is a sense of community with the entire country. The ruling elite are so insular, their education and court-environment focused so exclusively on people like themselves, that they rarely develop concern for society as a whole. They identify only with their own social stratum. They lack “*Humanity or Sense of Publick Good*,” an appreciation of “the common Interest of Mankind” (C 1.66). *Sensus communis* is a “*Fellowship or Community*,” a “publick Spirit [that] can come only from a social Feeling or *Sense of Partnership* with human Kind” (C 1.67). *Sensus communis* is the “universal Friendship” of which virtue consists (C 2.137).

Shaftesbury makes some of his most important contributions to the philosophy of human nature in his discussion of the obstacles to *sensus communis*. One of the main obstacles he discusses is selfish egoism. He takes Hobbes to be its spokesperson.

As Shaftesbury interprets him, Hobbes believes that the ultimate motive behind every human action is self-preservation. On this egoist view, there is “only one Master-Passion, *Fear*, which has, in effect, devour’d all the rest.”<sup>17</sup> The real goal of everything we do—the only thing we care about for its own sake—is warding off our own destruction.

If this egoist view is correct, then *sensus communis* is impossible. *Sensus communis* is a feeling of genuine friendship, a direct concern for the welfare of others. It consists of caring about others for their own sakes, not simply as means to one’s own preservation. But Hobbesian egoism implies that one’s own preservation is the only thing one ever cares about for its own sake.

Shaftesbury thinks egoism is simply bad psychology. The human mind is “too complex a kind, to fall under one simple View, or be explain’d thus

<sup>17</sup> Shaftesbury, “Preface to *Select Sermons of Dr. Whichcot. In Two Parts*” (London, 1698).

briefly in a word or two. The Studiers of this *Mechanism* must have a very partial Eye, to overlook all other Motions besides those of the lowest and narrowest compass" (C 1.72–3). As examples of the "thousand other Springs" of human action, Shaftesbury points to the plethora of motives that lead people to act "counter to Self-interest," such as passion, humor, and caprice (C 1.72–3). The view that egoism is refuted by actions that harm not only others but also oneself is a point that Butler would also advance. But Shaftesbury's most significant attack on egoism comes in his discussion of the "herding Principle" (C 1.70).

The herding principle is the innate desire of a creature to associate with members of its own species (C 1.69–72, 2.45–47, 2.178–81, 3.134). The strength of the herding principles in species varies, depending on the extent to which cooperation among conspecifics contributes to the thriving of the species as a whole. No species (Shaftesbury thought) can thrive if its parents do not care at all for their young. So nature has implanted in all animals at least some degree of concern for offspring. But certain animals can thrive with very limited parental concern and nothing more, and nature has implanted in members of those species little concern for conspecifics beyond that for newborns. As an example of a non-social species Shaftesbury cites the elephant. This may not be totally off-base as a description of adult males (who spend up to 95 percent of their lives on their own or in only loose association with other males), but it's a drastic mischaracterization of female elephants. Perhaps Shaftesbury would have done better to cite the giant panda, which spends almost the entirety of its adult life munching alone in bamboo forests. Other species, in contrast, can thrive only if their members engage in intensive cooperation for subsistence and safety. In those species nature has implanted a powerful concern not merely for offspring but for other conspecifics as well. As examples of social species Shaftesbury cites beavers, wolves, ants, and bees.

What about the human species? Are we more like pandas or beavers? Shaftesbury's answer: beavers, emphatically. We're "Creatures whose Oeconomy is according to a *joint-Stock* and *publick-Weal*" (C 3.136). We belong in the category of "*thorowly associating* and *confederate-Animals*" (C 3.134). Conspicuous features of human life make this clear.

Human childhood is "long and helpless" (C 2.179). Even after grown to adulthood, a human being is relatively "feeble and defenseless ... more fitted to be a Prey himself, than live by Prey on others." But while other animals unfit for predation can subsist by "grazing," a human "must have better Provision and choicer Food than the raw Herbage." While other animals can survive without housing or clothing, humans require "a better Couch and Covering than the bare Earth or open Sky."

Yet humans thrive despite their "Weakness" and "necessitous State" (C 2.179). They thrive because they excel at helping each other. And they excel at helping each other because they are implanted with strong mutual concern, a powerful herding principle. It starts with child rearing. Human

children can survive only if their parents expend prolonged, concentrated effort to raise them. If parents didn't have great love for their children for a very extended period of time—if they didn't care tremendously about their children's long-term welfare—they wouldn't have the motivation such an immense, difficult task requires. And it doesn't stop with parental affection. Siblings and other relatives are also bound by affection that leads them to help each other. And likewise are members of the same settlement. Circles of mutual concern radiate outward. It takes a village.

If there be any thing of Nature in that Affection which is between the Sexes, the Affection is certainly as natural towards the consequent Offspring; and so again between the Offspring themselves, as Kindred and Companions, bred under the same Discipline and OEconomy. And thus a *Clan* or *Tribe* is gradually form'd; a *Publick* is recogniz'd: and besides the Pleasure found in social Entertainment, Language, and Discourse, there is so apparent a Necessity for continuing this good Correspondency and Union, that to have no *Sense* or Feeling of this kind, no Love of *Country*, *Community*, or any thing *in common*, wou'd be the same as to be insensible even of the plainest Means of *Self-Preservation*, and most necessary Condition of *Self-Enjoyment*. (C 1.70)

Individual humans cannot “subsist” without “Society and Community.” That humans do subsist—that they thrive—is testimony to the intense “Sense of Fellowship” they have with each other. It is as natural for us to care for others—to exhibit true kindness, compassion, and mutual succor—as it is for “the Stomach to digest, the Lungs to breathe, the Glands to separate Juices, or other Intrails to perform their several Offices” (C 2.45).

Shaftesbury is not doing conjectural history here. He's not considering an “imaginary *State of Nature*” (C 2.179), nor drawing implications about a hypothetical contract. He means to describe what in fact leads humans to engage in sociable cooperation. He's arguing that egoism is wrong as a description of human nature as it actually is.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Grote has argued that Shaftesbury himself advances egoistic hedonism. According to Grote, when Shaftesbury attacks Hobbes, the voluntarists, and other “selfish” theorists, he is not attacking the view that pleasure-based self-interest is our only reason to be virtuous but rather is attacking the view that pleasures accrued from *externally-bestowed* rewards and punishments are our only reason to be virtuous (Simon Grote, “Shaftesbury's Egoistic Hedonism,” *Aufklärung* 22 [2010], 135–49). For our purposes here, we can be neutral on whether Shaftesbury is attacking every form of hedonistic egoism, or only an external-rewards form. That said, I think it is hard to square the hedonistic-egoist interpretation with Shaftesbury's explicit criticism of the view “That our real *Good* is Pleasure” (2.128). When making that criticism, Shaftesbury points out that people sometimes define as synonymous what we will to do and what will give us pleasure, but in that case the view collapses into meaninglessness or tautology (2.128). And once pleasure is defined independently of what we will to do, we have to acknowledge that we think there are right and wrong things to feel pleasure in, which implies that we recognize a standard independent of and prior to pleasure itself (2.128–9).

Shaftesbury intends his account to be continuous with scientific investigation of other parts of the natural world. Beavers, ants, and bees all cooperate in the “Arts of Storing, Building, and other OEconomy” (C 2.179). Many beasts of prey are “very kind and loving” toward each other. Wolves, for instance, “strictly join in the Care and Nurture of the Young; and this Union is continu’d still between ‘em. They houl to one another, to bring Company; whether to hunt, or invade their Prey, or assemble on the discovery of a good Carcase. Even the swinish Kinds want not common Affection, and run in Herds to the assistance of their distress’d Fellows” (C 2.180; see also C 3.132–3). This care that nonhuman animals exhibit toward each other shows that egoism is false of them. Corresponding human phenomena show that it’s false of humans as well.

The continuity Shaftesbury draws between humans and other animals sets him apart from rationalist and Christian thinkers who began with the assumption that the leading feature of human beings—exalted reason, immaterial soul—removes them to a realm distinct from the zoological. Shaftesbury differs from empirical examiners of our day in thinking of Nature as a purposive agent, as something to capitalize. But the nuts and bolts of his explanation of sociability—that humans have been endowed with powerfully altruistic traits that enable the species to thrive even though its individuals are weak and needy—can be straightforwardly translated into non-capitalized parlance. And this explanation is a clear antecedent of the naturalistic examinations of human nature in Hume and Smith—a precursor to the new “science of man.”

Shaftesbury uses this picture of human nature to attack Hobbes’s social contract theory. He takes the theory to begin with the claim that humans originally existed in a state of nature that was an unsociable war of all against all. Such a picture is flatly contradicted by the facts of human nature as Shaftesbury understands them. Our innate constitution compels us toward society. Our inborn “Faculty’s” move us directly toward “Fellowship or Community” (C 2.178). Sociability is as natural to humans—as inextricably built into human nature—as self-interest (C 2.179). Shaftesbury also argues that there is an incoherence in Hobbes’s combination of the claims that it is not wrong to kill or maim other humans in the state of nature and that the original compact justifies allegiance to government:

‘Tis ridiculous to say, there is any Obligation on Man to act sociably, or honestly, in a form’d Government; and not in that which is commonly call’d *the State of Nature*. For, to speak in the fashionable Language of our modern Philosophy: “Society being founded on a Compact; the Surrender made of every Man’s private unlimited Right, into the hands of the Majority, or such as the Majority shou’d appoint, was of free Choice, and by a Promise.” Now *the Promise* it-self was made in the *State of Nature*: And that which cou’d make a *Promise* obligatory in the State of Nature, must make *all* other Acts of Humanity as much our real

Duty, and natural Part. Thus *Faith, Justice, Honesty, and Virtue*, must have been as early as the State of Nature, or they cou'd never have been *at all*. The Civil Union, or Confederacy, cou'd never make *Right* or *Wrong*; if they subsisted not before. He who was free to any Villany before his Contract, will, and ought to make as free with his Contract, when he thinks fit. The *Natural Knave* has the same reason to be a *Civil one*; and may dispense with his politick Capacity as oft as he sees occasion: 'Tis only *his Word* stands in his way—A Man is oblig'd to *keep his Word*. Why? Because *he has given his Word to keep it*—Is not this a notable Account of the Original of moral Justice, and the Rise of Civil Government and Allegiance! (1.68–9)

Shaftesbury's argument can be put in the form of a dilemma. Either promises in the state of nature have obligatory force, or they do not. If promises in the state of nature do have obligatory force, then Hobbes can account for our obligation to obey government but only by abandoning his story about a state of nature in which violence toward others is not wrong. For someone who acknowledges that promises are naturally obligatory will have no grounds for denying that other things are naturally obligatory as well: "If in original and pure Nature, it be *wrong* to break a Promise, or be treacherous; 'tis as truly *wrong* to be in any respect in human, or any way wanting in our natural part towards human kind" (1.69). If, on the other hand, Hobbes claims that promises do not have obligatory force in the state of nature, then he has to abandon his account of our obligation to obey government. For if a promise in the state of nature has no obligatory force, and if the only difference between a knave in the state of nature and knave in the commonwealth is that the latter made a promise in the state of nature, then the commonwealth-knave is no more in violation of his obligations than the nature-knave.

Egoism falsely describes human nature. But Shaftesbury thinks it is a dangerous view nonetheless, one that it is morally important to defeat. For propagating the belief that it is impossible to have real concern for others will diminish individuals' drive to cultivate their benevolent tendencies. The Hobbesian view is self-fulfilling "Poyson" that induces people to act more selfishly. As Shaftesbury puts it in his 1698 preface to Whichcote's *Sermons*, Hobbes "*made War* (if I may say so) even on *Vertue it self*" by "explod[ing] the Principle of Good-nature" and denying any "Enjoyment or Satisfaction in Acts of Kindness and Love."<sup>19</sup>

In *Sensus Communis* Shaftesbury makes a similar objection to religious versions of egoism, arguing that justifications of morality based on the afterlife are counterproductive because their stress on external rewards weakens people's commitment to virtue for its own sake.

<sup>19</sup> Shaftesbury, "Preface to *Select Sermons of Dr. Whichcot*."



I have known a Building, which by the Officiousness of the Workmen has been so *shor'd*, and *screw'd up*, on the side where they pretended it had a Leaning, that it has at last been turn'd the contrary way, and overthrown. There has something, perhaps, of this kind happen'd in *Morals*. Men have not been contented to shew the natural Advantages of Honesty and Virtue. They have rather lessen'd these, the better, as they thought, to advance another Foundation. They have made *Virtue* so mercenary a thing, and have talk'd so much of its *Rewards*, that one can hardly tell what there is in it, after all, which can be worth rewarding. (C 1.61)

Focusing extensively on the external rewards of virtue can increase mercenary motivations to such an extent that other kinds of motivation will be crowded out. Someone who has been "brib'd only, or terrify'd into an honest Practice" may cease to find the practice intrinsically valuable (C 1.61). Shaftesbury is making the same point as the "overjustification hypothesis" of recent experimental psychology, which holds that

a person's intrinsic interest in an activity may be undermined by inducing him to engage in that activity as an explicit means to some extrinsic goal. If the external justification provided to induce a person to engage in an activity is unnecessarily high and psychologically "oversufficient," the person might come to infer that his actions were basically motivated by the external contingencies of the situation, rather than by any intrinsic interest in the activity itself. In short, a person induced to undertake an inherently desirable activity as a means to some ulterior end should cease to see the activity as an end in itself.<sup>20</sup>

If a child who loves reading for its own sake is told repeatedly that she will be given external rewards for finishing a certain number of books, she may lose her intrinsic love of reading and become less likely to read when no external rewards are promised. In the same way educators can undermine love of reading, egoists who try to justify morality by pointing to external rewards can corrode the love of real virtue.

The intention behind the construction of an egoistic social contract theory is admirable enough. Social contract theorists believe that to describe the state of nature as a pleasant place is "to render it inviting" (C 2.179). So they go in the opposite direction, painting the state of nature in the darkest colors imaginable in order to motivate people to cherish and promote our social structures. They make the state of nature out to be by "many degrees worse than the worst Government in being. The greater Dread we have

<sup>20</sup> Mark Lepper, David Greene, and Richard E. Nisbett, "Undermining Children's Intrinsic Interest with Extrinsic Reward: A Test of the 'Overjustification' Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 28 (1973): 130.

of Anarchy, the better Country-men we shall prove, and value more the Laws and Constitution under which we live." But while the social contract theorist's imaginary story might be well-intentioned, the overjustification hypothesis explains why it is likely to backfire. Better to draw on the innate sociability humans share than build up mercenary motivations that can topple it.

### III. SHAFTESBURY ON PARTIALITY

The existence in human nature of the herding principle shows that self-interest isn't an insurmountable obstacle to *sensus communis*. But the herding principle does not lead inevitably to virtue. In fact, an uncultivated herding principle is the very cause of the second main obstacle to *sensus communis*.

*Sensus communis* is love for all. It is the drive "to promote the Interest of the whole World" (C 1.23), an "equal, just and universal Friendship" with "Mankind in general" (C 1.137). The virtuous person is characterized not by "Partial Affection" which is a regard for "some *one* Part of Society" but by "Intire Affection," which is "an *intire, sincere and truly moral*" regard for "society itself" (C 2.63–4). A truly moral person is one who works for the good of all. Essential to virtue is impartiality.

But the herding principle produces partiality. The problem here is not (as the egoist claims) that the average person doesn't sincerely care about other people. She truly does. The problem is that the herding principle leads her to care sincerely about only some people, to the detriment of others. This obstacle to *sensus communis* is our innate disposition to tribalism.

We are emotionally disposed to feel great concern for those with whom we are "intimately conversant and acquainted," for people in our "narrower Sphere of Activity" (C 1.72) whose companionship we can "see" and "enjoy" and "taste" (C 1.70). The trials and tribulations of distant folk tend to leave us cold. The bond that exists within the "contracted Publick" of those "sensible" to us does not "find Exercise for it-self in so remote a Sphere as that of the Body Politick at large" (C 1.70).

In *The Moralists* Shaftesbury clearly draws this distinction between concern for people one knows "by sight" and concern for the masses of humanity one knows only "*in Idea*" (C 1.71). Philocles (one of the characters in *The Moralists*) thinks himself fully capable of loving a companion. But, he says, the "*complex universal*" love for all of humanity is "beyond my reach. I cou'd love the Individual, but not the Species. This was too mysterious; too metaphysical an Object for me" (C 2.137). The narrator of *Sensus Communis* makes the same point when he writes: "Universal Good, or the Interest of the World in general, is a kind of remote philosophical Object. That *greater Community* falls not easily under the Eye. Nor is a National Interest, or that of a whole People, or Body Politick, so readily apprehended" (C 1.70). We have no direct acquaintance with the millions of people who make up the

"Body Politick at large." We are psychologically built to care about those with whom we have sensible interaction in a way we are not built to feel for people of whom we have merely a "Notion," an abstract idea.

But the problem is worse than a mere lack of concern. The herding principle leads us not only to love those in our narrow circle but also to hate those outside it. We cherish connection with those we're close to. We adore being in concord with them. And it turns out that one of the best ways of strengthening that connection—one of the most effective means of bolstering fellowship within the group—is to set ourselves in opposition to those outside. Empathy for friends and family is intimately connected to antipathy to strangers.<sup>21</sup>

Shaftesbury describes this problem in terms of the great "force" of "*the confederating Charm*" (C 1.71). People crave "combining" with those with whom they have "*close Sympathy*" (C 1.71). The resulting desire "to move in Concert" leads subsets of society to conceive of their collective good as being in conflict with the rest of society. The power of fellowship is fueled by a shared hostility toward non-fellows. "[T]he *associating Genius* of Man is never better prov'd, than in those very Societys, which are form'd in opposition to the general one of Mankind, and to the real Interest of the State" (C 1.72). Because there is such a great delight to incorporating—and because small groups have such a potent psychological advantage over large groups—human beings are deeply susceptible to "*Subdivision by Cabal*" (C 1.70). "*To cantonize* is natural; when the Society grows vast and bulky." Our emotional limitations facilitate "*the very Spirit of Faction*," and thus a sincere, non-selfish love for those in our small society can all-too-easily morph into a zeal destructive to society as a whole (C 1.72). "[B]y a small misguidance of the Affection, a Lover of Mankind becomes a Ravager: A Hero and Deliverer becomes an Oppressor and Destroyer" (C 1.71). "[T]he social Aim is disturb'd, for want of certain Scope."

Consider the word "conspire." Its etymology of breathing together is morally neutral. And the word's base meaning of combine or unite can carry positive connotations as easily as negative ones. Indeed, Shaftesbury's characters in *The Moralists* rhapsodize about how multitudinous physical elements "conspire" to produce wonders of the natural world—about the "peaceful Concord, and conspiring Beauty of the ever-flourishing Creation" (C 2.209). But when we say that human beings are "conspiring," negative connotations are almost inevitable. We instinctively distrust people whispering to each other. We assume that individuals who are excluding others by breathing together are scheming with those on the inside at the expense of those on the outs. The "conspiring Virtue" (C 1.71) seems inseparable from purposes nefarious.

<sup>21</sup> For a wealth of evidence for the existence this tendency, see J. Kiley Hamlin et al., "Not Like Me = Bad: Infants Prefer Those Who Harm Dissimilar Others," *Psychological Science* 24 (2013): 589–94.

Francis Hutcheson addressed the phenomena of partiality as well.<sup>22</sup> He too wanted to explain the tendency not only to promote the interests of our own group but also to oppose the interests of others. Hutcheson's explanation starts from the idea that humans are innately disposed to universal benevolence. He thinks we are endowed with moral and public senses whose default settings favor that which benefits all of humanity. He thinks as well that real disinterested malice does not exist. No one truly wishes for others' misery. Because of this deep-seated benevolence we will oppose people whose aims we believe to be harmful to humanity. Unfortunately, we may become so accustomed to opposing those people that eventually we develop toward them a standing hostility that can look like malice. Imagine you oppose a political party because you sincerely believe its policies are harmful to society. If your belief in the harm of those policies is particularly powerful, that opposition may become so entrenched in your psyche that you end up harboring negative feelings toward anything you associate with the party, even if some of those things aren't actually harmful in themselves. This Hutchesonian explanation of partiality is fundamentally optimistic. What you really care about is the good of humanity. The problem is just that your benevolent tendencies can be misdirected by mental associations you've accidentally formed. By consciously reflecting on the non-veridicality of those associations, Hutcheson believes, you can free yourself of those misleading thoughts. And once you are free of those misleading thoughts, you will recover the impartial benevolence that is original to human nature.

Shaftesbury is not as optimistic. There's a sense in which he believes it's natural to care about humanity as a whole, but it's an aspirational sense. Love for all is a goal we have to work hard to achieve. It's not a matter simply of clearing our minds of a few adventitious associations and then letting our underlying benevolence shine through. To reach the goal of impartiality, we have to overcome our powerful internal drives to thwart strangers. Partial sociability is the default setting of the Shaftesburean human psyche.

Joshua Greene has recently put this point in terms of two moral problems. One is "the problem of Me versus Us: selfishness versus concern for others."<sup>23</sup> The other is the problem of "Us versus Them: our interests and values versus theirs." According to Greene, long-ago evolutionary pressures from when humans lived in small groups solved the first problem by wiring the brain for emotions beneficial to kith and kin, such as love, guilt, honor, and loyalty. That same wiring, however, produced hostility toward those outside one's group, which gave rise to the partiality that is the

<sup>22</sup> I discuss these points about Hutcheson on partiality in *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181–94.

<sup>23</sup> Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 14.

root of the second problem. "Our brains are wired for tribalism. We intuitively divide the world into Us and Them, and favor Us over Them."<sup>24</sup>

Greene's first problem—the problem of individual selfishness—dominated much of the moral theorizing of Shaftesbury's time. Hobbesian egoism was the great bugbear. Among Shaftesbury's most important predecessors, the Cambridge Platonists emphatically denounced Hobbes himself and devoted great effort to defeating his philosophy. Among Shaftesbury's most important successors, Francis Hutcheson gave top priority to refuting the updated version of Hobbesian egoism that Mandeville advanced in his *Fable of the Bees*. Shaftesbury's early work falls squarely within that anti-egoist tradition, in both tone and content. The first book he published (in 1698) was an edition of sermons by the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote, and in his preface Shaftesbury placed special stress on the moral importance of Whichcote's attack on Hobbes. His second published work (in 1699) was *An Inquiry concerning Virtue*, the entire second half of which is devoted to showing that we are built to be sociable with our fellows and not selfish in the way Hobbes describes.

Shaftesbury never backed away from those anti-egoist claims. But he seemed to come around to thinking that Hobbesian egoism was not the gravest civic threat. The selfishness and corrupting greed of political leaders can certainly cause profound societal damage. But narrowly selfish private citizens generally pose minimal danger to the public weal. "[O]f all Characters, the thorow-selfish one is the least forward in *taking Party*. The Men of this sort are, in this respect, true *Men of Moderation*. They are secure of their Temper; and possess themselves too well, to be in danger of entering warmly into any Cause, or engaging deeply with any Side or Faction" (C 1.72). Thoroughly selfish individuals chart a moderate course. They are not swept by passion toward violent hostility. Much more dangerous are partisan zealots, those whose excessive attachment to a cause pulls them toward destructive hatred of others. It's not selfishness that drives the zealot. The zealot is motivated by "sociableness," but it's a sociableness that is misdirected to one part of society at the expense of others. The "very Spirit of *Faction*, for the greatest part, seems to be no other than the Abuse or Irregularity of ... *social Love*, and *common Affection*." It's Greene's second problem—"Us versus Them (*not Me versus Us*)"—that Shaftesbury came to see as politically the most pressing.

I think Shaftesbury's attitude toward Thomas Hobbes himself also softened. It was standard practice to label Hobbes a monster, to assail him as a loathsome standard bearer of immorality and damnation. Shaftesbury's early work has that tone. But by 1709 Shaftesbury seemed to think that although Hobbes's philosophical position was incorrect his heart was in the right place. Hobbes was no partisan. He was in fact an "anti-Zealot." He really did care about the good of society as a whole.

<sup>24</sup> Greene, *Moral Tribes*, 54.

[T]he good sociable Man, as savage and unsociable as he wou'd make himself and all Mankind appear by his Philosophy, expos'd himself during his Life, and took the utmost pains, that after his Death we might be deliver'd from the occasion of these Terrors [the terrors, that is, of the English Civil War's "Spirit of Massacre" and "Ravage of Enthusiasm"]. He did his utmost to shew us, "That both in Religion and Morals we were impos'd on by our Governors; that there was nothing which by Nature inclin'd us either way; nothing which naturally drew us to the Love of what was without, or beyond *our-selves*": Tho the Love of such great Truths and sovereign Maxims as he imagin'd these to be, made him the most laborious of all Men in composing Systems of this kind for our Use; and forc'd him, notwithstanding his natural Fear, to run continually the highest risk of being a Martyr for our Deliverance ... Whatever Savages [people like Hobbes] may appear in Philosophy, they are in their common Capacity as Civil Persons, as one can wish. Their free communicating of their Principles may witness for them. 'Tis the height of Sociableness to be thus friendly and communicative. (C 1.57. See also C 1.58–60)

Hobbes's espousal of egoism is self-defeating, since the very making of that espousal contradicts his own interests. If Hobbes really cared only about himself, he would have publically avowed anything but his selfish theory. But by publishing these views rather than taking the prudential course of keeping them secret, Hobbes created the opportunity for the sort of rational discussion of political institutions from which all stood to benefit. The dire picture Hobbes painted is itself a proof of his "Humanity," of his "love for Mankind." There was a time when I read this ad hominem as biting sarcasm. But the tone now seems to me to be more that of gentle raillery. I think Shaftesbury really did admire Hobbes. He understood Hobbes's reaction to the political and religious violence of his time, and believed Hobbes had a sincere, nonpartisan commitment to try to make things better.

At the same time, Shaftesbury continued to criticize divisive partiality. In the voice of a writer of miscellaneous reflections in the final volume of *Characteristicks*, Shaftesbury castigates the authors of "*Controversial Writings*" (C 3.8; see also 1.42). Shaftesbury is, obviously enough, not opposed to philosophical refutation and defense. But he disdains contemporary authors' zeal for attack and counterattack. He understands the temptation to such "Feuds." They're "not so wholly unprofitable" (C 3.11). A work of "highest Eloquence and profoundest Erudition" might not draw many readers (C 3.9). But if the author attacks a "*living Antagonist*," the public is more likely to take notice. If the antagonist responds in kind, and the author launches yet another counter, the spectacle may draw an even bigger crowd. People love to watch a fight. "[W]hen Issue is well join'd, the Repartees grown smart, and the Contention vigorous between the learned Partys, a *Ring* is made, and *Readers* gather in abundance." The more adversarial a

performance, the easier it is to attract attention and money. Of this booksellers are well aware, which is why they constantly urge authors to these contentious back-and-forths. Shaftesbury tells the story of an unscrupulous glazier who gives a football to local youths and encourages them to play in a street, where they end up breaking many windows. The glazier profits from the “ruins of Glass cover[ing] the stony Pavements,” even while the football itself becomes fatally deflated (C 3.11). Just so: booksellers profit from the kind of iterated fray that can be counted on to eventually drain the discussion of any meaningful content.

Most of these “*polemick Writings*” vanish without a trace in a year or two, all the “*Defenses, the Answers, Rejoinders, and Replications*” in the end little more than fuel for the fires of “*Pastry-cooks*” (C 3.10–11; see also 1.164–5). But the adversarial bickering does lasting damage along the way. It reduces public philosophy to mere “*Amusement*” (C 3.8), to maliciously-created “*diversion*” (C 3.11). It turns worthwhile intellectual debate into “*a kind of Amphitheatrical Entertainment exhibited to the Multitude, by these Gladiatorian Pen-men*” (C 3.9). Readers no longer engage meaningfully with ideas. Like sports fans, they simply root for their favorites to “*maul*” and “*kill*” the opposition. “*Every one takes party, and encourages his own Side.*” Controversial writing of this sort fosters a factionalism that rends society. It fosters the partiality that is the gravest obstacle to *sensus communis*.

How can we overcome this obstacle? What does promote *sensus communis*? Answering that question is one of Shaftesbury’s main goals in *Characteristicks*. He thinks that appreciation of the beauty of God’s creation is a large part of the answer (2.43, 2.136–7, 2.223). Another large part is the benefit of free converse between citizens.

Free conversation, Shaftesbury argues, promotes fellowship. It produces comity even between people with different views, engendering respect and affection between individuals who might otherwise regard each other hostilely.

*Wit* will mend upon our hands, and *Humour* will refine it-self; if we take care not to tamper with it, and bring it under Constraint, by severe Usage and rigorous Prescriptions. All Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of *amicable Collision*. (C 1.42)

People who converse freely and in good humor tend to develop mutual concern. They may not end up agreeing. They may continue to disagree for years. But their agreeable interactions will foster amicability. It’s hard to hate people you enjoy talking with. It’s especially hard to hate people you laugh with.

Shaftesbury makes his case for free conversation by deploying a commercial metaphor:

[B]y Freedom of Conversation this illiberal kind of Wit will lose its Credit. For Wit is its own Remedy. Liberty and Commerce bring it to its

true Standard. The only danger is, the laying an Embargo. The same thing happens here, as in the Case of *Trade*. Impositions and Restrictions reduce it to a low Ebb: Nothing is so advantageous to it as a *Free-Port*. (C 1.42)

Just as free trade favors the best goods, free discussion favors the most amiable wit. One can see this as the point of the colon in Shaftesbury's *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*: free conversation leads to fellowship and community.<sup>25</sup> We promote the sociability that improves life for everyone by keeping wide open all conversational ports.

Shaftesbury's discussion of free conversation clearly anticipates Mill's "marketplace of ideas" defense of free speech in chapter two of *On Liberty*. About the literal marketplace—about the commercial interactions that would so animate Hume and Smith—Shaftesbury has less to say. He argues directly for liberty of speech, of the arts, and of religion, but about commerce and trade he makes only occasional passing comments. Shaftesbury's most significant contributions to the development of political economy are due not so much to his close attention to economic phenomena but rather to his observational method of studying human nature and his elucidation of the complex sociability of our sentiments.

#### IV. SHAFTESBURY AND PARTISANSHIP

In his discussion of controversial writing Shaftesbury painted a picture in which the commercial motive of maximizing a paying audience whips up aggressively partial speech that degrades public political discourse. If that sounds familiar to twenty-first century ears it may be because of some striking similarities between his time and ours.

Shaftesbury was writing during the reign of Queen Anne (1702–1714). It was an intensely partisan period. The Triennial Act of 1694 mandated general elections every three years, which led to ten elections in the ensuing twenty-year period. There were fierce Parliamentary battles between Whigs and Tories. And the adversarial character of politics jumped its banks and flooded large swaths of society. As Holmes describes what has come to be known as the era's "Rage of Party":

[T]he most extraordinary feature of the age of Anne was the unprecedented extent to which party strife, the inescapable and all-pervading distinction between Tory and Whig, invaded and finally took possession of the very lives of the politically-conscious. In spheres far removed from the confines of the Court and "the Parliament-House,"

<sup>25</sup> Although the title isn't always printed with the colon. On the title page of *Characteristicks* (in contrast to the title within the body of the text) it's a semicolon.



or for that matter of the parliamentary boroughs, a man's party allegiance became a fact of considerable, and often of supreme, importance.<sup>26</sup>

Shaftesbury was acutely aware of all this. His grandfather was a founder of the Whig Party infamous for his political machinations. Shaftesbury himself was a Whig member of the House of Commons from 1695 to 1698.<sup>27</sup> After his father's death in 1699 he assumed the Earldom and entered the House of Lords, while continuing to play a role in Whig electoral efforts of 1701 (and, to a lesser extent, of 1705).<sup>28</sup>

Some recent commentators read *Characteristicks* as part and parcel of Shaftesbury's Whig political career. Klein contends that Shaftesbury's philosophy was "harnessed to a political project," and that *Characteristicks* was a "deeply partisan project."<sup>29</sup> Says Klein: "*Characteristicks* was not only political in a general sense but specifically partisan and polemical."<sup>30</sup> Müller maintains that Shaftesbury was a "Whig propagandist" and that *Characteristicks* is "political propaganda."<sup>31</sup> Müller calls Shaftesbury's book "a Whig manifesto fraught with propaganda."<sup>32</sup> Williams says that Shaftesbury is a prime "spokesperson ... of modern Whig literary culture" and that Shaftesbury intended for his well-connected Whig friends to applaud "the Whigish philosophy outlined in the *Characteristicks*."<sup>33</sup> Jost claims that Shaftesbury's "philosophical thought is deeply influenced by the partisan political climate of his time—in fact, he often represents partisan politics in a positive light."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 20–21. There has been much debate about what the distinction between Whig and Tory actually amounted to in the reign of Anne, with disagreements about whether those coarse-grained labels capture the real lines of political faction. The idea that people during the period thought their own time was very factionalized and partisan is not so controversial. What is controversial is how to best identify the adversarial factions and parties that actually existed on the ground. See J. A. W. Gunn, *Factions No More: Attitudes to Party in Government and Opposition in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 1–34.

<sup>27</sup> Robert B. Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury 1671–1713* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 70.

<sup>28</sup> Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, 110, 210–11 and 230–32.

<sup>29</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 152.

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Müller, "Rewriting the Divine Right Theory for the Whigs: The Political Implications of Shaftesbury's Attack on the Doctrine of Futurity in his *Characteristicks*," in *Great Expectations: Futurity in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Mascha Hansen and Jürgen Klein (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012): 69.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Müller, "Hobbes, Locke and the Consequences: Shaftesbury's Moral Sense and Political Agitation in Early Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 37 (2014), 317.

<sup>33</sup> Abigail Williams, *Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture 1681–1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 234.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob Sider Jost, "Party Politics in *Characteristicks*," in *Shaping Enlightenment Politics: The Social and Political Impact of the First and Third Earls of Shaftesbury*, ed. Patrick Müller (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2018), 135; *Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture 1681–1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 234.

These partisan readings get important things right. Shaftesbury certainly contends for many Whig positions, such as powerfully positive endorsements of the 1688 revolution, of religious toleration, of a balance of power between Parliament and monarch, and—most centrally—of extensive liberty. I believe, nonetheless, that labeling *Characteristicks* a partisan text is a mistake, for a number of reasons.

The “partisan” label doesn’t do justice to the fact that Shaftesbury prided himself on *not* being a thoroughly partisan politician. At numerous times in his career he consciously departed from the party line. Nor was Shaftesbury a consistently political person. Throughout his life he wavered between political engagement and contemplative detachment, and in the last period of his life, when he wrote much of *Characteristicks*, he was leaning decidedly away from the political.<sup>35</sup>

And the “partisan” label minimizes in distorting fashion Shaftesbury’s passionate direct concerns with nature, beauty, art, self-improvement, and many other things besides. Klein was surely right to bring to our attention how many Whig positions Shaftesbury affirms. But I don’t think it follows that *Characteristicks* as a whole is harnessed to “partisan and polemical” ends. Much of the time, Shaftesbury wishes to expound philosophical ideas not tied to English politics in the age of Queen Anne. To take one example, Klein says that Shaftesbury’s goal “was a program of education in which the moral and literary would be combined to produce virtuous public action. Shaftesbury was designing a Whiggism that was civic and humanist.”<sup>36</sup> Klein is right that *Characteristicks* develops a humanist program of self-improvement that hopes to draw on art and moral philosophy to make people more virtuous. But labeling the resulting view a “Whiggism” is misleadingly narrow. The discussions of self-reflection and psychological health that make up the bulk of Shaftesbury’s *Soliloquy*, the second half of his *Inquiry*, and Philocles’ conversion in *The Moralists* can be unclipped from partisan political commitments. Another example: Klein makes a convincing case that Shaftesbury’s discussion of “imposture” in *A Letter concerning Enthusiasm* is in part an attack on Toryism.<sup>37</sup> But the substance of the idiosyncratic endorsement of enthusiasm that is the culmination of *A Letter* and *The Moralists* is unbound to local politics.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> For discussions of Shaftesbury’s political ambivalence, see Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 131–42; Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, 230–36; Jost, “Party Politics in *Characteristicks*,” 136 and 147.

<sup>36</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 150.

<sup>37</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 151.

<sup>38</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 152. One of the strongest bits of evidence Klein cites is a letter Shaftesbury wrote to Lord Somers in 1710. Shaftesbury says there that in the third volume of *Characteristicks* he had the courage “to attack and provoke a most malignant party,” and he goes on to express the hope that his work will destroy that party’s hold on English academics, religion, and culture (Shaftesbury, *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen*, ed. Benjamin Rand [London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1900], 432). This letter (and it’s not the only one) does sound like it was written by someone who hated the Tories. As I note, however, there are other letters and unpublished writings in which Shaftesbury seems to

It is important (and not only for Shaftesbury scholarship) to maintain a distinction between holding strong views on contested political matters and being a partisan propagandist. Partisan propagandists see the other side as an enemy. They adopt an adversarial, zero-sum mindset. They use whatever means they can to win adherents to their side, very much including manipulative rhetoric that short-circuits rational thought. A person can hold strong views on contested political matters without having that kind of partisan mindset. Indeed, a person can hold strong political views and believe such a mindset is a moral ill. And such a person would find at least as much succor in *Characteristicks* as would the partisan. For *Characteristicks* itself contains arguments against partisanship.

It was common in Shaftesbury's day (and not only his) to pay lip service to the idea that one ought to place concern for country above party affiliation while in practice subordinating all other allegiances "to a dominant Whig or Tory identity."<sup>39</sup> Making non-partisan noises isn't sufficient evidence that one isn't actually deeply partisan. In *Characteristicks*, however, meaty philosophical substance is marshaled against partisan writing.

*Characteristicks* explicitly aims to instill two virtues in writers: skepticism and good humor. The virtue of skepticism is a willingness to entertain doubt about every position, including one's own. The corresponding vice to be avoided is what Shaftesbury terms "*partial Scepticism*."

There is nothing so foolish and deluding as a *partial Scepticism*. For whilst the Doubt is cast only on one side, the Certainty grows so much stronger on the other. Whilst only one Face of Folly appears ridiculous, the other grows more solemn and deceiving. (C 1.52)

Just as we cannot know which wrestler in a match is truly superior if one is "out of reach" of the other, so too we cannot know which position in any argument is strongest if one is in any way shielded from doubt (C 1.48; see also 1.46). Unless every opinion is brought out into the light for full inspection we can have no confidence in any of them: "They may perhaps be Monsters, and not ... Sacred Truths" (C 1.40). Truly philosophical writing is thus the opposite of dogmatic, embracing fully the methods of "Questioning and Doubting" (C 2.107; see also 2.108). But the vice of partial skepticism, Shaftesbury thought, was pervasive in the writing of his day. His contemporaries

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eschew partisanship. And I have tried to argue that there are substantive philosophical aspects of *Characteristicks* that speak against a partisan characterization. Shaftesbury certainly bore a great deal of hostility toward the Tories. But that does not mean he was always very positive toward the Whigs, let alone that in his writing he consistently intended to advance a Whig agenda. One possibility (suggested by Jaffro to me in correspondence) is that Shaftesbury was more animated by political aims in the third volume, while aiming to be a more thoroughly sociable and polite author in the first two volumes. What I want to resist is the idea that his strong personal animus for the Tories is the interpretative key to *Characteristicks* as a whole. I don't think that's how Shaftesbury himself conceived of the work.

<sup>39</sup> Jost, "Party Politics in *Characterisks*," 138.

“love to take part instantly. They can’t bear being kept in suspense” (C 2.107). They are “superficial and “dogmatical in Philosophy” because they are “too lazy” and “too cowardly, to dare *doubt*” (C 2.108).

Shaftesbury’s virtue of good humor is the disposition to argue with others in friendship rather than enmity (C 1.43, 1.45, 1.49). It is the ability to engage intellectually in “*amicable Collision*” (C 1.42)—“unravelling or refuting any Argument, without offence to the Arguer” (C 1.45). The ultimate goal for Shaftesbury is *sensus communis*, affectionate good will toward our fellow humans. And being good-humored while disagreeing is instrumental to that.

Certain Socratic dialogues exemplify the virtues of skepticism and good humor that Shaftesbury has in mind. In works such as the *Charmides*, *Meno*, and *Phaedrus* claims are questioned, inconsistencies exposed, positions demolished. Nothing is sacred. But there is no rancor, no offense. The participants delight in the activity. They delight in each other.

Partisan writing exemplifies the corresponding vices. Partisan writers are dogmatic. They “take part instantly,” attempting to pull down the other’s side while shielding their own completely from doubt. And they are ill-tempered, bereft of the good humor of amicable collision, full of “Rage and Fury” (C 1.43).

Even more revealing than what Shaftesbury says about writing is his most fundamental position on morality. Morality is, for Shaftesbury, impartial. Its essence is equal affection for the entire whole, not for a part. It is *sensus communis*, the exact opposite of partisanship. This is the point I sought to make in [Section III](#): Shaftesbury thought that partiality is the greatest moral danger.

Some proponents of the partisan interpretation contend that Shaftesbury’s non-partisan stance was “a piece of legerdemain,”<sup>40</sup> a “pose,”<sup>41</sup> and that *Characteristicks* is in actuality a “political manifesto”<sup>42</sup> whose real meaning is “hidden in esoteric layers of his text, discernible to adepts and friends.”<sup>43</sup> According to these partisan interpretations, when reading Shaftesbury we have to “differentiate what he says (exoteric meaning) and really means (esoteric meaning)”<sup>44</sup>—where endorsement of above-the-fray impartiality is what he (exoterically) says while endorsement of partisan politics is what he (esoterically) means. It seems to me, however, that the basis for such a reading of *Characteristicks* is lacking.

Jost, for instance, acknowledges that Shaftesbury overtly claims that integrity is rational, while partiality is vicious. But he goes on to claim that

<sup>40</sup> Jost, “Party Politics in *Characteristicks*,” 140.

<sup>41</sup> Jost, “Party Politics in *Characteristicks*,” 146.

<sup>42</sup> Müller, “Rewriting the Divine Right Theory for the Whigs,” 68.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Müller, “Lord Ashley and the Republic Project,” in *Shaping Enlightenment Politics: The Social and Political Impact of the First and Third Earls of Shaftesbury*, ed. Patrick Müller (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2018), 125.

<sup>44</sup> Müller, “Lord Ashley and the Republic Project,” 126.

Shaftesbury subtly endorses “a normative picture . . . based on an ideal of party-based government” nonetheless.<sup>45</sup> To support his claim, Jost cites positions Shaftesbury advances on nonpolitical issues and then claims that Shaftesbury intends for his (adept) readers to see that he is really making a point about an analogous political matter. In *Soliloquy* Shaftesbury advises writers to engage in self-dialogue, and in order to do that, he says, you must “*Divide yourself, or Be Two.*” Jost reads this exhortation to self-dialogue as evidence of Shaftesbury’s endorsement of partisanship: “Latent deep within Shaftesbury’s language of ‘division’ (which is also the name of the voting procedure in the House of Commons) and prudent management is a metaphor of moral choice as political deliberation and action.”<sup>46</sup> Jost points as well to a passage in which Shaftesbury has us think of “Appetite” and “Reason” as “Two form’d *Partys,*” one full of “mere *Sophisters* and *Impostors*” and the other full of “*good Sense.*” The problem is that the text itself does not draw any connection between the importance of self-dialogue and the partisanship of the day. “Division” is too common a word on which to stake any robust esoteric reading. Thinking of reason and appetite as contending parts within the soul is a philosophical trope general enough to find a place with thinkers of almost any political stripe imaginable. Most importantly, Shaftesbury clearly cares about self-dialogue for its own sake, not as a stalking horse for some covert political purposes: self-reflection is a central aspect of his view of identity, of virtue, and of life as a work of art. Shaftesbury’s discussion of dividing oneself into two does not imply any particular position on the partisan politics of his day, nor do we need political purposes to explain why Shaftesbury cares about dividing oneself into two.

Jost also claims to find covert support of partisan politics in Shaftesbury’s claim that “integrity illuminates ‘each friendly Affection in particular’ and increases the enjoyment of ‘Participation,’” where the underlined bits are supposed to reveal Shaftesbury’s deepest meaning.<sup>47</sup> But these flatfooted uses of extremely common words that happen to be cognates of “party” fall far short of warranting an esoteric reading that casts in a different light what Shaftesbury explicitly advances with regard to impartiality. Shaftesbury himself may have been in favor of a party-based political system, but these quotations give us no reason to think that he intended for *Characteristicks* to be a pro-partisan tract.

Similar problems arise for Müller’s esoteric reading. Müller provides an illuminating account of Shaftesbury’s view that religion ought not be based on selfish desires for future reward and punishment. Müller then goes on to say that Shaftesbury “explicitly associates his reservations regarding the egoistic implications of this doctrine with the High

<sup>45</sup> Jost, “Party Politics in *Characterisks,*” 143.

<sup>46</sup> Jost, “Party Politics in *Characterisks,*” 144.

<sup>47</sup> Jost, “Party Politics in *Characterisks,*” 143.

Church Tory clergyman"<sup>48</sup> and that Shaftesbury claims that in "the hands of the Tory clergy, the doctrine of futurity is a means of enslaving the citizens' minds and as such a symbol of tyranny."<sup>49</sup> But Shaftesbury doesn't explicitly associate this selfish religious doctrine with the Tories in *Characteristicks*. The passage Müller claims to find this association in is a private letter.<sup>50</sup> In *Characteristicks*, moreover, Shaftesbury's explicit reasons for rejecting religious egoism are based on his most fundamental views of theism and virtue, views that are not tied to party affiliation. In the case of opposition to the religious egoism of the doctrine of futurity, we once again don't need any partisan commitments to explain Shaftesbury's view in *Characteristicks*, nor does the text of *Characteristicks* give us independent grounds for attributing such commitments to him.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Müller, "Rewriting the Divine Right Theory for the Whigs," 81.

<sup>49</sup> Müller, "Rewriting the Divine Right Theory for the Whigs," 84.

<sup>50</sup> Müller, "Rewriting the Divine Right Theory for the Whigs," 81–82, 84–85. Müller refers to two letters, and I have questions about his reading of both of them. Both letters were to Shaftesbury's protégé Michael Ainsworth, who was a student at Oxford at the time. Neither letter explicitly mentions Tories or Whigs. The first letter (10 May 1707) says that tyranny in the soul goes hand in hand with tyranny in government, and exhorts Ainsworth to guard against both in order to maintain his "freedom of reason" and "true zeal" for God. The first letter also warns that Oxford University has "the narrow principles and contagious manner of corrupted places" and urges Ainsworth not to be led astray by "dark speculations and monkish philosophy" (Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times with a Collection of Letters* [Basil: J. J. Tournaisen and J. L. Legrand, 1790], 318–320). The second letter (19 November 1707) is critical of Oxford professors "who understand not that there is anything preparatory to [true religion], beyond a little scholarship and knowledge of forms" and are too consumed by lower desires ("lusts and appetites," "allurements of external objects") to rise to the intrinsic love of God of which true religion consists (Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times with a Collection of Letters*, 320–23). It seems to me that the move from these pieces of advice to a partisan Whig reading of the religious views in *Characteristicks* is a big leap. I do not mean to deny that Shaftesbury bore animus toward Tories nor that he thought Toryism predominant with Ainsworth's Oxford faculty. What I question is whether these letters are evidence that we should read Shaftesbury religious views in *Characteristicks* as esoteric partisan attacks.

<sup>51</sup> Müller also argues that Shaftesbury's "Preface to *Select Sermons of Dr. Whichcote*" is an esoteric political work (Müller, "Lord Ashley and the Republic Project," 128–32). In that preface, Shaftesbury does lambaste Hobbesianism and Calvinism. But I don't see what the evidence is for taking Shaftesbury to be making any specific partisan points. One of the main thrusts of Shaftesbury's preface is that Whichcote's sermons should be made public because his good will can soothe the acrimony that is plaguing the contemporary scene, a stance that sounds to me more anti-partisan than partisan. Müller quotes passages from the sermons themselves in which Whichcote makes statements about the importance of freedom. But the kind of freedom Whichcote is talking about in those passages is the freedom of an individual person who is governed by her "Power of Reason" and the "Law of Right," as opposed to those who are enslaved because they are "under the Tyranny of their Lusts" (a point that would be just as amenable to Plato as to any Whig) (Müller, "Lord Ashley and the Republic Project," 129). The support from Shaftesbury's preface itself that Müller cites is a passage in which Shaftesbury expresses "[a]mazement" that some people who claim to be adherents to a religion as morally impeccable as Christianity end up leading such unvirtuous lives (Müller, "Lord Ashley and the Republic Project," 131). Maybe Shaftesbury thought that those on one side of the political divide were more guilty of this kind of hypocrisy than those on the other side. But it seems to me that it would be an overreading to find him making that point in the preface itself.

Another illustrative example of what I think is mistaken about the partisan characterization is Müller's interpretation of a comment Shaftesbury makes about passive obedience. Müller writes:

Moreover, both Hoadly and Shaftesbury target the Tory clergy's political self-interest: that party, they say, is espoused which promises political clout. For both writers, then, the doctrine of futurity is a cipher for the autocracy or tyranny they considered inherent in the doctrine of passive obedience. By limiting the individual's status as a free moral agent, this doctrine, which Shaftesbury regards as 'mere Nonsense' (*Sensus Communis*, 42 [80]), undermines the Whig cause of liberty.<sup>52</sup>

Now it's true that Shaftesbury was opposed to the doctrine of passive obedience. But the way Müller uses the "mere Nonsense" quotation suggests that in this part of *Sensus Communis* Shaftesbury is making a claim that is strongly partisan—anti-Tory, pro-Whig. But the context of the passage suggests something different. The letter-writer of *Sensus Communis* is relating an earlier conversation he and his correspondent had been a part of. The participants had been making all sorts of appeals to common sense. Then the wisest of the company made the rest realize that about any matter of importance there isn't anything like the universal consensus that could underwrite such appeals. We think there's consensus on some matters, the wise gentleman pointed out, but when we examine more closely we see that there isn't. There is great disagreement about religion, not only between Christians and non-Christians but even among Christians themselves. There is great disagreement about morals, not only between civilized and barbarous peoples but even within civilized nations themselves. And there is great political disagreement:

As for Policy; What Sense or whose cou'd be call'd common, was equally a question. If plain *British* or *Dutch* Sense were right, *Turkish* and *French* Sense must certainly be very wrong. And as mere Nonsense as Passive-Obedience seem'd; we found it to be the common Sense of a great Party amongst our-selves, a greater Party in *Europe*, and perhaps the greatest Part of all the World besides. (C 1.51)

Yes, it seems to the letter-writer that passive obedience is mere nonsense. But this passage is not an attack on those who believe in passive obedience. The point of the passage is that we should be more skeptical about even those things that seem obvious to us. We shouldn't wallow in lazy certainty but instead take seriously the fact that others—many others, maybe even most others—hold contrary views.

<sup>52</sup> Müller, "Rewriting the Divine-Right Theory for the Whigs," 83.

The great enemy of clear thinking and *sensus communis* is “*partial Scepticism*,” a mindset that vilifies one side while treating the other as sacrosanct (C 1.52). The best thing is a truly philosophical frame of mind—a frame of mind that is good-humored to everyone and questioning of everything. A frame of mind that is fundamentally non-partisan.

I do not mean to deny that there are in Shaftesbury significant connections between his political philosophy and his views of ethics, art, and religion. Shaftesbury is a normative unitarian. He thinks the telos of everything—of personal self-improvement, of art, of politics, of natural systems, of God’s creation—is the same: harmony, order, balance. All things are good to the extent that they achieve that end. And this normative unitarianism ensures that there will be extensive parallels between what Shaftesbury praises and condemns in ethics, art, and religion, and what he praises and condemns in politics. The ideal in each case is the same. This unity of value is what Jaffro astutely charts in his discussion of the centrality of “balance” in Shaftesbury’s thought.<sup>53</sup> As Jaffro shows, Shaftesbury takes balance to be the ideal of both a political constitution and a human’s psychological make-up, and thus draws heavily on the analogy between the state and the soul. But as Jaffro also points out, the “analogy between the soul and the state is as old as Plato’s *Republic*.”<sup>54</sup> And while Shaftesbury certainly does use that analogy and the ideal of balance when attacking political absolutism, his more “urgent” and “fundamental” task is to elucidate and promote individual virtue.<sup>55</sup>

In a 1706 letter to a friend Shaftesbury wrote: “[A]s to the public and the affairs of Scotland. You ask my opinion (father!)—you shall have it, and it will savour more (I fear) of the philosopher than the politician ... [A]s in philosophy so in politics, I am but few removes from mere skepticism.”<sup>56</sup> Shaftesbury then goes on to express support for the balance of power and condemnation of absolute monarchy. But in expressing those views he takes himself to be affirming positions more general than the subjects of partisan bickering of contemporary politicians. He writes: “though I may hold some principles perhaps tenaciously, they are, however, so very few, plain, and simple that they serve to little purpose towards the great speculations in fashion with the world.”<sup>57</sup>

Shaftesbury had his portrait painted in 1701. In the painting he’s standing in a room with an arched doorway. Stepping through the doorway is a

<sup>53</sup> Jaffro, “Psychological and Political Balances: The Third Earl of Shaftesbury’s Reading of James Harrington,” in *Shaping Enlightenment Politics: The Social and Political Impact of the First and Third Earls of Shaftesbury*, ed. Patrick Müller (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2018): 149–62.

<sup>54</sup> Jaffro, “Psychological and Political Balances,” 151.

<sup>55</sup> Jaffro, “Psychological and Political Balances,” 155–56. Although Jaffro argues that Shaftesbury’s use of “balance” is indebted to Harrington’s *Oceana*, which can suggest a more political purpose than I describe here.

<sup>56</sup> Shaftesbury, *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen*, 366–67.

<sup>57</sup> Shaftesbury, *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen*, 367. But as I say in note 38, Klein aptly points to a letter that strikes a more partisan tone.



servant. The servant is bringing what appears to be Shaftesbury's peerage robe, for his participation as an Earl in the House of Lords. An engraver worked from that painting to create the frontispiece for the 1714 edition of *Characteristicks*. Shaftesbury is in the same pose in the same room in both pictures. But he instructed the engraver to make some changes to the setting. In the frontispiece for *Characteristicks*, volumes by Xenophon and Plato that had been present in the left edge of the earlier painting are now placed conspicuously on the right. Most significantly, the servant and the peerage robe are now gone, replaced by a view of a garden and distant hills.

Shaftesbury sought to reclaim philosophy from what he took to be the modern intellectual plagues of pedantry and partisanship. And this perhaps partly explains the unsystematic and indirect writing style that lost him favor with later British thinkers. The allusive, digressive, jokey narrators may have shortened the half-life of the *Characteristicks'* influence. They were, however, anything but pedantic. And the different voices served to distance the text from the public figure Shaftesbury was—from an inherited name at the time more closely associated than virtually any other with political party. In public life he was willing to take on what pertained to that inheritance. But when writing *Characteristicks* he aimed to be a philosopher, not merely a third earl.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For evidence of Shaftesbury's wanting to identify with a philosophical self that is independent of politics, public affairs, and titled responsibilities, see Shaftesbury, "Askemata," in *Standard Edition* II.6, ed. W. Benda, C. Jackson-Holzberg, P. Müller, and F. A. Uehlein (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog), 171, 256–58, 272, 286–87.