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## Shaftesbury and *Sensus Communis* – An Unfinished Project

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**Abstract.** In the context of current critical debates about the viability of universal categories (e.g. reason, community, justice), this article examines Shaftesbury's complicated engagement with the ideal of *sensus communis*, focusing primarily on the three texts that comprise the original first volume of *Characteristics* (1711): *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*; *Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*; and *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*. Scholars have often read these less formal works by Shaftesbury through the lens of the more conventionally monologic and declamatory philosophy he articulated in the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*. Against the grain of this tendency, which emphasizes the confident idealism of Shaftesbury's thinking about *sensus communis*, this article reveals his deep-seated skepticism about the related projects of defining and achieving the kind of shared understanding and commitment to the public good to which this concept refers.

**Keywords:** Shaftesbury, *sensus communis*, universality, wit, self-reflection.

In a recent special issue of *Modern Language Notes* (MLN), editors Christiane Frey, David Martyn, and Rochelle Tobias argue that in our current intellectual climate «the universalist paradigms of the 'Western' tradition, including that of *sensus communis*, have lost credibility», so much so that «[a]ppealing to a shared common sense has become more difficult, many would say impossible»<sup>1</sup>. This critique of universalism arises out of a pluralistic concern about the «unbridgeable barriers and gaps among different groups and identities», and of «experiences and sensibilities that *cannot* be shared by all»<sup>2</sup>. Within this interpretive understanding, then, «appeals to universalism are hard to defend, as arguably *no* universal construction can avoid leaving something or someone out», often in ways that make those excluded seem «not just deficient but beyond the pale, less than human»<sup>3</sup>. In this context, the editors specify that (besides Kant) one of the Enlightenment's «two most pertinent authors for the history of *sensus communis*» is indeed Lord Shaftesbury<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> C. Frey, D. Martyn and R. Tobias, *Introduction*, «Modern Language Notes», 139, 2024, 3, p. 359.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 360.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

Of course, the historical situation informing Shaftesbury's theorization of *sensus communis* differs significantly from the contemporary scene the editors describe. With England's recent national traumas of civil war, failed monarchic restoration, and a bitterly fought crisis over succession squarely in mind – not to mention the new pressures of navigating an unlicensed press and a culture riven by religious discord and persecution – Shaftesbury tries to imagine not only the grounds of public consensus about universal moral and aesthetic norms, but also the modest possibility of agreeing with one's neighbors about anything at all. As scholars have recently pointed out, however, another crucially important dimension of Shaftesbury's particular discursive milieu has to do with the social delimitations through which it defined itself – precisely the kinds of exclusions toward which the *MLN* editors draw our attention: Rebecca Tierney-Hynes and Brian Cowan, for example, have persuasively revealed Shaftesbury's commitment to a male homosociality that denies access and importance to women; while Jordy Rosenberg and David Sigler have powerfully analyzed the racialized terms in which Shaftesbury represents non-European figures at multiple points in his oeuvre; and Daniel Carey has shown how Shaftesbury responded to the moral-relativist implications of Locke's notion of human diversity by articulating a set of universal norms that paradoxically could be understood only by elite male writers like himself<sup>5</sup>.

This essay does not argue against these scholars in any way. Instead, it offers a new account of how Shaftesbury approached the concept of *sensus communis*, and the extent to which the exclusions in his work might be contested from within the terms of his own philosophy. Rather than appearing in early English print culture as a reified and hegemonic universal, Shaftesbury's conceptualization of *sensus communis* foregrounds both the difficulties at play in determining aspects of its basic meaning, and the obstacles that might hinder its public effectiveness as a regulative ideal. Though it is oriented toward the promise of universal norms grounded in nature, *sensus communis* remains a heuristic under construction for Shaftesbury, a set of provisional processes and stipu-

lations performed situationally into being by the dialogic forms allegorized within and as his texts. Our focus here will be to read closely the three works that comprise the original first volume of *Characteristics* (1711): *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm; Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*; and *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*. Against the tendency to interpret these less formal texts through the lens of the idealistic and more conventionally philosophical *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*, this article reveals Shaftesbury's deep-seated skepticism about the related projects of defining and achieving the kind of shared understanding and commitment to the public good to which the concept of *sensus communis* refers.

#### I. PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION: SHAFTESBURY'S EXPERIMENT

Historians of *sensus communis* often find themselves confounded by definitional imprecision. As one critic has remarked with some irony, «there is much disagreement on the very notion of *sensus communis*»<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, Shaftesbury allegorizes this definitional problematic internally to his texts, both to foreground it as a serious conceptual difficulty and to stage potential methods through which it might be resolved. In Part I of *Sensus Communis*, for example, we see the initial emergence of this issue in *Characteristics*, when Shaftesbury reports on an impasse arrived at during a lively conversation in his social circle. While debating their contrasting opinions, Shaftesbury relates, several of the speakers began to «appeal to common sense» to defend their arguments<sup>7</sup>. While everyone initially goes along with such appeals, it soon becomes apparent that «no judgment could be given» about the point in question because there had been no prior consensual agreement about «what common sense was» (37). Indeed, as one gentleman explains, if common sense refers to an opinion or judgment shared by «any considerable part of mankind», it would be difficult «to discover where the subject of common sense could lie» (37); on most subjects, «the sense of one part of mankind was against the sense of another», a problem not solved by referring to majority opinion as a metonym for common sense, since majority opinion would «change as often as men

<sup>5</sup> See R. Tierney-Hynes, *Shaftesbury's Soliloquy: Authorship and the Psychology of Romance*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 38, 2005, 4, pp. 605-621; B. Cowan, *Reasonable Ecstasies: Shaftesbury and the Languages of Libertinism*, «Journal of British Studies», 37, 1998, 2, pp. 111-138; J. Rosenberg, *Critical Enthusiasm: Capital Accumulation and the Transformation of Religious Passion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013; D. Sigler, *Shaftesbury takes an Ethiopian to the Carnival: Foreignness, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity in "Sensus Communis"*, «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 53, 2012, 1, pp. 23-40; and D. Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

<sup>6</sup> B. Pettersson, *Exploring the common ground: Sensus communis, humor and the interpretation of comic poetry*, «Journal of Literary Semantics», 33, 2004, p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), ed. by L.E. Klein, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 37. Subsequent citations will be made from this edition directly in the text, with the cited page number(s) enclosed in parentheses.

changed», such that «common sense today would be the contrary tomorrow» (37).

Undaunted by the gentleman's doubts, the conversationalists reorient their deliberations toward discovering a *sensus communis*, on the assumption that there must be subjects on which «they all agreed» (37). But when they review three areas of public discourse crucial to social cohesion – religion, policy, and morals – they find no promising shared ground. An overview of political principles reveals no ready universality: the discussants find little agreement within England regarding the doctrine of passive obedience, for example, and even less encouragement from the international sphere, given that «if the British or Dutch sense [of politics] were right» then the «Turkish and French sense must certainly be very wrong» (38). «As for morals», Shaftesbury reports, they found that irreconcilable difference of sentiment, «if possible, was still wider» than that in politics; and, finally, «differences in religion» had already proven so unbridgeable in previous conversations that «there was no occasion to speak» of them again (38). The conversation reaches a dead-end, despite being peopled by «better critics» than usual, a group exceptionally «ingenious and fair in their way of questioning received opinions» (39).

Shaftesbury's response to this impasse, however, is to pursue the inquiry on his own for the remainder of his essay. His aim, he says, is «to carry on their humour» and «to make the experiment» as to whether any «certain knowledge or assurance of things» – in short, any basis for a *sensus communis* – «may be recovered» (39). Shaftesbury begins Part II by seeking shared ground between himself and his philosophical arch-adversary, Thomas Hobbes. Rather than reacting with «horrors and consternations» to Hobbes, Shaftesbury views the «paradoxical system» of the *Leviathan* as an outward form obscuring Hobbes's underlying affection for humanity (45): if philosophers like Hobbes «represent men by nature [as] treacherous and wild, it is out of care for mankind, lest, by being too tame and trusting, they should easily be caught» (44). By drawing attention to this performative contradiction in Hobbes – that he is «in practice so different» (sociable) from «what he would appear in speculation» (selfish) – Shaftesbury clarifies a crucial element in his theory of *sensus communis*. Though he disagrees with Hobbes's arguments, what Shaftesbury recovers is their shared orientation toward dialogue and the possibility of mutual understanding: in the «free communicating of their principles» writers like Hobbes enact their inclination toward a shared public interest they otherwise deny (43). Through this dispositional accord with Hobbes, Shaftesbury reveals that the process of arriving at a robust *sensus communis* of

shared ideas requires a prior commitment to the act of deliberative discussion itself, a kind of meta-agreement without which no subsequent propositional agreement will be possible.

Shaftesbury continues the experiment in Part III by engaging with the long history of writers interested in *sensus communis*, curating a textual canon of ancients (Galen, Herodian, Horace, Juvenal, Marcus [Aurelius], and Seneca) and early modern scholars (Isaac and Méric Casaubon, Thomas Gataker, and Claude Saumaise). Shaftesbury's extended gloss of the term *sensus communis* goes far beyond the idea of shared opinion, and many scholars have taken this as his decisive statement about its meaning; viz. that it signifies «sense of public weal and of the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness,» or «that sort of civility which arises from a just sense of the common rights of mankind, and [our] natural equality» (48). As the heterogeneous terms in this list imply, however, Shaftesbury offers less a concise accounting of his own conclusions than an aggregative summary of what previous writers have suggested; he frames the gloss not by saying he personally endorses it, but by explaining it is what «some of the most ingenious commentators» have read into the term, ironically interpreting it in an uncommon way, «very differently from what is generally apprehended» (48). Shaftesbury clearly finds aspects of this definition compelling, but even his own elaborate footnote lays bare the hermeneutic and etymological difficulties in reconstructing a coherent history for this concept. Shaftesbury questions the universality of this ostensibly natural sense, quoting Saumaise on how the ancients (particularly Juvenal) believed their societies were full of people «*who can properly be said not to possess sensus communis*» (48). Without specifying an authoritative definition, Shaftesbury spells out some key terms to be considered in answering the as yet unanswered question – what is common sense? His friends' inconclusive inquiry, Shaftesbury insists, serves as a modern iteration of a venerable and ongoing philosophical conversation about a concept that resists easy definition and social realization. Part III, in short, highlights *sensus communis* as a promise and a problem: a dispositional ideal with far-reaching social, moral, and political implications; but one that is difficult to find exemplified in current or historical societies.

For his part, Juvenal had little confidence in his contemporaries' capacities; among the imperial Roman «nobility and the Court», Juvenal archly notes, «common sense is quite rare» (48). In his satire, Juvenal draws attention not to flaws inherent in the people he mocks, but to what he calls their «situation» as the particularly

corrupting influence (48). Shaftesbury agrees, remarking first that it would be «difficult to apprehend what community subsisted among courtiers or what public between an absolute prince and his slave-subjects»; and second that, as for the rest of society, «there could be none [no community] between such as had no other sense than that of private good»<sup>8</sup> (49). Shaftesbury clarifies here the causal relationship between two different components of *sensus communis*: the unequal institutions of the early Roman empire (their «situation») prevented the development of that «social feeling» and «sense of partnership with humankind» without which «public spirit» is unimaginable<sup>9</sup> (50). Shaftesbury specifies that Roman aristocratic «education» failed to offset the shaping power of situation by being «unapt to raise any affection toward a country», encouraging in young courtiers a «thorough contempt» toward others (49). From this, Shaftesbury concludes that «good government» is crucial to the production of citizens who understand themselves as «partners» or «sharers» in the «common affection» (50); he optimistically claims modern Britons, compared to Juvenal's Romans, have inherited «from [their] ancestors» a «better sense of government», one founded on the dual notions of «a public and a constitution» (50), an institutional matrix from which one might find citizens motivated by the social feeling Shaftesbury values.

But the argument takes a negative turn in the second section of Part III, when Shaftesbury acknowledges that the very sociable impulses without which no *sensus communis* can emerge often express themselves with «violence» and cause «much disorder» (52). From the social passions come «love of party and subdivision by cabal» (52), not to mention «factions» and «religious societies» who pursue their narrow «interests [...] with the utmost zeal» (53). These antagonistic forms of «social spirit» are not outliers, Shaftesbury insists – they are the rule: humanity's «associating genius» is most clearly «proved» by the existence of «those very societies which are formed in opposition [both] to the general one [and to] the real interest of the State» (53). Even where the social affections are not inhibited by situation or political institution, they most often manifest themselves in ways that subvert an expansive *sensus communis*.

<sup>8</sup> Shaftesbury makes these remarks with rather obvious application to contemporary European aristocratic and monarchic norms, in the one case, and to contemporary theories and practices of self-interest, in the other.

<sup>9</sup> Textual moments like this bolster Hans-Georg Gadamer's idea that for Shaftesbury the *sensus communis* is less an inherent natural trait – Juvenal sees it almost nowhere – than a social virtue that requires cultivation; for fuller discussion, see H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. ed. by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Continuum, New York 1999, pp. 24–27.

Education emerges as a potential antidote to this «misguidance of the affection» (52). Shaftesbury laments that the public interest suffers from its scalar incomprehensibility: «[u]niversal good», he explains, is such a «remote philosophical object» that the interest of the «greater community falls not easily under the eye»; it is therefore in «more contracted» groups that we can more easily «taste society and enjoy the common good» (52). To keep this natural «combining principle» from expressing itself destructively in «conspiracy» and «sedition», Shaftesbury argues, we need to create mechanisms through which it can be more «happily directed by right reason» toward the interest of «the body politic at large» (52). But where are we to find such reforming social institutions? Shaftesbury looks neither to philosophy nor to the universities for help. Quoting Hobbes and Rochester, Shaftesbury bemoans skeptics who explain «all the social passions and natural affections» as «cunning» and «more deliberate» forms of a universal «selfishness» (55). Among the ancients, Shaftesbury continues, «youth of the highest quality» were sent to philosophers for an education in self-sacrifice and the value of public service (57). Modern universities, by contrast, Shaftesbury deems «not so very effectual to these purposes» (57).

As he concludes his essay, Shaftesbury's «experiment» has yielded promising but equivocal results. On the one hand, he has established the importance of good government to creating an institutional «situation» in which the social affections necessary for public-spirit-edness can develop. On the other, he has acknowledged that the social passions by themselves are not enough to promote the idea of *sensus communis*, since they require strong external direction by right reason to avoid devolving into faction, conspiracy, and sectarian quarrels. Moreover, he has explained that the two contemporary institutions traditionally relied upon to effect the proper guidance of the passions – philosophy and the universities – are not only ill-equipped to serve this purpose but might in fact be making matters worse. In response to this impasse, two things are required: first, a widely shared commitment to deliberative dialogue about these substantive social and moral questions – an agreement, in short, about the possibility of agreement itself; and second, a method that can give effective shape to this consequential dialogue – a method he had begun spelling out in the *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*. It is to this earlier text that we shall now turn, to better understand how these two texts are connected through a shared investment in the rational-critical uses of satirical wit<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> For illuminating accounts of contemporary responses to Shaftesbury's *Letter* that prompted him to write *Sensus Communis*, see especially D. Alvarez, *Reason and Religious Tolerance: Mary Astell's Critique of Shaftesbury*.

## II. QUESTIONS OF EFFECTIVITY: SHAFTESBURY'S METHOD

Shaftesbury's satirical method in the *Letter* applies wit to the problem of violent religious antagonism, with its primary goals imagined as deconstructive and palliative: rather than clarifying the grounds of shared belief<sup>11</sup> – a goal Shaftesbury later implies can never be achieved (472-475) – satirical wit in the *Letter* unmasks false enthusiasm, primarily to calm the passions of a public sphere riven by sectarian conflict. As Christoph Henke has argued, Shaftesbury «provides a rationale to the *ex negativo* truth-seeking that is at the core of both satiric criticism and common sense judgments»<sup>12</sup>. Shaftesbury criticizes his government's approach to the problem of excessive religious zeal: both its attempt «to regulate [...] religious beliefs» by requiring Anglican «uniformity» (11), and its censoring of the «freedom of raillery [...] against serious extravagances» in religious discourse (12). Against this, Shaftesbury recommends the «ancient policy» according to which «visionaries and enthusiasts of all kinds were tolerated», while philosophers were «allowed to use all the force of wit and raillery against [them]» (11). In short, the proper way to «treat this distemper» of zeal, from Shaftesbury's perspective, is to allow both freedom of religious belief and freedom of satiric ridicule (12). In the *Letter*, the «test of ridicule» deflates what Shaftesbury considers risible forms of religious discourse – those characterized by unwarranted «gravity» (8), «melancholy» (9), or even «panic» (10) – serving both an epistemological purpose (correcting unfounded beliefs and inauthentic zeal), and the cathartic social aim of allowing wits and enthusiasts to «vent» their pent-up passions (9), rather than imposing a fear of suppression which would «increase the very cause of the distemper» (10). Satiric conversation prevents its participants from being duped by zealots, without establishing a clear sense of exactly what should be believed, since Shaftesbury idealizes a tolerant religious pluralism rather than a «precise orthodoxy» – especially not one «settled by law» (12). Shaftesbury emphasizes the manner of the conversations' participants more than the content of their thoughts: «All I contend for is to think of [religion] in a right humour» (13).

*Sensus Communis* begins by similarly encouraging readers to apply the «edge of ridicule» (29), especially against those «monsters» or «spectres» that «impose on us» by remaining unexamined, hidden away «in some dark corner of our minds» (30). Shaftesbury again insists on conversational wit's powers of critical negation, how it enables us «to question everything» in such a way that allows for «unravelling or refuting any argument» (33). It should come as no surprise, then, that even the most «diverting» of witty conversations produces no consensual agreement about any subject, but rather ends «abruptly» with a «great many fine schemes [...] destroyed», «many grave reasonings overturned», and «total uncertainty» (33). Though it ends inconclusively, Shaftesbury describes such a conversation as «advantageous to reason», because it is through «the habit alone of reasoning» that we will be made into better «reasoner[s]» (33): in this case, the process develops not a series of truth claims but a set of socially beneficial aptitudes and dispositions among its discussants – for whom even a debate culminating in «confusion» ultimately «set[s] the appetite the keener to such conversations» in the future (33). The participants agree on nothing but the importance of meeting again to see if they can agree in another conversation. As we have seen, however, this kind of conversation precipitates a crisis about the very viability of *sensus communis* as a concept. For what the participants cannot finally agree about has nothing to do with any specific subject; it has to do with the possibility of agreement itself.

Shaftesbury takes pains in Parts III and IV of *Sensus Communis* to test whether wit can discover solid consensual ground in ethics and aesthetics. Part II serves as an important turning point here, as Shaftesbury realizes he must get beyond using wit merely as an instrument for critique – as he did in his humorous deflation of Hobbes (see above). He transitions to Part III by highlighting this move: to avoid seeming «ridiculous», he says he will «endeavour to satisfy» his addressee by clarifying «upon what principle [he] differ[s] from a knave», against Hobbes's theory of universal selfishness (48). To do this, Shaftesbury again engages philosophers of the egoistical school, affirming their shared commitment to a substantive moral axiom: «we should all agree», Shaftesbury asserts, «that happiness was to be pursued and in fact was always sought after» (56). But he uses this agreement to reframe the terms of his debate with them: the crucial question is not, as his opponents seem to think, «who loved himself or who not», since we are all aiming at our own happiness, but rather «who loved and served himself the rightest and after the truest manner» (56). In a *tour de force* of witty immanent critique, Shaftesbury

esbury, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 44, 2011, 4, pp. 475-494; and J. Frank, «Besides Our Selves»: An Essay on Enthusiastic Politics and Civil Subjectivity, «Public Culture», 17, 2005, 3, pp. 371-392.

<sup>11</sup> For a reading of Shaftesbury that calls into question laughter's capacity to generate universal consensus, see J. Weinsheimer, *Shaftesbury in Our Time: The Politics of Wit and Humour*, «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 36, 1995, 2, pp. 178-188.

<sup>12</sup> C. Henke, *Common Sense in Early 18<sup>th</sup>-Century British Literature and Culture: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics, 1680-1750*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2014, p. 101.

appropriates for himself his opponents' key concept, redefining it for his own contrary purposes: sounding like Rochester, Shaftesbury claims that «It is the height of wisdom, no doubt, to be rightly selfish», but this can be true only if we understand «honesty», «natural affection», «friendship», and «sociableness» as «intrinsically valuable» to anyone who cares about «self-interest», since a life without these virtues would inevitably be «wretched» (56). Shaftesbury reveals the internal inconsistency of his opponents' position by showing that the selfish system fails by its own standards, as it is incapable of achieving the end it proposes: happiness. Turning the debate on its head, Shaftesbury affirms the principle by which he is not a knave in counterintuitively asserting the self-interest in his conduct: the honest person embodies virtue not by being opposed to selfishness, but by being «rightly selfish» (56). All of this, lest we forget, is according to common sense» (48).

Having constructively applied critical wit to philosophical discourse, Shaftesbury turns to the reform of his own demographic in Part IV, addressing himself to men of «thorough good breeding» and «gentlemen of fashion» (60, 62). Reinforcing the move away from ridicule, Shaftesbury emphasizes that «defending raillery» involves being «sober too in the use of it», engaging in «serious study» of how «to regulate that humour which nature has given us» as a remedy against «vice», «superstition and melancholy delusion»<sup>13</sup> (59). Rather than skeptically «seeking how to raise a laugh from everything», Shaftesbury insists on «seeking in everything what justly may be laughed at» – since whatever is impervious to ridicule might provide the ground for a substantive *sensus communis* (59). Using a subtle form of interpellation, Shaftesbury compliments his gentlemen-readers as if they already were the virtuous men he is encouraging them to become: he describes them as being «incapable of doing a rude or brutal action», and uninfluenced by «prudential rules of self-interest and advantage»; indeed, falling short of this standard would make it «impossible» for them to be considered «truly well-bred» (60). The description's accuracy is belied, of course, by the need for Shaftesbury to address this group as needing reform in the first place, but he acknowledges seeking a light touch with this audience: if it is «the

complaint of our standing reformers» that «they are not heard so well» by witty gentlemen of fashion, the solution must be «to engage the adversary on his own terms» by «ridicul[ing] folly and recommend[ing] wisdom and virtue» through the use of «pleasantry and mirth» (62).

Through their genius and education, Shaftesbury explains such men generally have «a sense of what is naturally graceful and becoming», so that however «irregular» they may be «in their morals», constructive raillery about their follies can help them «discover their inconsistency» and the fact that they «live at variance with themselves»<sup>14</sup> (62). As Karen Valihora points out, the inward gentlemanly congruence that Shaftesbury humorously encourages here actually requires «considerable inward struggle and self-reflection»<sup>15</sup>; indeed, if the graceful and the becoming are categories with both moral and aesthetic implications for Shaftesbury, then «sottishness, avarice, and cowardice» become obvious targets of corrective wit even from the perspective of the gentleman of fashion (60), while virtues like «real bravery» and «generosity» remain untouchable by «ridicule» (59). Later in Part IV, Shaftesbury again takes up the intersection of the moral and the aesthetic by insisting that even «men of pleasure», who seem to favor physical over «philosophical beauty», often «confess» the «charms» of the latter when rallied about the distinction (64), and routinely prefer pleasures «which arise from a generous behavior, a regularity of conduct and a consistency of life and manners» (65). By the end of his essay, Shaftesbury has brought the method of wit full circle, from its critical function against imposture in the *Letter*, through the skeptical uncertainty about the possibility of agreement with which he closes Part I, to the positive clearing of some ground for *sensus communis*.

### III. CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY: SHAFTESBURY'S INTERLOCUTORS

For readers making their way through *Characteristics*, however, some doubts around this crucial concept remain unresolved as we move toward the end of Volume I. Increasing certainty about the shared ground of moral and aesthetic judgment has required Shaftesbury's method to become less inclusive, retrenching the

<sup>13</sup> For more on Stoic influences on Shaftesbury's satiric mode, see R.B. Wolf, *Shaftesbury's Just Measure of Irony*, «Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900», 33, 1993, 3, pp. 565-585; for a general treatment of Stoicism in Shaftesbury, see L.P. Agnew, *Outward, Visible Propriety: Stoic Philosophy and Eighteenth-Century British Rhetorics*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia 2008, pp. 55-69; and for an account of laughter as key to Shaftesburian social reform, see P. Müller, *Ridentem dicere verum quid vetat: Shaftesbury, Horatian Satire, and the Cultural (Ab)uses of Laughter*, «XVII-XVIII», 70, 2013, pp. 47-71.

<sup>14</sup> Shaftesbury may be anticipating Simon Critchley's notion that conversational humor can function as a kind of «everyday anamnesis» that, in this case, reminds aristocratic men of moral and aesthetic standards of which they are already aware; for more, see S. Critchley, *On Humour*, Routledge, New York 2002, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> K. Valihora, *Austen's Oughts: Judgment after Locke and Shaftesbury*, University of Delaware Press, Newark 2010, p. 35.

sphere of wit's public effectivity and altering the conversational structure of the process by which we arrive at shared truth. In the *Letter*, for example, Shaftesbury engages the English public at large regarding matters of religious expression and satirical critique, only to conclude that no universal agreement is possible in matters of belief. The first part of *Sensus Communis*, by contrast, moves from analyzing broad public discourse to focusing on (and defending the liberty of) much more delimited conversations, those carried out by «the Club» or small groups of «gentlemen and friends who know one another perfectly well» (36). At least initially, though, even these conversations end in skeptical uncertainty, questioning the possibility of agreement itself, though they do enact a shared commitment to ongoing dialogue. It is only in Parts II through IV, when Shaftesbury takes a more monologic approach – addressing himself to the single (silent) interlocutor for whom the essay is written – that he uses wit and raillery to uncover universal standards of conduct and judgment<sup>16</sup>; here, still, the discursive communities involved in Shaftesbury's potential *sensus communis* are relatively small – the coterie of philosophers (and readers) interested in debates about selfishness (Part III), and wayward gentlemen of fashion who need to bring their conduct in line with their principles (Part IV).

To these problems, Shaftesbury closes out his first volume by presenting readers with *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author* as a paradoxical antidote. On the one hand, Shaftesbury's *Soliloquy* can be viewed as pulling even further back from the idea of *sensus communis*: he recommends readers retreat within themselves to correct their excesses as «self-examiner[s]» in a «solitary way» (76). On the other hand, Shaftesbury's ultimate goal in having readers «play the critic» on themselves is to make them «more profitable in company» (75, 72) – suggesting that the word «Author» in Shaftesbury's title refers not only to those who formally publish texts, but also to anyone who authorizes or expresses opinions in less formal, more conversational contexts. Indeed, from the *Letter* onwards, Shaftesbury presents self-examination of this kind as a necessary precondition for entering into deliberative discussion. Because it is «not in every disposition that we are capacitated to judge of things», Shaftesbury explains in the *Letter*, «[w]e must beforehand judge of our own temper» by «freely applying» the test of ridicule «to ourselves» (8). It is not until *Soliloquy*

that Shaftesbury spells out how this kind of self-examination should proceed.

As Shaftesbury's title suggests, his therapeutic method for putting ourselves in the proper «disposition» for public discourse involves talking to ourselves in private: he suggests that we «divide ourselves into two parties» (77), with the added implication, as David Marshall observes, that «one becomes an audience to oneself playing two different parts»<sup>17</sup>, as a supervisory manager watching the remedy. On one level, this habit serves as a «method of evacuation» for authors (74), allowing them privately to «give a vent to the loquacious humour» (73), to «discharge» in advance any «froth and scum» they should not present to the public in their writing (74). But self-discoursing ultimately can achieve much more profound purposes of self-reform. The «distinct persons» into whom we divide ourselves, after all, represent opposing elements in our psyche – nor does Shaftesbury depict this internal heterogeneity in the same way across his several attempts to exemplify it: the model itself is characterized by the multiplicity it enacts. In the third and most complicated model, Shaftesbury explains how the «dramatic method» of Socratic dialogues provides readers a «mirror» for understanding opposed forces within themselves: on the one hand, the «commanding genius» or «leader and chief» (patterned after Socrates), and on the other, «that rude, undisciplined and headstrong creature» whom we resemble «in our natural capacity» (88). Shaftesbury connects this model explicitly to his theory of *sensus communis*: the self-reflection induced by such philosophical texts, when we become «accustomed to the practice», helps us «acquire a peculiar speculative habit» that imitates the «refined raillery» Socrates applied to all subjects (87). In the best-case scenario, then, soliloquy resolves our internal discord by personifying contrasting elements of the psyche who allegorically reach an accord with one another by enacting the witty conversational protocols discussed in Shaftesbury's earlier texts. Shaftesbury tellingly describes the desired goal: to «make us agree with ourselves» (77).

The feasibility of this outcome, then, has significant implications for Shaftesbury's broader theorization of *sensus communis*: if we cannot agree with ourselves, then it becomes difficult to imagine how we will possi-

<sup>16</sup> For a sharp analysis of Shaftesbury's tendencies toward monologue in lieu of real conversation, see R. Markley, *Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue*, in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. by F. Nussbaum and L. Brown, Methuen, New York 1987, pp. 210-230.

<sup>17</sup> D. Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, p. 37. For a compelling account of how, in Shaftesbury's text, only «this act of fiction or division» can enable «anything like a "self" [to] separate itself out from the world», see V. Soni, *How to Hit Pause: Language, Transcendence, and the Capacity for Judgment in Shaftesbury's "Soliloquy; or Advice to an Author"*, in *Judgment and Action: Fragments toward a History*, ed. by V. Soni and T. Pfau, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2018, p. 9.

bly be able to reach agreement with others. Shaftesbury's rhetorical strategies in describing how soliloquy should work betray serious anxiety about this problem. By framing therapeutic self-reflection as initiated by the act of dividing ourselves into the antagonistic participants of our inner dialogue, Shaftesbury gives readers agency over the process, implying that we bring our internal fragmentation into being as a matter of conscious and instrumental intent. But what if the disagreeing forces within our psyche are ontologically prior to our reflection upon them, as the universal applicability of Shaftesbury's method would seem to suggest? Soliloquizing doesn't initiate a process so much as it makes us momentarily aware of conflicts within ourselves that are always already going on, regardless/because of our desires to the contrary. Solitary reflection helps us to notice this inner multiplicity, and perhaps to give conceptual shape to (our understanding of) it through figures of personification and allegory – and there is undoubtedly a kind of agency in this process. Whether it can predictably enable us to agree with ourselves through the development of «will» and «resolution», however, is another matter (84). Rational inner concord of this kind, Shaftesbury admits, «will be thought a miracle» by anyone «who well considers the nature of mankind» (84).

Perhaps this explains the marked lack of resolution in Shaftesbury's narratives about how the soliloquizing process is likely to unfold. Shaftesbury remarks that though we «might think there was nothing easier for us than to know our own minds» (77), it is actually the «hardest thing in the world» (78), and especially difficult for gentlemen like himself, men of privilege and power habitually insulated from criticism. He imagines that a typical gentleman's internal dialogue might unfold around a fundamental moral question: «am I really honest and of some worth» as «I appear outwardly to the world», or «do I only make a fair show and am intrinsically no better than a rascal» driven amorally by «my interest» (78)? Shaftesbury describes the gentleman's encounter with himself, even in private, as ultimately «insupportable», particularly since the «chief interest» of a gentleman's vices is to «prevent this interview» with himself and «evade our proving method of soliloquy» (79). The very moral failings soliloquy might correct threaten to make soliloquy impossible before it has even started.

After some optimistic discussion about the possibility of self-knowledge and internal congruence, near the end of *Soliloquy* Shaftesbury offers a frank reckoning of the insurmountable difficulties his method is likely to encounter, comparing critical self-discipline to the labor of Sisyphus: «as long as we have appetites and sense», Shaftesbury admits, the addressing of our internal con-

flicts is «a business which can never stand still» (144). In fact, Shaftesbury locates reflective subjectivity not in the resolution of inner discord but in its necessarily endless management: the «disagreement» between faculties, he says, «makes me my own» (145). In this formulation, Shaftesbury represents unresolvable internal discord as the preferable/only alternative to «Fancy» having unopposed command of the psyche (145). As Shaftesbury succinctly puts it, «Either I work upon my fancies or they on me» (144): regardless of which side is winning at any given moment, the «work» by which the reflective self is defined is both inevitable and infinite. «There can be no truce, no suspension of arms» in Shaftesbury's method (144).

The unsettling martial analogy returns with a vengeance in the final section of *Soliloquy*, where Shaftesbury powerfully clarifies both sides of the tension we have been examining. On the one hand, Shaftesbury asserts (as in the *Inquiry*) that there is «in the very nature of things» the basis of a *sensus communis* in ethics and aesthetics toward which we should all orient ourselves: «the foundation of a right and wrong taste, as well in respect of inward characters and features as of outward person, behaviour and action» (150). But Shaftesbury can speak of our approach to this standard only in conditional terms: if only we «could [...] convince ourselves» of that which is «in itself so evident», Shaftesbury laments (150). Shaftesbury explains that to aspire to this standard would require that we have «fought hard» against «custom and fashion», «powerful» forces keeping us from seeing the obvious (158). Returning to allegory, Shaftesbury describes this inner «conflict» as a potentially unending form of imperial warfare. He advises the reader to «set afoot the powerfulest faculties of his mind» and to «assemble the best forces of his wit and judgment», in order «to make a formal descent on the territories of the heart, resolving to decline no combat nor hearken to any terms till he had pierced into its inmost provinces and reached for the seat of empire»<sup>18</sup> (158). All of this we should undertake with no real confidence of victory, but only the modest hope «to gain at least some tolerable insight into [ourselves]» (158). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Shaftesbury closes Volume I with an emphasis on reforming *how* his readers might engage with others in the search for *sensus communis*, rather than on the content that might define

<sup>18</sup> For a lucid analysis of Shaftesbury through the lens of colonialism and its aftermath impacting enlightenment conceptualizations of the *communis*, see R. Khanna, *Technologies of Belonging: Sensus Communis, Disidentification*, in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. by B. Hinderliter et al., Duke University Press, Durham 2009, pp. 111-118.

that term: through the soliloquizing process, we might become «less conceited» and engage others in «modesty, condescension, and just humanity», as we offer the kind of «friendly counsel and admonition» that we would just as gladly «receive» ourselves (162).

#### IV. CODA: SHAFTESBURY'S FUTURES

It would take another essay to analyze the fortunes of Shaftesbury's *sensus communis* in the remaining volumes of *Characteristics*, but a look at the subsequent texts' formal structures suggests that the difficulties we have remarked remain unresolved, perhaps by design. Throughout his work, Shaftesbury encourages in his readers a shared disposition toward arriving at universal regulative norms of judgment and behavior, even if such norms are difficult if not impossible to achieve – in our own minds, let alone among others in conversation or in the broader public sphere. Volume II of *Characteristics* begins with the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, Shaftesbury's confidently declamatory text about the natural basis of universal criteria for judgment. One might read this textual ordering as a sign that Shaftesbury meant to offset the skeptical inconclusiveness of Volume I by juxtaposing it with a clearer statement of system. Lawrence Klein has lamented this strain in interpretations of Shaftesbury – how the *Inquiry* is «often taken as the key work»<sup>19</sup> – when Shaftesbury later became deeply dissatisfied with that text's monologic method, which he could only describe as «hostile to politeness: formal, grave, methodical, dry, rigid»<sup>20</sup>.

As Klein points out, in Volume II Shaftesbury paired the *Inquiry* with a genre-defying philosophical dialogue called *The Moralists*, a text which «aspired to conversation at the highest level»<sup>21</sup>. Michael Prince notes that *The Moralists* «has generally been read as the narrative of a skeptic's conversion to theism»<sup>22</sup>, as the witty libertine Philocles seems to concede victory to Theocles, a rhapsodic defender of natural religion. By contrast, Prince convincingly shows that there is no such «easy conversion» or «unity of viewpoints» achieved in the text's concluding moments<sup>23</sup>; rather, Prince views *The Moralists* as offering readers a «performative experi-

ence whereby contradictory modes of interpretation» are «held simultaneously» without being «synthesized»<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, the principle of unresolved heterogeneity gets further elaborated in the final volume of *Characteristics*, which is comprised of *Miscellaneous Reflections* narrated by a voice distinct from (and often critical of) the authorial personae of the first two volumes. On the one hand, this increasing fragmentation threatens to hyperbolize the constitutive self-disagreement theorized in *Soliloquy*. As the collection moves from monologue (the *Inquiry*), to a dialogue that may well represent as opposing characters contrasting tendencies within Shaftesbury's own philosophy (*The Moralists*), to a meta-commentary in which the persona often impersonates the voices of the previous texts (the *Miscellaneous Reflections*), the notion of a coherent model of subjectivity starts to become untenable; as David Marshall notes of the *Miscellaneous Reflections*, «the boundaries which keep one character from becoming another» – boundaries which might guarantee the integrity of the self – «seem destined to become blurred»<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, we might view this staged disagreement between texts as evidence, in Kevin Cope's words, that «Shaftesbury presents his essays not as an achieved goal or completed product but as a drawing toward something»<sup>26</sup> – a project he invites readers outside the text «to continue, revise, or complete»<sup>27</sup>. Klein reinforces this idea by claiming that when readers arrive at the *Miscellaneous Reflections*, we are «reminded by the text itself of the open-ended quality of intellectual debate»<sup>28</sup>.

Or, as this essay has argued, perhaps we are confronted with both of these overlapping possibilities at once: Shaftesbury's work foregrounds the extent to which both shared arrival at *sensus communis* through deliberative discussion, and our individual efforts at fashioning congruent selves that might enter into such a conversation, should be understood as processes that cannot be completed – even as he insists, simultaneously, on the value of orienting ourselves toward these goals as regulative ideals which themselves should be subject to ongoing debate and redefinition. As the heterogeneous texts of *Characteristics* suggest, Shaftesbury spent

<sup>19</sup> L.E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness: Moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> M. Prince, *Philosophical dialogue in the British Enlightenment: Theology, aesthetics, and the novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, p. 69. For an incisive discussion of how *The Moralists* poses the difficulty of imagining an unbiased perspective, see Valihora, *Austen's Oughts*, pp. 106-107; and for a persuasive account of *The Moralists* as in skeptical tension with the *Inquiry*, see N. Yousef, *Feeling for Philosophy: Shaftesbury and the Limits of Sentimental Certainty*, «English Literary History», 78, 2011, 3, pp. 609-632.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall, *Figure*, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> K. Cope, *A rhapsody on disagreement: The Shaftesburian essay and the incorporation of literary strife*, «Prose Studies», 12, 1989, 3, p. 210.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 212.

<sup>28</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury*, p. 113.

his career theorizing and producing discursive forms through which a *sensus communis* might be articulated, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that his various interlocutors and soliloquizers never quite manage to do so. *Sensus communis* functions as a conceptual horizon toward which their conversations are oriented, but as the metaphor of the horizon implies, they never arrive at this ever-receding destination, even if it is the heuristic fiction that makes concerted intellectual activity meaningful (or even possible).

To the extent that he leaves us with an unresolved heterogeneity of perspectives, perhaps Shaftesbury in his historical moment anticipated what the *MLN* special-issue editors describe as a «dissatisfaction with the lack of commonality in reaction to the various ways in which particularities are foregrounded» in current critical discourse<sup>29</sup>; after all, his texts try to model discursive spaces within which pluralistic dissensus or skeptical uncertainty can be expressed, even if we do not accept the natural ground of universalizable judgment which, in his more idealistic formulations, organized Shaftesbury's ethical and aesthetic philosophies. As we noted earlier, however, Shaftesbury's model also suffers from its explicit exclusivity – a homogeneously masculine aristocratic discursive realm, as Timothy Dykstal rightly observes, with «little interest in seeing that the conditions that make its freedom possible are extended to other realms and to other publics»<sup>30</sup>. Given the universalizing goals of Shaftesbury's ethical philosophy – especially his definition of virtue as conducing to the benefit of the entire human society of which we are a part and on which we depend – his model would seem ripe for an immanent critique of the kind Nancy Fraser and others brought to bear on the work of Jürgen Habermas. As has proven to be the case with Habermas, however, whether the critical continuation of Shaftesbury's project seems like a viable or desirable pursuit in the present remains an open question – one about which even our disagreement might constitute us as a community.

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<sup>29</sup> Frey, Martyn and Tobias, *Introduction*, p. 359. For a discussion of how the concept of community in eighteenth-century studies can be viewed as «both politically fraught and not easily forsaken», see L. Cole, «The Contradictions of 'Community': Elegy or Manifesto?», «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 36, 1995, 3, p. 200.

<sup>30</sup> T. Dykstal, *The Luxury of Skepticism: Politics, Philosophy, and Dialogue in the English Public Sphere, 1660-1740*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 2001, p. 104. It is worth noting that the aristocratic men in Shaftesbury's homosocial community come in for some heavy criticism in *Characteristics*, particularly for their inexcusable moral failings (*Sensus Communis*, Part Four) and their deep resistance to self-reflection (*Soliloquy*, Part One). Shaftesbury in no way idealizes the actually existing members of the exclusive gentlemanly club.