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HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



ANTHONY ASHLEY COOPER,  
THIRD EARL OF SHAFTESBURY

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Manners, Opinions, Times*

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EDITED BY  
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Since the third Earl of Shaftesbury assumed a classically educated readership, *Characteristics* was laced with quotations in the original Greek and Latin. The translations provided here are the work of my colleague and friend, A. J. E. Bell. His participation in this project was an act of collegiality and friendship far beyond the call of duty: *quis nunc diligitur nisi conscius?*

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## Introduction

In 1711, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), brought out an anthology of his previously published works. He had revised them and supplemented them with new writing, and he called the collection *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. In its optimistic assessment of an orderly cosmos, confidence in human sociability and fellow feeling, harmonization of ethical and aesthetic experience, emphases on liberty and toleration, and commitment to the role of philosophy in educating humanity, *Characteristics* found readers throughout the eighteenth century, in Britain and on the Continent.

Shaftesbury did not explain why he chose the particular title he gave to the collection, but the title does convey the fact that the work was diverse in its contents and, also, often concrete and topical in approach. It is hardly surprising that *Characteristics* has been of interest to a wide range of modern scholars. The text has been read to illuminate the histories of religion and irreligion, ethics and aesthetics, political discourse, painting, architecture, gardening, literature, scholarship and, most recently, gender – not to mention such big themes in the interpretation of the eighteenth century as the civilizing process, the Enlightenment, the public sphere and sensibility. *Characteristics* is indeed a fundamental work for understanding the intellectual and cultural aspirations and achievements of the eighteenth century (and, in some respects, of a period extending deep into the nineteenth century).<sup>1</sup>

Though the title may suggest a project almost sociological in nature, Shaftesbury certainly regarded it as a work of philosophy. We should take this claim seriously, although much of the work differed from the dominant style of philosophical discourse in its own era and in the philosophical tradition ever

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Burrow in *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) presents ‘the concept of politeness’, developed in the post-1688 decades by the writers including Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, as ‘the distinctively modern form of virtue’, persuasive in Whig thinking through the 1870s.

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since. This introduction aims to explain, in the first place, what Shaftesbury meant by philosophy and how he tended to conflate philosophical with cultural and political reflection. His interpretation of the identity of philosophy helps, in turn, to explain why the book is so miscellaneous, both in its content and its form. Finally, because *Characteristics* is so miscellaneous, the introduction lays out the most important frames of reference through which Shaftesbury grasped the world.

### The worldliness of philosophy

At the heart of *Characteristics* was the philosophical dialogue, ‘The Moralists’, which opened with a character bemoaning the current condition of philosophy. ‘She is no longer active in the world nor can hardly, with any advantage, be brought upon the public stage. We have immured her, poor lady, in colleges and cells and have set her servilely to such works as those in the mines’ (p. 232). We can be confident that this character voiced Shaftesbury’s own opinion on the subject. His work aimed at nothing other than returning philosophy to the world, an aspiration that explains both the work’s themes and its design.

What did philosophical worldliness mean? Most important, Shaftesbury thought that philosophy should make people effective participants in the world. It was a practical enterprise and, given the disabilities from which humans generally suffered, often a therapeutic one. Philosophy was neither an intellectual discipline for specialists nor a profession, according to Shaftesbury, but a wisdom that had to touch each thoughtful individual: ‘If philosophy be, as we take it, the study of happiness, must not everyone, in some manner or other, either skilfully or unskilfully philosophize?’ (p. 336).

This practical activity embraced the pursuit of moral self-knowledge and the process of moral self-transformation. Self-consciously seeking to re-animate a Socratic project, Shaftesbury repeatedly invoked the imperative to know oneself. At the same time, he was original in conceiving the pursuit of self-knowledge as a procedure of inner conversation. He elaborated extensively on the technique of talking to oneself, but he also used dialogic patterns throughout *Characteristics* to illustrate and underpin his point.

Self-knowledge through inner conversation was not an end in itself; rather, it helped the individual to refashion the self on a moral pattern. Shaftesbury emphasized the ‘workmanship’ that went into being a moral agent, the ‘improvement’ to which the self should aspire, and the creative energy required for the self to be its own ‘author’ (pp. 117, 332, 151): this emphasis on self-fashioning was one of many ways in which Shaftesbury’s aesthetic propensities contributed to his moralism. Though the technique of self-fashioning might demand episodes of withdrawal and solitary ascetic discipline, the point was



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always to re-enter the world in a morally effective way, just as the moralists at the very end of the philosophical dialogue of that title, having acknowledged the cosmic framework of human endeavour, returned 'to the common affairs of life'.

Philosophical worldliness had another important value for Shaftesbury. He assumed that philosophy was embedded in history and culture – a position he adopted for several reasons. First, he believed that the Western philosophical tradition at its best insisted on the imperative of self-knowledge and self-transformation. He also believed that humans were naturally sociable and thus always already participants in processes of civilization. In addition, he believed that the development of moral sensibility was inextricably linked with that of aesthetic sensibility. Thus, while the core of Shaftesburian philosophy was a moral imperative of self-knowledge and character formation, Shaftesbury was really propagating a *paideia*, a programme of intellectual and aesthetic as well as ethical cultivation. This explains the proximity in his writing of philosophy and 'politeness', a contemporary expression for moral and cultural refinement: 'To philosophize, in a just signification, is but to carry good breeding a step higher', he wrote (p. 407). Shaftesbury's commitment to this broad programme of training also explains why so much of the material in *Characteristics* was historical and cultural commentary rather than strictly philosophical argumentation.

Finally, philosophical worldliness had a political resonance since Shaftesbury linked his *paideia* to a political programme. The contours of his moral thinking and his cultural sensibility fitted political preferences and priorities that were very much of his immediate world. In ways discussed below, Shaftesbury was a partisan in a world divided by parties. However, philosophical worldliness had a political significance beyond partisan allegiance: to be philosophical, for Shaftesbury, was to understand and orient oneself toward 'the public'.

Shaftesbury lived during events that allowed him to reconsider the status of monarchs, and, though his perspective was always aristocratic, he used resources within the ancient and English traditions to conceive what might take the place of the political culture of kings, courts and courtiers. Like other Europeans of the eighteenth century who were attempting to imagine a world without royal and ecclesiastical authoritarianism, Shaftesbury developed norms for conduct, conversation and limited conflict that could accommodate both liberty and order, both individual actualization and social responsibility. Perhaps his most important, and neglected, contribution to European reflection was his vision of civil society. Shaftesbury's moralism aimed to cultivate political subjectivities appropriate to civil society while his cultural commentary demonstrated the opportunities and pathologies that emerged from the complex relationship among manners, culture and power.

Though later thinkers tended to distinguish the spheres of ethics, culture and politics, Shaftesbury assumed their mutual inextricability. To insist on the

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worldliness of philosophy was to claim that philosophy had to be, all at once, oriented toward ethical practice, immersed in human history and culture, and committed to a political programme. As his writing conflated ethical, cultural and political matters, so his own persona conflated those of philosopher, poet and ideologist.<sup>2</sup>

## The idiosyncrasies of the text

Shaftesbury's ambition for worldliness helps to explain the unusual form his philosophical writing took. *Characteristics* has never been an easy text for readers to get a grasp of, and philosophical commentators have often remarked on its intractability. It is, to be sure, long, somewhere in length between Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and the Baron de Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*: eighteenth-century editions appeared in three hefty volumes. More important, *Characteristics* is composite, both in its contents and in its form: it has ten component parts; these components explore a wide range of subject matters; and they are in different genres and styles.

This composite quality may suggest that *Characteristics* is not a work of any particular integrity. Nor is it surprising that scholars have often approached *Characteristics* in a selective manner. Philosophers, in particular, finding so much in the text that they do not recognize as philosophy, have known Shaftesbury primarily through extracts of *Characteristics*, often identified as the 'genuinely philosophical' parts, in anthologies devoted to 'the British moralists'.<sup>3</sup>

In part, this composite quality of *Characteristics* is explained by the circumstances of its production. It was not written as a whole but was in fact an anthology, representing, more or less, the complete works of Shaftesbury, gathered together and supplemented with new material. Although the idea for such an anthology came to him late, Shaftesbury had been working on its contents for most of his short adult life.

He began in the 1690s, drafting *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, which was first published in 1699. The *Inquiry* argued that goodness and virtue had real foundations in the nature of the human self and in its relations to a morally designed universe and that virtue was its own reward since its practice conduced to human happiness. The *Inquiry* advocated natural human sociability, as against theories of egoism, and a scheme of ethical value independent of religious institutions and teachings.

<sup>2</sup> This formulation is inspired by Douglas J. Den Uyl, 'Shaftesbury and the Modern Problem of Virtue', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998): 275–316.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed., *British Moralists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897); D. H. Monro, *A Guide to British Moralists* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1972); and J. B. Schneewind, *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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This work was formal philosophy, demonstrative in its aspiration to argue some of Shaftesbury's most important ethical convictions. However, when he included a revised version of this treatise in *Characteristics*, he repeatedly distanced himself from its form, though not its substance. The other components of *Characteristics* forthrightly presented themselves as alternative and less formal approaches to knowledge. In the decade that intervened between the initial publication of the *Inquiry* and its inclusion in *Characteristics*, it appears that Shaftesbury decided to shift the rhetorical grounds on which philosophy needed to fight its battles.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, he moved toward the more self-consciously literary form of the highly wrought philosophical dialogue, *The Moralists*, drafted in the early 1700s but published in much revised form in 1709.<sup>5</sup> *The Moralists* was a complex account of a number of conversations narrated by one of the participants. These conversations delineated Shaftesbury's notion of the worldly aims of modern philosophy while illustrating its dialogic practice. The principal substantive tasks of the work, however, were to fend off sceptical attacks on Shaftesbury's ethical realism while underpinning it with an aesthetic foundation. *The Moralists* argued the inseparability of ethical truth and aesthetic beauty. While this allowed Shaftesbury to develop a theistic cosmic vision of harmonious aesthetic and ethical order, it also provided a cosmic foundation for his more quotidian concerns with bodily comportments, discursive practices and aesthetic tastes.

On the other hand, Shaftesbury moved toward apparently more spontaneous, digressive, though no less self-conscious, forms of writing. The first of these was *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708) (about which more will be said below). Stimulated by the appearance in London of a group of prophetically inspired Christians, the *Letter* both ridiculed religious delusion and recuperated imagination and feeling as fundamental to human experience. Shaftesbury's proposal that the most efficient means to disarm dangerously deluded people was good humour and tolerance, rather than shrill polemics and publicly orchestrated persecutions, made the *Letter* itself an object of critical comment.

<sup>4</sup> The *Inquiry* itself underwent serious revision between the 1699 edition and the first edition of *Characteristics*. The two versions can now be read, side by side, in the Shaftesbury Standard Edition, Volume II, Part 2. See Further reading. See also David Walford's edition of the *Inquiry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> An early version of the dialogue was printed privately as *The Social Enthusiast* in 1704. *The Social Enthusiast* and 'The Moralists', as it appeared in the first edition of *Characteristics*, are printed on facing pages in the Shaftesbury Standard Edition, Volume II, Part 1. See Further reading. The complex evolution of this work is told in Horst Meyer, *Limae Labor: Untersuchungen zur Textgenese und Druckgeschichte von Shaftesburys 'The Moralists'* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1978). The work is interpreted brilliantly in Michael Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 23–73.

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In response to several pamphlets attacking the *Letter*, Shaftesbury wrote *Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709).<sup>6</sup> Here Shaftesbury's defence of good humour, tolerance and the benefits of open discussion led him to present conversation in a free society as the basis for moral and cultural improvement, or politeness. However, he went further, arguing that the premise for all such improvement was the possibility of human virtue, which he grounded in natural human sociability, the *sensus communis* or the sense of the common, to which he sought to provide a rich moral and civic definition.

At about the same time, Shaftesbury was writing *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*, which first appeared in 1710. As the main title indicated, this essay took up the conversational theme, already suggested in the *Letter* and enunciated in *Sensus Communis*, and redirected it. *Soliloquy* asserted the necessity of self-discourse in constituting moral subjectivity. In particular, however, authors, who should be the ethical moulders of a civilization, were in need of self-knowledge and self-discourse. This argument was supplemented with assessments of the roles of the social and political elite, of critics and, finally, of the people at large in the formation of a culture. We find here an elaborate and complex discussion of the dynamics and politics of culture, in which the themes of conversation, philosophy and liberty were interwoven.

It is hard to specify precisely when Shaftesbury decided to combine his several published writings into a collection. However, clearly it was not later than 1710 since *Characteristics* appeared in the spring of 1711. Its first volume comprised *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, *Sensus Communis* and *Soliloquy*, each of which was modestly revised for its new appearance. The second volume of *Characteristics* contained *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* in a considerably revised form and *The Moralists*. For the third volume, Shaftesbury wrote a new set of pieces, five highly discursive, even rambling, essays. In these 'Miscellaneous Reflections on the Preceding Treatises and Other Critical Subjects' (as they were identified on the title page of the third volume), Shaftesbury adopted the remarkable trope of assuming the voice of a commentator on the contents of *Characteristics*. The miscellanies of the third volume allowed Shaftesbury to bring some coherence to this assemblage: the five components of 'Miscellaneous Reflections' corresponded roughly to the first five treatises and provided a unifying gloss. Shaftesbury also took advantage of the opportunity offered by his anthology to knit the various pieces together

<sup>6</sup> The pamphlets were: Mary Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair: Or an Enquiry after Wit* (1709), Edward Fowler, *Reflections upon A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, to Lord \*\*\** (1709), and *Remarks upon the Letter Concerning Enthusiasm. In a Letter to a Gentleman* (1708). Both the 'Letter' and 'Sensus Communis' are helpfully presented in Richard B. Wolf, *An Old-Spelling Critical Edition of Shaftesbury's Letter Concerning Enthusiasm and Sensus Communis* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988).

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with hundreds of cross-referencing footnotes, directing readers to thematic continuities.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is a mistake to exaggerate the unity of *Characteristics*. Indeed, to proffer thematic summaries of the component treatises (in the manner just performed) goes against the grain of the text and violates the tone and style of much of the writing. Shaftesbury took great care to give *Characteristics* play, both in the sense of humour and playfulness and also in the sense of variety and open-endedness. Humour, playfulness, variety, open-endedness – these were Shaftesburian values, formal expressions of his aspiration to worldliness. It is important to understand how this worldly style served both rhetorical and cognitive purposes in *Characteristics*.

Shaftesbury's readership was gentlemanly. (In Shaftesbury's case, the gender bias of this expression is accurate since he was consistently dismissive of women as participants in civil society.) He wrote for members of the English upper orders, wealthy men who were probably but not necessarily landed, literate men who were educated but not necessarily learned. He wrote, in short, for men of the world, and humour, playfulness, variety and open-endedness recommended themselves as ways to reach them.

In justifying his approach, Shaftesbury constructed a picture of the English gentleman bored and bullied by clerics and academics (frequently the same persons in Shaftesbury's era). He regularly denigrated the clerical and the homiletic, the academic and the pedantic. He regarded sermons and lectures as notably unsuitable vehicles for edification, and often dismissed or ridiculed their characteristic traits: the formal, the systematic, the consistent, the methodical and the abstract. (He blamed the same traits for the sterility of much philosophical writing.) He condemned the style of the pulpit and the classroom as authoritarian or 'magisterial', a word that, in light of its Latin origin, *magister*, combined a reference to the schoolteacher with one to the magistrate. Indeed, *Characteristics* was a collection of rhetorical gambits aiming to represent a discursive practice distinct from that of the lecture or the sermon.

A more 'polite' approach was required. 'Politeness', referring to the conventions of good manners, conveyed the fundamental rhetorical necessity of making concessions to the knowledge, interests and attention spans of an audience. As well, the word 'polite' had a more idiomatic meaning at this time, referring to matters of refined conversation. Shaftesbury invoked the importance of regulating 'style or language by the standard of good company and people of the better sort' (p. 75). Replacing the magisterial with the polite man-

<sup>7</sup> In the second edition, further unity was provided by a set of emblematic engravings, commissioned by Shaftesbury to illustrate the work's main points: see Felix Paknadel, 'Shaftesbury's Illustrations of *Characteristics*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974): 290–312.

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ner implied writing that was more informal, miscellaneous, conversational, open-ended and sceptical.

A philosophy that lectured or a moralism that hectored was in danger of sterility, leaving audiences bored and unmoved. However, it was more than unpersuasive: it posed serious cognitive problems.

For one thing, it violated the goals of philosophy. At the outset of *Soliloquy*, Shaftesbury discussed the art of giving advice in a way relevant to the practice of philosophy. The central quandary of giving advice was that an effort ostensibly devoted to the good of the advisee degenerated so easily into a means to celebrate the adviser or, worse, to establish the dominance of adviser over advisee. The challenge for the adviser, for the philosopher and, indeed, for all who would teach and edify, was how to create and encourage, and not undermine, the autonomy of the subject: philosophy had to create moral agents. (The magisterial approach, by contrast, induced passivity before authority.) The form of *Characteristics* was meant to meet this challenge, to make philosophers of readers and to ensure that, as philosophers, they would be morally intelligent agents in the world.

The magisterial approach also violated the limits of human knowledge, promising more than philosophy could, ought or needed to provide. The discursive practice to which Shaftesbury aspired was often sceptical. Endorsing the sceptical methodology of ancient schools and such moderns as Pierre Bayle,<sup>8</sup> he urged on his readers the open-ended quest for truth and the benefits to be derived from free exchange. Scepticism was an attribute of an active and questing philosophical comportment. At the same time, Shaftesbury's scepticism limited his patience with the technical pursuit of philosophical truth: he lacked confidence that extensive logical analysis produced significant answers. One of the most important grounds on which Shaftesbury rejected the 'cavils of philosophy' in his own time was its quixotic search for analytic precision in domains far from moral concern and, in any case, where precision was far from attainable. Thus, René Descartes was of much less interest to Shaftesbury as a sceptic than as a deluded seeker after certainty.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) was a French Protestant scholar and philosopher who, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, settled in Rotterdam. His most influential publication was the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) in which expository articles on religious, philosophical and historical topics were supplemented by notes and commentaries that challenged received opinions. His scepticism targeted especially Christian orthodoxies. Shaftesbury associated with Bayle during his stays in Rotterdam and left a tribute to him in a letter to John Darby, publisher of *Characteristics*, dated 2 February 1708, Public Record Office (PRO) 30/24/22/4, f.63 (Benjamin Rand, ed., *The Life, Unpublished Letters and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1900) (referred to in this edition's notes as *Rand, Regimen*), pp. 385–6).

<sup>9</sup> The Frenchman René Descartes (1596–1650), famous for his sceptical methodology, was also the inventor of co-ordinate geometry and the central analytic genius of the seventeenth-century revolutions in physics and philosophy.

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However, Shaftesbury was far from being a thorough sceptic. He had a pragmatic side which dismissed the possibility that human feelings and thoughts might not have a relation to a determinate reality. He responded to extreme scepticism with an animal faith in the senses, the feelings and their referents: 'I take my being upon trust' (p. 421). Moreover, he had no doubt about his most important metaphysical and ethical convictions. In *Characteristics*, he toyed with the persona of the dogmatist (p. 395), but he provided a more accurate assessment once in a letter: 'I am but few removes from mere scepticism, and, 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>10</sup>

The principles to which he tenaciously held were the intelligence and order of the cosmos and the reality of human sociability. *Characteristics* was devoted to conveying these principles although they were only occasionally argued on an abstract plane and with analytic rigour. As Shaftesbury put it, 'it is in a manner necessary for one who would usefully philosophize, to have a knowledge in this part of philosophy sufficient to satisfy him that there is no knowledge or wisdom to be learnt from it' (p. 427). Thus, he readily abandoned 'the high road of demonstration' for 'the diverting paths of poetry or humour' (p. 425), where he hoped not only to encounter his gentlemanly reader but guide him on his way. Thus, the text of *Characteristics* moved back and forth between the ancient and the modern worlds and among the topics of morals and customs, politics and culture – 'men, manners, opinions, times'.

## Shaftesbury's frames of reference

*Modern politics*

Shaftesbury was deeply attentive to public affairs during his life, and *Characteristics* testified to this political consciousness.

The memory of civil war and revolution in seventeenth-century Britain haunted Shaftesbury's era and was frequently invoked, especially at moments of political crisis: during the Exclusion movement of the late 1670s and early 1680s, at the Revolution of 1688, and in the partisan contests between Whig and Tory during the reign of Anne. Moreover, Shaftesbury's life was entirely contained within the span of Louis XIV's reign in France. In the English imagination, Louis embodied arbitrary government and the aspiration to universal monarchy. He also kept alive the spirit of persecution that had made possible

<sup>10</sup> See Shaftesbury to 'Tiresias', 29 November 1706, PRO 30/24/22/4, ff. 358–9 (Rand, *Regimen*, pp. 366–9).



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an age of religious wars: as recently as 1685, Louis had revoked the Edict of Nantes, precipitating a flood of Protestant emigration from France.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background, Shaftesbury advocated liberty and constitutional government, which he contrasted with Continental absolutism. He attacked politicized religion and deformations of the religious spirit that menaced the body politic. He urged toleration and rational conversation, softened by good manners and good humour, as models of behaviour for civil society.

His invention of a normative design for modern political culture took off from the Revolution of 1688, the central public event during his life. The Revolution was a new beginning in a number of ways. To be sure, this was a political revolution in the House of Stuart: James II's proclivities toward absolutism and Catholicism inspired the aristocratic coup that replaced him with his Protestant daughter, Mary II, and her Dutch husband, William III. The Revolution brought with it the Toleration Act of 1689, which provided religious freedom, at least for Protestants. It also brought wars with France, lasting most of Shaftesbury's adult life, in which Britain acceded to a greater European role and a more self-consciously imperial identity.

More generally, the post-1688 era was one of growing prosperity, however unevenly distributed, marked by increasing consumption at many levels of society: as convenience and luxury achieved wider circulation in society, so too did 'taste' as an acknowledged capacity in human experience. This consumption fostered a burgeoning culture of print (facilitated by the lapse of censorship laws in 1695) and an elaboration of commercialized urban institutions – coffeehouses, theatres, assemblies, lectures, clubs – which offered expanded opportunities for sociability, cultural expression and political contestation. All told, Shaftesbury's lifetime witnessed an increasing sense of British leadership not just in European politics but also in European culture. Shaftesbury hailed these developments, articulating the ideal of politeness through which British cultural ambitions could be conveyed.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Shaftesbury had significant relations with a number of displaced Protestant intellectuals, aside from Pierre Bayle. These included: Pierre Coste (1668–1747), friend and correspondent of Shaftesbury, who translated much of John Locke's work into French; Pierre Desmaizeaux (1673–1745), who wrote, translated and edited numerous works of contemporary philosophy and scholarship as an intellectual broker in the European Republic of Letters; and Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736), a Genevan polymath, prolific writer on theology, philosophy, criticism and history, and editor of several international periodicals concerning literature and scholarship. The intellectual world of these men, through which Shaftesbury passed, is presented in Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Some basic works on these developments are: Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds., *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989); Jonathan I. Israel, *The Anglo-Dutch Moment: Essays on the Glorious Revolution and its World Impact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,



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Envisioning the shape and norms of civil society was, for Shaftesbury, a deeply partisan project, however, and *Characteristics* cannot be understood without reference to his passionate, though nuanced, Whiggism and his subtle hostility to Toryism. His grandfather, the first Earl, achieved eminence during the Exclusion crisis as leader of the first Whigs, who orchestrated a pre-emptive strike against the future James II by trying to exclude him from the succession. For Tories, who defended the hereditary succession, the name ‘Shaftesbury’ evoked an image of moral and political monstrosity.<sup>13</sup>

The third Earl’s early life was dominated by the famous grandfather, who arranged for him to be tutored by a political ally, the philosopher and Whig ideologist John Locke (see p. xxvii). After the Whig movement collapsed and the first Earl was exiled, Shaftesbury spent several uncomfortable years at Winchester school (a Tory stronghold), followed by more private tutoring and a Grand Tour of the Continent. He was abroad in 1688 but wrote home celebrating ‘our late purges from those promoters of that interest [Tories] that was to have enslaved us to the horridest of all religions [Catholicism] and to the service of the usurpations and treacheries of that neighbouring crown that has aimed so long at the subjection of all Europe [France]’.<sup>14</sup>

After 1688, Whiggism was associated with support for the Revolution and its consequences. Whigs claimed to be the defenders of the English constitution, liberty, Protestantism and toleration. They attacked Bourbon power and argued the case for vigorous warfare against France. These positions are evident in *Characteristics*, where the Revolution of 1688 was depicted as a pivot in British history, preserving and extending liberty in public life by ensuring the rule of law and the balanced constitution of monarch and Parliament.

However, *Characteristics*’ main contribution to Whiggish thinking was analysing the moral and cultural concomitants of politics: it is precisely by articulating for Whiggism a cultural ideology, a politics of manners and culture, that *Characteristics* approaches the status of political discourse. Much of the work was devoted to elaborating the positive connection between liberty and intellectual and cultural achievement, expressed in the proposition that ‘all politeness is owing to liberty’ (p. 31).

Likewise, Shaftesbury expressed his Whiggish suspicion of kings in an elaborate critique of the culture of royal courts. Shaftesbury accepted England’s (and, after the Union with Scotland in 1707, Britain’s) constitutional monarchs and only occasionally aired criticism (at least in print) of the pre-1688 Stuarts,

1991); and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> John Dryden (1631–1700), Poet Laureate from 1670 through the 1688 Revolution, gave this sentiment classic literary formulation in his depiction of the first Earl as Achitophel in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681).

<sup>14</sup> Shaftesbury to the second Earl, 3 May 1689, PRO 30/24/21/229 (Rand, *Regimen*, pp. 275–80).

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but he explicitly attacked Bourbon monarchy. He depicted the moral and cultural turpitude of the French Court where a mixture of thrusting egoism and craven submissiveness undermined any possibility for sociability or autonomy. (He assimilated other contemporary instances, as he saw them, of despotism, whether the sultan's in Turkey, the Mogul's in India, or the Pope's in Rome, to this model of Court culture.)

Shaftesbury's Whiggism also had an ecclesiastical dimension. The Whigs had been identified since their beginnings with the policy of toleration. Shaftesbury accepted the Church of England as a component of the constitution and supported the tolerant Low Churchmanship associated with such Whiggish clerics of the post-1688 period as John Tillotson and Gilbert Burnet. Meanwhile, he condemned the High Church wing of Anglicanism for what he identified as its spirit of bigotry and persecution. The decades of Shaftesbury's maturity saw a revitalization of High Church postures among Tories, encouraged by politicians such as Daniel Finch, second Earl of Nottingham, and clerics such as Francis Atterbury, and symbolized by the great controversy surrounding the sermons of Henry Sacheverell in 1709 and 1710. Against this background, Shaftesbury argued for broad religious and intellectual toleration in the context of a public sphere, a worldly domain of free and open discussion in which exchange and criticism advanced both truth and refinement.

For Shaftesbury as well as many Whigs, the concomitant of tolerationism was Erastianism, the commitment to the subordination of the Church to the State. He strongly disliked pretensions, which he discerned among the High Churchmen, to ecclesiastical independence in the political arena. Thus, he frequently attacked politicized clergymen, lavishing attention on the history of 'priestcraft'. This term had emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century to express alarm that, even among Protestants, clerics were liable to arrogate power in the manner of the Catholic hierarchy, thus undermining moral and political liberty.<sup>15</sup> (This hostility to the High Church fed his hostility to educational institutions, especially the universities, which, in his era, were branches of the established Church. He saw them, accurately, as hotbeds of High Church sentiment.)<sup>16</sup>

In his political and ecclesiastical views, Shaftesbury was the opponent of contemporary Tories, whom he identified with support of the pre-1688 Stuarts, High Church Anglicanism and France. In pursuing this partisan project through an examination of culture, Shaftesbury was highly aware that he was

<sup>15</sup> Mark Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism', in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 209–31.

<sup>16</sup> Given his experience at Winchester School in the 1680s, his hostility to educational institutions also had an autobiographical explanation.

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attempting to reverse the cultural associations of the two political allegiances: the Tories were traditionally conceded an intellectual and cultural precedence, 'their sovereignty in arts and sciences, their presidentship in letters, their Alma Maters and academical virtues' while the Whigs were dismissed as 'poor rival presbyterians . . . unpolite, unformed, without literature or manners'. The burden of *Characteristics* was to demonstrate how the Tories were not just 'corrupters merely of morals and public principles', but also 'the very reverse or antipodes of good breeding, scholarship, behaviour, sense and manners'.<sup>17</sup>

This strong emphasis on the cultural dimensions of Whiggism helps to explain Shaftesbury's relationship with John Baron Somers (1651–1716). Somers had impeccable political credentials: a lawyer, he was sympathetic to the Whigs of the 1670s, active in the events that precipitated James II's deposition, and a dominant figure during the 1690s, when he was a member of the Junto, the clique that led the Whigs in office and Parliament. He rose to be Lord Chancellor, but suffered severe political attack at the end of William III's reign and was out of office for most of Anne's. However, he was also an important patron and intellectual in his own right as well as president of the Royal Society. Shaftesbury addressed his 'Letter Concerning Enthusiasm' to Somers and, indeed, made a point of sending Somers dedicatory letters of respect and devotion along with most of his work, including the three volumes of *Characteristics*, before it was printed.

To claim politeness for the Whigs was a way to attack the Tories, but it also required reworking the Whig inheritance. Though a friend of Somers, Shaftesbury also associated, especially in the 1690s, with a group of younger Whigs critical of the compromises being made by Whig elders, such as Somers, who had moved to the centre of power, the Court, after 1688. These Real or Country Whigs included Robert Molesworth, John Toland, Andrew Fletcher, Walter Moyle, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.<sup>18</sup> Familiar with the writings of James Harrington, Niccolò Machiavelli and, of course, the ancients themselves, their political critique was informed by the tradition of civic humanism: they endorsed liberty, active participation, political virtue and republican institutions and investigated how these themes played themselves out in the political history of the ancient, medieval and modern worlds. Shaftesbury always retained a strong Country suspicion that anyone with power at Court was liable to corruption, substituting self-interest for public good as

<sup>17</sup> Shaftesbury to John Somers, 30 March 1711, PRO 30/24/22/4, ff. 153–66 (Rand, *Regimen*, pp. 430–2).

<sup>18</sup> On this circle, see Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), and A. B. Worden, Introduction to Edmund Ludlow, *A Voyage from the Watch Tower, Part Five: 1660–1662* (Camden Fourth Series, Volume 21, London: Royal Historical Society, 1978). When Shaftesbury served in the Commons of 1695–8, he pursued policies identified with Country Whiggism.

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the basis for action. However, the civic tradition sometimes proposed that the best guarantee of civic virtue was economic and social simplicity: liberty and virtue had been safest, it was proposed, in the conditions of early Rome or of Gothic Europe.<sup>19</sup> Though a proponent of liberty and virtue, Shaftesbury was also an aesthete who favoured cultural sophistication. He therefore elaborated old, even ancient, commonplaces about the positive association of liberty and culture and he looked to cultivation as the best security for virtue.<sup>20</sup>

*Humanistic scholarship*

The European past, and especially the ancient world, provided Shaftesbury with a wealth of models, both positive and negative, for his critical and constructive efforts in conceptualizing the political dimensions of the modern era. Having been taught classics as a young scholar, he extended his command of ancient philosophy, history and literature throughout his life. He added to the library he inherited, avidly collecting editions of the classical texts, especially during sojourns on the Continent in 1698–9 and 1703: he seems, for instance, to have gathered some fifteen editions of the works of Horace.<sup>21</sup>

*Characteristics* was filled with classical citations, used for several purposes. The fact that Shaftesbury translated little of this material suggested the degree of learning he anticipated in his imagined reader. The text itself was ornamented with lines of literature, which he regarded as capable of conveying philosophical insight. He was drawn especially to the Roman satirists, Horace, Juvenal and Persius, who echoed both the urbanity and incisiveness to which he aspired. He also quoted historians, geographers and others, usually in footnotes, to construct pictures of the relevant aspects of the classical past. These included Herodotus, Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, Pausanias and many others. However, he only occasionally cited the ancient writers who were most influential in shaping his philosophical ideas and moral orientation: Plato and Xenophon, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. He barely cited Cicero, with whom he shared many attitudes. Thus, the citations, while significant devices, are not sufficient guides to the sources of his thinking; nor do they illuminate how much Shaftesbury was inspired by the forms of ancient literature (for instance, by *Phaedrus* and other Platonic dialogues in the constructing of ‘The Moralists’).

In mastering the ancient inheritance, Shaftesbury became a connoisseur not just of the classics but of the humanist scholarship that, during the preceding

<sup>19</sup> On the civic humanist tradition, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> On this commonplace in the eighteenth century, see Michael Meehan, *Liberty and Poetics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> A number of library lists survive in the Shaftesbury Papers: PRO 30/24/23/11, 30/24/23/12 and 30/24/27/14.

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several centuries, had produced ever more accurate texts of ancient works and accurate pictures of ancient cultures (including those from which the classics of ancient Judaism and Christianity emanated). He deployed this material throughout *Characteristics*.<sup>22</sup> He cited numerous scholars, important in their day but not readily recognized in ours, including Daniel Heinsius, Isaac and Meric Casaubon, Claude Salmasius, Dionysius Lambinus, Joannes Harduinus, Isaac Vossius and many more. The underlying irony is that Shaftesbury, who so often attacked pedants, antiquarians and others for the inconsequence of their material and the inelegance of their style, was eager to display the scholarly evidence that supported his politically and philosophically inflected history of Western culture. To be a scholar was, in many ways, to be the opposite of a polite gentleman.<sup>23</sup> Yet, *Characteristics* strove for an elegant, gentlemanly and indeed polite form while offering obscure documentation for many of its points. In using footnotes extensively, Shaftesbury showed himself simultaneously playful with scholarly form and compulsive about scholarly erudition.<sup>24</sup>

*Ancient culture*

Shaftesbury's vision of antiquity mirrored the structure of his modern concerns about politics and culture. In Greece and Rome he found a model in which gentlemanly citizens discussed and advanced the good of Man and State while religion was reduced to a perfunctory civic cult. By contrast, ancient Egypt, infested with priests and superstitions, was the source of a pattern bequeathed first to the Hebrews and then, by long lines of filiation, to later Rome and the Catholic Middle Ages.

Within the ancient world, Shaftesbury was attracted most to ancient Greece, which he considered without rival in both politeness and liberty. He honoured the unique and supreme status of Homer, but was intellectually engaged by the political and cultural history of Greece, especially Athens, in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. He traced at length the process of refinement that accompanied the growth and defence of freedom between two encounters with 'universal monarchy', Persia's failed attempt to conquer Greece at the beginning of the fifth century and Macedonia's successful one in the middle of the fourth.

<sup>22</sup> This edition clarifies Shaftesbury's often cryptic references to humanistic scholarship by fleshing out and modernizing his citations.

<sup>23</sup> On this tension, see Steven Shapin, "A Scholar and a Gentleman": The Problematic Identity of the Scientific Practitioner in Early Modern England', *History of Science* 29 (1991): 279–327, and, more extensively, *The Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> On the political and cultural history of footnotes, see Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), which traces the footnote to the environment of Pierre Bayle.

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In this interval, Greece developed not only participatory political institutions but, according to Shaftesbury, a culture based on public exchange and criticism. This public culture was an ingredient of the Greek political achievement since it was the arena in which the common good was determined. However, a public culture also contributed crucially to Greek cultural achievement since critical exchange about language and the arts led to that refinement of critical understanding and practice embodied in their literature and arts. In Aristotle and his successors, Shaftesbury found critical equipment and standards that mark his own discussion of literature and the arts with a strong concern for regularity, decorum and the imitation of nature.

In considering ancient cultures, Shaftesbury was particularly drawn to careers in which gentility, liberal education, philosophical insight and libertarian political commitments were conjoined. Among the Greeks, Xenophon (c. 430–c. 354 BC) was exemplary. He was a follower of Socrates and, after Socrates' fall, a champion of his memory and interpreter of his philosophical enterprise. However, Xenophon was also a defender of liberty and man of action: he joined the unsuccessful expedition of Prince Cyrus against the Persian Emperor and, after defeat, led the Greeks back to their homelands in the perilous journey recorded in Xenophon's own account, *Anabasis* (The expedition upland). Later, it is true, he was exiled from Athens, but the Spartans gave him an estate where for years he led the life of a country gentleman engaged in literary and philosophical pursuits. There he perfected what Shaftesbury called the 'simple' style, joining 'what was deepest and most solid in philosophy with what was easiest and most refined in breeding, and in the character and manner of a gentleman'. Thus, Xenophon united the roles of public servant and virtuous citizen with those of moral philosopher, elegant stylist and thorough gentleman.

Among the Romans, the poet Horace (65 BC–8 BC) most engaged Shaftesbury's attention. Like his contemporary, Virgil, Horace's career straddled the transition from Republic to Empire. Shaftesbury followed other civic humanists in directing attention to this process, in which republican liberty deteriorated, but, here as elsewhere, he was especially concerned to delineate its cultural concomitants. Shaftesbury was vexed by the figures of Octavius and Maecenas. Octavius, Augustus Caesar (63 BC–AD 14), came to dominate the Roman polity after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC: Augustus was the destroyer of the Republic, but also a cultural patron whose support shaped the literature and arts of this great age. Maecenas (about 70 BC–8 BC) was friend, adviser and agent of the Emperor. Though presenting himself as luxurious and idle, the aristocratic Maecenas not only had considerable political acumen, but helped to create an Augustan age by bringing his own literary patronage to bear, especially on behalf of Virgil and Horace.

Virgil (70–19 BC) was, simply, the most celebrated of Augustan writers. Though humble and provincial in origin, he had a literary and philosophical

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education, which ultimately brought him to the attention of Maecenas. He was already a celebrated poet when he began work on the *Aeneid*, his great epic of Roman origins. Augustus took a strong interest in the writing of the *Aeneid*, which, in its patriotic evocation of the glorious Roman past, suggested the glories to be expected in the Augustan era. Shaftesbury, however, preferred to see the epic as the final efflorescence of republican culture.

Among *Characteristics*' numerous citations to writers both ancient and modern, Horace was by far the writer most frequently quoted, his verses providing apt, albeit sometimes dense and allusive, support for Shaftesbury's ideas. The 'best genius and most gentleman-like of Roman poets' (p. 146) was not born to gentility. He achieved it through a first-rate liberal education in Rome, which he furthered in Athens. To this, Horace added republican credentials, joining the army of Marcus Junius Brutus, conspirator against Julius Caesar and foe of Caesar's heirs Antony and Octavius. After Brutus' defeat at Philippi in 42 BC, Horace returned to Rome and, impoverished, he turned to writing poetry. He made the acquaintance of Virgil, which led him ultimately to the patronage of Maecenas. Henceforward, Horace was well connected in the social, political and literary circles of Rome, and he became a defender of Augustus' objectives and regime. He was rewarded with an estate north of Rome, his Sabine farm, which he idealized as a site of country retreat and literary endeavour. In this establishment, Shaftesbury could see Horace's resumption of his early principles and a reaction against the seductions of Court life in favour of independence and simplicity. In his urbanity, good humour and affability, Horace provided an appropriate ancient equivalent of the tone to which Shaftesbury aspired in *Characteristics*.

While granting Augustus credit for his cultural patronage, Shaftesbury condemned Augustus' imperial successors. He considered the reign of Augustus to have introduced an epoch of corruption and tyranny, epitomized in the turpitude of figures such as Nero (AD 37–68, Emperor, AD 54–68)

Precisely because of the enormities ascribed to Nero, Shaftesbury was drawn to interpret another intellectual career, that of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 5 BC–AD 65), Nero's tutor and, after Nero's accession, a minister. From a wealthy and distinguished family, Seneca had a thorough education in rhetoric and philosophy before entering on a career in office. Though a serious and influential philosopher attracted to such stoic themes as tranquillity and providence, he was drawn into the disturbing realities of court politics. He was an accessory to the murder of Nero's mother, Agrippina, and later, accused of conspiring against Nero himself, he was allowed to kill himself. His death illustrated stoic dignity but, for Shaftesbury, his life dramatized the difficulty, as well as the value, of synthesizing worldly action with the philosophical frame of mind.

Like most humanists, Shaftesbury saw the imperial epoch as one of intellectual and cultural decline as well as political tyranny. He did, however, make



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exceptions for two imperial figures: the second-century Marcus Aurelius Antoninus on account of his philosophical writings (see p. xxvi) and the fourth-century Flavius Claudius Julianus (Julian the Apostate) on account of the toleration Shaftesbury discerned in his religious policies (p.375n).

In Shaftesbury's view, Roman decline paved the way for the Middle Ages, but the precedents for what went wrong were deep in the ancient world. *Characteristics* presented a remarkable account of ancient Egypt, where priests dominated both polity and culture by a mutually reinforcing mixture of economic and legal privileges and superstitious beliefs. According to Shaftesbury, they transmitted their priestcraft to the ancient Hebrews whose culture Shaftesbury reconstructed on the basis of both the Old Testament and seventeenth-century Biblical commentaries. In turn, later Roman paganism followed these 'oriental' examples by multiplying the number of religious officials, enhancing their material endowments and so proliferating superstitions – a pattern bequeathed to the Christian Middle Ages when, before expiring entirely, the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Shaftesbury's Middle Ages were characterized by ecclesiastical domination, an absence of liberty, civic consciousness and public debate, and an accompanying lack of refinement in the verbal and visual arts, which Shaftesbury dismissed as 'Gothic'.

*Ancient philosophy*

Though Shaftesbury admired the Greco-Roman world for its political and cultural legacies, he was particularly taken by the status he imagined that philosophy occupied in it. Philosophy, not religion, was the central mode of understanding in classical antiquity. It was worldly, a component of gentlemanly education and a contributor to the public life of democratic and republican polities. Its content was civic and ethical in character.

Socrates loomed large in Shaftesbury's vision of ancient philosophy. Of course, since Socrates left no writings, Shaftesbury was dependent, as all commentators have been, on such sources as Plato's dialogues and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Immersing himself in this material, Shaftesbury planned a large work on Socrates for which his private papers contain an outline and notes.<sup>26</sup> Although Shaftesbury did not finish this work, *Characteristics* has much evidence of his interest in Socrates, who appeared repeatedly as the embodiment of a philosophy dedicated to the quest for self-knowledge and moral wisdom. Moreover, Socrates helped to underpin Shaftesbury's interest in philosophical

<sup>25</sup> See Lawrence E. Klein, 'Shaftesbury, Politeness and the Politics of Religion', in Phillipson and Skinner, eds., *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, pp. 283–301.

<sup>26</sup> On this project, see Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 107–11.



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worldliness since Socrates carried out his quest in public through a process of public conversation in the midst of the city-state.

Socrates, thus, provided a model for the project of philosophy as conceived by Shaftesbury. Indeed, *Characteristics* went so far as to trace the variety of ancient philosophy to Socratic origins. Platonism, Aristotelianism and cynicism were represented as stylistic or formal variations on Socratic themes: Plato and Aristotle took philosophy in new formal directions – toward the sublime and poetic in one case, toward the methodical and analytic in the other – but not in new substantive directions (pp. 113–15).

It is not surprising then that Shaftesbury also identified stoicism with Socratic philosophy. Crystallizing the history of philosophy in the ancient world, he once isolated ‘two real distinct philosophies’:

the one derived from Socrates and passing into the old Academic, the Peripatetic and stoic; the other derived in reality from Democritus and passing into the Cyrenaic and Epicurean . . . The first therefore of these two philosophies recommended action, concernment in civil affairs, religion, etc.; the second derided all and advised inaction and retreat, and [with] good reason. For the first maintained that society, right and wrong was [*sic*] founded in nature and that nature had a meaning and was . . . well-governed and administered by one simple and perfect intelligence. The second, again, derided this and made Providence and Dame Nature not so sensible as a dotting old woman. The first of these philosophies is to be called the civil, social, theistic; the second, the contrary.<sup>27</sup>

This distinction, as we will see, served Shaftesbury as a characterization of philosophy not just in the ancient world but in the modern world as well.

Shaftesbury’s exposure to stoicism was primarily through his attentive reading of the later Roman stoics, of which he left a remarkable record. After serving vigorously in Parliament in the 1690s, his life took a sudden and unexpected shift in direction. At the age of twenty-seven, he withdrew from public affairs, leaving England for more than a year and setting up residence in Rotterdam for a life of privacy and study. Through Benjamin Furley (1636–1714), a Quaker businessman of advanced intellectual leanings and friend of Locke, he was connected to the local political and intellectual elite. However, his most important intellectual engagement during this period of self-exile was with the ancient stoics. His withdrawal from England seems to have reflected a spiritual, intellectual and, even, existential crisis, which is fully reflected in the notebooks he began keeping in 1698. These notebooks, which he labelled Ἀσκηματα (Exercises), explored his own moral quandaries, translating the ethical questions that he had considered already in a demonstrative manner in the 1699 edition of *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue* into a much more personal and

<sup>27</sup> Shaftesbury to Pierre Coste, 1 October 1706, PRO 30/24/22/7 (Rand, *Regimen*, pp. 355–66).

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existential idiom. In this process, he read, recorded and engaged with stoic thought, especially that of the Roman stoics.

In Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (AD 121–80), Shaftesbury found a peer of Xenophon and Seneca: a man whose life combined upper-class pedigree, public action and philosophical preoccupation. Of aristocratic birth, he early achieved the favour of the Emperors Hadrian and his successor Antoninus Pius. His own reign as Emperor (161–80) was dominated by warfare which often required his presence at the margins of the Empire. However, his entire adult career was inspired by stoic philosophy, to which he gave eloquent expression in his *Meditations*, reflections compiled during his military campaigns. Marcus Aurelius had been influenced, meanwhile, by Epictetus (AD c.55–c.135), a freed Greek slave who started studying philosophy before his emancipation and, afterwards, taught a stoic philosophy in Rome and later in Greece. His teachings were collected by Arrian who also produced a well-known epitome of his wisdom, the *Enchiridion*. As the passage cited above suggests, these stoics of the imperial age offered Shaftesbury a number of themes: the importance of self-knowledge and moral discipline and autonomy; the participation of humans in ever larger schemes of civil, political and indeed cosmic association; and, ultimately, the order of the cosmos and the reality of virtue and beauty.

The counterpoint to these emphases Shaftesbury found in Epicureanism with its denial of world order and rejection of public service. Epicurus, who lived from about 342 to 271 BC, setting up his famous school in the Garden in Athens, makes several appearances in *Characteristics*. He was a Democritean atomist and a thorough materialist who believed the gods themselves were made up of atoms. The gods were remote from the world of men since they themselves were devoted to a lofty existence of ἀταραξία, *ataraxia*, a condition of serene impassiveness. The well-known Epicurean emphasis on pleasure was not hedonistic, but mainly negative, seeking to free the body and mind from disturbance and anxiety. This meant a withdrawal from the world of politics and business and even from marriage and reproduction in order to live in a quiet community of philosophical adepts. Since Epicurus' writings, said to be voluminous, hardly survived, Shaftesbury's knowledge of Epicurus was filtered through Lucretius (c.94–c.55 BC), of whom little is known except for his authorship of *On the Nature of Things*, a long didactic poem in six books expounding Epicurean views on the physical world and the moral dimensions of human life.

*Modern philosophy*

This excursion from Shaftesbury's politics through his response to the culture and especially the philosophy of the ancient world illuminates his engagements with the philosophy of his own era, which he regarded as a new manifestation

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of Epicureanism. The philosophical worldliness at which he aimed constituted a critique of the modern philosophical project.

At its broadest, Shaftesbury's dispute with contemporary philosophy concerned the nature of philosophy itself. The reader of *Characteristics* should observe how frequently and how extensively Shaftesbury undertook to define philosophy or to characterize its aims and methods. 'Philosophy' had many referents in this era: it applied not just to the scholastic inheritance still surviving in the universities, but also to new projects in natural philosophy itself or in epistemological mapping that were intended to facilitate the acquisition of sounder knowledge in the realms of nature.<sup>28</sup> Like much of the forward looking philosophy of the preceding century, Shaftesbury was breaking away from the formal, demonstrative and systematic pretensions of the inherited scholastic tradition. However, he also was criticizing many of the new philosophical initiatives of the same period. He was hostile to technical inquiry seeing in philosophy not a solution to metaphysical or epistemological quandaries but rather a vehicle for moral formation. As we have seen, he sought to revitalize philosophy's public capacity and revive those principles that had animated such philosophy in the ancient world.

The modern philosophy to which Shaftesbury was most attentive was the work of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Hobbes (1588–1679) responded to the sceptical crisis of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with a new initiative in demonstrative philosophy. Combining commitments to the analytic efficacy of geometry and the explanatory simplicity of materialism, Hobbes sought to demonstrate the links between nature, humans and society. Though Hobbes wrote many works, Shaftesbury confined his treatment of Hobbes to an attack on the pronouncements in *Leviathan*, first published in 1651.

Meanwhile, the third Earl of Shaftesbury grew up with an important personal tie to Locke (1632–1704), friend, assistant and dependant of the first Earl. Despite this close personal connection, the explicit statements of Shaftesbury's maturity reveal mostly intellectual hostility. Shaftesbury took issue with ideas in both the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and the second *Treatise of Government* (1690). If there is a Lockean resonance in Shaftesbury's thinking, it can be traced not to Locke's more famous works but to his views on mentorship and cultivation, crystallized in *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693).

In the course of *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury recurred to two particular features of modern philosophy which seemed to him fundamentally Epicurean and thus counter to his Socratic/stoic enterprise.

<sup>28</sup> The philosophical bequest of the seventeenth century is surveyed in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, eds., *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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One was the nominalism of modern philosophy. Insisting on the trans-historical and transcultural reality of cosmic order and the moral principles woven into its fabric, Shaftesbury was alert to the suggestion that fundamental moral principles might be products of convention rather than structures of reality, the outcome of artifice rather than ingredients of nature. Thus, Shaftesbury read Hobbes unsympathetically, but not inaccurately, as a thorough nominalist: because, for Hobbes, human signs and their referents were entirely conventional, moral injunctions derived from custom or fiat. Similarly, Shaftesbury offered a selective but hardly perverse reading of Locke to emphasize the degree to which Locke, in the face of the diversity of moral opinion across cultures, relied on the commands of God (rather than the structure of nature) to ground ethical principles.

The second trait in modern philosophy to which Shaftesbury objected was philosophical egoism, which was consistent with the denial of ontological foundations for ethics or politics and with the methodological individualism espoused by its supporters. A conspicuous target in this regard was the contention that human self-regard made human action an enterprise in selfishness. Shaftesbury attributed such an outlook to Hobbes but also to expressions of a revived Augustinianism (as in the French Jansenists or such secularizing fellow travellers as the Duc de La Rochefoucauld): Bernard Mandeville's critical response to Shaftesbury derived from this standpoint.

A less conspicuous instance of the egoistic tenor of contemporary philosophy, to which Shaftesbury objected, was the commitment to analyses grounded on the ahistorical individual. Shaftesbury ridiculed the natural law tradition for resting a theory of society on the supposition of a natural condition of human atomism. From such a supposition, Hobbes had developed his argument for absolutism; but Locke argued for constitutional government on a similar basis. Shaftesbury sympathized with Locke's political beliefs but not his attempt to ground them on the consequences of a supposed natural state prior to society. A humanity prior to society was simply inconceivable if one insisted on natural human sociability. For Shaftesbury, humans were always already social, immersed in society, culture and history.

Though opposed to the figures who would in time occupy the apex of the philosophical canon, Shaftesbury derived support and inspiration from other recent writers. Many of them were, ironically, men of the Church. He cited such representatives of the latitudinarian strand of religious thinking as Jeremy Taylor and John Tillotson. The latitudinarians were committed to lowering the volume in religious dispute by shifting attention from narrow theological details to broad ethical concerns. They were thus more accepting of toleration than High Churchmen and more optimistic about the possibility of human goodness than Calvinists.

A tighter intellectual affiliation exists between Shaftesbury and the so-called

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Cambridge Platonists. Shaftesbury's first publication, dating from the 1690s, was an edition of sermons by Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), a London preacher usually counted among their number. In introducing a cleric who warmly endorsed the naturalness of human sociability and benevolence, Shaftesbury enunciated a theme he would elaborate later, the critique of selfishness underlying the writings of both Thomas Hobbes and Protestant divines.

Another Cambridge Platonist who influenced Shaftesbury was Ralph Cudworth (1617–88). Cudworth spent a long career at Cambridge and wrote profusely though only one principal work was published during his lifetime, the stupendous *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). In its effort to justify theism against atheism while also discriminating among theisms that conduced toward or impeded morality, this volume paralleled Shaftesbury's simultaneous critique of Hobbes and utilitarian Christians. Moreover, certain key ideas of stoic derivation in Shaftesbury were supported by Cudworth and perhaps even cast by Shaftesbury in Cudworthian language.<sup>29</sup>

*Modern enthusiasm*

As much as Shaftesbury respected the latitudinarian clerics of the English Church, however, he was separated from them by a wide gulf. They were all committed to Church teachings which Shaftesbury opposed. The doctrine which he attacked most frequently in *Characteristics* was the promise of future rewards and punishments, which clashed with his search for an ethic, intrinsic to the design of the cosmos and of humanity, autonomous of religious prescription. In his view, the doctrine of future rewards and punishments reduced the spiritual orientation of the Christian to a high-minded condition of egoism, in which the Christian was coaxed to goodness through rational calculations of short- and long-term benefits.

Shaftesbury abandoned reliance on this doctrine and, indeed, on many defining features of Christianity, including sin, salvation and revelation, although he continued to endorse a significant role for a tolerant and charitable Church and the morally improving contributions of Christian traditions of benevolence. His ethic was grounded in ideas about cosmic intelligence and order which, though compatible with aspects of Christianity, were also easily detached from it.

It is important, however, to distinguish Shaftesbury from some contemporary deists and freethinkers. *Characteristics* ended with a peroration in defence of freethinking. Yet, Shaftesbury was careful here to acquiesce in the authority of a legitimate Church. Some deists were simply too radical for him. He had no truck with arguments liable to bring the entire social and cultural order

<sup>29</sup> J. A. Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), pp. 96–100. See also Further reading.

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into question. More important, he objected to ideas that smacked of materialism and mechanism and, thus, in his view, tended toward atheism. While Shaftesbury was happy to admit that non-Christians (including atheists) were capable of virtue and that Christianity itself had unleashed many moral enormities, his own theism was fervent – at least, if we are to take the raptures of Theocles in ‘The Moralists’ as indicative of his spiritual experience.

Like Theocles, Shaftesbury was, by his own playful admission, an enthusiast. ‘Enthusiasm’ had played a most important role in English discussion of religion over the past half of a century. It was used to describe, in general, those who were extravagant in their religious expressions but, more specifically, those who made a false claim to inspiration and, with that, unwarranted independence from such anchors of faith as Scripture or the Church. In the polemically charged atmosphere of the period, the term functioned as a general aspersion of Puritanism or sectarianism, though the precise sense was only applicable to a small number of more radical Protestants.<sup>30</sup>

It was the appearance in London of just such a group that prompted Shaftesbury to write *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*. Though Louis XIV, in revoking the Edict of Nantes in 1685, had hoped to free France of its Huguenot population, Protestants remained, and in the early 1700s disturbances broke out between the authorities and a millennially-minded sect, known as the Camisards, in the remote Cevennes region of southern France. By 1706, several of these ‘prophets’ had arrived in London where, though condemned by the well-established Huguenot community, they attracted considerable attention through their detailed prophecies delivered often with dramatic bodily displays. The ‘prophets’ were joined in their activities by several Britons including John Lacy (b. 1664), a Londoner and man of means, whom Shaftesbury discussed in his *Letter*.<sup>31</sup>

Shaftesbury’s *Letter* was only peripherally about the ‘prophets’ since its theme was enthusiasm and its burden to shift the term’s meaning. The particular combination of imagination and passion that comprised enthusiasm was not, for Shaftesbury, confined to religious extremists but rather characteristic of a wide range of human creative, heroic and romantic activity. Indeed, it was

<sup>30</sup> The best summary of this discourse is Michael Heyd, ‘Be Sober and Reasonable’: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). For the term’s eighteenth-century career, Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa, eds., *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> The definitive study of this episode is Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980). See also the bibliography of contemporary responses to the ‘prophets’ in Hillel Schwartz, *Knaves, Fools, Madmen and That Subtile Effluviuim: A Study of the Opposition to the French Prophets in England, 1706–1710* (Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1978).