

Oxford English Dictionary (OED)

sensibility, n

a. plural. Sensible species; the emanations from bodies, which were supposed to be the cause of sensation.

1374 Chaucer tr. Boethius De Consol. Philos. (1868) v. met. iv. 166 Philosophers þat hy ten stoiciens þat wenden þat ymages & sensibilites [sensus et imagines] þat is to sein sensible ymaginaciouns..weren inprentid in to soules fro bodies wiþ oute forþe.

b. Capability of being perceived by the senses. Obsolete, rare.

c1616 R. C. Times' Whistle (1871) i. 496 That's only good In their grosse braines, whose visibility And appetituall sensibility Lies open to their sence.

a. Power of sensation or perception; †the specific function of any of the organs of sense (obsolete.). Now often, the (greater or less) readiness of an organ or tissue to respond to sensory stimuli; sensitiveness.

c1400 tr. Secreta Secret., Gov. Lordsh. xci. 97 Þe sensibilitez of þe Eres er harkenynge of souns..

b. Philosophy. Power or faculty of feeling, capacity of sensation and emotion as distinguished from cognition and will.

1838 F. Haywood tr. Kant Critick Pure Reason 57 If we will term the receptivity of our mind for receiving representations..sensibility, so is..the faculty of itself bringing forth representations, or the Spontaneity of the cognition, the Understanding.

†3. Mental perception, awareness of something.

c1412 T. Hoccleve De Reg. Princ. 5009 Þei erren foule, & goon out of þe wey; Of trouth haue þei scant sensibilitie.

a. Emotional consciousness; glad or sorrowful, grateful or resentful recognition of a person's conduct, or of a fact or a condition of things.

1751 Earl of Orrery Remarks Swift (ed. 5) iii. 21 The treatment was thought injurious, and Swift expressed his sensibility of it in a short, but satirical copy of verses entitled The Discovery.

†b. pl. A person's feelings of gratitude. Obsolete.

1753 S. Richardson Hist. Sir Charles Grandison (1781) IV. xxii. 168, I cannot speak my grateful sensibilities.

†c. A mark of appreciation or consideration; a delicate attention. Obs.

1795 J. Dalrymple Let. to Admiralty 9 Every sensibility that we can shew to our brave Officers and Seamen..is too little for what they do for us.

a. Quickness and acuteness of apprehension or feeling; the quality of being easily and strongly affected by emotional influences; sensitiveness. Also, with const., sensitiveness to, keen sense of something.

1711 J. Addison Spectator No. 231. ¶7 Modesty..is a kind of quick and delicate feeling in the Soul... It is such an exquisite Sensibility, as warns a woman to shun the first appearance of every thing which is hurtful.

1741 D. Hume Ess. i. 2 There is a certain Delicacy of Passion, to which some People are subject, that makes them extremely sensible to all the Accidents of Life... And when a Person, that has this Sensibility of Temper, meets with any Misfortune, his Sorrow or Resentment takes intire Possession of him.

b. plural. Emotional capacities; †instincts of liking or aversion.

1634 W. Tirwhyt tr. J. L. G. de Balzac Lett. 36 It is fitting that reason convince our Sensibilities, causing us to agree to what is otherwise distasteful unto us.

c. singular and plural. Liability to feel offended or hurt by unkindness or lack of respect; susceptibilities.

1767 T. Gray Let. 17 Dec. in Corr. (1971) III. 980, I wish, he would not give too much way to his own sensibilities; & still less (in this case) to the sensibilities of other people.

6. In the 18th and early 19th c. (afterwards somewhat rarely): Capacity for refined emotion; delicate sensitiveness of taste; also, readiness to feel compassion for suffering, and to be moved by the pathetic in literature or art.

1756 J. Warton Ess. on Pope I. v. 252 The force of the repetition of the significant epithet foreign, need not be pointed out to any reader of sensibility.

1762 W. Cowper To Miss Macartney 68 Oh! grant, kind heav'n, to me, Long as I draw ethereal air, Sweet Sensibility.

1768 L. Sterne Sentimental Journey II. 182 Dear sensibility! source inexhausted of all that's precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows!

sentimental, adjective.

1. a. Of persons, their dispositions and actions: Characterized by sentiment. Originally in favourable sense: Characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling. In later use: Addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion; apt to be swayed by sentiment.

1749 Lady Bradshaigh in S. Richardson Corr. (1804) IV. 282 What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word sentimental, so much in vogue among the polite... Every thing clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word...I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a sentimental man; we were a sentimental party; I have been taking a sentimental walk.

1752 H. Walpole Let. to H. Mann 27 July, I am still sentimental enough to flatter myself, that a man who could beg sixteen guineas, will not give them.

b. as a noun, a sentimental person.

1784 Unfort. Sensibility. I. 39 Your dying sentimentals, who can..execute more mischief in a single hour, than [etc.]

ƒc. Arising from sentiment or refined æsthetic emotion. Obsolete.

1764 O. Goldsmith Hist. Eng. in Lett. I. vi. 37 They [i.e. the English in 7th cent.] were only incapable of sentimental pleasure.

2. Pertaining to sentiment.

a. Arising from or determined by feeling rather than by reason.

1752 (title) Reflections on Sentimental Differences in Points of Faith.

b. That is a matter of sentiment and not of material interests. Often in sentimental grievance.

1891 Weekly Notes 200/1 The tenant for life..could over~ride the sentimental interests of the remainder men.

3. Of literary compositions (occas. of music or other art): Appealing to sentiment; expressive of the tender emotions, esp. those of love.

1765 Ld. Kames Elements Crit. (ed. 3) I. ii. 127 (note) It is beyond the power of music to raise a passion or a

sentiment: but it is in the power of music to raise emotions similar to what are raised by sentiments expressed in words pronounced with propriety and grace; and such music may justly be termed sentimental.