

Snapshot for the Philosophers' Magazine: Bernard Mandeville

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Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) was a doctor and pamphleteer, whose works had a large impact on the course of eighteenth century social philosophy. Mandeville was born and educated in the Dutch Republic. After being implicated in a popular uprising in his native city of Rotterdam, he travelled Europe and settled in London, “having happen’d to take great delight [in the language], and in the mean time found the Country and the Manners of it agreeable to his Humor.”

Mandeville started a practice as a doctor and soon began to write. In 1705, he published a poem with the title *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn’d Honest*. It tells of a wealthy and powerful beehive whose inhabitants act only in pursuit of gain and esteem. Nevertheless, they espouse an ethic that condemns this behaviour and frequently lament that their society is full of sin. Irritated by their constant complaining, their god decides to make them all virtuous. In a flash, their society comes to a stop: commerce and industry are abandoned, and the bees leave their once flourishing hive and withdraw to live simply in the hollow of a tree. The moral is that virtue can only lead to a poor, ascetic society, whereas the vices are the necessary engines of a wealthy and powerful nation. As Mandeville put it:

“T” enjoy the World’s Conveniencies,
Be fam’d in War, yet live in Ease,
Without great Vices, is a vain
EUTOPIA seated in the Brain.
Fraud, Luxury and Pride must live,
While we the Benefits receive.”

In 1714, the poem reappeared as part of *The Fable of the Bees, or: Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, in which Mandeville explains and defends the claim that private vices lead to public benefits. Mandeville does so by examining human nature in the same meticulous way “a surgeon studies a carcass.” This uncompromising examination leads him to conclude that man is “a compound of various Passions, that all of them, as they are provok’d, come uppermost, and govern him whether he will or no.” The gratification of these passions, Mandeville writes, is wholly selfish. Mandeville defines vice as “every thing, which, (...) Man should commit to gratify any of his Appetites”, and virtue as “every Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of Being good.” But, since on Mandeville’s view of human nature, man is a selfish creature, wholly governed by his passions, people’s behaviour will always be vicious, and true

virtue can have no role in managing people's destructive desires. But should people become virtuous through divine grace, no one would pursue temporal success and society would go the way of the bees. Thus, virtue has no connection with maintaining society or worldly success.

Mandeville also explains why vice is the key to sociability and material progress. In a state of nature, people pursue only their own desires, without thinking of the consequences for others. As such, man is a dangerous 'untaught animal', too cunning and skilful to be subdued and brought to society by force. Happily, however, people have a characteristic that makes them fit for society. This characteristic is the value they place on themselves, and their wish to see this high opinion of themselves affirmed by others. Realising this, leaders of small bands of men construct an image of a praiseworthy person who controls his passions in the interest of others. These 'skilful Politicians' then encourage people to conform to this image by heaping praise on all that act in accordance with it. And, since it is to everyone's benefit to "preach up Publick-spiritedness, that they might reap the Fruits of the Self-denial of others", others readily join in. Thus, as Mandeville puts it, for the effort of controlling his destructive appetites, man is paid by his fellows in the 'Aerial Coin of Praise'.

Thus, through flattery, people are instilled with a sense of pride and shame, the two emotions that ready us for society. Once part of society, people's desire to see themselves admired and their inexhaustible desires for goods spur industry and the division of labour, through which wealth increases. Therefore, it is vanity and all its attendant vices that, when properly managed, make a society function and prosper. As Mandeville puts it: "what we call Evil in this World (...) is the Grand Principle that makes us sociable Creatures".

Like Mandeville's earlier writing, which he admitted "went down with the public like chopt Hay", the *Fable* initially generated little interest. However, after it was presented to the Court of the King's Bench as a public nuisance on account of its tendency 'to Corrupt all Morals', the *Fable* became immensely popular. As new editions rolled off the printing press, Mandeville produced several new provocative works, and joined the debate on his book with gusto.

The *Fable* proved more than the subject of a temporary scandal. Mandeville's idea that the pursuit of self-interest, when properly managed, can have good consequences, and his insights into the way in which vanity makes people conform to social norms were put to good use by the principal philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume and Adam Smith. Moreover, the tension Mandeville exposed between the standards of Christian virtue and the beneficial outcomes due to the pursuit of self-interest provided an impetus to develop a new moral idiom

that could accord some value to the tamed forms of self-interest that have beneficial consequences. But old habits of moral thought die hard, and it is still good to have Dr. Mandeville's prescription at hand to deal with rigoristic pundits.

Suggested reading

The Fable of the Bees, edited by F.B. Kaye. 1988. Liberty Fund.