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0521460824 - The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society

E. G. Hundert

Excerpt

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## *Introduction and agenda*

In the spring of 1723, a London physician nearing his fifty-third birthday anonymously published an enlarged version of a barely noticed satire which he had written nine years earlier. The work aroused little immediate reaction. Then, during the following July, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* was twice presented by the Grand Jury of Middlesex to the Court of the King's Bench as a public nuisance, with a recommendation that its publisher be prosecuted. While the book was never censored, its author, Bernard Mandeville, "Snatched from Oblivion's Grave by Infamy,"<sup>1</sup> at once became associated with wickedness. *The Fable of the Bees* was immediately reviled by a chorus of clergymen, journalists and philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Astonished and delighted, Mandeville found himself a national celebrity.

Writing in his third or, more probably, his fourth language (after Dutch, French and academic Latin), Mandeville devoted much of the remaining ten years of his life to the elaboration, refinement and defense of his now notorious thesis: contemporary society is an aggregation of self-interested individuals necessarily bound to one another neither by their shared civic commitments nor their moral rectitude, but, paradoxically, by the tenuous bonds of envy, competition and exploitation. In the midst of a decade of virtually unrelieved criticism and polemic, and while continuing to support his family by treating the nervous diseases of his patients, he published *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724), a provocative plan for the establishment of public houses of prostitution; *An Enquiry into the*

<sup>1</sup> John Brown, *Honour, a Poem* (London, 1743).

<sup>2</sup> For summaries of this literature see F.B. Kaye, "Criticisms of the Fable," in *Fable*, II, pp. 401–417, and Paul Sackmann, *Bernard de Mandeville und die Bienenfabel-Controverse* (Leipzig: Mohr, 1897).

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*Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn* (1725), an attack upon the ceremonies of public execution with recommendations for greater severity in the treatment of criminals; a second volume of *The Fable* in 1728; and then in 1732, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Honour, and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*, which amounted to a third. Later in the same year, Mandeville produced his last work, *A Letter to Dion*. This was a polemical reply to *Alciphron: Or, The Minute Philosopher* (1732), in which Bishop Berkeley attacked various freethinkers and cast Mandeville as Lysicles, a lawless libertine and atheist. Mandeville exposed in detail Berkeley's wholesale misrepresentation of *The Fable*. He also forcefully reasserted his thesis that a strict interpretation of Christian conduct, which requires self-denial and the sacrifice of impulse, fatally compromises Christians like Berkeley, who hypocritically pretend to charity and benevolence while reaping the benefits of modern forms of affluence and exchange.

Mandeville did his most creative work and produced a masterpiece during what until recently was considered the onset of old age – an accomplishment surpassed in the eighteenth century only by Kant, one of *The Fable's* great admirers. For his immediate audience, however, and then for the two succeeding generations of European intellectuals, “Mandeville” was less the person who wrote an infamous book, than an ideologically charged symbol constituted by the eighteenth century's intense and prolonged dispute about how to understand and evaluate the liberation of acquisitive instincts engendered in modern polities by the infusion of commercial relations into the centers of public life.

Bernard de Mandeville was born in or near Rotterdam in 1670, the son of Judith (Verhaar) and Michael de Mandeville, a doctor, as was Michael's own grandfather, also named Michael, who had served as municipal physician and rector of the Latin school in Nijmegen. No portrait of Mandeville is known to exist, and little can be gleaned about the details of his life from the few surviving relevant documents in the British Library and Somerset House. Save for an off-hand remark by Benjamin Franklin to the effect that Mandeville was “a most facetious, entertaining companion,”<sup>3</sup> we know almost nothing of his character. Indeed, more is known about *The Fable's* minor critics than of its author, despite his rise to prominence, and immeasurably

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, in *Works*, ed. J. Bigelow (New York: Putnam, 1904), 1, p. 92.

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less of Mandeville than about virtually all of his philosophically significant adversaries, particularly Hume, Rousseau and Adam Smith, so much of whose seminal work was shaped in confrontations with *The Fable of the Bees*.<sup>4</sup> While his family name suggests French ancestry, the de Mandevilles were not recent immigrants to Holland but had lived in Leeuwarden in Friesland from at least the late sixteenth century, later establishing themselves in Nijmegen. After attending the Erasmian school in Rotterdam, to which Michael had moved when young, Bernard followed his father and great-grandfather in the study of medicine, matriculating at the University of Leiden in 1685 after submitting a medical subject for his obligatory inaugural address, *De oratorio scholastica*.

During his years of study at this major European medical faculty riven by disputes between Cartesians and their critics, Mandeville published a required dissertation entitled *Disputatio philosophica de brutorum operationibus* (1689), in which he argued the Cartesian case for animal automatism. Before receiving his medical degree in 1691 after a largely ceremonial public examination of his thesis on digestive disorders,<sup>5</sup> Mandeville may well have made his literary debut during the so-called 1690 Costerman tax riots in Rotterdam – in which both he and his father participated – by anonymously publishing a satirical lampoon about the town Bailiff, Jacob Van Zuilen van Nievelt, a “sanctimonious atheist” whose harsh prosecution of the tax farmer Costerman on a charge of smuggling precipitated the disturbances. The riots led to direct military intervention by the government of the States of Holland, public vindication of the Bailiff, and the subsequent removal by banishment of Michael de Mandeville from Rotterdam.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps in response to this sudden decline of his family's fortunes, Bernard, shortly after being granted the MD, travelled in France, Italy and then to England, “to learn the Language; in which

<sup>4</sup> F.B. Kaye first brought together most of the existing documentary materials relating to Mandeville's life into biographical order and produced the publication history of his work upon which everyone still must rely. See *Fable*, 1, pp. xvii–xxxvii. In addition, see P.A. Christiaans, “De Mandeville,” in *Jaarboek Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* 33 (1979), pp. 118–125; Richard I. Cook, *Bernard Mandeville* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), pp. 11–20, and Irwin Primer, “Bernard Mandeville,” in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1991), ci.

<sup>5</sup> *Disputatio medica inauguralis de chylosi vitiata . . . Publico examini subijcit Bernardus de Mandeville* (Leiden: Apud Abrahamum Elzevier, Academiae Typograph, 1691).

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Dekker, “‘Private Vices, Public Virtues’ [sic] Revisited: The Dutch Background of Bernard Mandeville,” *History of European Ideas* 14, 4 (1992), pp. 481–498.

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[I] happen'd to take great delight,"<sup>7</sup> returning to Holland in 1694. A short time later Mandeville immigrated to England and settled in London, where he married Ruth Elizabeth Laurence in 1699, fathered at least two children, and remained until his death from influenza in 1733.

Until late in life, when fame assured him access to an audience, the fulfillment of Mandeville's literary ambitions depended upon the rapidly changing opportunities for writers provided by the dramatic enlargement of the English reading public in the early eighteenth century. Most importantly, a writer's success hinged upon the ability of the bookseller–publishers who organized the London Grub Street presses to offer to an easily bored metropolitan audience in search of self-endorsing diversions a continuing stream of inexpensively produced pamphlets, broadsides and, crucially for Mandeville, satirical verse. Mandeville made his English debut with two anonymous works in 1703, *The Pamphleteers: A Satyr and Some Fables after the Easie and Familiar Method of Monsieur de la Fontaine*. As he was to do throughout his career, in the first work Mandeville defended the revolutionary settlement of 1689 against the attacks of Tory and Jacobite “pamphleteers,” while the second work was the earliest (rather loose, octosyllabic verse) English translation of twenty-seven of La Fontaine's *Fables*, to which Mandeville added two of his own in the same style, “The Carp” and “The Nightingale and The Owl.” Probably in response to reasonable sales of *Some Fables*, an expanded edition of these poems was printed under Mandeville's name as *Aesop Dress'd: Or a Collection of Fables Writ in Familiar Verse* in the next year. In 1704 Mandeville again drew upon his familiarity with French skeptical and libertine traditions, publishing *Typhon: Or the Wars Between the Gods and Giants: A Burlesque Poem in Imitation of the Comical Mons. Scarron*, a work whose dedication to the “Numerous Society of F[oo]ls” was intended as an invocation of Erasmus, one of the very few Dutch writers or artists whose work Mandeville ever praised. One year later, in 1705, Mandeville sought to advance his career as a fabulist in verse with the publication of *The Grumbling Hive: Or, Knaves Turn'd Honest*, a long 433-line poem written after the manner of Samuel Butler, whose anti-puritan satire *Hudibras* was one of his favorite works. Pitched in the popular “low” style which he had mastered, but attracting hardly any attention from the wider reading public, *The Grumbling Hive* would later serve as the foundation of *The Fable of the Bees*.

<sup>7</sup> *A Treatise of the Hypochondriak and Hysterick Passions*, cited by Kaye in *Fable*, 1, p. xix.

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While Mandeville produced one final volume of poetry, some of it erotic, in the 1712 collection *Wishes to a Godson, with Other Miscellany Poems*, the remainder of his literary output was in prose, most often in the then popular dialogue form in a conversational idiom which he employed for the purposes of philosophical and social commentary. The tone of Mandeville's mature writing is already evident in his first prose volume, *The Virgin Unmask'd: Or, Female Dialogues Betwixt an Elderly Maiden Lady, and her Niece, On several Diverting Discourses on Love, Marriage, Memoirs, and Morals, &c. of the Times* (1709). Here, in ten sexually charged dialogues on virginity, marriage and the designs of men, which include many digressions on history and politics, the luscious and inexperienced Antonia is instructed in the ways of the world by her maiden aunt Lucinda. As he would later do at the beginning of *The Fable's* second volume of 1728, Mandeville again adopted a female persona in thirty-two numbers of *The Female Tatler* between 2 November 1709 and 29 March 1710. This journal employed the fiction of discussions of a "Society of Ladies," often joined by gentlemen, in order to ridicule the pretensions of Isaac Bickerstaff, the spokesman of Richard Steele in his popular *Tatler*, published between 1709 and 1711. Bickerstaff self-righteously proclaimed that the practice of moral virtue made society possible. In direct contrast, humility, temperance and frugality emerge in the discussions of Mandeville's personae as unpracticed, if much commended, virtues in opulent nations, virtues which flourish precisely because their wealthy members indulge the vices of self-aggrandizement, avarice and prodigality. As one character, the Oxford Gentleman, says, it is absurd because contradictory at once to desire a flourishing trade and the decrease of the vices of pride and luxury – a position Mandeville first enunciated in *The Grumbling Hive*.

By the beginning of the second decade of the eighteenth century, Mandeville had established a decidedly modest literary reputation. Few readers could have known the identity of "B.M.," the initials appearing on the title page of *The Virgin Unmask'd*, or the anonymous author of *The Female Tatler*. Nevertheless, he continued to claim the attention of publishers for the expression of his widening interests, particularly those in medicine and politics. In 1711 he published *A Treatise of the Hypochondriak and Hysterical Passions, Vulgarly call'd the Hypo in Men and Vapours in Women*, also in dialogue form, in which Mandeville's spokesman Philiporo expounds upon the iatromechanical theories of physiology then at the forefront of medical theory. Unlike his competitors – and presumably the officers of the College of

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Physicians with whom Mandeville had continuing disputes – Philiporo treats few patients because his scientifically grounded methods demand close and careful observation of patients over long periods of time, in contrast to conventional physicians who engage in profitless speculations about symptoms whose meaning eludes them. Mandeville went on to publish an expanded edition of his medical treatise in 1730, adding to the speeches of its main participants, translating Latin passages for non-learned readers, and reflecting in some detail upon the scientific study of human behavior. The content of these reflections was an important feature of his wider arguments about the analysis of society.

Mandeville's political interests and commitments were not publicly apparent until 1714 (the year before he dropped the copula from his name) when he made his debut as a Whig propagandist. In that year he published *The Mischiefs that Ought Justly to be Apprehended from a Whig-Government*, a dialogue between Loveright, a Whig, and the Tory Tantivy, in which the conventional Whig defense of the revolutionary settlement of 1689, the Protestant succession, and the legitimacy of the Hanoverian line, are primary elements of an uninspired dialogue which concludes with thanks to Providence for sparing the British from popish chains of popery and Stuart tyranny. Many of these same themes reappear in Mandeville's final party political tract, again published under his initials in 1720. As its title implies, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church and National Happiness* discourses upon the advantages of Whig governance, explaining that the apparent abuses of politicians, so grumbled at by malcontents, are in fact trivial vices of private persons who in their public roles efficiently administer a benign constitution. In this work Mandeville also adopted an aggressively skeptical view of the religious establishment and of priestcraft generally, stopping short of an outright defense of Deism while arguing for a rationally defensible religion. The humility of bishops, he quipped, must be a very ponderous virtue, since it had to be drawn by a coach and six. Such views evoked the spectre of freethinking – as did the book's title – and despite the patronage of Lord Macclesfield, the Lord Chancellor from 1718 to 1724, Mandeville was never again employed by the Whigs in the cause of political propaganda, something for which his notorious reputation would have in any case permanently debarred him once *The Fable of the Bees* became known as a scandalous book.

Mandeville's masterpiece first appeared under its full title in 1714,

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when he transformed *The Grumbling Hive* into a small book by adding a preface, “An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue,” as well as twenty prose “Remarks” ranging from single paragraphs to full essays which were meant to elaborate the meaning of his original verses. In these essays, Mandeville first achieved a register adequate for his larger philosophical purposes, but the book in which they were contained seems to have made only a small public impression. In the years immediately following, some other defenders of commercial opulence, like Defoe, employed the phrase, “private vices, public benefits.” So did the staunch Whig Matthew Tindal, who defended the regime against critics who complained of growing moral laxity, stating, after Mandeville, that “[p]rivate vices, in this Case, are far from being publick Inconveniences . . . vast Numbers of Trades People and Artificers wou’d soon starve, were we oblig’d to live . . . in those Times most celebrated for their Frugality; when [there were] no Manufactures, no Trade . . . and . . . Riches chiefly consisted in . . . Cattle . . .”<sup>8</sup> Such allusions were quite rare, however, and since Mandeville’s name was absent from the book’s title-page, his small place in the public’s imagination remained confined to readers of his early verse and later political tracts. Only when Mandeville published an enlarged edition of *The Fable of The Bees* in 1723, which included an amplified set of “Remarks” and two new lengthy essays – “A Search into the Nature of Society” and “An Essay on Charity and Charity-Schools” – did he achieve the fame he sought. After the Middlesex Grand Jury’s presentment appeared in the press, Mandeville attacked his accusers in *The London Journal* of 27 July 1723, and shortly thereafter published the text of the presentment, together with his own defense, as “A Vindication of the Book, from the Aspersions contain’d in a Presentment of the Grand-Jury of Middlesex, and an abusive Letter to Lord C.,” which he then appended to the 1724 edition of *The Fable*. A literary career was belatedly launched, as “Man-devil”<sup>9</sup> joined Hobbes as the eighteenth century’s “detested Names, yet sentenced ne’er to die,”<sup>10</sup> while *The Fable of the Bees* quickly acquired an independent identity as an unsubdued mutiny in moral philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Tindal, *A Defence of our Happy Establishment: And the Administration Vindicated* (London, 1722), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> “And if GOD-MAN Vice to abolish came / Who VICE commends, MAN-DEVIL be his NAME,” in the anonymous *The Character of the Times Delineated* (London, 1732).

<sup>10</sup> John Brown, *Honour, a Poem*.

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The immediate ideological circumstances surrounding Mandeville's spectacular rise to fame have been established by an efflorescence of scholarly interest in the dominant civic humanist language of argument within which the emergence of modern forms of mobile property, public finance and enlarged government power were understood in early-eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>11</sup> *The Fable of the Bees* first came to public attention because it was implicated in an intense controversy about the nature of politics, modern commerce and their contemporary moral consequences. The presentment to the Middlesex Grand Jury claimed that *The Fable* was designed "to run down Religion and Virtue as prejudicial to Society, and detrimental to the State; and to recommend Luxury, Avarice, Pride, and all vices, as being necessary to *Public Welfare*, and not tending to the Destruction of the Constitution . . ."<sup>12</sup> This charge, elaborated in the full case against the book published in *The British Journal* on 3 July 1723, was couched in the language of traditional Christian moral preception, laced with puritan idioms. In his "Vindication," Mandeville recognized it at once as the rhetoric of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, whose campaigns for moral reform and whose program for the education of poor children he had savaged in *The Fable's* "Essay on Charity and Charity-Schools."

The Grand Jurymen judging the case were Country opponents of the current Court Whig administration. They shared the Tory, and possibly Jacobite, sympathies of the sheriffs who appointed them. These men sought publicly to assert their loyalty to the crown and their moral opposition to Robert Walpole, its chief minister, whose principles they now found politically opportune to claim were enunciated in Mandeville's chargeable book. In his *Free Thoughts* of 1720, Mandeville had argued that "dominion always follows property," and that the Revolution of 1688 had brought the constitu-

<sup>11</sup> Most influentially by J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975). The paragraphs which immediately follow also rely upon W.A. Speck, "Bernard Mandeville and the Middlesex Grand Jury," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11 (1978), pp. 362–374; J.A.W. Gunn, "Mandeville: Poverty, Luxury, and the Whig Theory of Government," in *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), pp. 96–119; Reed Browning, *The Political and Constitutional Ideas of the Court Whigs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); W.A. Speck, "Conflict in Society," in *Britain After the Glorious Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 135–154; John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989), and Shelly Burt, *Virtue Transformed: Political Argument in England, 1688–1740* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 128–149. <sup>12</sup> *Fable*, 1, p. 385.



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tion into equilibrium with contemporary property relationships – a thesis which had become the official doctrine of the government party. Mandeville's argument was an elaboration of the government's well-known position, coupled with a satiric attack upon its opponents, who had denounced the government's financial manipulation of placemen in parliament, and came close to questioning its legitimacy as well. Government publicists like Mandeville not only sought to defend the Hanoverian succession against Jacobite claims of usurpation. In championing the new regime, Court Whigs were also obliged to claim as well that its institutions were not signs of what had, for nearly a half-century, commonly been called "corruption": the ability of government through financial reward and the granting of office to manipulate parliamentary institutions. Mandeville's was a telling critique of the opposition's principles. He argued that what was formerly regarded as political unscrupulousness had become inevitable in modern conditions of affluence, and that it was now the function of a well-ordered state to govern men whose growing opportunities for private gain were at the same time prerequisites of contemporary prosperity. Mandeville infuriated his immediate enemies because he defended existing political practices by offering a compelling account of the social place of private impulse to explain their necessity.

In their assault on *The Fable* the Grand Jurors spoke as Old Whigs, in what has been variously called the language of the Commonwealth, of civic humanism or republicanism. They attacked Mandeville in the context of an intense and comprehensive critique of modernity, undertaken in the name of an ideal of virtue practiced in antique Mediterranean republics, particularly republican Rome and the quasi-mythical Sparta framed by Lycurgus' laws. For the Augustans, the primary language of political opposition engaged a vocabulary that opposed virtue to corruption, the dignity of landed to mobile property, and public service to self-interest. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the political press and on the stage, where "Cato" and "Cicero" exposed the duplicities of "Caesar" and "Cataline," names serving as rhetorical markers for the ministers who could not, without risk of prosecution, openly be named. Behind this rhetoric stood a tradition of political analysis ultimately derived from Machiavelli's account of the Roman Republic in the *Discourses*, which was translated into English by Henry Neville in 1674, and then re-issued four times (1675, 1680, 1694 and 1720) by the date of *The Fable's*

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prosecution. This mode of argument inveighed against tyrants, found the source of political corruption in self-interest, suspected material affluence as a sign of moral degeneration, and hailed a citizen militia as the necessary guardian of liberty. A commitment to “the liberty of the people” was a constant theme; this literature hardly sought its material betterment, however, since affluence would fan self-interest. Neither did those who spoke as Commonwealthmen encourage popular participation, since political judgement was seen to be embodied in the hero-statesman like Cincinnatus or Cleomenes (the name Mandeville expressly chose for his own spokesman in *The Fable*), whose virtue was thought to derive from their devotion to patriotic principles, and was sustained by an aristocratic, landed, independence from material need.

This cluster of concepts received its decisive English formulation in James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656), a “Machiavellian meditation on feudalism”<sup>13</sup> that became a primary source of British civic humanist principles. Harrington argued that the nobility had been transformed from territorial magnates supporting armies of clients into dependent courtiers, a decline in noble power that accelerated after the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII. The balance of property and thus the balance of power which, for Harrington, followed property, had then come to lie in the freeholders who purchased former monastic lands. Monarchy based upon a landed nobility, what Harrington called “the Gothic Balance,” had quickly dissolved. Now the “ancient prudence” of classical republics could be restored in a polity based upon assemblies of independent, armed freeholders. An Agrarian Law would limit wealth and thus luxury; rotation of offices would prevent official corruption; decadent courts would be eliminated; and a natural aristocracy would simultaneously endorse popular sovereignty to ensure liberty.

Central to the civic humanist position was the assumption of a necessary connection between political liberty and landed property. Machiavelli and his Florentine contemporaries had insisted upon this connection,<sup>14</sup> while advancing the complementary thesis that the pursuit of private gain threatened civil liberty. As exemplified in Sallust's explanation of the collapse of the Roman Republic into the

<sup>13</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> See especially Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. L. Walter, ed. Bernard Crick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), Chapter 19.