

### MANDEVILLE'S "THE FABLE OF THE BEES"

In the history of mythmaking the artificially created fiction, fable, parable, or allegory, looms large. Examples of such works range from Christian and Buddhist teaching and Aesopian fables to Mozart's "The Magic Flute." The "object lesson," or conte morale, appears in Bacon and Swift, particularly "A Modest Proposal," and in La Fontaine. Rarely does it assume a more provocative form than in Bernard Mandeville's "The Fable of the Bees" (1714), an elaboration of "The Grumbling Hive" (1705).<sup>1</sup>

Mandeville himself adapts a fable from LaFontaine's "Le Gland et La Citrouille" in which the wisdom of Nature is questioned. Why should not oaks support pumpkins rather than acorns? The answer is received, Newton-fashion, when an acorn falls on the skeptic's noggin. The lesson is that is=ought, or things are as they ought to be so don't tamper with or criticize Nature.

In that Mandeville considers vice and evil to be natural, even beneficial, the moral of "The Fable of the Bees" may be the same. All of the bees indulge in their individual vices, which when catered to or pandered to, render the whole a "Paradis Mandeville intends the hive to represent England "writ small." Since he has no yearning for the martyrdom of a Bruno, he declines to reveal his specific intent. In the hive the dishonest contribute by 'redistributing the wealth' while hypocritically proclaiming their honesty and self-righteousness. Some sort of moral crusade occurs. Vice is eradicated, but the result is the destruction of

the economy. War ensues, but the victory decimates the hive. The remaining bees retire to a hollow tree. Mandeville reveals himself as a master of mythmaking psychology. The politician manipulates emotions, fear and anger to achieve his results and manifests a kinship with Machiavelli.

The moral to the fable is then drawn: "Fools only strive/ To make a great and honest hive." Utopian idealism and morality are self-destructive, no "heavenly cities," no "kingdoms of the saints," no civil service reformers. Idealism is merely a false illusion which prevents the individual from perceiving and pursuing his own interests, thus "private vices, public benefits." Like Swift, however, it is not at all that easy to tell when Mandeville is serious. After he has written an obituary to man and human nature, it is difficult to prove as Bickerstaff found out that the subject is still alive. When does he actually mean to burn the house down to roast the pig and when something a little less radical?

As in the best stage illusions there is a certain superficial attractiveness to the paradox, "public benefits, private vices," for it is maintained that values are artificially created and that there are tangential benefits in tolerating vice. (We move gloriously from the abolition of crimes to the equality of crimes to the equality of opinions to the indifferent equality of vice and virtue.) Mandeville would argue that abortion is not and should not be a crime, and even if it is a vice it produces population control. The pro-life position then is a hypocritical illusion to enslave the masses. Next he might deny that he favors abortion. Furthermore his writing is not really equalitarian. Vices, perhaps, should be tolerated to alleviate misery and despair. Why take away the worker's gin? Prohibition is what is evil (besides as Gilbert Keith Chesterton said: "Better England free than England sober."). Tobacco and snuff may be hazardous to the consumer, but look at the positive side, the great fortunes amassed, the colonies developed. The greatest vices, however, are certainly reserved for the classes who can afford the luxury, not for the masses who cannot.

"The Fable of the Bees" certainly illustrates the manner in which myth can be used as an educational device to convey certain values, even if Mandeville's topsy-

turvy inversion of conventional thinking only fools those who want to be fooled, much like a psychology experiment in which floor and ceiling are interchanged. Philosophers and politicians are adept at demonstrating that black is white and vice versa, or virtue versa, in this case. At the hands of "dextrous" or manipulative politicians vice appears to be virtue. Mandeville's inversion at very least forces us to reexamine our basic conceptions of man and society. He argues, for example, for a rejection of the social contract theory and posits three stages of social development: protection against external threats and necessity; protection against each other, and the development of letters. For Mandeville the social contract is too unnatural, too artificial, and too community-oriented.

Frances Hutcheson suggested that Mandeville's "Fable" can be understood at several different levels: (1) "private vices are themselves public virtues" (2) "private vices naturally tend, as the direct and necessary means to produce public happiness" (3) "private vices by dextrous management of governors may be made to tend to public happiness" (4) "private vices natively and naturally flow from public happiness" (5) "private vices will probably flow from public happiness through the present corruption of man."<sup>3</sup>

Primer comments that all of these levels and a few more may be needed to interpret the "Fable" correctly. On the last point, since Mandeville believes that human nature is continuous, the emphasis on present corruption is not well-taken. At best Mandeville sounds like an Augustinian on man's sinful nature. He certainly believes that democracy is evil but then does not proceed to argue that it generates desirable public benefits. He argues that the body politic is quarrelsome without pointing to the public benefits which accrue from quarrelsomeness. Mandeville does not quite carry his arguments to their full absurdity. He does not weigh the benefit against the injury or examine to see if the vice is the only way to achieve the desired result. Hanging indeed may produce cadavers for medical research but so does benevolent donation of the type presumably favored by Shaftesbury or Bentham (although Bentham opts for mummification in his own case).

Mandeville argues that by imposing artificial moral restrictions society impedes

public happiness, leading man away from his "natural" inclinations. The aphorism is "the moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride" and pride is the cause of man's self-delusion and downfall. (But if pride is the *greatest "vice" in Mandeville's terms then it should produce the greatest benefit*). Mandeville jumps back and forth between his novel arguments and the more conventional position. Mistaken for courage, pride leaves men standing on the "burning deck" rather than jumping overboard and leads intellectuals to their own self-destruction in the name of principles, causes, or ideals. Their self-interest is to retreat or recant." Soldiers are duped with cheap brick-dust dyed uniforms and the "noise made on a calf-skin." "win us with honest trifles to betray us in direst consequence." Mandeville concludes that honor is a chimera created by moralists and politicians and manipulated by the more "dextrous ones." As Montaigne writes: "Some impose on the world and would be thought to believe what they really do not; but much the greater number impose upon themselves, not thoroughly apprehending what to believe." <sup>2</sup>

There is an uncomfortable modernity in the issues Mandeville's observations raise, general debates regarding "moral man and immoral society" and specific policies such as divestiture and "sin taxes," war's stimulus to the economy, lotteries to finance public education, population control and abortion. There are trade-offs, spin-offs, "mixed blessings," or rather "mixed cursings." Censorship, for example, does get people to buy and read otherwise unreadable books, and Mandeville even makes the vicious insinuation that his purpose in inserting "private vices, public benefits" into the title was to sell the book.

Review and recapitulate the evidence regarding "The Fable of the Bees" as a clever and anticipatory creation of political myth-making. What are the possible levels of interpretation?

(1) Realism: Mandeville argues that we should work with man, imperfect though he is, not with Utopian man as he ought to be. "Acting naturally" or "act(ing) well your part," but not by telling the customer that he is always right. He argues that the appearance of virtue is not the reality, that values tend to be relative and changing concepts, even though human nature itself is continuous.

(2) Sophism: Mandeville is anti-Aristotelean and anti-Socratic. He would approve the "enlightened self-interest" of doing what is in the interest of the stronger or Ayn Rand's objectivist "virtue of selfishness." The development of the individual should not be retarded by artificial notions of altruism, benevolence, and morality.

(3) The "Invisible Hand:" Mandeville anticipates a good part of Adam Smith's economics and the mythology that the individual interest is guided in the national interest, hence laissez-faire economics. He also offers insights into the kind of thinking which stimulated Munn's "England's treasure by foreign trade," utilitarianism, conspicuous consumption, and the theory of the leisure class.

(4) A New Bogomilism: Perhaps there is some good to be found even in the worst of evils. Root through the garbage heap of human vices to discover it, Perhaps the process of discovery is good for its own sake.

(5) Satanism: The interpreter is left to grapple with that manifestation of pride in Milton's Satanic insanity, "Evil be thou my good" in which there is a complete inversion of conventional values. The individual is instructed to "do what thou wilt." We are left with the Hell-fire Club and Melnmedham Abbey and a very narrowly selfish public to benefit. The Hive becomes Pandemonium.

When it condemned the "Fable," Augustan England certainly thought that it was to the last destination that Mandeville was heading, which made the author's Parthian shaft against his opponent bitterly ironical: "He seems to have endeavoured to sap the foundation of all revealed religion with design of establishing Heathen virtue or the ruin of Christianity." <sup>4</sup> On the other hand Law's response sees only the economic devilry of a proto-Marxist.

NOTES:

1. Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick Benefits (1962) Cf. also George Berkeley's "Second Dialogue Between Alciphron and Lysicles," Works, Vol. II (1901), which dissects Mandeville's arguments.

In a far less philosophical form, Mandeville resurfaces in the Plunkitt of Tammany Hall philosophy of an "honest graft" and in the entire concept of political bossism with benefits accruing to the public in the form of jobs, welfare, social security, and political education.

2. Ibid., p. 109 (Montaigne)
3. Ibid., p. 6.
4. Ibid., p. 268.