

## **Bernard Mandeville as moralist and materialist**

Daniel Luban

Department of Political Science, University of Chicago

NOTE: This is the manuscript version of an article that was published in *History of European Ideas* 41 (2015), pp. 831-57. The version of record can be found at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01916599.2015.1010777>

ABSTRACT: Today remembered primarily as an eighteenth-century predecessor of laissez-faire economics, Bernard Mandeville's notorious *Fable of the Bees* marks the intersection of two modes of thought. On the one hand, Mandeville was a 'moralist' heir to the French Augustinianism of the previous century, viewing sociability as a mere mask for vanity and pride. On the other, he was a 'materialist' forerunner of economics, concerned to demonstrate the universality of human appetites for corporeal pleasures. The tension between these two modes of thought results in ambivalences and contradictions—concerning the relative power of norms and interests, the relationship between motives and behaviors, and the historical variability of human cultures—that run throughout the *Fable*. Both traditions, with their attendant difficulties, have a long afterlife in the later history of the social sciences; understanding their origins in Mandeville's thought can help us get a firmer grip on problems that still trouble us today.

### 1. Two Mandevilles

Three centuries after Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* emerged as the Enlightenment's most publicly reviled and quietly influential philosophical work, its author is chiefly remembered today as a figure from the prehistory of economic thought.<sup>1</sup> His instantly-notorious paradox—that 'private vices', correctly managed, could be turned into 'public benefits'—is considered an early expression of what Adam Smith was to make famous as the 'invisible hand', and Mandeville himself is generally presented more as a polemical precursor to Smith than as a major theorist in his own right.<sup>2</sup> The private

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Mandeville's work in the text refer (by volume and page number) to Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F.B. Kaye, two volumes (Oxford, 1924; reprinted Indianapolis, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> For this view of Mandeville see, among many others, Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977), 18-19.

vice in this account of Mandeville's scheme is greed (or, more neutrally, economic self-interest) and the public benefit is prosperity; understood in this way, positive and negative reactions to Mandeville tend to break down along the lines of supporters and critics of laissez-faire economics.<sup>3</sup>

The eighteenth-century reaction to the *Fable* was strikingly different. To begin with, the *Fable's* reception was almost uniformly hostile, since even those who were profoundly influenced by Mandeville, like Smith, tended to concede nothing more than that his system 'in some respects bordered on the truth'.<sup>4</sup> And to be sure, some of Mandeville's opponents took issue with his defense of luxury and his (largely implicit) vindication of England's emerging commercial society. Yet many of Mandeville's most prominent critics were in fact defenders of commercial society and its associated forms of economic behavior. What they objected to in the 'private vices, public benefits' scheme was not the claim that commercial behavior was beneficial, but rather the claim that it was vicious. For them Mandeville was threatening not so much for his empirical doctrines about luxury and prosperity but for what they perceived as a corrosive and

---

<sup>3</sup> The question of whether Mandeville's strictly economic thought can be considered truly 'free market' or proto-laissez-faire as opposed to mercantilist and interventionist need not concern us here. Classic statements of the laissez-faire view include F.B. Kaye's 'Introduction' to his edition of the *Fable*, and Nathan Rosenberg, 'Mandeville and Laissez-Faire', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963), 183-96. The classic statement of the contrary view, originally published in 1953, is Jacob Viner, 'Introduction to Bernard Mandeville, *A Letter to Dion*', in *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics* (Princeton, 1991), 176-88.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), VII.ii. 4.14, 313. Samuel Johnson, who half-jokingly called Mandeville his 'old tutor', made sure 'always loudly to condemn the Fable of the Bees, but not without adding, "that it was the work of a thinking man"'. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. during the last twenty years of his life* (London, 1786), 115-16.

ultimately nihilistic moral philosophy that would deny humans even the possibility of acting virtuously.<sup>5</sup>

These divergent reactions are not accidental, for they reflect the nature of Mandeville's project. 'His critical importance', André Morize suggested over a century ago, 'is that, in this fertile period of development, he represents the decisive moment when the French Epicurean and skeptical current merges with English economic doctrines'—when the philosophy of Montaigne and Bayle joins the scientific political economy of Petty and North, and the old French ideas are given 'a new significance that renders them unrecognizable'.<sup>6</sup> Part of Mandeville's achievement was to take the rich moral psychology of the French tradition—with its depiction of the subtle and varied manifestations of human egoism in the social world—and transpose it from seventeenth-century court society to eighteenth-century commercial society, thereby using it to explain emerging forms of economic behavior. Thus we may say that the divergent criticisms of Mandeville reflect unease both with the philosophical framework he inherited from his French predecessors and with his empirical claims about the commercial society to which he applied it.

But how are we to understand the relationship between these two strands? Istvan Hont has noted the 'elective affinity' that many early modern thinkers detected between

---

<sup>5</sup> Mandeville felt compelled to defend himself from this charge (for instance at II, 336) by stressing that he merely thought virtue was rare, not impossible; whether this defense holds water is debatable.

<sup>6</sup> *L'Apologie du Luxe au XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle: 'Le Mondain' et ses Sources* (Paris, 1909), 69, my translation. For a similar judgment see Laurence Dickey, 'Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility in Mandeville's Social and Historical Theory', *Critical Review* 4 (1990), 387-431 (395). Dickey's valuable essay treats many of the same themes as this one, although—as suggested below—I believe he ascribes undue coherence to Mandeville as a historically-grounded heir to the French moralists and thus neglects much of the 'materialist' strand in his work.

the ‘feigned morality’ of commercial society and its ‘utilitarian sociability’.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, most interpreters of Mandeville have taken his appropriation of the moralist tradition as a relatively straightforward and unproblematic one, notwithstanding the apparent incongruity of using a philosophy rooted in the ascetic Augustinianism of the Jansenists to glorify luxury and self-interest.<sup>8</sup> On one level, the existence of such an affinity is undeniable; Mandeville himself was only the starkest example of the ways that what we might loosely call ‘moralism’ and ‘materialism’,<sup>9</sup> like Augustinianism and Epicureanism more broadly, often made for unlikely bedfellows in this era.<sup>10</sup>

But surface affinities can conceal deeper contradictions, and in what follows I will argue that we can detect throughout the *Fable* the presence of oppositions stemming from the tension between Mandeville’s philosophical sources and his empirical subject matter. While often only implicit in the *Fable* and only occasionally noticed by its critics, these tensions can help explain why the moralist Mandeville has been almost forgotten while the materialist Mandeville has endured.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 50.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Kaye, ‘Introduction’; Dickey, ‘Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility’; Thomas A. Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville: Virtue and Commerce in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1978); E.J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge, 1994). For a view of Mandeville as fundamentally split between a number of strands and lines of thought, see Hector Monro, *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville* (Oxford, 1975); however, the ambivalence Monro describes in his useful book does not align precisely with the split that I am suggesting.

<sup>9</sup> I use the labels ‘moralist’ and ‘materialist’ more as convenient shorthands than as rigorous analytical descriptors, and do not claim that either side of Mandeville matches up precisely to all the connotations that either term might evoke. I hope that the ways in which I see these labels as useful will become clear in the course of this essay.

<sup>10</sup> On the convergence of Augustinianism and Epicureanism in the period, see Jean Lafond, ‘Augustinisme et épicurisme au XVII siècle’, in *L’homme et son image: morales et literatures de Montaigne à Mandeville* (Paris, 1996), 345-68; Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge, 2003), 48-57; John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005), 127-30.

Most immediately, grasping the side of Mandeville's thought that was lost when he was posthumously adopted as proto-laissez-faire economist—a side that likely *had* to be lost in order for such an adoption to be possible—can help us gain a fuller understanding of him as a historical thinker. Yet the story is not simply, or at least not solely, one of vulgarization by whiggish economists, and likewise the moral is not necessarily that by viewing him historically we can recover a Mandeville who is more nuanced and therefore more adequate for our own political moment. Both sides of Mandeville's thought, his moralism as well as his materialism, have important—yet sharply divergent—legacies in the later history of the social sciences. It is surely significant that for the man typically seen as the cock crowing to announce the dawn of European capitalism, these two problems did not always seem distinguishable, let alone opposed. Yet by the same token it is revealing to examine the difficulties into which Mandeville fell in his effort to keep the two united under the roof of a single overarching philosophy. In any case, understanding Mandeville's two faces may help us clarify for ourselves both the presuppositions and the limitations of the social theories that we have inherited from him. What appear as mere cracks in the edifice of his work have, in the intervening centuries, widened into fissures—the same fissures that divide our own sharply divergent ways of viewing the social world.

## 2. Virtue is Vice

To get a better sense of what I have called the 'moralist' and 'materialist' sides of Mandeville's thought, let us begin by returning to one prominent critic of the *Fable*.

Adam Smith, despite his aforementioned debts to Mandeville, devoted a section of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to refuting Mandeville and his predecessor La Rochefoucauld, whose systems he deemed ‘licentious’. The consequence of Mandeville’s thesis, Smith suggested, would ultimately be to ‘take away altogether the distinction between vice and virtue’.<sup>11</sup> Some variant of this charge was frequently made against Mandeville, and although he denied it repeatedly, it clearly touched on something deeply rooted in his thought.<sup>12</sup> But what are the implications of claiming that Mandeville sees no difference between virtue and vice? With only slight simplification, we might say that this can be taken to mean two distinct things: that virtue is vice, and that vice is virtue.

Virtue is vice: this is the project that Mandeville inherited from the seventeenth-century French moralists.<sup>13</sup> Both explicitly Augustinian Jansenists like Pascal and Nicole and their comparatively secular counterparts like La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyere were

---

<sup>11</sup> *Theory* VII.ii.4.6, 308. For varying accounts of Smith’s relationship to Mandeville, see Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*, 219-36; Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834* (Cambridge, 1996), 57-89; Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*; Daniel Luban, ‘Adam Smith on Vanity, Domination, and History’, *Modern Intellectual History* 9 (2012), 275-302.

<sup>12</sup> Mandeville would insist that he clearly distinguishes virtue (based on rational self-denial) from vice (based on indulgence of the passions), and that he similarly differentiates conduct with a virtuous motive from conduct that is vicious but beneficial (e.g. I, 48-49; I, 87). This, however, raises the further question of whether he actually believes that any conduct meets his criterion of virtue, since he suggests in places that all moral conduct is rooted in pride rather than rational self-denial (e.g. I, 51). After all, if all conduct is vicious by his definition, then there is little force in theoretically distinguishing between vice and a hypothetical virtue.

<sup>13</sup> I have adopted the conventional label ‘moralist’ to refer to a somewhat heterogeneous set of thinkers who would not, of course, always have seen themselves as part of a unified project. Space does not permit more than a cursory examination of them, and for the student of seventeenth-century French thought their differences will appear as important as their similarities, but for present purposes I believe that they can all be usefully contrasted with what I call the ‘materialist’ strain in Mandeville. Michael Moriarty’s recent trilogy of books is particularly helpful for background on this tradition: *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford, 2003); *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford, 2006); *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought* (Oxford, 2011). Other worthwhile treatments in English include Anthony Levi, *French Moralists: The Theory of the Passions 1585 to 1649* (Oxford, 1964); Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1980); Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*.

preoccupied with the notion that egoism or self-love (*amour-propre*) can lie at the root of every human action, no matter how seemingly virtuous or self-sacrificing. ‘Self-interest speaks all manner of tongues and plays all manner of parts, even that of the disinterested’, wrote La Rochefoucauld, meaning that our ‘virtues are, most often, only vices disguised’.<sup>14</sup> Society arises out of the varied manifestations of this fundamental egoism. ‘We have established and developed out of concupiscence admirable rules of polity, ethics, and justice’, Pascal wrote, ‘but at root, the evil root of man, this evil stuff of which we are made is only concealed; it is not pulled up’.<sup>15</sup>

What is the mechanism by which vice comes to imitate virtue? We might think of reasons that an egoist would be eager to convince others of her good intentions for purely instrumental reasons, in order to achieve other goals. Indeed, the moralists sometimes described *amour-propre* in this way, as in the following maxim of La Rochefoucauld:

It might seem that self-love is fooled by goodness, and that it forgets itself when we work for the advantage of others. But this is taking the safest road to achieve one’s ends; it is lending at interest under the pretext of giving; ultimately, it is winning others over by subtle and delicate means.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, trans. Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard (South Bend, 2001), no. 39 (10), epigraph (3).

<sup>15</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London, 1995), no. 211 (69). (I have followed this edition in using the Lafuma numbering for Pascal’s *Pensées*.)

<sup>16</sup> *Maxims*, no. 236 (47), translation emended. It is not clear, however, that it even makes sense to differentiate ‘material’ or ‘vulgar’ forms of self-interest from the desire for esteem when discussing La Rochefoucauld, as we might for later figures. Pierre Force rightly points us to La Rochefoucauld’s roots in Versailles court society, in which ‘a person’s interest is this person’s position within a scale of hierarchy and prestige’ (*Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, 176). In such a setting it becomes difficult to speak of some form of self-interest (such as wealth) independent of social standing. Indeed, La Rochefoucauld’s prefatory note to the fifth edition of the *Maxims* cautioned that ‘the word *Intérêt* does not always mean the interest concerned with material goods, but most often means the interest concerned with glory or honour’ (2). On the expansive meaning given to ‘interest’ by the French moralists more generally, see Moriarty, *Fallen Nature*, 191-96.

But crucially, the moralists did not generally view the goodwill of others as merely a means to some other end; rather, the desire for esteem itself (or what later thinkers would call ‘recognition’) was for them perhaps the strongest and most important of human drives.<sup>17</sup> La Rochefoucauld himself made this point, claiming that there are ‘more people without self-interest than without envy’, while Pascal insisted that ‘whatever possession [man] may own on earth, whatever health or essential amenity he may enjoy, he is dissatisfied unless he enjoys the good opinion of his fellows’.<sup>18</sup> More systematically, Pierre Nicole noted that *amour-propre* can imitate true charity out of fear or self-interest, but that the ability to explain human behavior from these obvious forms of egoism is quite limited. It is only the ‘desire to be loved’—more often referred to as ‘vanity’ or ‘pride’—that allows *amour-propre* to produce the variegated social world we see around us:

[T]here are many occasions in which neither fear nor self-interest is involved, and it is often quite easy to distinguish what is being done out of fear of other men or out of vulgar self-interest from what is done out of charitable impulse; but this is not the case when it comes to the pursuit of men’s love and esteem. This inclination is so cunning and so subtle, and at the same time so pervasive, that there is no action into which it cannot creep; and it knows so well how to assume the appearances of charity that it is almost impossible to know clearly what distinguishes the two...<sup>19</sup>

Thus egoism can produce such apparently non-egoistic behaviors as religious ascetism, martial valor, and even suicide. Furthermore, the desire for esteem from others typically

---

<sup>17</sup> The classic study of this frequent theme in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore, 1961).

<sup>18</sup> *Maxims*, no. 486 (87); *Pensées*, no. 470 (151).

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Nicole, ‘Of Charity and Self-Love’, trans. Elborg Forster, in J.B. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, two volumes (Cambridge, 1990), II, 370-87 (374). On Nicole see Dale Van Kley, ‘Pierre Nicole, Jansenism, and the Morality of Enlightened Self-Interest’, in Alan Charles Kors and Paul J. Korshin (eds.), *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany* (Philadelphia, 1987), 69-85.

becomes internalized as a desire for self-esteem, with the result that we can never truly know whether our own actions are the product of charity or self-love.

We should note a few features of this moralist project that will prove relevant for our discussion of Mandeville. First, it is essentially concerned with human motives rather than human behavior. While the moralists were of course aware of all the mundane forms of self-love that were conventionally understood as vice, they were particularly interested in those forms that were conventionally understood as virtue—ascetism, courage, self-sacrifice, and so forth. Thus their critique had to be not of the behavior itself but of the motives underlying it, and it was precisely because such behavior received social approval that the desire for esteem or praise came to figure so centrally in their account.

Second, on the moralist account, Mandeville's maxim 'private vices, public benefits' is true by definition. At least, this is the case if we abandon the idea of a true charity accessible through God's grace and view all human conduct as the product of a vicious self-love—a move already hinted at by La Rochefoucauld and subsequently followed by Mandeville.<sup>20</sup> The logic is simple: if self-love is a vice, and all actions originate in self-love, then *a fortiori* all beneficent actions originate in self-love, and are

---

<sup>20</sup> Both writers included disclaimers that their analyses applied only to humans 'in nature', not to those saved by divine grace. But it is fair to say that neither La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* nor Mandeville's *Fable* displayed much interest in the operations of the grace whose existence they professed to accept. (Indeed, Keohane notes that some of La Rochefoucauld's more theologically-minded contemporaries objected to his appropriation of Jansenist ideas for worldly purposes: *Philosophy and the State*, 307.) To be sure, La Rochefoucauld's case is more ambiguous than Mandeville's; from his earliest readers onward, there has been lively debate about the religious commitments (or lack thereof) of his work, and about whether it suggests that true virtue is impossible or merely rare. But at the very least he could plausibly be read as arguing for the essential viciousness of all human action. For a valuable discussion of these questions, see Moriarty, *Disguised Vices*, 253-75, 359-82.

thus vicious. It was in this respect that Smith argued that Mandeville aimed to destroy the distinction between vice and virtue.

But this points to a third feature of the moralist account: on its own it can only be a moral-philosophical doctrine without immediate relevance to concrete social analysis. The very fact that Mandeville's paradox becomes true by definition deprives it of any real empirical bite: it may be true that all public benefits originate in some form or other of private vice, but the more important practical question is which specific private vices we might expect, and which specific public benefits. More generally, the claim that all human action is egoistic does not lead in itself to any particular view of how humans will tend to behave; it is rather a philosophical stance on how we should view any such behavior.

In particular, the desire for esteem that was so central to the moralists does not in itself entail any behaviors of its own. Simpler passions such as hunger or lust have specific physical objects that allow us to predict the ways that they will manifest themselves, at least to a certain extent. But the desire for esteem, as Arthur Lovejoy notes, is 'wholly indeterminate with respect to the modes of behavior that may result from it', since the specific content of the actions it inspires will depend on precisely which things happen to be esteemed by its intended audience.<sup>21</sup> These social norms governing esteem, in turn, may vary widely according to time, place, and culture.<sup>22</sup> Thus

---

<sup>21</sup> Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Pascal was perhaps most forceful of the French writers in stressing the mutability of human nature and the variety of human goals; see, e.g., *Pensées*, no. 630 (209): 'There is nothing that cannot be made natural. There is nothing natural that cannot be lost'. Cf. Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought*, 126-36.

the moralist account of human nature can only be turned into a social theory if it is supplemented by a sociohistorical account of the values governing self-love.

### 3. Vice is Virtue

Vice is virtue: this was the project that pointed forward to economics and its characteristic mode of social analysis. The main thrust of this project was to show that various forms of apparently-vicious behavior had beneficial unintended consequences for society at large. It may be slightly misleading to identify this project (which I will call ‘materialist’ for reasons that I hope will become clear) with the claim that vice is virtue, at least on the terms that Mandeville sets for himself: he is keen to insist that virtue is a matter of intention, and that the fact that conduct is unintentionally beneficial does not make it virtuous.<sup>23</sup> But this line of thought presents a clear contrast to the moralist project of unmasking vice behind virtue, and the differences between the two are worth spelling out in more depth.

First, it is essentially concerned with behavior rather than motives. Whereas the moralists were particularly interested in the causes of behaviors conventionally understood as virtuous, the materialist project is instead interested in the effects of behaviors conventionally understood as vicious. The result is to diminish much of the impetus for examining the motives underlying such conduct. For the moralists, what was

---

<sup>23</sup> I, 87: ‘Men are not to be judg’d by the Consequences that may succeed their Actions, but the Facts themselves, and the Motives which it shall appear they acted from’. The sincerity of this doctrine has been doubted—most notably by F.B. Kaye, who claimed that Mandeville’s moral ‘rigorism’ was essentially extraneous to his thought, the fundamental tone of which was empirical and utilitarian (‘Introduction’, lii-lvi). If Mandeville’s real doctrine is utilitarian rather than rigorist, as Kaye suggests, it would in fact be fair to gloss it as suggesting that ‘vice is virtue’.

interesting was precisely the gap between motives and behavior: how, for instance, apparently altruistic conduct could spring from egoistic motives. For obvious reasons, this sort of investigation ceases to be of much interest when examining transparently selfish actions, and the intuitive move is simply to read off the motive from the behavior.

Second, whereas on the moralist account the claim that private vices create public benefits is true by definition, on the materialist account it becomes a matter of empirical inquiry. Of course, one might posit an outright theodicy in which *every* misdeed and misfortune ultimately contributes to the greater good, and in his more provocative moments Mandeville sometimes comes close to this sort of theodicy. But the more plausible claim is that some specific forms of private vices lead to some specific kinds of public benefits, and the task becomes to determine when and how this occurs. Greed, of course, has from Mandeville's time onward been taken as the classic example of such a beneficial vice.

Third, the desire for esteem—which played such a central role in the moralist account—largely drops out of the materialist one. If pride was for the moralist the most important of the seven deadly sins, the materialist tends to focus instead on the others—chiefly greed, but also gluttony, sloth, lust. Whatever psychological oversimplification results from this move may be offset by the fact that it provides a way of getting around the indeterminacy of the moralist view of human nature. Whereas pride may, as already mentioned, lead to virtually any behavior that happens to be esteemed, these other motives have more definite and material objects, leading to a vision of human nature that is more tractable for the purposes of practical analysis. The materialist's imagined agent

has a determinate set of wants ('preferences'), typically for some concrete object or sensation rather than for a nebulous good such as esteem; these preferences prescribe specific and intuitive behaviors that are balanced through some calculus of want-satisfaction. From an aggregate of these individual calculuses we can arrive at a vision of the society as a whole and the unintended benefits or harms (generally understood in similarly material terms) that arise out of individual actions.

We might usefully understand the difference between these two projects in terms of a distinction that was to become prominent in twentieth-century social theory. This is the contrast between what Talcott Parsons called 'normative order' and 'factual order', or what Jürgen Habermas called 'social integration' and 'system integration'.<sup>24</sup> In either case the distinction turns on whether social order is achieved by harmonizing actors' intentions through social or communicative processes—most obviously, through reaching some kind of shared understanding about what to do—or whether it is achieved through the unintended consequences of actions that occur behind the backs of the actors involved. (Smith's 'invisible hand' is the classic example of the latter.) Mandeville has traditionally been taken exclusively as a theorist of the second kind of order—indeed as its prototypical theorist, the man who suggests that sociability is altogether unnecessary, since all public benefits will come about through unintended consequences. But we will see that Mandeville is equally concerned with the first kind of order; he never suggests that a society can survive without a sociability that goes beyond the mere pursuit of brute

---

<sup>24</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, second edition, two volumes (New York, 1949), I, 91-92; Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, two volumes (Boston, 1984-87), II, 117.

interests, and in fact sociability itself is chief among the ‘public benefits’ whose origins he wishes to unearth.

More broadly, we might say that the *Fable* is centered on two main problems. The first is the problem of unintended consequences, exemplified by the relationship between personal luxury and communal prosperity. Passing from Mandeville through Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* to later inheritors like Hayek, it became a central problematic of economics as a social-scientific discipline.<sup>25</sup> The second, however, is the problem of social norms. Here the line of descent goes through Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Durkheim to Parsons, in whose hands it would become a central problematic of postwar sociology. What would come to appear as mutually exclusive ways of analyzing the social world remain united in Mandeville, coexisting uneasily under the overarching rubric of ‘private vices, public benefits’. As already suggested, it may be revealing—of the era more than the man—that he rarely distinguished between these two strands, or viewed them as opposed in the way that his various successors would come to do. In fact, it will be my contention that both strands are deeply embedded enough that it would be a mistake to claim that one or the other represents the ‘true’ Mandeville.

On the other hand, Mandeville’s own descriptions of his project do implicitly suggest that he was aware of its dual nature. In his preface to the *Fable*, he states the goals of the work as follows:

That in the first Place the People, who continually find fault with others, by reading [the work], would be taught to look at home, and examining their own Consciencs, be made asham’d of always railing at what they are more or less guilty of themselves; and that in the next, those who

---

<sup>25</sup> This is the lineage that Hayek himself wished to draw. See F.A. Hayek, ‘Dr Bernard Mandeville’, in *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (Chicago, 1978), 249-66.

are so fond of the Ease and Comforts, and reap all the Benefits that are the Consequence of a great and flourishing Nation, would learn more patiently to submit to those Inconveniences, which no Government upon Earth can remedy, when they should see the Impossibility of enjoying any great share of the first, without partaking likewise of the latter. (I, 8)

Here Mandeville distinguishes between two distinct goals: first, to reveal (by ‘examining their consciences’) the hidden vice behind the sanctimony of the ostensibly virtuous, and second, to demonstrate the necessity of certain obvious vices (‘inconveniences’) to produce ‘a great and flourishing nation’. We can see that one of these is essentially a moral-philosophical claim about human psychology, while the second is essentially an empirical claim about the unintended consequences of human behavior. He echoes this dual account of his project elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Nor did this basic split go unnoticed by his critics. ‘Is it not very inconsistent’, David Hume asked, ‘for an author to assert in one page, that moral distinctions are inventions of politicians for public interest; and in the next page maintain, that vice is advantageous to the public?’<sup>27</sup>

There is, of course, no inherent contradiction in pursuing both such projects simultaneously. For all of his philosophical importance, Mandeville remained in many ways a polemicist who defined himself first and foremost against the views of his opponents. Both of these strands buttressed his larger point that vice was inevitable and

---

<sup>26</sup> Most notably in the vindication of the *Fable* towards the end of Part I (I, 229-30). It is true, however, that in Part II of the *Fable*, Mandeville’s self-assessments became more ‘moralist’ in our terms—that is, more focused on the moral-psychological as opposed to the empirical aspects of his project (see especially II, 102; II, 356). The likely reason for this shift, in my view, is that in the course of defending himself against critics Mandeville quietly dropped many of his more provocative empirical claims about the benefits of specific forms of brute vice, and retreated to the relatively safer ground of portraying himself as purely an ascetic Christian moralist. On this shift see also Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*, 175-76. For the view that the differences between the two parts of the *Fable* are stark enough to make them two philosophically distinct works, see Mikko Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume: Anatomists of Civil Society* (Oxford, 2013), 41-102.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Of Refinement in the Arts’, in *Essays Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 268-80 (280). The charge of inconsistency was at least as old as Francis Hutcheson’s *Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* in 1725.

necessary to human society, by casting doubt either on the very possibility of true virtue or on its ability to provide the benefits to which inhabitants of modern commercial societies were accustomed. Yet we will see that the two strands ultimately imply two very different visions of human nature and human society, and that the tensions between them are visible throughout the *Fable*.

#### 4. Real and Imaginary

Mandeville begins the *Fable* proper with ‘An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue’, one of the work’s most notorious sections and one which betrays a clear debt to the French moralists. The most important point of influence is the central role that Mandeville attaches to the desire for esteem, or pride, in the operation of morality. But whereas his predecessors had predominantly focused on the ways that pride causes esteem-seekers to obey existing moral norms, in the ‘Enquiry’ Mandeville goes farther to suggest that it is only due to the desire for praise that such norms exist at all. Morality began at a determinate moment, which he describes as follows:

Lawgivers and other wise men...observing that none were either so savage as not to be charm'd with Praise, or so despicable as patiently to bear Contempt, justly concluded, that Flattery must be the most powerful Argument that could be used to Human Creatures...Having by this artful way of Flattery insinuated themselves into the Hearts of Men, they began to instruct them in the Notions of Honour and Shame...  
(I, 42-43)

More simply, ‘the moral Virtues are the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride’ (I, 51).

Morality owes to pride not merely its origin but also its continued existence, since only through pride can anyone ever act in accordance with moral norms. Even the person who has internalized these norms to such an extent that he no longer seeks (and may even

avoid) actual praise from others, ‘must confess, that the Reward of a Virtuous Action, which is the Satisfaction that ensues upon it, consists in a certain Pleasure he procures to himself by Contemplating on his own Worth’ (I, 57)—and thus is a form of pride and self-flattery. These conclusions largely restate (albeit in a more polemical form) the account of human psychology developed by the moralists.

But Mandeville develops this discourse in notable ways. For one thing, as Dickey notes, he historicizes it, turning an account of the operation of *amour-propre* in seventeenth-century France into an account of the development of pride across time and space.<sup>28</sup> But equally important, as Hundert suggests, is Mandeville’s attempt to make the moralist account of human nature scientific by grounding it on a ‘thorough-going naturalistic anthropology’.<sup>29</sup> Whereas the moralist discussion of *amour-propre* and the passions tended to be impressionistic and aphoristic, with no pretensions to scientific rigor, Mandeville discusses humans in essentially mechanistic and naturalistic terms influenced by the materialist philosophy of Hobbes and Gassendi. This means that every passion must for him be grounded in some aspect of humans’ corporeal nature.

It is because of this naturalism that Mandeville develops his theory in ways that will prove crucial for our purposes. For the moralists, there was no clear distinction in kind between pride and the more sensuous passions. Yet on the terms of a materialistic anthropology, the notion that humans can act not merely in pursuit of sensuous goods but also immaterial goods like esteem becomes more complicated and perplexing. Thus

---

<sup>28</sup> Dickey, ‘Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility’, esp. 387-88.

<sup>29</sup> Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*, 37.

Mandeville's account of the 'Origin of Moral Virtue' focuses heavily on the moment when humans are tricked into substituting 'imaginary' pleasures for 'real' ones:

[I]t is not likely that any Body could have persuaded them to disapprove of their natural Inclinations, or prefer the good of others to their own, if at the same time he had not shew'd them an Equivalent to be enjoy'd as a Reward for the Violence, which by so doing they of necessity must commit upon themselves. Those that have undertaken to civilize mankind, were not ignorant of this; but *being unable to give so many real Rewards as would satisfy all Persons for every individual Action, they were forc'd to contrive an imaginary one*, that as a general Equivalent for the trouble of Self-denial should serve on all Occasions, and without costing any thing either to themselves or others, be yet a most acceptable Recompense to the Receivers.  
(I, 42, emphasis added)

This 'imaginary reward' is, of course, praise. The critical episode in the story of how 'Savage Man was broke' (I, 46), and humans became moral and social beings, is the moment that they were convinced to seek the purely ideal pleasure of esteem rather than natural sensuous pleasures. Mandeville is frequently caustic in his mockery of human folly in sacrificing the real to the imaginary: 'the great Recompence for which the most exalted Minds have with so much Alacrity sacrificed their Quiet, Health, sensual Pleasures, and every Inch of themselves, has never been any thing else but the Breath of Man, the Aerial Coin of Praise' (I, 54-55). Pride is 'the Sorcerer, that is able to divert all other Passions from their natural Objects' (II, 96).

We must clarify how pride is 'imaginary' for Mandeville. He does not mean by this that the passion itself is weaker than the sensuous passions, or even that it is artificial in the sense of being created by life in society. Pride and shame, 'in which the Seeds of most Virtues are contained, are Realities in our Frame, and not imaginary Qualities' (I, 67). They have attendant physical symptoms, like other passions, and the pleasures and pains associated with them are in that sense 'real'. In Part II of the *Fable*, Mandeville develops this point further by claiming that both pride and shame are simply

manifestations of ‘self-liking’, an over-valuation of one’s own worth that is implanted in human nature alongside ‘self-love’, the desire for self-preservation (II, 130). (Rousseau, himself a keen reader of Mandeville, would draw a similar distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour de soi-même* in the *Second Discourse*.) Mandeville introduces self-liking both to develop a naturalistic, ethically neutral way of discussing the theologically-laden concept of pride, and also to stress that the desire for esteem is a fundamental rather than adventitious part of human nature.<sup>30</sup>

Thus pride and shame are themselves ‘real’ and natural; they are ‘imaginary’ only in the sense that their object is an incorporeal one. Although ‘Shame is a real Passion, the Evil to be fear’d from it is altogether imaginary, and has no Existence but in our own Reflection on the Opinion of others’ (II, 95). As noted, Mandeville generally refers in contemptuous language to this tendency to dwell in the ideal world of others’ opinions, and there are specific evils—such as dueling—that in his view would be alleviated if humans would reflect on the unreality of pride and focus instead on their real interests. Yet for all this, we must remember that in the broader framework of his theory the move from real to imaginary is a crucial and necessary one, for it is only through the imaginary pleasures of flattery and esteem that humans are able to obey moral norms and live together socially.

---

<sup>30</sup> The distinction between self-love and self-liking in Part II, however, seems not so much a fundamentally new vision of human nature as a refinement of concepts that are both inchoately present even in Part I. For that reason I am not fully persuaded by Tolonen’s view that Part II marks a ‘decisive turn’ away from the materialist ‘Hobbism’ of Part I, and a ‘whole-hearted shift in emphasis from self-love to self-liking’ (*Mandeville and Hume*, 84-85). The power of pride to subdue bodily desires, as we have seen, plays a central role in Mandeville’s argument from the beginning, and the associated tension between moralism and materialism is visible throughout his work rather than being resolved definitively one way or the other.

But regardless of whether the realm of the imaginary is judged positively or negatively, introducing the distinction between real and imaginary proves to be a critically important move for Mandeville's broader theory. By doing so he separates out pride, and with it the entire world of reflection, esteem-seeking, and norm-following, and sets it against the 'real' drives—those that are sensuous, unreflective and relatively independent of norms. This, in turn, raises the further question of the relative power of these two sets of drives.<sup>31</sup> Are we to take humans as being primarily motivated by the imaginary or the real, as primarily esteem-seekers or sensuous utility-maximizers?

Mandeville generally follows his French predecessors in stressing the overwhelming power of pride and its ability to subdue all the sensuous and natural passions: 'The Greediness we have after the Esteem of others, and the Raptures we enjoy in the Thoughts of being liked, and perhaps admired, are Equivalentents that overpay the Conquest of the strongest Passions' (I, 68). Those under the spell of self-liking 'are deaf to the loudest Calls of Nature, and will rebuke the strongest Appetites that should pretend to be gratify'd at the Expence of that Passion' (II, 136). As a result 'there is no Danger so great...nor any manner of Death so terrible' that it cannot be faced with the aid of pride; 'no good Offices or Duties...nor any Instances of Benevolence, Humanity, or other Social Virtue' that cannot be produced from it (II, 64-65). In such passages the material

---

<sup>31</sup> Framing the issue in this way allows us to sidestep certain issues that have been prominent in the scholarly debates about Mandeville. For instance, commentators since Kaye have dwelt on the issue of whether Mandeville's rigorism was genuine—that is, did he actually believe that any gratification of a passion is vicious and that true virtue consists only in self-denial? But our discussion need not take a position on this question—the issue is simply the relative power of the passion of pride as against the sensuous passions, regardless of whether the indulgence of these passions is judged by rigorist or non-rigorist standards. Humans will be judged as equally vicious (or not) whether we take them to be esteem-seekers or sensuous maximizers, since both visions involve the indulgence of one or the other set of passions.

and sensuous aspects of human existence seem to fade into the background, and humans are presented as creatures who are shaped primarily by the imaginary world of norms and opinions in which they come to dwell.<sup>32</sup>

Yet elsewhere, Mandeville seems to give precedence to the sensuous pleasures. Indeed, the very rhetoric of ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ might be taken to tilt the balance in advance in favor of the sensuous, by presenting it as a somehow more fundamental and non-negotiable part of human life. While the prominence of the sensuous drives may diminish during Mandeville’s discussions of pride and honour, elsewhere they are very much in the foreground, as he devotes much of the *Fable* to the ways that humans gratify the more mundane vices of greed, lust, gluttony, and so forth. He gives this focus its most explicit expression in the crucial ‘Remark O’, which deals with ‘real pleasures’. Here ‘real’ comes to mean not merely ‘material’ but also ‘actual’—that is, real (material) pleasures are the ones that people actually pursue. And in this discussion Mandeville abandons any exploration of the ways in which vice can imitate virtue, instead dwelling upon the brute hypocrisy of the seemingly virtuous and the universality of sensuous pleasure-seeking. While elsewhere Mandeville is content to show that the adherence to ascetic or self-denying moral norms is motivated by pride rather than disinterested virtue, here he dismisses the notion that these norms are actually adhered to at all:

I expect to be ask’d why in the Fable I have call’d those Pleasures real that are directly opposite to those which I own the wise Men of all Ages have extoll’d as the most valuable. My Answer is, because I don’t call things Pleasures which Men say are best, but such as they seem to be most pleased with; how can I believe that a Man’s chief Delight is in the Embellishments of the Mind, when I see him ever employ’d about and daily pursue the Pleasures that are contrary to them?  
(I, 151)

---

<sup>32</sup> For more examples of this theme, see I, 213-14; II, 74-75.

After describing at great length the hedonism and pleasure-seeking to be found even among the supposedly virtuous, he concludes: ‘the real Pleasures of all Men in Nature are worldly and sensual, if we judge from their Practice’ (I, 166).<sup>33</sup> Here and elsewhere, Mandeville presents a far more skeptical view about the power of pride to restrain the sensuous passions, of the imaginary to control the real.

‘I don’t call things Pleasures which Men say are best, but such as they seem to be most pleased with’: it was to be an influential move in the history of the social sciences. Indeed, the great Chicago School economist George Stigler, one of Mandeville’s foremost latter-day admirers, cited this passage as an early example of the ‘revealed preference’ approach—the notion that the social scientist need not be concerned with motives, since these can simply be inferred unproblematically from behavior.<sup>34</sup> Nothing could be further from Mandeville’s position in his moralist moments: he exhaustively details how pride creates a gap between inner motive and outward conduct, transmuting selfishness into apparent self-renunciation, and he stresses that it is only by noticing this gap that we can understand the conduct itself. But the brute behaviorism on display in his discussion of ‘real pleasures’ is not a momentary slip; it reflects a deep-seated (if only sporadically evident) strain in Mandeville’s thought.

---

<sup>33</sup> The phrase ‘in nature’ is liable to mislead us here: we might take it to mean that Mandeville is saying only that the pleasures of humans in the state of nature are sensual, whereas the pleasures of humans in society might not be. But he immediately clarifies that ‘nature’ here stands in contrast not to ‘society’ but to ‘grace’: ‘I say all Men *in Nature*, because Devout Christians, who alone are to be excepted here, being regenerated, and preternaturally assisted by Divine Grace, cannot be said to be in Nature’ (I, 166, original emphasis). This, as noted above, was a disclaimer also to be found in La Rochefoucauld. Thus Mandeville’s claim that all men ‘in nature’ prefer sensual pleasures applies to everyone outside of the (perhaps nonexistent) ranks of the saved.

<sup>34</sup> George J. Stigler, *The Theory of Price*, third edition (New York, 1966), 68.

## 5. The Power of Pride

One revealing discussion of these issues comes in Part II of the *Fable*. Cleomenes, Mandeville's spokesman in the dialogue, has just finished drawing up a 'Portrait of a complete Gentleman', apparently well-mannered and virtuous in every respect, before demonstrating the prideful roots of every aspect of his conduct. The message, as before, is that all moral and social virtues are (or at least can be) the result of the desire for esteem. But Horatio, the foil to Cleomenes, is unsatisfied with this explanation. If all humans are naturally prideful, and pride by itself can produce this sort of virtuous character, he asks, then why does it not do so more often? Why are there so few virtuous people to be found in the world?

If Pride could be the Cause of all this, the Effect of it would sometimes appear... why is it so very seldom, that many Virtues and good Qualities are seen to meet in one Individual?  
(II, 75)

Horatio's question touches on a difficulty in the moralist discourse on pride. Essentially the problem is this: if we take the desire for esteem to be the strongest of all human drives, able to reshape and overrule all other natural passions, and if it is virtuous conduct in accordance with social norms that receives esteem, then we would expect that prideful human beings would nearly always act in accordance with such norms. In fact, it becomes difficult to understand why human behavior frequently diverges so widely from these norms—in Horatio's terms, why virtuous conduct (whether genuine or feigned) is so rare. To return once more to terms that were to become prominent in twentieth-century social theory, prideful actors run the risk of seeming 'oversocialized'—mindless norm-

followers whose behavior embodies the dominant values of their society to a degree that real human behavior rarely if ever does.<sup>35</sup>

There are at least two possible ways of resolving this difficulty. One is to suggest that the economy of esteem is more complicated than the simple account above would suggest: that it is not virtuous conduct alone that receives esteem, or that the norms governing human behavior are multiple rather than unitary. This solution preserves the premise that humans are fundamentally social creatures whose action is governed above all by pride and the desire for esteem. The other solution is to drop the notion that pride is the overriding determinant of human behavior, and to suggest that humans typically fail to live up to the dictates of moral norms because their desire for esteem is overruled by more immediate and pressing desires. Whereas the first line of argument remains within the ‘moralist’ horizon by maintaining the centrality of pride, this second line of argument corresponds to the ‘materialist’ outlook by stressing the dominance of the real over the imaginary.

Cleomenes’s reply to Horatio pursues both of these solutions. He lists ‘several Reasons’ why ‘so few Persons...ever arrive at any thing like this high pitch of Accomplishments’. In the first place there is the fact that ‘Men differ in Temperament’, in the second that these natural temperaments are varyingly ‘check’d or encourag’d by Education’. A third factor is ‘the different Perception Men have of Happiness, according to which the Love of Glory determines them different ways...So that, tho’ they all love

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Dennis H. Wrong, ‘The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology’, *American Sociological Review* 26 (1961), 183-93.

Glory, they set out differently to acquire it' (II, 75-76). In other words, Cleomenes explains the prevalence of vice through a mixture of both material factors (such as temperament, which for him is purely a matter of physiology) and social ones (such as education and differing conceptions of the good). Horatio, unsatisfied, continues to press the point, and Cleomenes lists more reasons why virtuous behavior is so rarely found:

[I]n some perhaps the predominant Passion [pride] is not strong enough entirely to subdue the rest: Love or Covetousness may divert others: Drinking, Gaming may draw away many, and break in upon their Resolution; they may not have strength to persevere in a Design, and steadily to pursue the same Ends; or they may want a true Taste and Knowledge of what is esteem'd by Men of Judgment; or lastly they may not be so thoroughly well-bred as is required to conceal themselves on all Emergencies... (II, 77)

In this response Cleomenes seems to give greater precedence to the sensuous, by emphasizing the ways in which baser desires thwart the pursuit of esteem; he also attributes vice to a deficiency in the passion of pride in relation to the sensuous passions.

But later in the same dialogue, Cleomenes elaborates still further on these themes:

[T]hose we call Shameless, are not more destitute of Pride than their Betters. Remember what I have said of Education, and the Power of it; you may add Inclinations, Knowledge, and Circumstances; for as Men differ in all these, so they are differently influenced and wrought upon by all the Passions. There is nothing that some Men may not be taught to be ashamed of. The same Passion, that makes the well-bred Man and prudent Officer value and secretly admire themselves for the Honour and Fidelity they display, may make the Rake and Scoundrel brag of their Vices and boast of their Impudence. (II, 90)

Here, he seems to reverse what was said in the previous response: the vicious are 'not more destitute of pride' than the virtuous; rather, they are simply governed by different norms of pride and shame.<sup>36</sup>

What is notable about this discussion is how much Cleomenes (and thus Mandeville) vacillates between the two lines of argument discussed above. At times he is

---

<sup>36</sup> Later, Cleomenes suggests that humans are differently endowed in terms of pride, but that this is a social rather than natural fact: 'I am convinced that the difference there is in Men, as to the Degrees of their Pride, is more owing to Circumstances and Education, than any thing in their Formation' (II, 122).

inclined to view human behavior primarily as a set of varied manifestations of pride and esteem-seeking; at other times he suggests a view in which pride is relatively ineffectual in most people and easily overturned by the more immediate and sensual drives. The reader is left uncertain about the relationship and relative strength of the real and the imaginary, and the ambivalence of this whole discussion suggests that perhaps Mandeville was uncertain about it himself.

## 6. Nature and Culture

This is not to say that such ambivalence is fatal to Mandeville's theory. In itself, there is no contradiction in suggesting that both material and social drives play some role in constituting human behavior in society, and it may even be a virtue to avoid a one-sided explanation that places all weight on one or the other side of the scales. Nonetheless, Mandeville's ambiguity on this point is important, for we arrive at very different visions of the social world depending on how much weight we attribute to each set of drives.

A social world made up of fundamentally prideful actors is characterized, above all, by multiplicity and contingency. This, as already noted, is due to the indeterminate nature of pride; it can take on virtually any form depending on the norms by which it is governed. 'It is incredible, what strange, various, unaccountable and contradictory Forms we may be shaped into' by pride, Mandeville tells us, and thus there is 'no Achievement good or bad, that the human Body or Mind are capable of, which it may not seem to perform' (II, 90). Prideful actors may be warlike or peaceable, lavish or ascetic, pious or

libertine. Although they are egoists on Mandeville's terms, in many cases their behavior may not appear self-interested in any intuitive sense.

One important implication of this view is that human behavior is in a deep sense historically and culturally constituted. The norms directing the operations of pride, and with them the agent's conduct, vary widely across time and space: 'the fear of Shame in general is a matter of Caprice, that varies with Modes and Customs, and may be fix'd on different Objects, according to the different Lessons we have receiv'd, and the Precepts we are imbued with' (II, 95). Thus, any social theory that aims to understand or predict the behavior of prideful actors must have an eye to culture and history.

A social world made up of fundamentally sensuous-minded actors, on the other hand, is far less varied and contingent. Such agents have a set of fairly determinate wants, which they can satisfy in ways that are somewhat variable but nonetheless limited. (Hunger can be slaked by plain bread as well as by filet mignon—but it cannot be slaked by art or love or prayer.) The actor's behavior will be determined by the attempt to satisfy these wants according to the external constraints facing her. Such behavior will be 'self-interested' in an intuitive sense, and thus fairly predictable given knowledge of the external constraints.<sup>37</sup> History and culture become relatively unimportant on this view; at

---

<sup>37</sup> Of course, we must be careful not to underestimate how varied the modes of satisfying even unreflective desires like hunger can be. Nor should we deny that there are in fact interesting histories to be written centered on the development of such modes of satisfying basic needs—'materialist' history in whatever form remains a fertile analytical tool. But however varied the historically-constituted ways of satisfying hunger (for instance) may be, nonetheless they are fundamentally more constrained and limited than the modes of satisfying pride. Any such mode of food consumption, for example, will be constrained above all by the imperative to provide individuals with enough calories to sustain them physically from day to day; analogous constraints could likely be provided for other physical needs. Yet it is difficult to think of any such constraint upon the operations of the desire for esteem; its protean nature means that it can encourage many kinds of behavior that bear no obvious relation to the imperatives of social reproduction. Thus it is fair to say that the behavior of prideful actors remains far less predictable, given a knowledge of the material constraints facing them, than the behavior of sensuous-minded actors.

most they are worth examining to gain knowledge of the constraints on individual action, but they are essentially exogenous to the actor and exert little influence on her desires themselves. Preferences, in the language of two of Mandeville's leading twentieth-century heirs, are 'stable'.<sup>38</sup>

Characteristically, we can detect elements of both these visions in Mandeville. On the one hand, he argues against the existence of a single rational *summum bonum* by proclaiming a strong form of cultural relativism:

[O]ur Liking or Disliking of things chiefly depends on Mode and Custom... In Morals there is no greater Certainty [than in aesthetics]... What Men have learned from their Infancy enslaves them, and the Force of Custom warps Nature, and at the same time imitates her in such a manner, that it is often difficult to know which of the two we are influenced by. (I, 330)

If the general sentiment was already a familiar one from the skeptical tradition, in Part II of the *Fable* Mandeville goes further than his predecessors by offering a conjectural history of the development of human society from its earliest beginnings. By highlighting the enormous difference between 'Man in his Savage State' and man 'as a Member of a Society and a taught animal' (I, 205), and by outlining the gradual and spontaneous development not merely of social institutions but of the human personality itself, he buttresses the vision of humans as historically and culturally constituted on a deep level, with aims and desires that are far more the product of custom than of nature.

But although Mandeville never explicitly repudiates this relativism, he frequently undercuts it elsewhere in the *Fable*. One such passage is the previously-discussed chapter

---

<sup>38</sup> George J. Stigler and Gary S. Becker, 'De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum', *The American Economic Review* 67:2 (1977), 76-90. While Stigler and Becker are not pure 'materialists' in that they allow for desires for social distinction, fashion, and so on, they are adamant that human behavior should always be viewed as the product of 'utility maximizing with stable tastes', in contrast to 'approaches based on custom and tradition' (82). It can readily be seen that the stable preferences approach is the heir to the 'real pleasures' strain in Mandeville's thought.

on ‘real pleasures’, with its sweeping conclusion that all people are first and foremost concerned with ‘worldly and sensual’ pleasures. Another revealing example comes in his discussion of luxury and frugality in ‘Remark Q’. Here as elsewhere, Mandeville seems to arrive at his argument negatively, according to the doctrine that he wants to refute. Whereas he formulates his most full-blown defense of cultural relativism in order to refute Shaftesbury and other proponents of a *summum bonum*, here he is concerned to refute those admirers of the Dutch Republic who argued that England should emulate its austerity and frugality. In order to do so, Mandeville (himself, of course, a native of Holland) argues that the Dutch were forced into frugality rather than adopting it by choice. It was only because of external constraints—the expense of war with Spain, overpopulation of the land, heavy taxes—that the Dutch arrived at their famous frugality, he suggests. Therefore the English, not subject to such constraints, should feel no need to emulate them (I, 187).

Thus in his attempt to vindicate luxury and refute frugality, Mandeville slips into a sort of structural determinism in which desires are fixed and only constraints are mutable:<sup>39</sup>

Men are never, or at least very seldom, reclaimed from their darling Passions, either by Reason or Precept, and...if any thing ever draws ‘em from what they are naturally propense to, it must be a Change in their Circumstances or their Fortunes. (I, 182)

He has previously stressed the power of pride to suppress all the sensuous passions and to overcome virtually any obstacle. If pride is able to make people courageous or pious or

---

<sup>39</sup> To be sure, it is not inconsistent for Mandeville to say that the passions are unaffected by reason; he always argues that action must spring from one or another passion. But in this discussion the passion of pride seems to drop out of the picture, and with it the regulation of action by norms (‘precept’).

even suicidal, one might reasonably ask Mandeville, why is it not sufficient to make them frugal? But he does not want to concede the point, for his goal is to show that frugality is not merely unwise but impossible. Therefore he rejects the notion that mere norms are sufficient to inculcate austerity: ‘to make a Nation generally frugal, the Necessaries of Life must be scarce, and consequently dear...let the best Politician do what he can, the Profuseness or Frugality of a People in general, must always depend’ on structural and material factors (I, 183). Here and elsewhere, his argument implicitly undercuts his claims about the cultural specificity of norms and goals.

In his discussions of nature and custom, Mandeville betrays some of the same tensions that were found in his discussion of the real and imaginary. The tensions are related, for the relevance or irrelevance of history and culture to human behavior is a direct function of the relevance or irrelevance of pride: only insofar as conduct takes place in the ideal world of norms and customs do history and culture become crucial for comprehending it. As before, we can see that these divides correspond broadly to the moralist and materialist sides of Mandeville’s thought.

## 7. Two Concepts of Hypocrisy

As a social critic, Mandeville’s fundamental theme was hypocrisy. Indeed, it is difficult to come up with a thinker who was more exhaustive in investigating and exposing hypocrisy.<sup>40</sup> Taken as polemic, Mandeville’s basic point regarding hypocrisy is

---

<sup>40</sup> On the theme of hypocrisy in Mandeville see David Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond* (Princeton, 2008), 45-73.

intuitive and needs little further elaboration: despite all their pretenses to the contrary, the ostensibly virtuous and the ostentatiously moralistic are just as selfish as everyone else. Their morality and piety are a sham; ‘of Virtue or Religion there is not an hundredth Part in Reality of what there is in Appearance’ (II, 340). But what is the appearance in this scheme, and what is the reality? On closer inspection, it becomes evident that there are two somewhat distinct kinds of hypocrisy that figure prominently in the *Fable*.<sup>41</sup>

The first is what we might label ‘refined’ hypocrisy. It is found among those who are by all appearances virtuous—that is, whose behavior conforms to moral norms—and it resides in the gap between the agent’s professed and actual motives for such behavior. The basic drive underlying refined hypocrisy is pride: because virtuous behavior receives esteem, the prideful behave virtuously while feigning disinterested motives. And because refined hypocrisy is essentially a matter of motives rather than behavior, detecting it requires subtle and probing investigation of human psychology. We can see all these facets of refined hypocrisy in Mandeville’s description of the self-examination of Cleomenes, his spokesman in Part II of the *Fable*:

Cleomenes seemed charitable, and was a Man of strict Morals, yet he would often complain that he was not possess’d of one Christian Virtue, and *found fault with his own Actions, that had all the Appearances of Goodness; because he was conscious, he said, that they were perform’d from a wrong Principle*. The Effects of his Education, and his Aversion to Infamy, had always been strong enough to keep him from Turpitude; but this he ascribed to his Vanity, which he complain’d was in such full Possession of his Heart, that he knew no Gratification of any Appetite from which he was able to exclude it. Having always been a Man of unblameable Behaviour, the Sincerity of his Belief had made no visible Alteration in his Conduct to outward Appearances; but in private he never ceas’d from examining himself.

(II, 18, emphasis added)

---

<sup>41</sup> Dickey seems to have something similar in mind when he suggests that there are ‘two dimensions’ of hypocrisy in Mandeville: ‘Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility’, 412. My distinction between refined and brute hypocrisy is somewhat different, however, from Mandeville’s own later distinction between ‘malicious’ and ‘fashionable’ hypocrisy and from Runciman’s related distinction between ‘first-order’ and ‘second-order’ hypocrisy. See Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and The Usefulness of Christianity in War*, ed. M.M. Goldsmith (London, 1971), 201-02; Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy*, 51-56.

One important aspect of refined hypocrisy that this passage suggests is that it need not be conscious. When the socialization process is successful, the desire for esteem gives way (at least in large part) to the desire for self-esteem, meaning that actors may frequently behave virtuously even when doing so does not win praise from those around them. Refined hypocrites may genuinely wish to behave virtuously, and even believe that they are doing so, even though their conduct originates in a prideful desire to think well of themselves. Thus Mandeville speaks of ‘that strong Habit of Hypocrisy, by the Help of which, we have learned from our Cradle to hide even from our selves the vast Extent of Self-Love’ (I, 135).

In contrast to this is what we may label ‘brute’ hypocrisy. While refined hypocrisy is characterized by the gap between professed and actual motives, brute hypocrisy is characterized by the gap between professed and actual behavior—‘the Disagreement between the Words and Actions of Men’ (II, 348). And whereas refined hypocrisy involves the conformity to moral norms out of selfish motives, brute hypocrisy involves the failure to conform to such norms at all. Because brute hypocrisy is a matter of behavior rather than motives, exposing it does not require any refined psychological investigation; it simply requires calling attention to the publicly visible failure of the self-righteous to live up to their professed ideals. It is in this regard that we may understand Mandeville’s fixation on the sensual indulgences of the clergy and the high-and-mighty, and the gap between those pleasures ‘which Men say are best’ and those which ‘they seem to be most pleased with’ (I, 151). Brute hypocrisy accounts for the fact ‘that the

Theory of Virtue is so well understood, and the Practice of it so rarely to be met with' (I, 168).

As before, there is nothing inherently contradictory about the coexistence of these two forms of hypocrisy. Both buttress Mandeville's basic point that hypocrisy is universal and necessary for society;<sup>42</sup> all humans are sinners, he suggests, either because they fail to live up to their ideals or because they live up to them out of pride. Moreover, he suggests that in many cases the two forms of hypocrisy blend together. Such is the case with the well-mannered behavior characteristic of the 'Beau Monde': the refined gentleman is given nearly unlimited license to indulge his appetites, provided that he conforms to a set of relatively unobtrusive social norms.

But as before, the two forms have significantly different implications for how we perceive the social world. If refined hypocrites behave in accordance with moral and social norms, whatever the content of these norms may be, brute hypocrites merely pay lip service to these norms while indulging in sensual pleasures. As we saw with regard to pride and the sensuous passions, much comes to depend on the weight attributed to each set of factors. What proportion of humans are refined hypocrites and what proportion brute hypocrites? This is not a question that Mandeville ever asks; he is content simply to argue that they are all hypocrites of one kind or the other. In general he relies on a sort of principle of maximum uncharitability, burrowing down psychologically as far as necessary—but only as far as necessary—to convict his targets of vice. When he can indict the bishop for carrying on with the chambermaid, he does so; it is only when there

---

<sup>42</sup> Mandeville notes that 'it is impossible we could be sociable Creatures without Hypocrisy' (I, 349).

is no chambermaid to be found that he focuses in on the more psychologically complex operations of vanity and pride. (Among his other contributions to social science, he may have inaugurated the venerable procedure of explaining as much as possible with reference to brute self-interest, then using norms as a kind of *deus ex machina* to plug whatever explanatory gaps remain.) Given his recurrent focus on the baser failings of the ostensibly righteous, however, the reader could be forgiven for coming away with the impression that the vast majority of humans are brute hypocrites.

#### 8. Economies, Moral and Literal

Our discussion began with the image of Mandeville as proto-economist that has been the most enduring legacy of the *Fable*. We may now return to this image in order to examine the extent to which Mandeville may properly be viewed as a specifically economic thinker at all. Is the economic Mandeville solely an anachronistic imposition, or does it reflect something real and important about his project?

We may begin by noting the obvious fact that an enormous amount of the *Fable* (or more specifically, Part I of the *Fable*) deals with what we would intuitively understand as economic phenomena. These are not limited to the subject matter of what had already emerged as the discipline of political economy—the balance of trade, the composition of the labor force, and so forth. Mandeville also investigates in detail the newly emergent forms of vice characteristic of England’s nascent commercial society: the mundane duplicity involved in everyday commercial transactions, the ways that the impersonality of the money economy helps conceal the predation and degradation

involved in economic life, the spur to conspicuous consumption provided by the anonymity of cities.

In these and other respects, we can see the ways in Mandeville's scheme of private vices and public benefits is centrally (although far from exclusively) economic in nature. Thus the image of him as economic thinker is not purely anachronistic. But this raises a further question that is more important for our purposes: how are we to understand economic behavior in terms of the two strands of Mandeville's thought that we have been tracing? To be sure, he takes various forms of greed, or what we would label 'economic self-interest', to be perhaps the most important private vices insofar as they create public prosperity. But are we to take this economic interest as a sensuous or a social passion? Is its object a real or an imaginary one? Is it a product of nature or of culture? In other words, does Mandeville understand it in materialist or moralist terms?

One plausible view would read Mandeville as suggesting that economic interest is simply the most recent in a succession of historically situated forms of pride.<sup>43</sup> Whereas actors in previous societies sought esteem through martial valor, piety, honour, and the like, the breakdown of these sets of norms means that economic status becomes the principle means by which agents seek esteem. On this account, Mandeville's account of economic motivation is deeply 'moralist' in nature: he takes the true object of economic interest not to be the material rewards that are most immediately pursued, but rather the imaginary reward of esteem that results from them, and he takes the forms of esteem-

---

<sup>43</sup> This view is suggested by Dickey, 'Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility', 406-08; Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 34.

seeking to be dictated by historically-given social norms. This is the understanding of economic motivation that was systematically developed by Adam Smith, who stressed that ‘it is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us’ when we pursue economic interest.<sup>44</sup> Its twentieth-century inheritor was the economic sociology of Karl Polanyi and his successors, with its vision of an economy ‘embedded’ in broader social relationships.

There is a great deal in the *Fable* to support placing Mandeville within this tradition. It is worth noting, to begin with, that the seemingly-simple concept of ‘economic interest’ appears nowhere in his work, and that his view of economic behavior is more complicated than the notion that people typically strive to increase their wealth. Typical of his era, Mandeville instead differentiates the behaviors that we would label economic interest into avarice (the tendency to save money) and prodigality (the tendency to spend it on goods). If the archetypical figures of subsequent economic thought are the profit-maximizing entrepreneur and the rational wage-earner who saves some of his income while consuming the rest, the equivalent figures of Mandeville’s thought are the miser, who saves pathologically while consuming as little as possible, and the prodigal heir, who fritters away his fortune on sensual pleasure-seeking. Both are treated with scorn, their behavior understood as highly perverse, if not irrational. Yet Mandeville stresses that society can only prosper through the combination of avarice and prodigality, and not through the sort of frugality that lies in between the two extremes:

---

<sup>44</sup> *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I.iii.2.1, 50. For this reading of Smith see Luban, ‘Adam Smith on Vanity, Domination, and History’.

Frugality is like Honesty, a mean starving Virtue, that is only fit for small Societies of good peaceable Men, who are contented to be poor so they may be easy...I would compare the Body Politick (I confess the Simile is very low) to a Bowl of Punch. Avarice should be the Souring and Prodigality the Sweetning of it. (I, 104-05)

Elsewhere, Mandeville differentiates between ‘diligence’ and ‘industry’, suggesting that the ‘thirst after gain’ is not found uniformly throughout the population:

A poor Wretch may want neither Diligence nor Ingenuity, be a saving Pains-taking Man, and yet without striving to mend his Circumstances remain contented with the Station he lives in; but Industry implies, besides the other Qualities, a Thirst after Gain, and an Indefatigable Desire of meliorating our Condition. (I, 244)

These passages are relevant for our discussion insofar as they show that Mandeville has no notion of a kind of unproblematic ‘self-interest’ that is the natural mode of human economic behavior. Rather, economic behavior varies according to temperament, inclination, and social station; prosperity springs from the harmonious interplay of these varied behaviors rather than from conformity to some uniform standard of economic rationality.

Similarly, we have already seen that Mandeville aims to dissect the vices underlying all modes of behavior and all social strata, not merely those engaged in the pursuit of economic gain. He devotes much of his attention to analyzing the self-denying and self-sacrificing behavior of the ascetic and the man of honour. Sometimes he treats such behaviors as simply instrumental and cunning ways of pursuing one’s interests in material terms. But more frequently he explains such behavior by suggesting that the imaginary pleasure of esteem is more powerful than the material pleasures of sensual indulgence; thus ‘material interest’ often comes to play a secondary role in his account of human motivation.

Indeed, in places he suggests explicitly that the desire for wealth is simply one mode of esteem-seeking, concerned more with status hierarchies than with material rewards. This is evident in his discussion of why ‘those who pretend to undervalue, and are always haranguing against, Wealth, are generally poor and indolent’. He suggests that professed contempt for wealth is simply a matter of sour grapes, born out of the fact that poverty is held in contempt:

They act in their own defence: no body that could help it would ever be laugh'd at; for it must be own'd, that of all the Hardships of Poverty it is that, which is the most intolerable....In the very Satisfaction that is enjoy'd by those, who excel in, or as possess'd of things valuable, there is interwoven a spice of Contempt for others, that are destitute of them... (II, 115)

Here Mandeville suggests that considerations of status and esteem are centrally constitutive of the desire for wealth. However, it is also worth noting the implication he draws from this argument: because all humans seek esteem, and wealth brings esteem with it, therefore all humans would prefer wealth to poverty. Thus, he argues, anyone who professes to be indifferent to wealth is insincere. While the logic of the argument is grounded in moralist considerations, its effect is precisely to universalize the motive of economic interest.

A related ambiguity can be found in Mandeville's discussion of why most people aim to improve their social status. He suggests that if ‘impartial Reason [were] to be Judge between real Good and real Evil’, it is doubtful ‘whether the Condition of Kings would be at all preferable to that of Peasants’. How then to explain the prevalence of ambition and social striving? He answers:

The Reason why the generality of People would rather be Kings than Peasants is first owing to Pride and Ambition, that is deeply riveted in human Nature, and which to gratify we daily see Men undergo and despise the greatest Hazards and Difficulties. Secondly, to the difference there is in the force with which our Affection is wrought upon as the Objects are either Material or Spiritual. Things that immediately strike our outward Senses act more violently upon our

Passions than what is the result of Thought and the dictates of the most demonstrative Reason...  
(I, 316)

Characteristically, Mandeville suggests two different explanations. The first is moralist: ‘pride and ambition’, the desire for the imaginary reward of esteem, which leads humans to disregard considerations of material benefits and harms (‘real good and real evil’). When Adam Smith later attempted to account for the same paradox, he suggested that this desire for esteem was the sole reason for human striving.<sup>45</sup> But Mandeville also provides a second, more sensuous and naturalistic, explanation: that humans seek material rewards because their natural constitution predisposes them to prefer ‘material’ objects to ‘spiritual’ ones. The two visions of human nature here are in tension, if not outright contradiction. Whereas Mandeville generally suggests that the imaginary and reflective considerations of pride are more powerful than our immediate and unreflective physical urges, here he reverses the hierarchy. It remains difficult to tell, however, which of the two explanations—one grounded in pride and the imaginary, the other in the sensuous and real—he takes to be more fundamental in understanding material interest.

This tension—a constantly recurring one throughout the *Fable*—suggests that although the ‘moralist’ interpretation suggested above represents one real strain of Mandeville’s thought, it is not the only strain. We cannot, in other words, simply take economic interest in its moralist sense, as one historically contingent form of pride, for elsewhere Mandeville does indeed naturalize and universalize it. The effect of doing so is

---

<sup>45</sup> *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I.iii.2.1, 50; cited above.

to ground the economic realm upon the materialist categories (real, natural, sensuous) rather than the moralist ones (imaginary, social, prideful).

In places, the sensuous passions, rooted in physical need, come to appear as the foundational elements of human society: ‘that every Body is obliged to eat and drink, is the Cement of civil Society’ (II, 350). Pride recedes into the background, and economic interest takes its place as the primal force that, in its variegated manifestations, constitutes the social world: ‘To me it is a great Pleasure, when I look on the Affairs of human Life, to behold into what various and often strangely opposite Forms the hope of Gain and thoughts of Lucre shape Men, according to the different Employments they are of, and Stations they are in’(I, 349).

To be sure, Mandeville never renounces his arguments about the fundamental role of pride in human society. But his focus on this theme comes and goes, as required by his polemical purposes. When seeking to discredit the very possibility of virtue as the basis for society, he largely abandons the notion, so fundamental elsewhere, that human behavior can be shaped in profound ways by historically constituted norms. All humans everywhere, he suggests, seek their ‘real pleasures’, whether they admit it publicly or not; those who do not devote themselves to sensuous indulgence are simply prevented from doing so by external constraint. The clear implication is that these facts are the product of

nature, not of culture—of humans’ basic constitution, not of contingent norms and practices.<sup>46</sup>

But whatever Mandeville’s views about the universality or particularity of economic behavior may have been, the closing passages of the *Fable* indicate the general shape of the society that he saw emerging around him; it is perhaps significant that his major work ends with a prolonged ode to money, an invention ‘more skillfully adapted to the whole Bent of our Nature, than any other of human Contrivance’ (II, 353). The moralists had spoken of society as a reciprocal commerce of debts and services, but the economic language was largely metaphorical. Their point, which Mandeville echoes elsewhere, was that economic transactions were only one of the forms of commerce by which the social world functions—just as often the debts and credits were paid in affection, esteem, hatred, self-renunciation, loyalty.<sup>47</sup> But here, the economic language ceases to be metaphorical, and the social commerce of reciprocal services comes to be identified with the literal commerce of economic transactions. There is nothing besides money that is ‘so absolute necessary to the Order, Oeconomy, and the very Existence of the Civil Society’:

---

<sup>46</sup> In this regard it is notable that when discussing ‘Remark O’, the chapter on ‘real pleasures’ that has been so important for our discussion, Dickey seems to read into the text a level of historicism that is not actually there. To support his interpretation that Mandeville views economic interest as simply a historicized form of pride, Dickey glosses ‘Remark O’ as arguing that ‘the age-old antithesis between individual pleasure and social morality changed’ during the seventeenth century as a new commercial and acquisitive ethos emerged (‘Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility’, 407). However, ‘Remark O’ makes no such historical claim; it argues that ‘the real Pleasures of all Men in Nature are worldly and sensual’, but contains no suggestion that this is a historically contingent fact (I, 166). If my argument is correct, it is in fact highly significant that Mandeville does not historicize his claims at this point in the *Fable*. Mandeville does later include a temporal qualification of these claims, albeit an extremely minimal and cursory one (I, 245).

<sup>47</sup> E.g. La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, no. 83 (18); and, in the *Fable*, I, 78; I, 222.

[F]or as this is entirely built upon the Variety of our Wants, so the whole Superstructure is made up of the reciprocal Services, which Men do to each other....To expect, that others should serve us for nothing, is unreasonable; therefore all Commerce, that Men can have together, must be a continual bartering of one thing for another....Money obviates and takes away all those Difficulties, by being an acceptable Reward for all the Services Men can do to one another.  
(II, 349)

Money's role as universal medium, as ubiquitous and essential as speech, is not an eternal fact of nature; Mandeville notes that it is only in 'a large polite Nation', populous, prosperous and impersonal, that it comes to fulfill this role (II, 350). But it is telling to compare the account of money as universal equivalent here at the end of the *Fable* to the 'Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue' at the beginning, in which Mandeville placed not money but praise in the analogous role of 'general equivalent' for the pains of social cooperation.<sup>48</sup> We have seen that praise was of interest to Mandeville as an 'imaginary reward' that would serve, in lieu of 'real rewards', as recompense for the pains of self-denial. But here this imaginary reward drops out of the picture, and Mandeville's vision implies its replacement by the real reward, money, as the cement of commercial society.

Similarly, Mandeville had devoted great energy to dissecting the phenomenon of honour, the central principle of social distinction during the epoch that was drawing to a close in his lifetime. His discussion, as we have seen, frequently stresses the overwhelming power of pride to shape the behavior of the man of honour against all material incentives. Yet the *Fable* ends with a denial of Horatio's claim that 'upon noble Minds that despise Lucre, Honour has a far greater Efficacy than Money', to which Cleomenes replies:

[N]othing is more universally charming than Money; it suits with every Station; the high, the low, the wealthy, and the poor: whereas Honour has little influence on the mean, slaving People,

---

<sup>48</sup> I, 42; see §4 above.

and rarely affects any of the vulgar; but if it does, Money will almost every where purchase  
Honour... (II, 354)

Mandeville's thought has its origins in the subtle psychological dissection of honour, piety, and self-renunciation first put forward by the moralists. Yet he ends the *Fable* with a dismissal of the relevance of such considerations. It is money, not honour or pride, that is the efficacious force in society, among 'the high, the low, the wealthy, and the poor' alike. While the statement may be taken as a sociohistorical claim about the changing mores connected to the rise of commercial society, it is nonetheless in keeping with that strand of his thought which prioritizes the real, the sensuous, and the natural over the imaginary, the prideful, and the acquired.

This strand of Mandeville's thought is the one that has endured, at least among his self-proclaimed heirs. Mandeville came to be remembered as the early herald of *laissez-faire*, his scheme of private vices and public benefits nothing more than a gratuitously polemical version of the invisible hand. The side of his dichotomies that came from the moralists, the side that gave his work its psychological depth and ethical bite, was largely forgotten. What remained was nature without culture, sensuousness without pride, desires without norms, materiality without reflection, behavior without motives, society without history. The vision was one of sensuous maximizers, unbound by norms, cultures, histories, concerned only with material goals, faced only with material constraints; society consisted only of the sum of their atomistic pursuits. Such a vision had little interest in private vices beyond material egoism, or public benefits beyond material prosperity. It can be said fairly that this vision was faithful to one side of Mandeville's thought—but only to one side.

## 9. Philosophical Chemistry

Does it follow that we must strive to put Bernard Mandeville together again? That by reconnecting his materialist legacy with its moralist origins we can arrive at more humane, more astute, or more nuanced ways of thinking about our own social world? Or does the eventual split between the two strands of his project indicate a fundamental incoherence in the project itself? These are somewhat larger questions than I can attempt to answer here. Nonetheless it may be useful, by way of conclusion, to return once more to the eighteenth-century debates that surrounded the *Fable*.

Mandeville had many clumsy critics but also a few shrewd ones, none perhaps shrewder than David Hume. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, Hume included an appendix ‘Of Self-Love’, in which he drew on Bishop Butler’s critiques of egoism to examine those philosophical systems (Epicurus’s and Hobbes’s as much as Mandeville’s) that located selfishness at the root of every action. Hume began by distinguishing two kinds of such theories. The first kind, ‘which is utterly incompatible with all virtue or moral sentiment’ and ‘can proceed from nothing but the most depraved disposition’, is based on the following principle:

...that all *benevolence* is mere hypocrisy, friendship a cheat, public spirit a farce, fidelity a snare to procure trust and confidence; and that while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest, we wear these fair disguises, in order to put others off their guard, and expose them the more to our wiles and machinations. What heart one must be possessed of who professes such principles, and who feels no internal sentiment that belies so pernicious a theory, it is easy to imagine...

Such a claim, Hume believed, was clearly belied by our everyday experience of non-instrumental forms of benevolence and public-spiritedness; it failed even as a bare

description of human behavior. Yet he also noted ‘another principle, somewhat resembling the former’, which was the basis of the second kind of self-love theory:

...that, whatever affection one may feel, or imagine he feels for others, no passion is, or can be disinterested; that the most generous friendship, however sincere, is a modification of self-love; and that, even unknown to ourselves, we seek only our own gratification while we appear the most deeply engaged in schemes for the liberty and happiness of mankind.

This sort of theory would not deny the existence of unselfish behavior; it would merely attempt, ‘by a philosophical chymistry’, to explain every passion or action as self-love transformed.

Hume had more than one objection to even this weaker version of the ‘selfish hypothesis’, but his most immediate was that it would have little practical effect on moral judgment. Even if we agree to view every action as a form of self-love, this simply means that we will now regard as virtuous those whose self-love directs them in beneficent ways, and regard as vicious those whose self-love directs them in malicious ways. In its weaker and more plausible form, the selfish hypothesis becomes little more than a tautology, and thus ‘not so material as is usually imagined to morality and practice’.<sup>49</sup>

In his attack on the first kind of thinker, who due to a ‘depraved disposition’ sees only brute selfishness everywhere, Hume clearly had Mandeville in mind. Yet as we have seen, in his moralist moments Mandeville was something more like the second kind. He is not blind to the everyday facts of altruism and self-abnegation, but he attempts to

---

<sup>49</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, §247-250, in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, third edition, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 295-97, original emphasis. Other eighteenth-century critics of egoism similarly argued that its claim was ultimately a semantic one with little practical impact on moral judgment. See, for instance, Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, Sermon XI, §7, in *Five Sermons*, ed. Stephen L. Darwall (Indianapolis, 1983), 47; Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), 19-20.

explain them as a set of transformations of pride and an internalized desire for approval. Thus in some ways he straddles the two forms of self-love theories.

But if Hume may not have been entirely right about Mandeville, his general point remains sound. For Mandeville's Augustinian forebears, the selfish hypothesis was freighted with real import: they inhabited a mental world containing at least the possibility of true charity and divine grace, and the line between *charité* and *amour-propre* divided the saved and the damned. Lumping together all action without grace as so many forms of selfishness made philosophical and polemical sense as a way of insisting on the fallenness of the world and the necessity of Christian salvation.

For Mandeville and his successors, however, the possibility of grace ceased to be more than a notional gesture, and with it the contrast between self-love and charity faded away. In the absence of such a contrast, set against an implied background of heaven and hell, the upshot of the selfish hypothesis ceased to be clear: was it an empirical claim about the concrete ways that humans tended to behave, or a philosophical claim about what all such forms of behavior essentially are? This is the ambiguity that ran throughout Mandeville's work, and which ultimately led him onto the horns of the dilemma that Hume located: a choice between falsehood as an empirical claim or emptiness as a philosophical one.

Mandeville occupied a transitional point between his Christian predecessors and his social-scientific successors. If the immediate possibility of divine grace was absent from his work, much of the Christian moral vocabulary for discussing human behavior remained; indeed, it was from this inherited vocabulary that Mandeville's arguments

derived their power to sting. He started from a standpoint that allowed for the possibility of a transcendent source of human action and morality, then proceeded to systematically deny such transcendence—showing that no action could occur unless it gratified some internal desire of the agent, and that no moral norm could rely on any sanction beyond the immanent social uses which it had arisen to fulfill.

Mandeville's successors developed less ethically-laden ways to talk about this essential worldliness of human social life. What he would explain with reference to self-love, they would explain with reference to rationality; what he would see as gratifying a vice, they would see as gratifying a preference. Yet these changes may have been more cosmetic than substantive, and it is not clear that they ever succeeded in extricating the overall project from the horns of Hume's dilemma. If Mandeville ended up stranded somewhere between falsehood and tautology, in this respect he was no worse off than those who followed him.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: I would like to thank Ashleigh Campi, Greg Conti, Julie Cooper, Tania Islas Weinstein, Steven Klein, Gabriel Mares, Sankar Muthu, Shannon Stimson, Ian Storey, and two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions. Early versions of this essay were presented at Berkeley, Harvard, and the Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting in Chicago; I am grateful to fellow panelists and audience members. Finally, I note with sadness the recent passing of Istvan Hont, who never saw this essay but had a major influence on the ideas contained in it.