BERKELEY AND MANDEVILLE

Bernard de Mandeville was born in 1670 in Dort, Holland. He was educated in Leyden, where he received a Doctor of Medicine degree, and for some reason he then settled in London. He was apparently a rather coarse and conceited fellow, not noted for impressing people with his charm and good manners. He supposedly knew Benjamin Franklin. In 1705 he published a poem called *The Grumbling Hive, or, Knaves turned Honest*. It was not very long, but for some reason it caught on immediately, and by 1714 it had been republished, together with preface, notes, explanatory essays, and some dialogues, now under the title *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices Public Benefits*. A second edition appeared in 1723, and as of 1755, there had been nine editions. The poem and its essays became the target of heated and very partisan debate, and among those who criticized Mandeville, aside from Berkeley, were John Dennis, William Law, Frances Hutcheson and John Brown.

I. MANDEVILLE’S THEORY

Mandeville had some things in common with the Deists, though most of them would have disowned this. He believed in the primacy of reason, and was tempted by determinism as was Anthony Collins. He thought that religion had little to do with morality. But most of the Deists were optimists, whereas Mandeville was a cynic and a pessimist in the Hobbesian tradition, at least on the subject of human nature. Throughout his work, a constant theme is that man is at bottom thoroughly selfish and that even those actions which seem altruistic are ultimately to be explained in terms of our selfish desires. Because of this, with Hobbes, he thought that society was the result of a compromise with our worst natures, and that in truth even our love of
society was the result of our many desires and the difficulty we have in satisfying them. Because of this, society is founded upon vice, and since virtues only arise within society, virtue depends upon vice. Man was not somehow designed for society, as revelation would have it. Rather, man is dispositionally social, as grapes are for wine. As wine is an invention of man, though he needs grapes to make it, so society is also artificial, though it could not arise without our attributes.\(^1\) Societies, furthermore, require the concurrence of human intelligences, as opposed to natural phenomena, and this means that societies “must have a dependence; either on mutual compact, or the force of the strong, exerting itself upon the patience of the weak.”\(^2\)

Throughout his theories, a number of consistent and relatively simple mistakes prevail. One of these is the failure to realize that even if the origins of society were as he described them, what we once were might have relatively little to do with what we now are. Mandeville virtually ignores qualitative change, both through social time and among classes of men. Further, there is not much evidence to suggest that he, and Hobbes, are correct about the origins of our society in any case, and as Jessop and others have pointed out, he persistently identifies “actually” with “really”. Hobbes and Mandeville were the favorite bugbears at the time Berkeley wrote, along with the Deists. But in spite of this, they did have some allies. Certainly not everyone agreed with Berkeley’s criticisms of Mandeville. One author, speaking of the second dialogue of *Alciphron*, has this to say:

For instead of answering what the Author of the *Fable of the Bees* really says, he supposes him to have said Things which he does not say, and answers them; which is carrying his Zeal for *Orthodoxy*, and his *Knight-Errantry* against *Free-Thinkers* and *Free-Writers* so far, that it puts one a little in mind of *Don Quixote*, who fancied he saw Giants and Magicians in every Passenger he met upon the Road; and by this means (never seeing any thing in its true Light, or calling any thing by its true Name) was perpetually fighting with *Phantoms* of his own raising, and the unsubstantial *Scarecrows* of his own disturb’d Imagination.\(^3\)

Mandeville’s argument is worth considering in more detail. He begins from what he thinks is a factual base, namely, the proposition that there never were any societies without vice, and that it is impossible to

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\(^1\) *Remarks on a Book entitled The Fable of the Bees*, by John Dennis, London (1724), pp. 104-105 (RFB)

\(^2\) RFB, pp. 206-207

\(^3\) Hervey, Lord John, *Some Remarks on the Minute Philosopher*, London (1732) pp. 42-43 (HR)