

# Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), *The Fable of the Bees*

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**Bernard Mandeville** is primarily remembered for his impact on discussions of morality and economic theory in the early eighteenth century. His most noteworthy and notorious work is *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), which triggered immense public criticism at the time. He had a particular influence on philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, most notably Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith. The *Fable's* overall influence on the fields of ethics and economics is, perhaps, one of the greatest and most provocative of all early-eighteenth century English works.

The controversy sparked by the *Fable* was over Mandeville's proposal that vices, such as vanity and greed, result in publicly beneficial results. Along the same lines, he proposed that many of the actions commonly thought to be virtuous were, instead, self-interested at their core and therefore vicious. He was a critic of moral systems that claimed humans had natural feelings of benevolence toward one another, and he instead focused attention on self-interested passions like pride and vanity that led to apparent acts of benevolence. This caused his readers to imagine him to be a crude reincarnation of Hobbes, particularly as a proponent of egoism.

Mandeville implied that people were hypocrites for espousing rigorous ideas about virtue and vice while they failed to act according to those beliefs in their private lives. He observed that those preaching against vice had no qualms about benefiting from it in the form of their society's overall wealth, which Mandeville saw as the cumulative result of individual vices (such as luxury, gambling, and crime, which benefited lawyers and the justice system).

Mandeville's challenge to the popular idea of virtue—in which only unselfish, Christian behavior was virtuous—caused a controversy that lasted through the eighteenth century and influenced thinkers in moral philosophy and economics. The *Fable* influenced ideas about the divi-

sion of labor and the free market (*laissez-faire*), and the philosophy of utilitarianism was advanced as Mandeville's critics, in defending their views of virtue, also altered them. His work influenced Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith.

## *The Fable of the Bees*

### Introduction

One of the greatest reasons why so few people understand themselves is that most writers are always teaching men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their heads with telling them what they really are. As for my part, without any compliment to the courteous reader, or myself, I believe man (besides skin, flesh, bones, *etc.*, that are obvious to the eye) to be a compound of various passions, that all of them as they are provoked and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or no. To show that these qualifications, which we all pretend to be ashamed of, are the great support of a flourishing society has been the subject of the foregoing poem ["The Fable of the Bees"]. But there being some passages in it seemingly paradoxical, I have in the Preface promised some explanatory Remarks on it; which to render more useful, I have thought fit to inquire how man, no better qualified, might yet by his own imperfections be taught to distinguish between virtue and vice: and here I must desire the reader once for all to take notice that when I say men, I mean neither Jews nor Christians; but mere man, in the state of nature and ignorance of the true Deity.

### An Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue

[State of Nature]

All untaught animals are only solicitous of pleasing themselves, and naturally follow the

bent of their own inclinations, without considering the good or harm that from their being pleased will accrue to others. This is the reason that in the wild state of nature those creatures are fittest to live peaceably together in great numbers that discover the least of understanding, and have the fewest appetites to gratify. And consequently no species of animals is, without the curb of government, less capable of agreeing long together in multitudes than that of man; yet such are his qualities, whether good or bad I shall not determine, that no creature besides himself can ever be made sociable: but being an extraordinary selfish and headstrong, as well as cunning, animal, however he may be subdued by, superior strength, it is impossible by force alone to make him tractable, and receive the improvements he is capable of.

The chief thing, therefore, which lawgivers and other wise men that have labored for the establishment of society have endeavored, has been to make the people they were to govern believe that it was more beneficial for everybody to conquer than indulge his appetites, and much better to mind the public than what seemed his private interest. As this has always been a very difficult task, so no wit or eloquence has been left untried to compass it; and the moralists and philosophers of all ages employed their utmost skill to prove the truth of so useful an assertion. But whether mankind would have ever believed it or not, it is not likely that anybody 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 showed them an equivalent to be enjoyed 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 forced to contrive an imaginary one, that as a general equivalent for the trouble of self-denial should serve on all occasions, and without costing anything either to themselves or others, be yet a most acceptable recompense to the receivers.

### [Uses of Praise and Flattery]

They thoroughly examined all the strength and frailties of our nature, and, observing that none were either so savage as not to be charmed 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. Making use of this bewitching engine, they extolled the excellency of our nature above other animals, and setting forth with unbounded praises the wonders of our sagacity and vastness of understanding, bestowed a thousand encomiums on the rationality of our souls, by the help of which we were capable of performing the most noble achievements. Having by this artful way of flattery insinuated themselves into the hearts of men, they began to instruct them in the notions of honor and shame; representing the one as the worst of all evils, and the other as the highest good to which mortals could aspire: which being done, they laid before them how unbecoming it was the dignity of such sublime creatures to be solicitous about gratifying those appetites which they had in common with brutes, and at the same time unmindful of those higher qualities that gave them the pre-eminence over all visible beings. They indeed confessed that those impulses of nature were very pressing; that it was troublesome to resist, and very difficult wholly to subdue them: but this they only used as an argument to demonstrate how glorious the conquest of them was on the one hand, and how scandalous on the other not to attempt it.

### [Classes of People]

To introduce, moreover, an emulation amongst men, they divided the whole species in two classes, vastly differing from one another: the one consisted of abject, low-minded people that, always hunting in after immediate enjoyment, were wholly incapable of self-denial, and, without regard to the good of others, had no higher aim than their private advantage; such as, being enslaved by voluptuousness, yielded without resistance to every gross desire, and made no use of their rational faculties but to heighten their sensual pleasures. These vile, groveling wretches,

they said, were the dross of their kind, and having only the shape of men, differed from brutes in nothing but their outward figure. But the other class was made up of lofty, high-spirited creatures that, free from sordid selfishness, esteemed the improvements of the mind to be their fairest possessions; and, setting a true value upon themselves, took no delight but in embellishing that part in which their excellency consisted; such as, despising whatever they had in common with irrational creatures, opposed by the help of reason their most violent inclinations; and, making a continual war with themselves to promote the peace of others, aimed at no less than the public welfare and the conquest of their own passions “Stronger is he who conquers himself than he who breaches the strongest fortifications.” These they called the true representatives of their sublime species, exceeding in worth the first class by more degrees than that itself was superior to the beasts of the field.

As, in all animals that are not too imperfect to discover pride, we find that the finest and such as are the most beautiful and valuable of their kind have generally the greatest share of it; so in man, the most perfect of animals, it is so inseparable from his very essence (how cunningly soever some may learn to hide or disguise it) that without it the compound he is made of would want one of the chiefest ingredients: which, if we consider, it is hardly to be doubted but lessons and remonstrances so skillfully adapted to the good opinion man has of himself as those I have mentioned must if scattered amongst a multitude, not only gain the assent of most of them, as to the speculative part, but likewise induce several, especially the fiercest, most resolute, and best among them, to endure a thousand inconveniences and undergo as many hardships, that they may have the pleasure of counting themselves men of the second class, and consequently appropriating to themselves all the excellences they have heard of it.

From what has been said we ought to expect, in the first place, that the heroes who took such extraordinary pains to master some of their natural appetites, and preferred the good of others to any visible interest of their own, would not

recede an inch from the fine notions they had received concerning the dignity of rational creatures; and, having ever the authority of the government on their side, with all imaginable vigor assert the esteem that was due to those of the second class, as well as their superiority over the rest of their kind. In the second, that those who wanted a sufficient stock of either pride or resolution to buoy them up in mortifying of what was dearest to them, [and] followed the sensual dictates of nature, would yet be ashamed of confessing themselves to be those despicable wretches that belonged to the inferior class, and were generally reckoned to be so little removed from brutes; and that, therefore, in their own defense they would say as others did, and, hiding their own imperfections as well as they could, cry up self-denial and public-spiritedness as much as any. For it is highly probable that some of them, convinced by the real proofs of fortitude and self-conquest they had seen, would admire in others what they found wanting in themselves; others be afraid of the resolution and prowess of those of the second class; and that all of them were kept in awe by the power of their rulers. Wherefore it is reasonable to think that none of them (whatever they thought in themselves) would dare openly contradict what by everybody else was thought criminal to doubt of.

### [Origins of Morality]

This was (or at least might have been) the manner after which savage man was broke; from whence it is evident that the first rudiments of morality, broached by skillful politicians to render men useful to each other as well as tractable, were chiefly contrived that the ambitious might reap the more benefit from and govern vast numbers of them with the greater ease and security. This foundation of politics being once laid, it is impossible that man should long remain uncivilized: for even those who only strove to gratify their appetites, being continually crossed by others of the same stamp, could not but observe that whenever they checked their inclinations, or but followed them with more circumspection, they avoided a world of troubles, and

often escaped many of the calamities that generally attended the too eager pursuit after pleasure.

First, they received, as well as others, the benefit of those actions that were done for the good of the whole society, and consequently could not forbear wishing well to those of the superior class that performed them. Secondly, the more intent they were in seeking their own advantage, without regard to others, the more they were hourly convinced that none were so obnoxious to them as those that were most like themselves.

It being the interest then of the very worst of them, more than any, to preach up public-spirit- edness, that they might reap the fruits of the labor and self-denial of others, and at the same time indulge their own appetites with less disturbance, they agreed with the rest to call everything which, without regard to the public, man should commit to gratify any of his appetites *vice* if in that action there could be observed the least prospect that it might either be injurious to any of the society, or ever render himself less serviceable to and to give the name of *virtue* to every performance by which man, contrary to the impulse of nature, should endeavor the benefit of others, or the conquest of his own passions out of a rational ambition of being good.

It shall be objected that no society was ever anyways civilized before the major part had agreed upon some worship or other of an over- ruling power, and consequently that the notions of good and evil, and the distinction between virtue and vice, were never the contrivance of politicians, but the pure effect of religion. Before I answer this objection, I must repeat what I have said already, that in this *Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*—I speak neither of Jews or Christians, but man in his state of nature and ignorance of the true Deity; and then I affirm that the idolatrous superstitions of all other nations, and the pitiful notions they had of the Supreme Being, were incapable of exciting man to virtue, and good for nothing but to awe and amuse a rude and unthinking multitude. It is evident from history that in all considerable societies, how stupid or ridiculous soever peoples received notions have

been as to the deities they worshipped, human nature has ever exerted itself in all its branches, and that there is no earthly wisdom or moral virtue but at one time or other men have excelled in it in all monarchies and commonwealths that for riches and power have been anyways remarkable.

The Egyptians, not satisfied with having deified all the ugly monsters they could think on, were so silly as to adore the onions of their own sowing; yet at the same time their country was the most famous nursery of arts and sciences in the world, and themselves more eminently skilled in the deepest mysteries of nature than any nation has been since. No states or kingdoms under heaven have yielded more or greater patterns in all sorts of moral virtues than the Greek and Roman empires, more especially the latter; and yet how loose, absurd and ridiculous were their sentiments as to sacred matters: for without reflecting on the extravagant number of their deities, if we only consider the infamous stories they fathered upon them, it is not to be denied but that their religion, far from teaching men the conquest of their passions, and the way to virtue, seemed rather contrived to justify their appetites and encourage their vices. But if we would know what made them excel in fortitude, courage, and magnanimity, we must cast our eyes on the pomp of their triumphs, the magnificence of their monuments and arches; their trophies, statues, and inscriptions; the variety of their military crowns, their honors decreed to the dead, public encomiums on the living, and other imaginary rewards they bestowed on men of merit; and we shall find that what carried so many of them to the utmost pitch of self-denial was nothing but their policy in making use of the most effectual means that human pride could be flattered with.

It is visible, then, that it was not any heathen religion or other idolatrous superstition that first put man upon crossing his appetites and subduing his dearest inclinations, but the skillful management of wary politicians; and the nearer we search into human nature the more we shall be convinced that the moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride.

There is no man, of what capacity or penetration soever, that is wholly proof against the witchcraft of flattery, if artfully performed and suited to his abilities. Children and fools will swallow personal praise, but those that are more cunning must be managed with greater circumspection; and the more general the flattery is, the less it is suspected by those it is levelled at. What you say in commendation of a whole town is received with pleasure by all the inhabitants; speak in commendation of letters in general, and every man of learning will think himself in particular obliged to you. You may safely praise the employment a man is of, or the country he was born in, because you give him an opportunity of screening the joy he feels upon his own account under the esteem which he pretends to have for others.

It is common among cunning men that understand the power which flattery has upon pride, when they are afraid they shall be imposed upon, to enlarge, though much against their conscience, upon the honor, fair dealing, and integrity of the family, country, or sometimes the profession of him they suspect; because they know that men often will change their resolution, and act against their inclination, that they may have the pleasure of continuing to appear in the opinion of some what they are conscious not to be in reality. Thus sagacious moralists draw men like angels, in hopes that the pride at least of some will put them upon copying after the beautiful originals which they are represented to be.

When the incomparable Mr Steele, in the usual elegance of his easy style, dwells on the praises of his sublime species, and with all the embellishments of rhetoric sets forth the excellency of human nature, it is impossible not to be charmed with his happy turns of thought, and the politeness of his expressions. But though I have been often moved by the force of his eloquence, and ready to swallow the ingenious sophistry with pleasure, yet I could never be so serious but, reflecting on his artful encomiums, I thought on the tricks made use of by the women that would teach children to be mannerly.

When an awkward girl, before she can either speak or go, begins after many entreaties to make the first rude essays of curtsying, the nurse falls in an ecstasy of praise: "There's a delicate curtsy! Oh fine miss! There's a pretty lady! Mama! Miss can make a better curtsy than her sister Molly!" The same is echoed over by the maids, whilst Mama almost hugs the child to pieces; only Miss Molly, who—being four years older, knows how to make a very handsome curtsy, wonders at the perverseness of their judgment, and, swelling with indignation, is ready to cry at the injustice that is done her, till, being whispered in the ear that it is only to please the baby, and that she is a woman, she grows proud at being let into the secret, and, rejoicing at the superiority of her understanding, repeats what has been said with large additions, and insults over the weakness of her sister, whom all this while she fancies to be the only bubble among them.

These extravagant praises would, by any one above the capacity of an infant, be called fulsome flatteries, and, if you will, abominable lies; yet experience teaches us that by the help of such gross encomiums young misses will be brought to make pretty curtsies, and behave themselves womanly much sooner, and with less trouble, than they would without them. It is the same with boys, whom they'll strive to persuade that all fine gentlemen do as they are bid, and that none but beggar boys are rude, or dirty their clothes; nay, as soon as the wild brat with his untaught fist begins to fumble for his hat, the mother, to make him pull it off, tells him, before he is two years old, that he is a man; and if he repeats that action when she desires him, he's presently a captain, a lord mayor, a king, or something higher if she can think of it, till, egged on by the force of praise, the little urchin endeavors to imitate Man as well as he can, and strains all his faculties to appear what his shallow noddle imagines he is believed to be.

The meanest wretch puts an inestimable value upon himself, and the highest wish of the ambitious man is to have all the world, as to that particular, of his opinion: so that the most insatiable thirst after fame that ever hero was inspired with was never more than an ungovernable

greediness to engross the esteem and admiration of others in future ages as well as his own; and (what mortification soever this truth might be to the second thoughts of an Alexander or a Caesar) the great recompense in view, 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 anything else but the breath of man, the aerial coin of praise. Who can forbear laughing when he thinks on all the great men that have been so serious on the subject of that Macedonian madman: his capacious soul, that mighty heart, in one corner of which, according to Lorenzo Gracian, the world was so commodiously lodged, that in the whole there was room for six more? Who can forbear laughing, I say, when he compares the fine things that have been said of Alexander with the end he proposed to himself from his vast exploits, to be proved from his own mouth when the vast pains he took to pass the Hydaspes forced him to cry out: "Oh ye Athenians, could you believe what dangers I expose myself to, to be praised by you!"? To define then the reward of glory in the amplest manner, the most that can be said of it is that it consists in a superlative felicity which a man who is conscious of having performed a noble action enjoys in self-love, whilst he is thinking on the applause he expects of others.

### [Public Benefits]

But here I shall be told that, besides the noisy toils of war and public bustle of the ambitious, there are noble and generous actions that are performed in silence; that virtue being its own reward, those who are really good have a satisfaction in their consciousness of being so, which is all the recompense they expect from the most worthy performances; that among the heathens there have been men who, when they did good to others, were so far from coveting thanks and applause that they took all imaginable care to be forever concealed from those on whom they bestowed their benefits, and consequently that pride has no hand in spurring man on to the highest pitch of self-denial.

In answer to this I say that it is impossible to judge of a man's performance unless we are thoroughly acquainted with the principle and motive from which he acts. **Pity**, though it is the most gentle and the least mischievous of all our passions, is yet as much a frailty of our nature as anger, pride, or fear. The weakest minds have generally the greatest share of it, for which reason none are more compassionate than women and children. It must be owned that of all our weaknesses it is the most amiable, and bears the greatest resemblance to virtue; nay, without a considerable mixture of it the society could hardly subsist: but as it **is an impulse of nature that consults neither the public interest nor our own reason, it may produce evil as well as good.** It has helped to destroy the honor of virgins, and corrupted the integrity of judges, and whoever acts from it as a principle, what good soever he may bring to the society, has nothing to boast of but that he has indulged a passion that has happened to be beneficial to the public. There is no merit in saving an innocent babe ready to drop into the fire: the action is neither good nor bad, and what benefit soever the infant received we only obliged ourselves; for to have seen it fall, and not strove to hinder it, would have caused a pain which self-preservation compelled us to prevent. Nor has a rich prodigal that happens to be of a commiserating temper, and loves to gratify his passions, greater virtue to boast of when he relieves an object of compassion with what to himself is a trifle.

But such men as, without complying with any weakness of their own, can part from what they value themselves, and, from no other motive but their love to goodness, perform a worthy action in silence; such men, I confess, have acquired more refined notions of virtue than those I have hitherto spoke of; yet even in these (with which the world has yet never swarmed) we may discover no small symptoms of pride, and the humblest man alive 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: which pleasure, together with the occasion of it, are as cer-

tain signs of pride as looking pale and trembling at any imminent danger are the symptoms of fear.

If the too scrupulous reader should, at first view, condemn these notions concerning the origin of moral virtue, and think them perhaps offensive to Christianity, I hope he will forbear his censures when he shall consider that nothing can render the unsearchable depth of divine wisdom more conspicuous than that man, whom providence had designed for society, should not only by his own frailties and imperfections be led into the road to temporal happiness, but likewise receive, from a seeming necessity of natural causes a tincture of that knowledge in which he was afterwards to be made perfect by the true religion, to his eternal welfare.