MANDEVILLE: A POST-AUGUSTAN PESSIMIST

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ON Benjamin Franklin's first visit to England he met Bernard de Mandeville, and remembered him later as the soul of the tavern club which he frequented, "A most entertaining, facetious companion". Something may be allowed, of course, for the peculiar advantages afforded him as a raconteur by his profession; the variety and extent of his data were much admired.

He was born at Dordrecht in Holland about 1670. His father was a doctor there and it was taken for granted that the son would not consider any other profession; graduating from the Erasmus School in Rotterdam he pronounced, at the mature age of 15, an *Oratio Scholastica, de Medicina*, and then went on to Leiden where four years later he maintained a violently-written thesis, also in Latin, *De Brutorum Operationibus*, endorsing Descartes' theory of automatism. Two years afterwards he took his degree in medicine, and then he came to England, no one knew why. "To learn the language", he said laconically; and he proceeded with such thoroughness that many, reading even his first works, refused to believe he was a foreigner. He evolved a crisp English style and a vivid pictorial power of description which challenged comparison with those of any native author, and his *Fable of the Bees* has all the vigour of *Hudibras*, for instance, with none of its odd, jerky constructions or its constant elisions. He became completely Anglicized, and never left England again; he lived in obscure lodgings somewhere in London, and died at Hackney in his 63rd year. Fortunately he never married.

He was not a successful doctor, although as doctors went then he was both a skilful and a learned one. But there was no gentleness in the man; he frightened men and women alike. He managed to bully or cajole a body of Dutch tradesmen into granting him, for some reason still unknown, a small pension, which was his only fixed income. Apart from this, he picked up a somewhat precarious living for a time as semi-official propagandist for the distilling interests; that is, he was paid to recommend the use of liquor on medical grounds, and this he did with more zeal, it would appear,

than scientific accuracy. A fellow-physician of London once approvingly told Hawkins, one of Johnson's innumerable crop of biographers, that Mandeville was "a good sort of man"; it seems he had told him that children of dram-drinking women were "never afflicted with the rickets". (Note: the physician's own wife was the daughter and heiress of a brewer). Incidentally one is fascinated to learn that the brewers of the 17th century found it necessary to enlist the aid of science to stir up trade.

Mandeville insulted many people during his life, but he did so anonymously by preference. There was nothing of the courageous fighter about him; he was overbearing to those beneath him and a libeller of those above him, and he combined coarseness and hardness to a remarkable degree. His circle of acquaintance, in any case, was not large. He preferred the company of his inferiors; strictly speaking he never had a patron, though when Lord Macclesfield was Chief Justice, from 1710 to 1718, he often entertained the Dutchman "for his conversation", on the understanding that he was to pay for his dinner with professional anecdotes. But apart from these technical accomplishments, he was a man of shrewd humour, and people found his caustic wit amusing—when they were safe from it themselves, around the Judge's table. It was here that he met Addison, whom he described as "a parson in a tye-wig". If Addison noticed his critic at all, he gave no sign of it.

In 1704 Mandeville began to write in English. The three works which appeared in this year were all in rhyme: *Esop Dress'd*, a collection of fables which would have astonished that Eastern sage; *Typhon*, a burlesque poem; and *The Planter's Charity*. They amused only a limited public, and Mandeville did not like to be ignored. In 1705 he threw his bomb into the literary world in the shape of 200 doggerel couplets called *The Grumbling Hive*, or, *Knaves Turn'd Honest*. It was promptly pirated and hawked about the streets as a halfpenny sheet. This was trying enough in itself; but the bomb did not even explode, and the reason was not far to seek. Just a year before, Marlborough had won the battle of Blenheim and the world had been his; but now the concerted Tory attack had set in, and all eyes were turned on his magnificent and fearless Duchess, who held her head higher than ever. But the Whigs were uneasy; everyone thought in terms of the political situation; and Mandeville's book, a general satire if there ever was one, was accepted as a matter of course as a veiled commentary on the War. In the flood of pamphlets which enveloped the controversy it was hardly noticed.

Mandeville was a persistent man, and in 1714 he republished the book anonymously as *The Fable of the Bees,* the title under which it was to remain famous. For good measure he threw in some long explanatory *Remarks* and *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue.* Still the bomb perversely refused to explode; for that was the year Anne died, more willingly than she usually took any important step. Her seventeen children were all dead, long ago, and she had never seen the man who had been chosen to succeed her. It was some comfort to the dying Queen that at least her crown would not pass to that brusque and graceless old freethinker, Sophia of Hanover, who had complacently awaited it so long. But now all the nobility of England, headed by dignitaries of the Church, went down to Dover to welcome the Elector and his two incredibly ugly mistresses, with the ceremony due to so important an occasion.

The legend is that the *Fable* was greeted by a storm of righteous indignation, but actually it was not until his third despairing attempt that Mandeville succeeded in arousing even the most languid remonstrance. In 1723 a second edition of the work came out, with *An Essay on Charity, and Charity Schools* and *A Search into the Nature of Society* appended. Even so, sales were dull until the enlightened Grand Jury of Middlesex, to whose attention it was brought, presented the book as a nuisance in July, describing it on that occasion with pleasing originality as "having a direct tendency to the subversion of all religion and civil government, our duty to the Almighty, our love to our country, and regard to our oaths". Almost simultaneously free advertising was accorded it from another quarter by a letter to the London Journal of July 27 from an indignant correspondent who signed himself Theophilus Philo-Britannus, and at last a little storm of controversy did set in. Mandeville felt better than he had felt since he came to England, and he promptly replied in a letter to the same Journal on the 10th of August, which was printed in later editions of the *Fable* as a formal "Vindication".

It was thereafter attacked successively by Archibald Campbell, Bishop Berkeley, Richard Fiddes, John Dennis, William Law, Francis Hutcheson, and John Brown, and with each fresh attack its fame grew, until people began to read the book to find what it was all about. Campbell infused new interest into the proceedings by challenging Mandeville to make good a promise he had made, that he would burn the book if it were proved to be immoral. A little later his own *Aretelogia* was advertised rather imprudently by a paragraph stating that the author of the *Fable* had, upon reading this challenge, solemnly burned his book before St. James Gate

on March 1, 1728, presumably overcome by horrid remorse. Mandeville denied this ingenious fiction in a preface to the second part of the *Fable*, and this too was tacked on to subsequent editions. It was steadily growing in size.

The controversy was largely between Mandeville, as it developed, and the followers of Shaftesbury. Hutcheson was a thoroughgoing adherent of the latter. John Brown alone was distinguished by attacking both Mandeville and Shaftesbury in his essay on the *Characteristics* in 1751, but that was after Mandeville's time. The verbal battle with William Law, the mystic, was strangely enough the most piquant. Law was stirred to an extraordinarily caustic brilliancy by the *Fable*, and in the book he devoted to controverting it, his reasoning was that of an alert man of the world rather than of the author of the *Serious Call*. Mandeville found his unfailing politeness very trying. "Though I direct myself to you", he began graciously, "I hope it will be no offence if I sometimes speak as if I was speaking to a Christian". Berkeley, in his grave and beautiful prose, endeavoured to point out Mandeville's errors in the second dialogue of his *Alciphron;* but Mandeville, unimpressed, replied at once in *A Letter to Dion*. This was in 1732, the year before he died.

Many of his other works were, at the time, better known than the *Fable* itself. In 1709 he wrote *The Virgin Unmasked*, a work which followed the lines of the Italian Novella of the Renaissance (it was very popular) and two years later a curious semi-medical "Treatise of Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions, vulgarly called Hypo in Men and Vapours in Women", protesting against what he called merely speculative therapeutics but advancing remarkably fanciful theories of his own about animal spirits in connection with "stomachic ferment". The whole was in three dialogues and was amusing at times and not too technical for the layman. Like many unsuccessful doctors, Mandeville was a confirmed and uncompromising critic of his own profession. Johnson, himself afflicted by a distinct hypochondriacal taint, admired this book. The author's last work, dating roughly from 1720, shows definitely the influence of Swift and Voltaire. *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness*, followed by *A Conference about Whoring* and *Enquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn*, both of 1725, and the *Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*, his last paper, all bear the same imprint.

It did not trouble him in the least that the public did not understand him. He was writing, he said, "for the entertainment

of people of knowledge and education", and as far as others were concerned he was supremely indifferent. Certainly he was no democrat. He was opposed to public education of even the most elementary description; as in the case of the society for promoting Christian Knowledge which was founded in 1699 to give poor children instruction in reading and writing, the Catechism, and ciphering (this last carefully restricted to boys), all under the watchful eye of the Bishop. Nothing could have been more innocuous; but Mandeville took alarm. "I note", he began acidly, "an enthusiastic passion for Charity Schools, a kind of distraction the Nation hath laboured under for some time". In the same tone he was fond of the word "impudent". If parents were too poor to give their children an education, "It is impudence in them to aspire any further", he said flatly; and again, "Every mean working fellow that can set up with little, has the impudence with the first money he gets to dress himself like a tradesman of substance", and so on up the scale. In his breezy dismissal of the human rights of the poor, Mandeville is, in fact, quite at one with the spirit of the most modern scientific reformers, though it must in justice be said that he regarded the prospect of any ideal state with unfeigned horror. As far as he was concerned, Hell was simply Utopia.

He was, within rigid limits, a powerful thinker, and though his forte was primarily that of negative criticism, a creative thinker as well. His most profound and at the same time most original contribution was to the science of government and the study of economic problems, though this is hardly remembered now in connection with his writing. He tried his hand, too, at a theory of the origin of society (everyone was doing it) and succeeded as well as most; but Hobbes and Helvetius had been there before him, to say nothing of Locke, and it did not create much of a sensation. As far as his place in English literature is concerned, he was singularly unfortunate in two ways. In the first place, he was a foreigner, and while England is kind to unorthodox foreigners she does not try to understand them. She does not even pay them the compliment of persecution. When Swift sardonically advocated a wholesale slaughter of the Irish peasantry the nation fell upon him, metaphorically speaking, and rent him; when Defoe, in the same spirit, urged the total extermination of Non-Conformists, and the High Churchmen, rather late, discovered the joke, they stood him in the pillory; but when Mandeville suggested a similar procedure it was another matter. They simply shrugged their shoulders and said, "The man is a foreigner", and that explained it all.

In the second place he did not belong to either the age which was just passing or the age which was just to begin. If he had lived a little earlier he might, as Herbert Paul suggested, have had the honour of being taken to church by Charles the Second; and if he had come a little later he would have been a Benthamite, unless Bentham had been a Mandeville-ite. But as it was he wrote forlornly in the void. England was more blasé at that time than she has ever been before or since. The most unorthodox theories Mandeville could expound about women and marriage, for instance, had all been aired with much greater brilliancy in the comedies of the Restoration; and a duller version of the same philosophy could not be expected to create much excitement even if it did possess a medical flavour lacking in the others. Moreover, Mandeville was a Latin scholar, and it is a curious fact that Latin in any discussion of sex has a peculiarly sterilising effect. It is practically impossible to say anything shocking with a Latin phrase in it. It spoils the flavour.

Everything, in short, was against him. Even his grossness, which might of itself have attracted attention at another time, failed now. He had no chance against the first of the German Georges.

His work was considered by his contemporaries as a counter-attack on the "facile optimism" of Shaftesbury, and in a sense it was that and nothing more. The great Augustans had all passed away; but still their sublime smugness could fill Mandeville with a fury of scorn. Yet his basic matter-of-factness robbed his pessimism of most of its sting. He saw the weakness of humanity as clearly as Swift or Nietzsche, but there was never any danger of his going insane over it. He has been likened most often to Nietzsche, but there is only a superficial resemblance between them; Neitzsche never made a joke. Nevertheless Mandeville went to ridiculous lengths. He meant only to deny Shaftesbury's version of the innate "moral sense", and he ended by denying, even as a matter of experience, the existence of conscience. As a doctor it should have occurred to him to wonder how, in that case, the asylums were filled. He believed in the utility of what he was pleased to call vice, but even in his most flamboyant moments the man was no Devil-Worshipper; to a very great degree it transpired that he was nothing but a rather perverse Humanist.

The *Fable* itself was very simple. The bees in their passion for reform abolished the evils of civilisation, but when these were quite gone they found that unfortunately civilisation itself had vanished along with them. In this way Mandeville arrived at his

famous paradoxical conclusion that private vices are public benefits. He has been called a master of ingenious and subtle paradox, but actually this was the only one he ever formulated. It was all quite simple and reasonable. He believed with Hobbes that the absence of self-love was the death of progress. He defined vices as "the self-regarding actions of men," which alone made civilisation possible and kept society alive and functioning. It followed inevitably, therefore, that if human failings could be eliminated, man would cease automatically to be capable of forming "vast, potent, and polite societies".

The purpose of virtue in this scheme of things was to curb dangerously anti-social instincts, for according to Hobbes the life of man in a state of nature had been "nasty, brutish and short". Shaftesbury had argued for an innate moral sense, it was true; but even he had left it to be understood that as a foundation for virtue this was a fragile thing at best. Mandeville went a step further. Virtue, he said, had been invented by politicians and philosophers, his two favourite aversions, who between them had persuaded man, "the silly creature man", that self-indulgence was inconsistent with his dignity as a rational being. His pride and vanity had been played upon to win him to the cause of virtue, which was defined as "every performance by which man, contrary to the impulse of nature, should endeavour the benefit of others, or the conquest of his own passions, out of a rational ambition of being good". "The moral virtues", said Mandeville in a famous sentence, "are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride".

He believed quite sincerely that the higher life was the merest delusion. But the irony of the situation was introduced when he asserted that virtue, in social relations, was not even useful. At least the other writers had all allowed it that distinction; but Mandeville insisted that it was actually harmful to the economic and intellectual life of the nation, and this view was quite startlingly new. Even so, Mandeville was never quite certain that an exception should not be made in the case of the lower orders. He made most of the mistakes common to his age, and naturally enough in the early Hanoverian days there was an epidemic of books on the corruptness of society. So, though he despised the moral philosophers, he paid them the unconscious compliment of adopting their assumption that human nature was essentially evil. He could not even think of new names for these new theories; he used the old terms with a new meaning, and it led people into the strangest muddles. Dr. Johnson, for instance, who loathed all talk of the

Simple Life and growled whenever Rousseau was mentioned, once told Boswell that he had read the *Fable* and been much impressed by it. It did not puzzle him, he said quite seriously, but "opened his views into real life very much". Perhaps it did.

As it stands there is a thoroughly Puritan grimness in Mandeville's uncompromising view of the wickedness of the world. Man was, indeed, born full of corruption and sin. But here, as elsewhere in his work, he was using violent words with tame meanings. Without any reservations he was a materialist. He thought of man as a walking collection of passions, whose relative strength varied from time to time; that was all. But since in his conception of things there was no opposite quality of goodness, the "vileness" in which he believed ceased to be relative and became an absolute quality, so that in the last analysis his vileness ceased to be vile. These characteristics, of envy and pride and lust and so on, existed; for lack of a better word he called them evil; but through them life went on, and whatever made life tolerable resulted directly from them. It seemed unreasonable to rebel against the facts; as far as he was concerned, at least, he asked for nothing better.

THE MORAL OF THE FABLE OF THE BEES.

Then leave complaints; fools only strive
To make a great and honest hive.
To enjoy the world's conveniences,
Be famed in war, yet live in ease
Without great vices, is a vain
Eutopia seated in the brain.
Fraud, luxury, and pride must live,
Whilst we the benefits receive.
Hunger's a dreadful plague, no doubt,
Yet who digests or thrives without?
Do we not owe the growth of wine,
To the dry shabby crooked vine?
Which whilst its shoots neglected stood,
Choked other plants and ran to wood,
But blest us with its noble fruit,
As soon as it was tied and cut;
So vice is beneficial found,
When it's by justice lopt and bound;
Nay, where their people would be great,
As necessary to the state,
As hunger is to make them eat.

Introduction to *The Fable of the Bees.*

REVOLT AGAINST THEOLOGY

JOHN M. C. WILSON

THERE is more interest in religion to-day than there has been for the past hundred years. Everything points to it, from the modernist-fundamentalist controversy in the United States, to the hard-hitting row over the new Prayer Book in England. That congregation of stout Protestants in Lancashire who, as a protest against a Choral Eucharist, sang thirty-two hymns at their vicar while he was trying to preach to them, are a symbol both of the religious spirit of the times and the general muddle-headedness that accompanies it. People want to be religious, but they also seem to want to have their religion surrounded by fog. The more vague God is, the more content they seem to be.

Theology is not a popular subject for conversation to-day, probably because the average man knows not even the meaning of its terms. If you speak to a factory owner about the Procession of the Holy Ghost, he will at once take for granted that you are speaking of some ecclesiastical ceremonial which he may vaguely associate with Whitsunday, if he has any lingering remembrance of his Sunday School teaching. To the average business man the dogma of Justification by Faith means simply nothing, although the whole credit system which is the foundation of his business is based upon it. The dogma of the Trinity is one over which even the most enthusiastic church-goers are apt to get muddled minds. Everyone has heard sermons from supposedly orthodox and earnest parsons which laid down as the faith what really was heresy for which the preacher would have burned at the stake five hundred years ago. All this is not the less unfortunate because it happens to be true.

The revolt against theology, and the attempt to separate it from religion and life, has come to a very large extent through the fact that its phraseology has not changed with the change of the language which has come during the past three centuries. The ecclesiastics have not kept up to date. When they talk about the things of the Church they talk in a language which the Middle Ages would understand, but which the younger generation of to-day simply knows nothing about. When the pious parson talks

about the Three Persons of the Trinity and then has to explain that when he says "persons" he doesn't mean persons at all, but indeed quite the reverse, he is apt to make the fog which surrounds Trinity Sunday even thicker than it was before. When he preaches about the comfortable doctrine of Election, his hearers are apt to associate it with the only elections of which they have any experience, and are surprised when there is no mention in the course of the whole sermon of bribery and corruption, or of the use of rum to influence votes. If he speaks of Final Perseverance, his hearers will probably for the moment think of the shades of night that were falling fast and the youth whose banner bore the strange device.

This is an abnormal state of affairs, for the average man does not willingly live in a mental fog. He likes to think straight ordinarily, and he naturally would want to think straight about God, if he ever were given the chance. The revolt against theology is not natural, but is rather the unfortunate effect of an antiquated vocabulary, plus an intellectual laziness on the part of the theologians, who, whenever they are chased up the theological tree by a mental bear, are wont to sit upon the highest branch, piously fold their hands and say to one another, "This is a great mystery, and while we cannot understand it, we must accept it".

The traditional method also militates against the acceptance of theological thinking by the present generation. This is an age when the scientific method and the historical method have been accepted in every other field of thought, and the fact that our grandfathers accepted this particular formula has little weight with us who are their grandchildren. For instance, the fact that everyone believed that the world was flat in the first century, does not convince the astronomers that the world is flat to-day, although it may convince Mr. Voliva. The traditional method of theological interpretation needs to be radically changed. Theology is clear thinking about God, and an interpretation of human life and human history resulting from that clear thinking. The truth or falsity of clear thinking does not rest upon the age of the tenet, although that is a fact to be considered, but rather upon the clarity of the mind which thinks, and of the fact behind the thought. Take the great central dogma of the Christian religion as an example. The truth of the Incarnation does not and cannot rest upon the fact that the Incarnation has been believed everywhere, always, and by everybody, for nineteen centuries. It rests primarily upon a historical fact, which happened in Palestine some nineteen hundred years ago, and the effect of that fact upon the lives of human beings for nineteen centuries; and this effect can be studied and analysed

by both the historical and the scientific methods. If the basis of Christian theology is sound, it can stand any examination and emerge triumphantly proven. What is more, if the traditional method is abandoned, and the historical and scientific methods are applied in its place, Theology will regain its proper position as the Queen of the Sciences.

This age is probably the most pessimistic that the Anglo-Saxon world has known since the eighteenth century. The favorite word of the moment among the younger generation is "sunk", and that fact is significant. The best cure for pessimism is Christian Theology, which is the most optimistic philosophy of the universe that the mind of man has ever produced. What is needed to-day is more clear preaching upon the great dogmas of the Church in terms which the ordinary mind will understand. If a generation of preachers will arise who can do this simple thing, they will find a generation of listeners awaiting for them, hungry both for God and for some means of escaping the apparent futility of life.