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Introduction

AT THE BEGINNING OF the eighteenth century the Dutch doctor Bernard Mandeville put forward an idea that appalled and scandalized the society of his adopted English homeland: that human beings are merely animals. Far from being elevated, rational creatures, we are in fact all greedy, self-interested, lazy, and deceiving, and live our lives according to mere rules of convenience. What's more, Mandeville claimed that these base passions and desires are the glue that holds our prosperous societies together. Mandeville was not surprised to be met with fierce opposition, for embedded within his theory of the human being was the crucial belief that we are animals who are in deep denial of our animal nature.

Mandeville published *The Fable of the Bees* in 1714, and if his name is still remembered today, it is for this. This notorious work is a humorous little tale of a hive full of greedy and licentious bees that, through a sudden act of God, is rid of all vice, from the humblest workers right up to the queen herself. Overnight the whole of bee society changes and now engages in only virtuous activity, and within a matter of days all the carefully maintained economic structures of the hive spectacularly collapse. Without crime, there is no need to employ a police force, or a construction industry for prisons; without gluttony, there is no need for medical treatment for overindulgence, or for health fads or quack cures; without deception and conniving there is no need for arbitration to settle legal disputes, so lawyers find themselves suddenly useless; without

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vanity, there is simply no fashion industry. It was the vices of the bees, it turns out, that had been keeping the little hive abuzz.

Readers knew of course that the work was intended as a direct analysis of London's modern commercial society, and for this Mandeville was denounced as a champion for vice. He always denied the charge, adopting the pose of a wounded and haughty moralist who was merely bemoaning the sad state of the human species. Few thought him sincere in these denials. In reality, Mandeville had come to his controversial view of human nature while a student and never veered from it, right up until his final mature works. He was deeply committed to the truth of this idea, but he also found it highly amusing. He revelled in the fact that it is such an unflattering and paradoxical picture of the human creature. For this reason, he set out his thoughts not in a series of scientific or philosophical works, reasoning carefully and seriously from first principles. Instead, Mandeville wrote poems, fables, satires, and dialogues, all meant to entertain, and to shock, but ultimately to coax the reader around to his way of thinking. He expected to be rejected, so committed himself early on to a literary persona that was alternately crude, sly, amused, offensive, ironic, and, above all, elusive.

Despite the irreverent tone of *The Fable of the Bees*, and the uproar that ensued, it turned Mandeville into one of the most influential thinkers of the eighteenth century. Within a few years, his infamy had spread not just in England but throughout France and Germany, and later America also. His writings influenced the subjects of philosophy, literature, and politics, and also the newly emerging disciplines of economics, sociology, and anthropology. He would later be cited appreciatively by figures as diverse as Marx, Darwin, Hayek, and Keynes. Philosophers such as Hume, Smith, Rousseau, and others disavowed Mandeville, while in the same breath they took up his ideas and integrated them into their own more well-known works.¹

The fact that *The Fable of the Bees* would also become an important text in future analyses of free-market capitalism has led many to include Mandeville as one of the founding figures of economic thought. But Mandeville is not primarily an economist at all, and he would hardly recognize himself in the description. Mandeville is first and foremost a theorist of human nature, a

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proto-anthropologist, and his economic theories are only a special application of his more general theory of human behaviour. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the breakdown of religious authority and the advent of the scientific revolution inaugurated a new approach to our ethical concerns. Instead of looking to the mind of God for guidance on how to live, various thinkers recommended that we should simply live in accordance and harmony with our own nature. But this then merely raised another question: just what is human nature? This would be perhaps the most hotly contested philosophical question of the eighteenth century, and Mandeville set that debate running with an answer no one could bring themselves to accept.

This work is about *The Fable of the Bees*, its theory of human nature, and its role in Mandeville's thought. It will also aim to position the man himself in his proper place in European intellectual history. There is no attempt made here to write a biography of Bernard Mandeville. We in fact know very little about the details of his life from contemporaries, and hardly any correspondence survives.² We have no decent images of him, no good idea even of what he may have looked like. This work will aim instead to give the reader a sense of Mandeville's mind through his writings. Only a thinker of Mandeville's character, and in possession of his rich intellectual heritage, could have written a book quite like the *Fable*. I will also answer the question of just how and why the *Fable* attracted such notoriety in its day—and, I hope, in so doing give a sense of a fascinating and unique cultural moment in London in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

In what follows, I'll set the crucial aspects of his intellectual character into sharper relief. These include Mandeville's medical background, which provides the origin of his conception of the human being and its ailments; the broad cultural anxiety regarding wealth creation that had marked Dutch culture in the seventeenth century and was only just emerging in England in the early eighteenth; his successful medical practice in London and his first-hand observation of the complex interplay among the physical, psychological, and societal factors that determine well-being; his medical treatment of women and his acute analyses of their vulnerability in society; his particular literary sensibility and his uncanny grasp

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of the psychology of the reader; his keen understanding of the unprecedented political situation in England at the time, where the interests of Whigs and Tories, court and country, Protestant and Catholic, businessman and aristocrat, vied in increasingly complex combinations; and above all, his philosophical inheritance from figures such as Erasmus, Montaigne, Spinoza, Bayle, La Rochefoucauld, and many others. I have chosen epigrams from La Rochefoucauld to begin these chapters, each expressing a central plank in Mandeville's own thinking.

Mandeville was deeply embedded in a particular kind of sceptical humanism. His writings did not serve just as a conduit for that tradition, however—they adopted it and adapted it, combining it with his own radical theory of human beings' strange animal nature. Mandeville's life was reflected through his writings. They reveal a man perfectly suited to analyse and satirize the emerging phenomenon of modern society, to reveal the gap between its self-image and its reality.

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