

The Fable of the Bees by Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733) and Its Influence in Literature and Economic Theory

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Bernard Mandeville was born in Rotterdam in 1670. He was educated at the Erasmian School in Rotterdam and at the University of Leyden, where he received the Doctor of Medicine degree in 1691. He journeyed to England sometime in the early or mid-1690s and returned to settle there later in the decade. He died in London in 1733.

Today, Mandeville is remembered chiefly for a two-volume work titled *The Fable of the Bees*, which is regarded as a founding document of laissez-faire economic theory and a work of fine literature. The leading piece of *The Fable* is a mock-epic poem, *The Grumbling Hive*, in which bee society is represented as a metaphor for human society.

The definitive edition of *The Fable of the Bees* is the edition of F. B. Kaye, published by the Oxford University Press in 1924. In preparing this article, I used a photographic reproduction of the Kaye edition published by Liberty Fund, Inc. (Mandeville 1988). A second important source was the Bernard Mandeville volume of *Twayne's English Authors Series* (Cook 1974).

Economic and Literary Background of *The Fable*

Mandeville's thought on economics was influenced by a number of earlier writers, including Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) of Holland, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) of England, and Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) of France. Erasmus and Mandeville were natives of Rotterdam, and Mandeville attended the Erasmian School in that city. Hobbes, whose work Mandeville studied at the University of Leyden, was a noted philosopher and author of the famous opinion that “The

life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Bayle spent the last 25 years of his life in exile in Rotterdam, and Mandeville may have had personal contact with him. All three, Erasmus, Hobbes, and Bayle, shared Mandeville's opinion that men and women do not act in accord with reason or morality, but in accord with their own self-interest.

Mandeville used humor, burlesque, mock-epic form, and epigrammatic satire in harshly rhymed, eight-syllable, four-stress couplets in his verse. His poetic style is often compared with that of Samuel Butler (1612–1680) (Cook 1974). Mandeville borrowed the literary device of the fable in verse from the French writer Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695). The idea of bee society as a metaphor for human society also predated Mandeville. William Shakespeare (1564–1616), in *King Henry V*, described bee society as a “peopled kingdom” with a king, officers, soldiers, magistrates, merchants, masons, porters, and other professions. John Day (1574–1640) described a similar society of bees in his play *The Parliament of Bees* (Day 1888).

Origin of and Evolution of *The Fable*

All of Mandeville's published writings were in English, except for his oration at the Erasmian School and his two dissertations, one in philosophy and one in medicine, at the University of Leyden, all of which were in Latin. In 1703, he published *Some Fables After the Easie and Familiar Manner of Monsieur de la Fontaine*. In the following year, this was reissued with new material as *Aesop Dress'd: Or, a Collection of Fables Writ in Familiar Verse*, consisting of 39 fables in verse, of which two were original and 37 were based on fables of La Fontaine.

Three of the fables, “The Grasshopper and Ant,” “The Wasps and the Bees,” which also includes a hornet, and “The Lyon and the Gnat,” feature insects in title roles, foreshadowing the role of the bees in *The Fable of the Bees*.

Aesop Dress'd has been reprinted by The Augustan Reprint Society of the University of California at Los Angeles (Mandeville 1993). La Fontaine's fables are available in verse translation by the American poet Marianne Moore (1887–1972) (Moore 1954). Many of La Fontaine's fables were based on those of the Greek fabulist, Aesop, who is believed to have lived about the middle of the 6th century, BC. For a comprehensive translation of Aesop's fables, see Temple and Temple (1998).

In 1705, Mandeville published *The Grumbling Hive: Or, Knaves Turn'd Honest*, a fable in verse that, at 433 lines, was far longer than any of those in *Aesop Dress'd*. At the time, not knowing that *The Grumbling Hive* was destined to be the leading piece of a much longer work, *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville wrote, “I do not dignify these few loose Lines with the Name of Poem.... The Reader shall be welcome to call them what he pleases.” Years later, in the preface to the 1714 edition of *The Fable*, he recalled the reception of the first printing:

The following Fable, in which what I have said is set forth at large, was printed above eight Years ago in a Six Penny Pamphlet, call'd, *The Grumbling Hive; or Knaves turn'd Honest*; and being soon after Pirated, cry'd about the Streets in a Half-Penny Sheet.

In the beginning of *The Grumbling Hive*, the hive is an economic and national power among hives:

A Spacious Hive well stockt with Bees,
That lived in Luxury and Ease...
Flatter'd in Peace, and Fear'd in Wars,
They were th' Esteem of Foreigners,
And lavish of their Wealth and Lives,
The Balance of all other Hives.

Although vice existed everywhere in the bee society ("All Trades and Places knew some cheat, / No Calling was without Deceit."), vice actually benefited the economy:

Vast Numbers throng'd the fruitful Hive;
Yet those vast Numbers made 'em thrive;
Millions endeavouring to supply
Each other's Lust and Vanity...
[Luxury] employ'd a Million of the Poor,
And odious Pride a Million more:
Envy it self, and Vanity,
Were Ministers of Industry;

But the bees complained of their own vices, so Jove imposed complete honesty on them, resulting in ruin of the economy. Unemployment spread through all trades and professions. For example, there was no work for lawyers:

The Bar was silent from that Day;
For now the willing Debtors pay,
Ev'n what's by Creditors forgot;
Who quitted them that had it not.

And there was no need for clergymen because everyone was honest:

Nor was there Business for so many,
(If th' Honest stand in need of any,)
Few only with the High Priest staid.
To whom the rest obedience paid:

And the wealthy no longer patronized the lower classes:

THE haughty *Chloe*, to live great,
Had made her Husband rob the State:
But now she sells her Furniture,
Which th' *Indies* had been ransack'd for.

In the end, the hive, although virtuous, was no longer an economic or national power. The poem closes with a moral in which Mandeville states his thesis that vice is the foundation of national prosperity and happiness:

So Vice is beneficial found,
When it's by Justice lopt and bound;
Nay, where the People would be great,
As necessary to the State,
As Hunger is to make 'em eat.
Bare Virtue can't make Nations live
In Splendor; they, that would revive
A Golden Age, must be as free,
For Acorns, as for Honesty.

In 1714 Mandeville reprinted *The Grum-*

bling Hive with new material in prose as *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. *The Fable*, Mandeville's elaboration and defense of *The Grumbling Hive*, occupied the remainder of his life. New editions appeared in 1723, 1724, and 1729, each with additional new prose material. The final version of *The Fable* was 933 pages in two parts (volumes), of which all except the 24 pages of *The Grumbling Hive* were prose. Table 1 shows the organization and content of the completed *Fable of the Bees* as we have it today.

Despite its title, *The Fable of the Bees* only rarely mentions bees or other insects in its prose sections. The following is from "The Fifth Dialogue" between Horatio and Cleomenes:

What I would prove is, that Nature produces no extraordinary Numbers of any Species, but she has contriv'd Means answerable to destroy them. The Variety of Insects, in the several Parts of the World, would be incredible to any one, that has not examin'd into this matter; and the different Beauties to be observed in them is infinite: But neither the Beauty nor the Variety of 'em are more surprizing, than the Industry of Nature in the Multiplicity of her Contrivances to kill them; and if the Care and Vigilance of all other Animals, in destroying them, were to cease at once, in two Years time the greatest part of the Earth which is ours now would be theirs, and in many Countries Insects would be the only Inhabitants.

In this passage, Mandeville comments on the number of insects in the world, stating that, if it were not for their natural enemies,

most of the earth would belong to them within two years. Here *The Fable* foreshadows Thomas Malthus's 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which influenced Charles Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species*. Malthus did, in fact, cite Mandeville's work, but Darwin did not. Mandeville's concern for the potential of insects is remindful of that of the American entomologist, L. O. Howard (1931), who believed that insects are "a very real menace to humanity."

In a subsequent passage of "The Fifth Dialogue" Mandeville comments on flies and their predators:

How curious is the Workmanship in the Structure of a common Fly; how inimitable are the Celerity of his wings, and the Quickness of all his Motions in hot Weather! Should a *Pythagorean*, that was likewise a good Master in Mechanicks, by the help of a Microscope, pry into every minute part of this changeable Creature, and duly consider the Elegancy of its Machinery, would he not think it a great pity, that thousands of Millions of animated Beings, so nicely wrought and admirably finish'd, should every Day be devour'd by little Birds and Spiders, of which we stand so little in need? Nay, don't you think yourself, that things would have been managed full as well, if the quantity of Flies had been less, and there had been no Spiders at all?

Here Mandeville marvels at the structure and movements of flies and laments that such marvelous beings should be eaten by birds and spiders. Mandeville was born during the lifetime of the Dutch anatomist Jan Swammerdam (1637–1680), and both were educated at the University of Leyden. Thus, it

Table 1. Organization and contents of *The Fable of the Bees*

Title/Description	Year
The Fable of the Bees, Part I	
The Preface	1714
The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves turn'd Honest	1705
The Introduction	1714
An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue	1714
Remarks [Consisting of 25 long text notes titled Remarks A through Y and keyed to passages in <i>The Grumbling Hive</i>]	1714
An Essay on Charity, and Charity-Schools	1723
A Search into the Nature of Society	1723
The Index	1723
A Vindication of the Book, from the Aspersion's Contain'd in a Presentment of the Grand Jury of Middlesex, and an Abusive Letter to Lord C	1724
The Fable of the Bees, Part II	
The Preface	1729
Dialogues [Consisting of six dialogues titled the First through the Sixth Dialogues, in the course of which one speaker, Horatio, is converted by the other, Cleomenes, to belief in the precepts of Part I of <i>The Fable</i> .]	1729
The Index	1729

seems likely that Mandeville was familiar with the minute dissections of insects for which Swammerdam is known (Singer 1959). Note also that in the last sentence of this quotation Mandeville suggests a managed economy for nature—the very opposite of *laissez-faire*.

Response to *The Fable*

The Fable attracted little attention before the appearance of the 1723 edition, which included the controversial “An Essay on Charity, and Charity-Schools” for the first time. But then the response was immediate and indignant:

The *Publication* of such Tenets as these, an open avow'd Proposal to extirpate the *Christian Faith* and all *Virtue*, and to fix *Moral Evil* for the *Basis* of the Government, is so stunning, so shocking, so frightful, so flagrant an Enormity, that if it should be imputed to us as a *National Guilt*, the *Divine Vengeance* must inevitably fall upon us.

Theophilus Philo-Britannus, 1723 [*The Fable of the Bees* is] a Composition of Dulness and Wickedness, as even this extraordinary Age has not produced before.

The Weekly Journal or Saturday's-Post, 1724.

The Fable was the subject of presentments of the Grand Jury of the County of Middlesex in 1723 and 1728. In France, it was ordered burned by the common hangman, and the French translation was placed on the *Index Expurgatorius* of the Roman Catholic Church by decrees of 1732 and 1745. The attacks hardly abated through 18th century and persisted throughout the 19th century into the 20th century:

[Mandeville's style exhibits] a coarseness which does not consist so much in the use of offensive language as in an almost incredible vulgarity and foulness of tone...his prose is frequently incorrect and never in any way polished.

George Saintsbury, 1894
He is a cynical and prurient writer, who shrinks from no jest, however scurrilous, and from no paradox, however grotesque, calculated to serve the object.

Leslie Stephen, 1907

The cause of the attacks was Mandeville's thesis that vice is the basis of national prosperity and happiness. In his own words:

What renders [man] a Sociable Animal, consists not in his desire of Company, Good-nature, Pity, Affability, and other Graces of a fair Outside; but that his vilest and most hateful Qualities are the most necessary Accomplishments to fit him for the largest, and, according to the World, the happiest and most flourishing Societies. This philosophy was widely seen as antithetical to established religious, moral, and ethical beliefs.

Mandeville's Influence

With the passage of time, many of Mandeville's ideas on political economy have become familiar through the writings of David Hume (1711–1776), Adam Smith (1723–1790), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), Robert Malthus (1766–1834), James Mill (1773–1836), J. R. McCulloch (1789–1864), and other influential members of the classical school of economics, which was the prevailing school of economics from 1775 to 1875. *Laissez-faire*, or economic liberalism, was the first principle of classical economic theory (Oser 1970, Eagly 1974).

The Fable was also cited by writers who opposed *laissez-faire*. Karl Marx (1818–1883) quoted extensive sections of Mandeville's “Remark Q” and “An Essay on Charity and Charity-Schools” in his great work, *Capital* (Marx 1906), adding that:

What Mandeville, an honest, clearheaded man, had not yet seen, is that the mechanism of the process of accumulation [of capital] itself increases, along with the capital, the mass of “labouring poor,” i.e., the wage-labourers, who turn their labour-power into an increasing power of self-expansion of the growing capital, and even by doing so must eternize their dependent relation on their own product, as personified in the capitalists. For Marx, this was an uncharacteristically kind rebuttal of a competing economic theory.

But according to Cook (1974), “It will always be Mandeville's literary excellence that most strongly commends him to attention.” Today Mandeville is still quoted, cited, and/or listed in most of our standard literary references, including *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Ousby 1993) and *A Handbook to Literature* (Harmon and Holman 1996). Among the many famous authors who were inspired by Mandeville or who gave him specific, often lengthy, mention were Alexander Pope (1688–1744), Francois-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778), Henry Fielding (1707–1754), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834).

The following passage from *The Life of the Bee* (1901) by Belgian poet, dramatist, and essayist Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) illustrates the pervasive influence of *The Fable of the Bees* in literature:

These reciprocal obstacles [to the construction of the cells of a honeycomb], it would seem, are capable of marvelous achievements; on the same principle, doubtless, that the vices of man produce a general virtue, whereby the human race, hateful often in its individuals, ceases to be so in the mass.

This is an obvious, though unstated, allusion to the theme of Mandeville's *Fable*. In context, the passage is sarcasm, so Maeterlinck

evidently did not accept Mandeville's opinion that private vices are a public benefit. Maeterlinck believed that bees are intelligent, and his lifelong interest in beekeeping led him to seek proofs of his pantheistic mysticism in nature.

Conclusion

Although the bees of Mandeville's *Fable* are just a literary device and bear little resemblance to actual bees, the *Fable* makes a memorable connection between the sciences of entomology and economics. In addition, *The Fable* is a notable contribution to the large body of fine literature in which bees are featured. The lore of bees extends to ancient times (Ransome 2004), and *The Fable of the Bees* will always be part of it.

Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated to my wife, Gerda, and my friend, Ginette Davis, who, between them, taught me most of what I know, or think I know, about political economy.

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