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Bernard Mandeville and the Universalization of Christian Ethics: an Impoverishing Tradition

Abstract

Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* was received with shock in eighteenth-century English society; this came due to its claims of vice being better than virtue for the economic benefit of society. He goes so far as to claim "virtue is made friends with vice" when people follow the latter's demands. Such a claim was viewed as being an attack on Christian ethics and the belief that society is best composed when done so with virtuous members (of a Christian variety) exclusively. Some of his detractors even went so far as to label him a "Man-Devil" for these perceived slights. But it is not the case that the *Fable of the Bees* entirely negates Christian virtue in its conclusions. Rather, in *The Fable of the Bees* and Mandeville's associated writings, he merely shows the incompatibility of Christian moral virtue at the societal level with the best functioning of its economy. But if a flourishing economy is understood as the best means of promoting welfare an antinomy arises between two lines of Christian ethical thought: the combatting of vice and the helping of those most in need. The solution to which may rest in a reinterpretation of the role of Christians within a society.

Part I - Introduction

Bernard Mandeville, born in 1670 and died in 1733, was many things, physician-cum-political-satirist foremost among which, but "Man-Devil" he was not.¹ His *Fable of the Bees* or *The Grumbling Hive*, a satirical poem published initially in 1703 and aimed at the virtue obsessed people of his day, however, certainly seems to have earned him this reputation among his peers. Richard Cook, in his book on Mandeville, notes that "no English author since Thomas Hobbes had touched so raw a nerve, and men who agreed in almost nothing else became united in their condemnation of Mandeville" (Cook 117). John Maynard Keynes, a giant of modern economic history, took space in his magnum opus to comment on how *The Fable of the Bees* was, "convicted as a nuisance by the grand jury of Middlesex in 1723," and that it, "stands out in the history of moral sciences for its scandalous reputation" (Keynes 359).

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Although the *Fable of the Bees* itself was a satirical poem which, upon the initial publishing, was hardly noticed by the public and would gain little to no ground beyond the artistic for its argumentation, the accompanying series of essays which were added in the 1714 and 1723 editions helped to further establish both Mandeville's arguments and notoriety. The fable itself is designed to mirror Aesop's fable of the frogs who wished for a king only to be given a crane by whom they are consumed; Mandeville depicts a thriving hive of bees that wish and pray away all the semblances of vice in their midst only to then starve, diminish in prominence and generally suffer due to that vice having been what sustained their flourishing. "Bare virtue can't make nations live" cried he, instead it is preferable that "every part [be] full of Vice / Yet the whole mass a paradise" (Mandeville 27).

What further garnered such an infamous reputation was his theses on the apparent incompatibility between a society that wishes to promote virtue with one which holds a thriving economy. This virtuosity which he combats is necessarily one defined by a Christian set of ideals, as it is the 18th-century English society for which he writes. Similar to Thomas Hobbes, as is noted in the prior remark from Richard Cook, detractors smeared him as utterly anti-Christian for his published views. Mandeville weaved an account of society in such a way as to reveal that, as he says in the remarks, "virtue is made friends with vice when industrious good people, who maintain their families and bring up their children handsomely, pay taxes, and are several ways useful members of society, get a livelihood by something that chiefly depends on, or is very much influenced by the vices of others, without themselves being guilty of, or accessory to them" (55-56). In fact, he goes further yet arguing that a society "without great Vices" is merely a "vain Eutopia" condemned to remain within one's imagination (34).

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Perhaps the most striking example to the reader comes in his “Remark G,” in which he argues thieves to be better for society than those “misers” who save their money and uphold an ascetic lifestyle; once a thief has spent the money he stole from those who would otherwise save it, Mandeville reckons, “the nation would be better for the robbery, and would receive the same and as real a benefit from it, as if an archbishop had left the sum to the public” (57). This view subtly anticipates the paradox of thrift later purposed by Keynesian economic theory. It holds simply that money saved deprives the economy of its utilization and therefore discourages the growth which otherwise might have arisen from it. Thus, the perceived ascetic virtue necessary to take up the act of saving, in the words of Keynes, would “necessarily defeat itself” (Keynes 84). A problem easily solved by Mandeville’s thief.²

So too is Mandeville considered a precursor to Adam Smith’s notion of the Invisible Hand, which allows economies to function through the self-love and pride of each actor therein. Mandeville argued, albeit less systematically than Smith, for a similar function of self-love in “Remark M” of the Fable; “pride and luxury are the great promoters of trade” he posits alongside the claim that “in a more virtuous age (such a one as should be free from pride) trade would in a great measure decay” (Mandeville 73-74). Rather, it is solely by virtue of having that vice of prideful self-love that any commerce might happen at all within a society; without which, nobody would seek to further their wealth beyond what is necessary for their survival. Should vice, then, be eliminated entirely from the society-at-large not only would a massive economic shock ensue as the barkeepers are forced to fight over the reduced demand for drink sans drunkards, lock makers become entirely obsolete, and the fashion industry vanishes into thin air, but so too would all industries become hurt by a universally diminished demand. Demand that

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was formerly defined by the wants and excess desires of people in a society would then be defined by the most basic necessities required for people to get by.

Part II - Antinomy

The fallacy of composition, perhaps, best illustrates the point at hand here; in which, the connection between an attribute held by all the parts is denied being necessarily indicative of the whole. William Rowe, in his essay on this fallacy, gives the example of a machine constituted exclusively by small parts – the machine need not be small simply because its parts are all small – and another example of a shape made entirely of triangular pieces – obviously, this new shape doesn't need to be a triangle. Yet counter examples exist where the connection is necessary. Such as something being made entirely of parts bearing a single-color, thus necessitating, aside from some trick of the light, the whole thing being that same color. But since the rules apply only some of the time³ it must be true that the connection is not necessary between a descriptor of all the parts and a proposed utilization of the same descriptor in regard to the whole.

How this fallacy manifests itself in our concerns here is self-evident: a society composed of virtuous people is not necessarily virtuous. Further yet, under the auspices of Mandeville, as described above, we might be made aware that specifically for a society utilizing Christian conceptions of virtue it is not the case that such a descriptor of the part would manifest itself unto the whole. Rather, the exact opposite is true if he is to be believed.

An irreconcilable set of beliefs then comes to the fore with the consideration of a moral duty given to Christians to feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and generally provide for those who are in need of such things given in Matthew chapter 25⁴. For it has become irrefutably apparent through the history of all hitherto society that the best-proven

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means of providing such necessities to those most in need is through promoting a thriving economy in which such things may be made available to the greatest numbers. So unless welfare towards the poor in Christian moral doctrine might be justified as being meant to exist solely on a case by case basis, for which I can think of no justification why this might be the case, then the best means yet known of following the commands given to Christians within the above cited piece would be through a capitalist market.

The antinomy is one of the promotion of virtue and optimal promotion of welfare⁵ each being anathema towards the other, yet each being potentially endorsed through different modes of Christian thought. Mandeville has shown his reader that the former, as it is understood to come at the expense of vice, cannot be promoted without becoming detrimental towards the welfare of society. Similarly, should the latter be chosen as an objective, it can only be made optimal should the equally good desire of limiting vice be disposed of.

Part III - Possible Solutions

Louis Dumont argued, albeit briefly, that Adam Smith reaches a similar problem of traditional Christian morals becoming opposed to the proper function of the market as understood through the concept of the invisible hand; declaring that it, “performs here a little-noticed function. It is as if God told us, ‘Don’t be afraid, my child, of apparently trespassing against my commands. I have so arranged everything that you are justified in neglecting morality in this particular case’” (Dumont 61-62). But I should ponder what type of omnipotent God should make such a precise incision into otherwise universal laws. Alternatively, if there were grounds for a Kierkegaardian teleological suspension of the ethical of some sort in these concerns it would render the laws of the deity comical in our modern age due to the mass

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proliferation of economic concerns into every aspect of our lives. Clearly, Dumont's characterization of the problem cannot be taken as the fact of the matter.

So how should the good Christian deal with such a conflict of ideas? In modernity, it seems, Christians have chosen to simply ignore the problem of vice being as such; practices, formerly morally ambiguous are reframed to fit within a modern context, such as usury, historically considered the case for any lending with interest, becoming merely those cases where excessive interest is charged; so too, pride and luxury only really being considered vice in modernity when at the levels of millionaires and movie stars. But these redefinitions seem to be nothing more than relativizing one's state in relation to what would otherwise be increased vice by the standards held in the rest of this document.

The solution must lay elsewhere. So, I will close with a brief comment which up until now has gone unnoted explicitly in the body of this work, despite holding a place in the title; this is the problem of the universalization of Christian ethics, or rather the incapacity therein. I suspect that the true merits of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* do not lay in his making friends of virtue and vice, as he would suppose, but his illumination of the impossibility of a truly Christian society. Perhaps, Christianity is only sensible and logically coherent within a minority status. Mandeville, in this sense, would become no less a name of infamy than Milan or Thessalonica.

Notes

¹ Mandeville's name was satirized to which in a London publication (Hundert, E.J. 7)

²It is worth noting two things here; the first, that Keynes did not use the term "paradox of thrift" so far as I can tell, this term seems to have been popularized by Paul Samuelson; second, Mandeville only endorses thieves in "Remark G" insofar as they are preferable to the miser.

³ He delves deeper into the issue of the descriptor being different in meaning when viewed relative to the part or the whole as a potential way of explaining this, which he ultimately rejects. Instead, he seems to favor what seems to be a case by case analysis of these part-whole instances of the fallacy of composition.

⁴ Specifically, Matthew 25:34-46.

⁵ By "welfare" I mean in the general sense of the term, not in the modern sense of it being a product of governments.

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