

‘Private Vices, Publick Benefits’ in Permissive Democracies: Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* in the Context of Transgressions by Western Political Classes

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Introduction

The work of many 17th-18th century thinkers on politics and society continues to shape modern discourse, with notable contributions including Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), John Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750). The renown enjoyed by a small number of thinkers should not, however, divert us from more obscure but equally significant works from the period. The Anglo-Dutch critic and satirist Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* (1714, henceforth ‘*Fable*’) is one such work. Through his central argument that the political class did not need to behave morally in order to establish a well-ordered society—hence the famous dictum ‘Private Vices, Publick Benefits’—Mandeville became one of the most controversial figures of the period.

This piece will provide a brief account of Mandeville’s thought and the fierce criticism it attracted, before looking at cases of political scandals in post-war Western democracies. The legal and philosophical scholar Edward L. Rubin has compellingly outlined how, in our contemporary era, a ‘morality of self-fulfilment’, in which citizens are primarily occupied with personal interests as opposed to wider ethical commitments, has replaced the forms of Christian piety seen in the 18th century.¹ Viewed alongside

Rubin, Mandeville’s thought appears almost prophetic. Though his viewpoints on the merits of capitalism and the cynicism of the political classes were radical to his contemporaries, they seem highly applicable to 21st-century society. Exploring instances of dubious moral conduct by members of the governing classes in modern morally permissive societies, the continuing relevance of Mandevillian thought becomes especially apparent.

Morality in a commercial society—Mandeville’s thought

In the work of Mandeville, the lay view of 18th-century Britain as a society dictated by monolithic concepts of decency and piety is quickly problematised. Indeed, these concepts are his primary targets. Humans were not a unique species following a divinely-ordained path. On the contrary, in the *Fable* he argued that ‘Providence should have no greater regard to our species, than it has to flies.’² His relegation of religion to the sidelines of discourse was an important aspect of his most prominent argument. Contrary to a movement of moralising writers who feared that commerce and social change would undermine ethics and values, the central thesis of the *Fable* was to connect these processes together in the

¹ State (Oxford University Press 2015) 43.

² Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (first published 1714, Penguin 1989) 71.

couplet ‘Private Vices, Publick Benefits’.³ He explained that ‘the skilful management of wary politicians’ regulated society. The hive of ‘bees’, a thinly-disguised metaphor for the vibrant, prosperous metropolis of London he had come to call home, were kept afloat by immorality as ‘their crimes conspired to make them great’.⁴ Mandeville argued that, contrary to Biblical notions of a benevolent soul influencing human action, ‘Man centres everything in himself, and neither loves nor hates but for his own sake’.⁵ He also reduced the good sense of polite society to a mere façade, as opposed to any form of innate morality, as ‘all good manners consist in flattering the pride of others, and concealing our own’.⁶

Whilst his side-lining of matters relating to the Church reflected the secular character of Mandeville’s thought, the few references to the place of religion in society reduced it to little more than a tool for cynical social control. At the beginning of Part 1 of the *Fable*, he outlined his aim to expose the ‘unreasonableness and folly’ of those always ‘exclaiming against those vices’, a clear attack on members of the clergy publishing moralising treatises.⁷ Indeed, his lampooning of the established Church went even further, identifying as the most important factors for social stability ‘envy and emulation’, traits which had ‘kept more men in bounds’ than ‘all the sermons that have been preached since the time of the apostles’.⁸ In relativising Christian morality to little more than another social more and interpreting the calculating and cunning characteristics of the ruling class as necessary for wider harmony, Mandeville established himself as a highly original and controversial satirist.

Insofar as *Fable* offered a response to contemporary issues through the structure of a classical, moralising form of literature, Mandeville can be placed in a wider context of thinkers who charted how recent developments and upheavals had brought aspects of the human condition into sharper focus. Two of the most salient examples are John Locke’s idea that recent political disagreements had highlighted the innate goodness of limited freedom of expression (*A letter concerning toleration*, 1689) and Adam Smith’s notion that the expansion of trade had highlighted the instinct of self-interest (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776). Mandeville argued that the new, commercial society was necessary for human flourishing. He was aware of how his ideas were challenging a near-consensus on morality as he explained that ‘what we call evil in this world’, i.e. materialism and self-aggrandisement, was in fact ‘the grand principle that makes us sociable creatures’.

The conventions brought in by avaricious commerce were, therefore, not malign but necessary for the growth of a polite and well-functioning society. Mandeville railed against the cultures of shame and stigma which certain intellectual circles had disseminated in response to burgeoning materialism. He targeted the moralists themselves and labelled them as hypocrites, suggesting that particular individuals were constantly ‘railing at what they are more or less guilty of themselves’. He posited that the models of morality and piety offered by religious writers were simply unattainable, as it was ‘so very seldom’ that ‘many Virtues and good Qualities’ were ‘seen to meet in one Individual’. Whilst temptations and vices naturally affected a majority of citizens, as ‘Love or Covetousness may divert’ some and ‘Drinking, Gaming may draw away many’, this

did not entirely scupper morality. In fact, morality existed because these vices equated to effective governance and social stability as ‘moral Virtues’ were defined as ‘Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride’.

Therefore, even though Mandeville’s portrait of a society plagued by self-interest and vices was comparable to that offered by other writers, the conclusions he reached from it were markedly different. He did not believe that the avarice and materialism brought in by commerce and trade were injurious to morality. These qualities were preferable as wealth created human flourishing and pleasure. This allowed a superior and more realistic notion of morality, in which citizens and rulers were aware of their human flaws and fragilities and honest reflection created good government, to prosper.

‘How monstrous it is’—Responses to Mandeville

The quotation above is taken from ‘Remarks on the Fable of the Bees’, a response to Mandeville’s work written by the non-juring priest and moralist William Law in 1724.⁹ Whilst modern audiences might simply dismiss his criticism as hyperbolic, it is in fact highly salient for understanding Mandeville’s context and how his work created fierce controversy, highlighting also the sheer originality of his conception of society. The impulse of conservative and journalistic circles to condemn inappropriate behaviour by politicians in the 20th-21st centuries reflects that though the moralising and pious opposition experienced by Mandeville has somewhat abated, it remains an important part of discourse.

Law argued that Mandeville’s tying of virtues to private corruption was libellous, pronouncing it was ‘monstrous’ to ‘impute these fine moral virtues to the contrivance of politicians’.¹⁰ Following the line of the Established Church, he similarly took issue with Mandeville’s diminishing of human reason as a secondary quality to cunning and calculation, arguing that God-given ‘reason’ directed us to ‘know... what is practical’.¹¹ Whilst the empiricist philosopher Francis Hutcheson did not write from such a confessionally-motivated standpoint, his belief in the benevolent strength of human reason made him another high-profile critic of Mandeville’s work. This criticism informed a significant part of his public discourse: in 1724, he penned letters to the *London Journal* criticising the *Fable* which formed the basis of his lengthier study *Reflections upon laughter and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* (1725).

Whilst certain responses to Mandeville did veer into hyperbole—in volume 2 of his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), the Whig historian Leslie Stephen castigated him for ‘jest’ and ‘grotesque...paradox’—they reflect the striking nature of his conclusions.¹² Responses to Mandeville are essential for comprehending his place in British thought and his connections to modern society. By acknowledging the imperfections of the human condition but concluding that these made it well-suited for public life, he placed himself apart from a generation of more moralistic, pious authors, the consequence of which has been his endurance and his relevance as a thinker.

3 *ibid* 55.

4 *ibid* 27.

5 *ibid* 40.

6 *ibid*.

7 *ibid* 5.

8 *ibid* 15.

9 William Law, *The Fable of the Bees* (first published 1724, Penguin 2013) 17.

10 *ibid* 5.

11 *ibid* 10.

12 Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century: Volume Two* (first published 1876, Penguin 1991) 47.

Sleaze and unease—modern political scandals

Though it is of course unfeasible to know how Mandeville would have responded to more modern cases of corruption and intrigue, by adopting a ‘Mandevillian stance’ based on the central principle that private vices can and do enable public virtues, this section will highlight applicability of his social philosophy to modern society.

The argument that ‘this House views with grave concern the continuing decline of moral standards’ would not have been out of place in early modern evangelical circles. It was, however, a statement made in 1970 by the Conservative MP Peter Fry about Parliament’s reflection of wider values.¹³ Whilst the religious inclinations of Western society have shifted since the 18th century and fairer processes, such as the abolition of privileges and the expansion of the franchise, have altered the political landscape, issues of morality are still recurrent in political discourse. However, it is clear that shifting social values, more liberal legislation, and greater rights for minority groups mean that in Western democracies, conceptions of morality have significantly changed since the era of the Enlightenment. Whilst interpretations of ‘declining values’ continue to have currency in certain conservative circles, thinkers have generally reconciled themselves with a morally permissive society. Also in 1970, the Scottish theologian and Biblical commentator William Barclay penned *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, an attempt to reconcile Christ’s doctrines with new social forces including sexual liberation and drug usage. The interpretation of Christian Adam, Christoph Knill and Steffen Hurka (2015) that despite ‘a general trend towards more permissive approaches in moral regulation’, the capacity of such issues to provoke controversy has persisted is salient.¹⁴ It reflects how legally and morally permissive societies continue to struggle to account for the forces of cynicism and materialism brought into sharp focus by economic modernity.

In the next part of this article, I will offer concise summaries of three cases in morally permissive post-war democracies in which the actions of members of the governing class generated discussions on morality. To account for a range of circumstances, countries, and outcomes, I have chosen the ‘Watergate’ scandal in the US in the 1970s, the revelations of ‘sleaze’ which contradicted the British Conservative Party’s ‘back to basics’ campaign in the 1990s and the charges of corruption which have altered the public image of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy. I will look at the questions of private morality raised by each and, in the final section, explain how Mandeville’s thought responds to these questions and thus generates a new form of social criticism.

The core details of the ‘Watergate’ scandal are well-known. In June 1972, police at the headquarters of the Democratic National Convention at the Watergate hotel arrested five intruders who occupied positions on President Richard Nixon’s re-election campaign. Further research by journalists indicated that, despite Nixon’s attempts to distance himself from the events, underhand techniques and surveillance of opponents were part and parcel of his administration. The turning-point of the scandal came in October 1973 when it was found that tapes delivered to a key investigator had been significantly redacted and by August 1974, public pressure had grown so much that Nixon resigned. His full pardon in September of the same year by President Gerald Ford (Nixon’s Vice President)

only heightened the public perception of corruption. In this case, the most prominent question of morality was pithily summarised by Vice Chairman James Baker who asked ‘What did the president know and when did he know it?’¹⁵ The point of contention was the extent to which the President was responsible for the illicit activities of a large number of officials answering to him, and how far he had given orders which had disrupted the democratic system to maintain his power. Interestingly, his victory in the 1972 presidential election indicates that early on, many sections of the public were not convulsed by these issues in the same way as sections of the media. In terms of morality, they believed that Nixon’s seemingly effective responses to issues including a tanking economy and the Vietnam War justified the means. The fact that by August 1974, political and public pressure led him to resign indicates that wider perceptions reached a point where Nixon’s personal impulses were seen to run contrary to the noble values of his office. A raft of revelations by the media regarding his personal conduct and direct involvement in underhand tactics had shattered his precarious position.

Morality was central to the outlook of Conservative PM John Major’s administration and in a 1993 speech, he committed the party to ‘the old values—neighbourliness, decency, courtesy’ which were ‘still alive’ and continued to encapsulate ‘the best of Britain’.¹⁶ However, this vision was followed by a wave of revelations which indicated that leading Conservative ministers had been guilty of lapses in morality which contradicted Major’s vision. These included a multitude of cases of marital infidelity, MPs being bribed by corporations to ask leading questions in Parliament, and a Conservative-run City Council distributing council houses according to who was most likely to vote for the party. These revelations led to a wave of resignations and firings, and it was no surprise when in the 1997 general election the Labour party won a majority of 146 seats. In this case, John Major and other ministers had set excessively high expectations for private morality, a naturally ambiguous area of life, and their blatant hypocrisy particularly appalled intellectual and political circles.

The final scandal I will be considering is the charges of corruption which have dominated the legacy of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (served 2007–12). Shortly after he commenced his term in November 2007, a *Brookings Institution* piece pronounced him a ‘hyper-president’, due to his flagrant attitude regarding his personal wealth and his images of hard work and wide-scale reform, which initially won him high approval ratings of around 60%.¹⁷ However, corruption charges relating to illegal payments to his campaign team soon blighted his presidency. The allegations continued and, in March 2021, Sarkozy was given a three-year suspended sentence for attempting to bribe a magistrate. In terms of morality, there had been prior criticisms over his approach to public life: his high-profile relationship with the actress Carla Bruni, shows of wealth, and flamboyant personality were perceived as licentious. Whilst the trail of evidence left by Sarkozy’s misdeeds indicate that he was guilty of financial corruption, in the eyes of many commentators, he had been liable for years before the verdict was passed, as his attempts to cultivate a celebrity image went against the high moral standards applicable to a head of state.

13 Hansard (4 May 1970) 38 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1970/may/04/permissive-society> accessed 25 April 2022.

14 C. Adam, C. Knill and S. Hurka, ‘Introduction’ in C. Adam, C. Knill and S. Hurka (eds.), *On the Road to Permissiveness? Change and Convergence of Moral Regulation in Europe* (Oxford University Press 2015) 2.

15 John Dean, *The Nixon Defence Deluxe – What He Knew and When He Knew It* (Viking Press USA 2014).

16 C. McCrystal, ‘Back to basics: But how basic? In search of a golden age, Cal McCrystal climbs the Prime Minister’s family tree’, *The Independent* (London, 28 November 1993) 9.

17 P. Gordon, ‘Nicolas Sarkozy: The Hyperpresident’ *Brookings Institution* (New York, 10 November 2007) 6.

Private corruption, public apathy?—a new conception of politics

Even though popular discourse has moved away from the standards of Christian devotion and piety seen in the 18th century, the media still finds it easy and expedient to lambast the private antics of politicians. Whilst this article does not intend to exonerate Nixon, Conservative ministers, or Sarkozy, the fact that an under-studied 18th-century thinker offered a model of society which excused such private transgressions suggests that high moral expectations continue to be set for members of the political classes. This notion makes Mandeville's outlook all the more arresting because even in a morally permissive society, he seems to go further than many commentators.

In all three cases, injury to the image of the guilty parties preceded guilty verdicts. Many media outlets perceived Nixon as dishonest and lacking the warmth and human touch seen in other Presidents. On 21st October 1973, the front page of *The New York Times* interpreted Nixon's firing of investigators who had refused to follow his orders as aggressive and upsetting the democratic process. The hedonistic lifestyles pursued by the Conservative ministers were seen as out of touch with social reform and welfare concerns. On 8th November 1993, an article in *People Magazine* entitled 'Ministering to the Needs of the Nation—Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, Minister!!!' crudely lampooned recent revelations relating to a minister's infidelity.¹⁸ This indicated that, by falling short of the high moral standards it had set, the Conservative Party had trapped itself in an almost tragicomic situation. However, tragicomedy led to wide public anger; in his biography, tabloid newspaper editor Piers Morgan reflected that 'Major brought all these exposés on himself, with that ludicrous 'Back to Basics' speech at the last Tory conference'.¹⁹ Sarkozy's standoffish attitude rankled many cultural and intellectual circles. In February 2008, little over half a year into his presidency, the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur* published a chain of text messages which indicated that a few days into his new marriage, Sarkozy had considered committing adultery.²⁰ This reinforced the wider interpretation that, with his hedonistic lifestyle, he was out of touch with the morality of ordinary voters, and his popularity quickly slumped.

Mandeville's response to these accusations would be one of indifference. He was aware that the changes wrought by a developing, commercial society were bound to unleash unsavoury aspects of the human condition and even if these were unideal at best and humiliating at worst, he did not believe that rulers needed to be overly image-focused. Instead, Mandeville believed that moral imperfections were a natural part of any personality. As long as they did not directly and specifically undermine good government, they did not undermine the wider, more important version of morality which upheld society.

In the cases of Nixon and Sarkozy, subsequent evidence has indicated that their actions bypassed democratic processes and tarnished aspects of the American and French political systems. Whilst Mandeville can be read as a proto-theorist of morally permissive societies—which kindles appeal across the political

spectrum, as his ideas seem to bolster leftist proponents of sexual freedoms and rightist libertarians—this does not mean he gave complete licence to rulers. Imperfections in the private sphere were only permissible if they did not have a malign impact on the public sphere. In his shorter work *Free thoughts on religion, the Church & national happiness* (1720), he defended democracy as the form 'of government' most effectively 'armed against knavery, treachery, deceit'.²¹ Therefore, though he did not set as high standards for the leadership class as other Enlightenment-era thinkers including Hobbes and Montesquieu who delineated clear views of a virtuous absolute monarch (*Leviathan*, 1651) and a well-defined division of legislative powers (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 1748), the actions of Nixon and Sarkozy were too injurious to be permissive.

His response to the adultery and cover-ups by Conservative ministers might, however, have been more balanced, however. Outside of the *Fable*, one of Mandeville's most striking pieces of social criticism was *A Modest Defence of Publick-Stews* (1724) in which he argued for a rationalist approach to public brothels in which prostitutes were judged by 'their beauty, or other qualifications'.²² Whilst many Christian commentators would have railed against the undermining of nuclear family values, it is unlikely that Mandeville would have been similarly critical towards infidelity. Finally, despite the clear hypocrisy of the Conservative ministers, an attribute also evident in the cases of Nixon and Sarkozy, Mandeville believed this cunning and unscrupulous management of public personas was immoral but entirely excusable, as the appropriate deployment of 'flattery' and 'self-love', two of mankind's primary instincts, could be done properly and sensibly for the sake of social stability.²³

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite his lack of attachment to Christian morality or ethics, Mandeville did not explicitly reject morality. Instead, he had a more pragmatic approach which accounted for human imperfections and saw that, as these had been brought into focus by a commercially flourishing society, they were excusable and even necessary. Whilst he may well have criticised the actions of Nixon, the Conservative ministers, and Sarkozy for undermining political stability and encouraging 'treachery', he would not have had a sensationalist approach to their lapses in private morality as he believed in the careful division between public and private spheres. The primary implication of Mandeville's thought for modern society is that, even though it is imperfect and the behaviour of the political classes regularly disappoints a wide cross-section of citizens, the relative prosperity we enjoy to other historical societies means we should not be overly judgemental. Instead, a more optimistic interpretation of society must go hand-in-hand with an understanding of human fallibilities and even if political intrigue and scandal have the capacity to shock us, our shock must not devolve into reductive moralising.

18 Jane Newman, 'Ministering to the Needs of a Nation', *People Magazine* (London, 8 November 1993) 10.

19 Piers Morgan, *The Insider: The Private Diaries of a Scandalous Decade* (Ebury Press 2005) 38.

20 Charles Balmer, 'Sarkozy drops legal case over SMS story', *Reuters* (London, 19 March 2008) 15.

21 Bernard Mandeville, *Free thoughts on religion, the Church & national happiness* (first published 1720, Oxford University Press 1989) 17.

22 Bernard Mandeville, *A Modest Defence of Publick-Stews* (first published 1724, Oxford 1989) 39.

23 Mandeville (n 2) 41.