

ABSTRACT

RECONCILING NATURALISM AND THEOLOGY IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF BERNARD MANDEVILLE

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The paradoxical nature of Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* has led a number of scholars to offer competing interpretations of his social and political thought. In particular, his rigoristic definition of moral virtue, which juxtaposes a version of Christian asceticism with Enlightenment rationalism, has allowed for competing portrayals of Mandeville as either a Christian moralist or a Hobbesian empiricist. Contributing to this perplexity is the fact that his writings are also characterized by repeated appeals to Christian ethics, despite the fact that he is making a case for the benefits to be derived from vice. In this paper, I attempt to illustrate that Mandeville's apparent references to Christian theology are a crucial part of his naturalistic argument for the need to manage fundamentally vicious passions through moral education. Understanding that Mandeville acknowledges the social utility of Christianity contributes to a more coherent reading of his political thought and allows us to place him more prominently among 18th-century thinkers whose ideas were borne out in practice at the time of the American Founding. Furthermore, the argument for Mandeville's consistency presented here speaks to a more general ongoing debate over the compatibility between naturalism and religious belief.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2016

RECONCILING NATURALISM AND THEOLOGY IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF
BERNARD MANDEVILLE

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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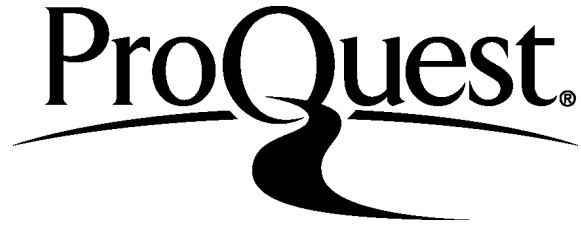
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to my graduate committee chair, S. Adam Seagrave, who encouraged me to pursue my interest in the political thought of Bernard Mandeville and worked closely with me through an independent study of *The Fable of the Bees*. Additionally, I am indebted to Larry Arnhart and Andrea Radasanu for taking the time to read drafts of this paper and provide invaluable feedback. Each of them has functioned as a mentor and role model, and this paper would not have been possible without their guidance and input over the past two years.

DEDICATION

For my father and mother, and for my Katherine.
Your unconditional love and support have been
a constant source of comfort and motivation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The paradoxical nature of Bernard Mandeville’s thought is most manifestly observed in his infamous maxim, “Private Vices, Publick Benefits,” the meaning of which has been dissected and analyzed by scholars since F.B. Kaye’s (1924) landmark edition of *The Fable of the Bees*. Yet a deeper paradox, which Kaye and others have observed in *The Fable*, seems to permeate much of Mandeville’s thought, and it can be described broadly as the simultaneous presence of two seemingly contradictory approaches or viewpoints – one of them naturalistic and the other theological. As Kaye has pointed out, Mandeville’s treatment of human morality seems to be primarily “empirical” in many passages of his writing and primarily “ascetic” or “rigoristic” in others (FB, lii-iv).¹ Subsequent scholars have debated this apparent dichotomy, drawing very different conclusions as to the general character of Mandeville’s writings. Some have argued that he should be read as a psychologist who is entirely concerned with the empirical, while others have argued that he should be read as a Christian moralist whose message is mostly theological in nature.

In this paper I intend to demonstrate that this apparent dichotomy of viewpoints in Mandeville’s thought is no dichotomy at all – rather, both are integral to one another and to Mandeville’s moral and political philosophy. More precisely, Mandeville’s inquiry into the

¹Throughout, references to *The Fable of the Bees, Or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (Ed. F.B. Kaye, Liberty Fund 1988 [1924]) will appear as FB. References to *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (1720) will appear as FT.

forces that drive modern commercial prosperity is undertaken from an empirical viewpoint, and the results of his inquiry reveal the social utility of the Christian religion, the value of which is conveyed to his audience through religious rhetoric and theological argumentation. Rather than arguing for the irreconcilability of these seemingly divergent aspects of his work, a more nuanced understanding of Mandeville's thought requires that we view both as complementary to one another, as two components fitting into a coherent message regarding human nature, human morality, and human religiosity. The argument for Mandeville's coherence and consistency that is presented here achieves two things. First, it indicates that Mandeville can be placed more prominently alongside modern political thinkers whose ideas regarding the social utility of religion were borne out in practice at the time of the American Founding. Second, it allows us to lend Mandeville's voice to a more general philosophical question regarding the compatibility of naturalism and religious belief.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEBATE

There is no dispute that Mandeville is a perplexing thinker on account of a number of paradoxes that permeate his written work. This is largely explained by the fact that much of his writing is purposefully satirical, with irony woven throughout his philosophical arguments. Contributing to this perplexity is the fact that the first volume of *The Fable* “was written piecemeal, and with less than his customary regard for logical consistency” (Maxwell, 242). While the first volume is arguably the most famous of his works, and has received the most scholarly attention, his thought is delivered more systematically in the second volume, as well as *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (1720) and *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour, and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* (1732). Although the style of *The Fable*’s first volume differs from these later works, all of them exhibit the peculiar blend of empiricism and asceticism that Kaye pointed to, which has led to an ongoing debate over whether or not Mandeville’s seemingly divergent approaches to his phenomena of interest can be reconciled.

F.B. Kaye maintained that “Mandeville was fundamentally an empiricist, and an intense one,” who saw no value in discoursing on anything that transcends human experience (FB, lii.). Kaye acknowledges that there are clear religious sentiments that can be detected in *The Fable*, but he argues that any claims Mandeville makes for the authenticity of religion or divinely

sanctioned standards of virtue should be read as an attempt to avoid trouble with the authorities of his day. According to Kaye, we must conclude that Mandeville “is lacking in any religious feeling or idealism” and focus our attention on his “insistence on the animal facts of life” (FB, liv-lv). In this view, Mandeville’s apparent naturalistic approach stands at odds with his apparent theological approach, and we must accept the primacy of the former over the latter. In other words, his empirical treatment of human morality should be taken as an implied rejection of any system of philosophy which aims to elevate morality above and beyond human nature.

Among more recent scholars, M.R. Jack (1975) has taken up a similar view, arguing that Mandeville’s only true intention was that of “a psychologist interested in giving a naturalistic account of ethical phenomena” and that “any interpretation relying heavily on assuming a theological basis to his thinking on ethical matters is bound to be misleading” (35). According to Jack, Mandeville’s extensive treatment of religion and references to Christian ethics should be taken to indicate his interest in the psychology of religion, rather than an interest in theology or doctrine. The “discussions of religion” which appear throughout his writings “do not proceed upon any assumptions of the value of piety and do not aspire to advance the cause of any specific sect”; thus, Mandeville ought to be read as “one who is uninterested in religion for its own sake” (42).

A very different interpretation of Mandeville’s thought is presented by E.J. Chiasson (1970), who places Mandeville in the long-standing tradition of “Christian humanism” as a successor to Richard Hooker. Mandeville, Chiasson claims, was primarily interested in the relationship between nature and divine grace, and he concluded that “fallen man was in need of *redeeming*” (508, emphasis in original). Thus, Mandeville’s writings are intended to illustrate that “the purely secular state is a truncated version of what the state might be if grace and

revelation were permitted to perform their illuminating function” (515). From this perspective, Mandeville is a Christian moralist, albeit one who has a propensity to look at human phenomena through the lens of a sociologist. Thus his naturalistic approach should be taken into account in particular instances, but his thought as a whole is most appropriately interpreted from a theological perspective.

These scholars have each observed what appears to be an inherent tension between two contradictory themes in Mandeville’s writing. And each of them insists that this apparent dichotomy can only be resolved by choosing to fully ignore one of the themes, or, at the very least, choosing to relegate one to a place of insignificance. John Colman (1972), on the other hand, observes a greater degree of compatibility between naturalism and theology in Mandeville’s thought. He argues that, “*in a sense*,” Christian morality can be said to play a constitutive role in Mandeville’s ethical philosophy, yet not to the extent that we can label him a “Christian apologist” who wrote with a “Christian purpose” (127-128, emphasis in original). While Colman convincingly argues that Mandeville put forth a “coherent moral theory” that acknowledges the natural capacity for humans to recognize, praise, and perform good actions, he never adequately addresses the question of what should be made of the Christian elements in Mandeville’s thought or whether they factor into this “coherent moral theory” (137).

The scholarly debate, then, has to do with whether or not Mandeville can be categorized as a naturalist or a theologian in his treatment of human morality. But this debate also points to a larger debate in the study of moral philosophy related to a broader question: Is a naturalistic understanding of human morality necessarily incompatible with religious belief? Put differently, will a system of morality that takes its bearings from the natural faculties of the human animal be subverted or threatened by coming into contact with a system of morality that claims to be

sanctioned by divine commands, or vice-versa? These questions underlie the debate over how to interpret Mandeville, precisely because Mandeville seems to fluctuate at times between these two systems of morality. How we choose to interpret Mandeville's thought on this front will be closely related to how we answer this broader question.

In the first part of this paper, I will argue that Mandeville lays out a system of moral philosophy that traces human morality to faculties that are inherent in human nature. In particular, natural human passions interact with social experience to give rise to ethical rules of behavior through an evolutionary process. In the second part, I will address a number of references to the Christian religion that appear in *The Fable* and which seem to advocate Christian ethics. It will be shown that Mandeville does *not* endorse Christianity as being historically or mysteriously true but instead sees religious belief in general as a phenomenon that, like morality, can be explained by the natural passions that drive human behavior. In the third part, I will show that Mandeville does endorse the Christian religion on the basis of its social utility. This social utility lies in the ability to supplement and reinforce ethical rules of conduct that are arrived at through the evolutionary process laid out in the first part of this paper. Deriving from this endorsement are particular theological arguments and propositions that are intended to enhance the social utility of Christianity while mitigating its more destructive tendencies. In concluding, I will briefly illustrate that a number of these Mandevilleian ideas were echoed and put into practice at the time of the American Founding, a time when Mandeville's works figured prominently into the ongoing moral and political discourse among intellectual elites.

CHAPTER 3

MANDEVILLE'S NATURALISTIC ACCOUNT OF HUMAN MORALITY

Mandeville's ethical thought can be characterized as "naturalistic" in the sense that he treats of human morality as a phenomenon that is fully grounded in human nature. More precisely, he claims that the development of moral behavior can be traced to original or instinctual faculties that have been placed in the human animal by "Nature" for the ultimate purpose of self-preservation. Mandeville shows himself to be a naturalist from the very beginning of *The Fable of the Bees*, where, in his introductory remarks, he declares: "I believe Man (besides Skin, Flesh, Bones, &c. that are obvious to the Eye) to be a compound of various Passions, that all of them, as they are provoked and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or no" (FB, i.39). This disclaimer reveals Mandeville's conception of what a human being is at the most essential level of understanding, a conception that seems to ignore any spiritual, supernatural, or other-worldly components.

Naturalism quickly becomes a prominent theme of the first volume of *The Fable* as Mandeville immediately follows "The Grumbling Hive" (the fable itself) with an essay entitled "An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue." In this treatise, he describes the human being as "an extraordinary selfish and headstrong, as well as cunning Animal" (FB, i.42). In his state of nature account, man, as an "untaught Animal," is entirely driven by his appetites, desires, and inclinations to seek pleasure and avoid pain (FB, i.41). According to Mandeville, human beings

have a greater potential capacity for sociality than any other animal. Yet the animalistic nature of human beings, which drives each individual to pursue his own inclinations, is inimical to any prolonged social interaction. Thus, without the “Curb of Government,” humans would be entirely incapable “of agreeing long together in Multitudes” (FB, i.41).

The true origins of moral virtue, according to Mandeville, can be found in the origins of political society. “The Chief Thing... which Lawgivers and other wise Men, that have laboured for the Establishment of Society, have endeavor’d, has been to make the People they were to govern, believe that it was more beneficial for every Body to conquer than indulge his Appetites, and much better to mind the Publick than what seem’d his private Interest” (FB, i.42). These founders of political society accomplished this by appealing to natural pride, one of the most pronounced passions in human nature, through the use of flattery. Early lawgivers “extoll’d the Excellency of our Nature above other Animals,” and “having by this artful way of Flattery insinuated themselves into the Hearts of Men, they began to instruct them in the Notions of Honour and Shame; representing the one as the worst of all Evils, and the other as the highest Good to which Mortals could aspire” (FB, i.43). In time, the elites who succeeded the founders of political society began to call those actions “vice” that were carried out in order to satisfy individual passions without regard for the common interest and to call all actions “virtue” by which an individual was said to have conquered his passions through rational ambition, acting in the interest of the common good contrary to all natural impulse.

This short discourse on the origin of virtue, while not to be taken as a historical treatise,² provides a crucial first look at Mandeville's naturalistic approach to political and ethical phenomena. In commencing his extended remarks on *The Fable* in this way, he has already begun to construct an effective framework for explaining human morality in purely naturalistic terms. There is no reference to either a divinely ordered moral standard or a natural moral standard. Instead, Mandeville claims "it is evident, that the first Rudiments of Morality" were "broach'd by skillful Politicians, to render Men useful to each other as well as tractable," and the conventional development of moral guidelines or rules is the true "Foundation of Politicks" (FB, i.47). It should be noted that this portrayal of natural man indicates that the *idea* of virtue³ is necessary for the establishment of sustainable political societies, insofar as the awareness of this idea provides individuals with an object of emulation, or, more properly, an object of aspiration. It is through emulation and aspiration that morality is made manifest. As individuals come to associate certain actions or behavioral patterns with the approbation or disapprobation of their fellow men, they will wish to emulate those behaviors that are consistently associated with praise. And having been taught by cunning lawgivers that self-abnegating virtue merits the highest praise of all, individuals will harbor aspirations for receiving this highest praise. Thus, the mechanism through which emulation will be carried out in practice is natural appetite and passion, particularly pride.

²See Colman (1972), who convincingly argues that "An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue" is best understood "as giving an account not of something which once happened in primitive or pre-social conditions, but of something taking place within society... an analysis of moral education" (129).

³ Mandeville defines "virtue" in a rigoristic manner, as a "Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavor the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good" (FB, i.49). Following this definition, the "idea of virtue" might be equated with the "idea of self-denial." As such, the idea of self-denial does not presuppose the reality or attainability of ascetic self-denial; rather, it presupposes the possibility that some actions might be *perceived* by spectators as self-denying.

While Mandeville has implied that there is no standard for virtue or morality beyond that which can be derived from the interactive relationship between human nature and social experience, he becomes more explicit in a later essay entitled “A Search into the Nature of Society.” Presenting this essay as a critique of Lord Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), Mandeville claims that his aim is “to discuss whether there be a real Worth and Excellency in things, a pre-eminence of one above another” (FB, i.325). Shaftesbury had essentially argued that there existed a natural standard of virtue which remained fixed across time and place. Human beings, he claimed, being naturally sociable, are possessed of an innate affection towards their society and also of a propensity to contribute to the general welfare of that society. Within this amiable disposition, deeply rooted as it was in human nature, resided true “Worth and Excellency.” Thus, virtue was said to consist naturally in those actions that arose from an affective regard to the common good, and this natural standard was said to transcend the particulars of history or culture.

Mandeville makes use of this essay to voice his fundamental disagreement with Shaftesbury, arguing that “Worth and Excellency” are entirely determined by convention: “Our Liking and Disliking of things chiefly depends on Mode and Custom, and the Precept and Example of our Betters and such whom one way or other we think to be Superior to us. In Morals there is no greater Certainty... It is manifest then that the hunting after this *Pulchrum & Honestum* is not much better than a Wild-Goose-Chace” (FB, i.330-331). True “Worth” only derives its meaning from the collective approbation or disapprobation bestowed upon the object in question by human beings in a political society, and human judgment operates in this manner whether the object of judgment is a painting or an action. Additionally, collective approval towards any given object varies with circumstances, meaning that experience, culture, and

custom are the final determinants of worth or excellence and provide the only real basis for human morality.

Having argued that morality has no solid foundation outside of human social experience, which in turn is driven and bounded by natural passions, Mandeville proceeds to illustrate the futility of looking to nature for a fixed moral standard. For, regardless of where we turn, nature alone will provide us with no such standard. “All the elements are our enemies... There is nothing Good in all the Universe to the best-designing Man, if either through Mistake or Ignorance he commits the least Failing in the Use of it... On the contrary every thing is Evil, which Art and Experience have not taught us to turn into a Blessing” (FB, i.344-345). Nature furnishes us with no blessings, nor anything else which can be said to be unqualifiedly good. It should also be noted that Mandeville makes no attempt here to attribute any blessing to a divine benefactor – the only source of “good” in our world is that which is brought about through human art and experience.

Just as there is nothing in nature that can be said to be unqualifiedly good, so it is in morality. Even that which is determined to be good through the accumulation of collective approbation might prove incredibly harmful to some individuals while that which is deemed evil by the generality of men might prove incredibly beneficial to some. So it is that “things are only Good and Evil in reference to something else, and according to the Light and Position they are placed in. What pleases us is good in that Regard, and by this Rule every Man wishes well for himself to the best of his Capacity, with little Respect to his Neighbour” (FB, i.367). Each individual finds that which is pleasing to be good, but not all individuals will find pleasure in the same things.

If this relativistic description of human morality is accurate, then how is it that human beings come together and ultimately organize their behavior around a set of moral rules? For a more detailed explanation of how human experience and art interact with human nature to establish ethical rules of conduct, we must turn to the second volume of *The Fable of the Bees*. The second volume consists of a series of dialogues between Mandeville's interlocutors, Cleomenes and Horatio, and much of their dialogue is directed towards questions of moral behavior and judgment. Speaking through his interlocutors, Mandeville illustrates how human morality can be traced back, through culture and convention, to the mechanistic faculties which the human animal is naturally possessed of.

A primary topic of the second dialogue is the "system of Honour," whereby men are deemed virtuous by their peers for acting in accord with the rules of the system. Speaking through his mouthpiece Cleomenes,⁴ Mandeville points out that "Honour is acquir'd, and the Rules of it are Taught," so this system cannot be derived from any natural (or supernatural) principle (FB, ii.92). Rather, the "system of Honour" has been established positively with a view to pride, an original passion that men are born with. All human beings, beginning at infancy, take great pleasure in the approbation, applause, and good opinion of others. In addition to this love of good opinion, pride is characterized by an equivalent fear of shame, a fear that is powerful enough on many occasions to outweigh competing fears, even the fear of injury or death. "A Passion that can subdue the fear of Death may blind a Man's Understanding, and do almost every thing else... there is no Benevolence or good Nature, no amiable Quality, or social Virtue,

⁴The extent to which Cleomenes is Mandeville's true mouthpiece in the dialogues is open to debate – see, for example, Kaye's interpretation, in which Horatio occasionally serves this function (FB, ii.21 n.2). In my view, Mandeville's extensive introductory description of Cleomenes might be read as a sort of autobiographical description of Mandeville himself, substantiating Mandeville's claim that Horatio is intended to be the antagonist.

that may not be counterfeited by it” (FB, ii.100-101). The system of honor provides an excellent example of a set of ethical rules for regulating conduct, rules which are derived from natural tendencies that are manifested in the passions, as opposed to being derived from a fixed natural or divine standard of right and wrong or good and evil.

Furthermore, Mandeville indicates that pride, the powerful passion which enables humans to “counterfeit” any social virtue, itself originates from the coexistent natural instincts of self-love and self-liking. These faculties, he claims, have been placed in humans (among a number of other animals such as horses and birds) by “Nature” for the purpose of self-preservation (FB, ii.130). Although honorable actions might be perceived by observers as being carried out on the basis of some virtuous principle or divine mandate, Mandeville maintains that all such actions can be shown to ultimately originate in our capacity for self-love and the passions which it gives rise to, a capacity that is not unique to the human species.

Because instinctual self-love and self-liking operate naturally upon all human beings, all are inclined to indulge their selfish tendencies to the fullest extent. This inclination, however, would not be hospitable to the sustenance of a cohesive social unit, as “a Declaration of their Sentiments would render them... insufferable to each other” (FB, ii.138). In order to be sociable, humans were required to temper their selfish inclinations by establishing general rules of conduct, “what we call good Manners and Politeness” (FB, ii.138). “The most crafty and designing will every where be the first, that for Interest-sake will learn to conceal” their self-love and pride (FB, ii.141). Over time this deceptive behavior disseminates, and “When once the Generality begin to conceal the high Value they have for themselves, Men must become more tolerable to one another. Now new Improvements must be made every Day, ‘till some of them grow impudent enough, not only to deny the high Value they have for themselves, but likewise

to pretend that they have greater Value for others, than they have for themselves” (FB, ii.145). Eventually this behavior will be formalized as a set of generalizable moral rules that govern conduct, but “the Basis of all this Machinery is Pride” (FB, ii.146).

At this point it becomes clear that Mandeville conceives of human morality as a phenomenon that develops evolutionarily, given that the general rules of conduct through which morality is manifested are established through a long process of trial and error. “Alterations” in the “Behaviour of Men” come about “without reflection, and Men by degrees, and great Length of Time, fall as it were into these Things spontaneously” (FB, ii.139). It is here that we can observe the notion of “spontaneous order”⁵ at work in Mandeville’s philosophy, further sharpening the image of Mandeville as a naturalist. Human morality over a great length of time takes on the appearance of a finely ordered system. Being the egoists that we are, “we often ascribe to the Excellency of Man’s Genius, and the Depth of his Penetration, what is in Reality owing to length of Time, and the Experience of many Generations, all of them very little differing from one another in natural Parts and Sagacity” (FB, ii.142). If there is anything that can be said to resemble a “standard” for human morality, it is the natural origin of “Manners and Politeness” that can be located in the passions derived from self-love and self-liking, and this standard is made manifest only through gradually accumulated social experience – not reflection, rational inquiry, purposeful design, divine revelation, or anything that transcends the empirical.

In summary, a strong case can be made that Mandeville’s thought in *The Fable* is characterized by a naturalistic approach to the phenomenon of human morality. From the very

⁵F.A. Hayek (1967) credits Mandeville with achieving “the definite breakthrough in modern thought of the twin ideas of evolution and of the spontaneous formation of an order, conceptions which had long been in coming, which had often been closely approached, but which just needed emphatic statement because seventeenth-century rationalism had largely submerged earlier progress in this direction” (177).

beginning, he speaks of human beings in a way that emphasizes their animalistic qualities, without explicitly acknowledging the existence of any spiritual or transcendental qualities. The account that is given of human morality is one that traces moral behavior back to the natural constitution of the human animal, as opposed to a divine lawgiver or a natural standard. All moral standards are relative in the sense that they develop in different particular ways and over different lengths of time across human societies, and the development of those standards occurs through an evolutionary process that would appear to exclude the possibility of divine intervention.

CHAPTER 4

RELIGIOUS THEMES IN MANDEVILLE'S THOUGHT

While a naturalistic understanding of human morality clearly permeates Mandeville's thought, an apparent paradox arises when we observe frequent references to the Christian God, similarities to Calvinist theology, and apparent defenses of Christian morality. Indeed, there are enough such passages throughout Mandeville's writing to make the case that his study of human nature was in fact a theological undertaking (Chiasson 1970). When viewed in light of the naturalistic approach that has been laid out above, it would seem as though we are faced with a dichotomy, or at the very least a tension that must be resolved in order for Mandeville's work to be viewed as coherent.

The very possibility that Mandeville might be interpreted as a Christian moralist seems to arise largely from the fact that his understanding of human nature bears a close resemblance to Calvinist doctrine.⁶ Subsequent critics were quick to point out that Mandeville's own treatment of moral virtue borrowed heavily from the theologically orthodox position of his time, which emphasized the corruption of human nature due to Original Sin, and maintained that virtue could only consist in unselfish actions that transcended this corrupt nature. Mandeville's harsh

⁶Interestingly, Chiasson (1970), who provides the most systematic argument for interpreting Mandeville as a Christian moralist, rejects the apparent connection to Calvinist doctrine. Instead, Chiasson places Mandeville in the tradition of "Christian humanism," which did not require a strict segregation of the orders of grace and nature. I, however, am in agreement with Kaye (1922), Maxwell (1951), and Jack (1975), all of whom identify a clear affinity between Mandeville's thought and the segregationist tradition of Calvin.

definition of moral virtue bears a striking resemblance to the Augustinian rigorism expounded not only by earlier Calvinists but also notable contemporaries such as William Law.⁷ By the time that Mandeville was writing in the early eighteenth century, Calvin's notion of the total depravity of human nature had been canonized as Reformed doctrine at the Synod of Dort. Clear traces of this notion can be seen in Mandeville's written works, where one of the most pervasive running themes, intertwined with the employment of Christian imagery and theological language, is the lack of any redeeming qualities in human nature.

Ironically, one might begin to argue for this theological reading of Mandeville by citing his introductory remarks to *The Fable*, the same passage in which he sets forth his naturalistic conception of the human being. Here, he concludes that when he speaks of man throughout, he is referring to "neither Jews nor Christians; but meer Man in the State of Nature and Ignorance of the true Deity" (FB, i.40). This qualification might be interpreted as making a distinction between *fallen* human nature, where man is hopelessly separated from God as a result of sin, and *regenerated* human nature, where divine grace has lifted man out of his fallen state and reconnected him with God. Such an interpretation would certainly attach a theological quality to Mandeville's thought, yet this sole qualification at the beginning of his *Fable* would not suffice to classify him as a Christian moralist.

The distinction between fallen and regenerated human nature that is merely alluded to here is elaborated in greater detail in "A Search into the Nature of Society," the same essay in which Mandeville claims that "things are only Good and Evil in reference to something else, and

⁷See Adam Smith's critique of Mandeville in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where it is alleged that "some popular ascetic doctrines which had been current before [Mandeville's] time, and which placed virtue in the entire extirpation and annihilation of all our passions, were the real foundation of this licentious system" (VII.ii.4.12). See also Kaye (1922) and Viner's (1953) introduction to Mandeville's *A Letter to Dion* for a more elaborate treatment of the Calvinist influence on Mandeville's conception of virtue.

according to the Light and Position they are placed in” (FB, i.367). At an earlier point in the essay, he pauses to ponder how different this relativistic picture might look “should we trace Man from his Beautiful, his Divine Original, not Proud of Wisdom acquired by haughty Precept or tedious Experience, but endued with consummate Knowledge the moment he was formed” (FB, i.346). He goes on to describe briefly what human affairs would have looked like during the “State of Innocence,” lamenting that human nature has been “alter’d since the Fall of our first Parents” (FB, i.346). Again, a Calvinist tone can certainly be detected here, with the explicit comparison of two categorically distinct conceptions of human nature, one preceding and one following the Fall of Man and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

As the apparent paradox between naturalism and theology in Mandeville’s writings becomes clearer, we might ask what ought to be made of such references to fallen human nature as they appear throughout – are they enough for us to conclude that Mandeville ought to be read as a Christian moralist who advances a particularly Protestant doctrine through an inquiry into the nature of man? I believe that this question can be answered confidently in the negative. In the case of the qualification which Mandeville places at the conclusion of his “Introduction,” the apparent allusion to regeneration through grace seems to come as a mere afterthought, not as a proposition that has considerable bearing on the general drift of his argument. And it becomes clear that when his brief discussion of the “State of Innocence” is placed in context, he is using it to advance a naturalistic argument. This discussion ends with Mandeville claiming that “In such a Golden Age no Reason or Probability can be alledged why Mankind ever should have rais’d themselves into such large Societies as there have been in the World”; thus we can easily infer that “no Societies could have sprung from the Amiable Virtues and Loving Qualities of Man” (FB, i.346). Here he is merely using the imagery of human nature prior to the Fall of Man to

advance his argument that vice is necessary to build and maintain large, economically prosperous societies while making no attempt to argue that human nature after the Fall might be regenerated through divine grace.

Passages such as these are scattered throughout Mandeville's writings, and selectively analyzing them outside of the context in which they are found may lead some to conclude that he is subtly advancing a theology that draws heavily on the Protestant themes of his day. When they are examined in the broader context within which they are located, it becomes clear that they have little bearing on the general direction of Mandeville's thought. It seems plausible that at least some degree of esoteric writing may be the reason for many of these passages. Given the intense controversy that surrounded his publication of *The Fable*, which included charges of atheism and heresy against him and culminated in a grand jury presentment against the book, it should come as little surprise that Mandeville would include some overtly religious statements in his writing. This would also explain why the qualification in his "Introduction" is so brief, whereas the more explicit theological elaboration presented in "A Search into the Nature of Society," written several years later, is comparatively detailed.

But we need not rely on speculation alone to reach the conclusion that Mandeville does not endorse the Christian religion as true. The most convincing evidence that Mandeville should not be read as a Christian moralist can be found in the second volume of *The Fable*, where he provides a naturalistic account of religion itself. His portrayal of human religiosity as a phenomenon that can be traced back to the animalistic nature of human beings bears directly on the scholarly debate at hand, and thus warrants further examination.

In the "Fifth Dialogue," Mandeville's interlocutors turn their inquiry towards the origins of religion. Horatio asks how it is that religion came into the world, to which Cleomenes initially

provides a feeble defense of divine revelation before quickly changing course.⁸ He goes on to say that man is naturally inclined toward religion due to the existence of a particular passion: “Fear is the Passion, that first gives them an Opportunity of entertaining some glimmering Notions of an invisible Power” (FB, ii.207). More specifically, man’s fearful nature drives him to attribute the unseen causes of awe-inspiring natural phenomena, such as thunder and lightning, to an unseen power. “Every Mischief and every Disaster that happens to him, of which the Cause is not very plain and obvious... Obscurity itself, and every thing that is frightful and unknown, are all administring and contributing to the Establishment of this Fear” (FB, ii.208). As primitive human beings were continually exposed to phenomena that had no perceptible cause, they were inclined to attribute the cause to an imperceptible power.

As natural fear drove these early humans to attribute unseen causes to unseen powers, the character of their attributions was shaped by the natural limitations of human cognition. Primitive man was inclined towards the “wrong Opinion of Things inanimate,” that “every thing thinks and feels in the same Manner as they do themselves” (FB, ii.209). Thus, not only did man conceptualize of deities as the unseen causes of great natural phenomena, but he did so in an anthropomorphic manner. Deities, once conceived, were believed to possess sentient qualities and characteristics not unlike those found among humans. Through this dialogue Mandeville indicates that, much like human morality, human religiosity has emerged naturally out of the animalistic faculties of human nature.

⁸See Mandeville’s “Preface” to the second volume, where he discloses the only instances in which his own opinions are represented by Horatio: “If ever [Horatio] offers any thing that savors of Libertinism, or is otherwise exceptionable, which Cleomenes does not reprove him for in the best and most serious Manner, or to which he gives not the most satisfactory or convincing Answer that can be made” (FB, ii.22).

Furthermore, just as human morality was said to have developed evolutionarily from the primitive faculty of natural pride into a well-ordered system of ethical rules of conduct, so too is human religiosity said to have developed from the primitive faculty of natural fear into a more refined understanding of the unseen causes behind natural phenomena. Primitive fear first leads man to “some glimmering Notions of an invisible Power; which afterwards, as by Practice and Experience they grow greater Proficients, and become more perfect in the Labour of the Brain, and the Exercise of their highest Faculty, will infallibly lead them to the certain Knowledge of an infinite and eternal Being; whose Power and Wisdom will always appear greater, and more stupendous to them, the more they themselves advance in Knowledge and Penetration” (FB, ii.208). Primitive man, apprehending a variety of apparently unexplainable phenomena, was led by his weak capacity for reason to attribute each phenomenon to a different unseen power, leading to the establishment of polytheistic religions. In time, as the capacity for human reason increased, primitive polytheistic religions were gradually replaced by more conceptually refined monotheistic religions. When once “the Art of Reasoning consequentially is come to that Perfection, which it has been arrived at these several hundred Years,” then “every Man of Sense” is capable of inferring from reason “the Unity of God, and his being the Author of the Universe” (FB, ii.219). Mandeville argues that the limited capacities of primitive man prevented him from conceiving of anything beyond rudimentary religious ideas. Divine power would first have been attributed to physical objects such as the sun, moon, or other objects in nature. Later in the process of cognitive development, man would conceive of unseen beings that were believed to be many in number, each being the cause of some subset of physical phenomena. And finally, as man came to comprehend that nature functioned as a single, well-ordered system, he would conceive of a single divine entity who had designed this system and brought it into being.

Some important points can be drawn from Mandeville's dialogue on the origins of religion that speak directly to the debate over whether he should be read as a naturalist or a Christian moralist. First, Mandeville provides a naturalistic account of human religiosity that is fully compatible with his naturalistic account of human morality. This dialogue is a purposeful endeavor on his part to trace religious belief and practice back to the natural faculties of the human animal, an endeavor to account for religiosity without appealing to the divine. Ultimately, Mandeville's interlocutors show that such an account can be derived from our knowledge of the natural passions and an understanding of the evolutionary process through which human social phenomena are developed.

Second, Mandeville has simultaneously pointed out that reflecting on the operation of these complex natural processes *does* seem to point to a divine or supernatural entity as the designer of the great system of nature. A man capable of reflecting on this wondrous system must see that "There is but one real Cause in the Universe, to produce that infinite Variety of stupendious Effects, and all the mighty Labours that are perform'd in Nature" (FB, ii.229). Mandeville indicates that it is fully in accord with reason to attribute "the Scheme, the Plan after which, it is evident, Providence has been pleas'd to order and dispose of things in the Universe" to a singular "Author" or "First Cause" (FB, ii.252-53).

Taken together, all of this seems to indicate a tendency towards some sort of natural theology in Mandeville's thought. In regards to the scholarly debate over how he should be read, it would appear at this point that Mandeville falls much closer to those who characterize him as an empiricist than those who see him as a Christian theologian. The natural theology towards which he is inclined appears to be something quite different from Christianity, while his account of the evolution of human religious behavior from the primitive natural passions is altogether

inimical to it. But we should not yet conclude that Mandeville places absolutely no value on piety, for he does indicate that religious belief and practice do have a certain utility at both the social and individual levels, and in his more overtly religious writings it can be observed that he does in fact have a theological message for Christians, a message that runs counter to both Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy.

CHAPTER 5

MANDEVILLE AND THE SOCIAL UTILITY OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

At this point I must pause to briefly elaborate on a point that should be obvious for those who are familiar with Mandeville's work. The two tendencies in his thought which I have been discussing thus far are located within the broader context of his famous (or infamous) moral and economic argument that private vices beget public benefits. It was pointed out above that Mandeville's conception of human morality is one in which the ethical rules that govern moral behavior evolve over long periods of time out of accumulated social experience, and this process operates entirely through natural passions which are fundamentally rooted in the coexistent instincts of self-love and self-liking. One of the implications of his understanding of morality is that all human behavior is fundamentally driven by passion and desire – in a word, vice. Virtue, in the way that Mandeville defines it, cannot exist because motives can never be divorced from passions.

Most of Mandeville's written work is located within his broader endeavor to show that vicious behavior, even behavior that arises from altogether sinister motives, can yield benefits to the public. Greed, prodigality, avarice, and a number of other vices interact in complex ways to drive economic activity and yield net benefits to the society at large. Yet vice cannot be allowed to go entirely unchecked in any society – the very notion of a political society presupposes an arrangement in which there are at least some boundaries on vicious behavior. Because of this,

Mandeville, as mentioned earlier, maintains that the *idea* of virtue remains critically important for social cohesion, even if the idea is a false one. It is worth dwelling on this point for a moment, given its relevance to Mandeville's views on the social utility of Christianity.

I began the first part of this paper by analyzing Mandeville's "An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue." To summarize that essay briefly, Mandeville's point of departure is the egoistic nature of human beings, which he sees as inimical to any stable, prolonged social interaction. While other "state of nature" theorists would find a solution for this dilemma in the establishment of a sovereign coercive power, Mandeville is more skeptical, arguing that "it is impossible by Force alone to make [Man] tractable, and receive the Improvements he is capable of" (FB, i.42). Coercive power exercised on natural fear is insufficient to make men malleable enough for any significant improvement, meaning that something more than positive law is required. Thus, the idea that one might rationally conquer his natural passions for the benefit of his neighbors or society – the idea of virtue – becomes socially beneficial. Of course, no human is naturally inclined to attempt this conquest, nor is such a conquest possible from Mandeville's view. In this way the idea of virtue, beneficial as it may be, is a false one.

Mandeville goes on to describe how early lawgivers would have realized the necessity of appealing to human pride, employing flattery to convince men of their own perfectibility. This strategy would prove quite successful, given the power that flattery can wield over the passions. The success of repeated appeals to human pride would culminate in the establishment of systems of honor centered on the idea of virtue. Natural pride would drive men to seek the approbation that could be attained by following the rules of this system, whereas the natural fear of shame would drive men to avoid the disapprobation that resulted by deviating from the rules. Thus, according to Mandeville, the idea of virtue provides an illusory standard which men strive

towards because they desire honor and praise – but the standard is one that can never be reached. Passions might be *tempered* as men strive to receive praise, but they will never be *conquered*. It is on the basis of these premises that Mandeville also observes the social utility that can be derived from the Christian religion, as I will proceed to show.

In “Remark T” of his extended commentary on *The Fable*, Mandeville lays out two very different illustrations of how religion might function in a society where each individual member is naturally inclined to indulge his passions and desires. In the first portrayal, we see a society in which a sort of religious tyranny is employed in a misguided attempt to extirpate all vice and coercively enforce virtue. In this society, “Profaneness and Irreligion” are strictly prohibited, while an all-powerful Church proceeds to “burn all the Books...and suffer no Volume in private Hands but a Bible” (FB, i.231). The clergy “preach Abstinence and Self-denial to others” as they attempt to replace all vice with virtue, and they simultaneously “bear the greatest Sway in the Management of State-Affairs” (FB, i.232). This policy of religious absolutism, in which an established religion is intertwined with state power to coercively prohibit vice and enforce virtue, is misguided in Mandeville’s view. It is an erroneous policy because it operates on the basis of an incorrect understanding of human nature, which is not nearly so malleable as to make the extirpation of vice possible. Additionally, even if self-denying virtue were a real possibility, coercively inculcating this virtue would be inimical to the material interests of the state because “Societies cannot be rais’d to Wealth and Power, and the Top of Earthly Glory without Vices” (FB, i.231). For Mandeville, this portrait of a society tyrannically governed with the aid of an absolutist religious establishment illustrates precisely what the function of religion should *not* be.

But Mandeville goes on to conclude this remark with an altogether different portrait of an allegorical society in which quenching one’s thirst is proscribed as a moral vice. Here, thirst is

analogous to the passions and desires that constitute human nature, while drinking beer is analogous to the sensual pleasures through which various passions are momentarily satisfied. In this society the production of beer is a primary source of economic prosperity while every individual is subjected to the “passion” of thirst. The people of this allegorical society are generally religious, and the clergymen regularly explain to their congregations just how powerful of a hold thirst exercises over the daily lives of all individuals, exhorting them to apply themselves towards controlling this passion. Of course, no human being can ever hope to conquer a passion as powerful as thirst, and the clergymen certainly understand this. After praying for forgiveness for the excessive indulgence of this passion, and the strength to resist future temptations of the flesh, they pray for the gods to bestow a continued abundance of beverages to fulfill the vicious desires of the people and increase the material prosperity of the society. The people themselves “often began their Prayers very mystically, and spoke many things in a spiritual Sense; yet they were never so abstract from the World in them, as to end one without beseeching the Gods to bless and prosper the Brewing Trade” (FB, i.238).

This allegorical tale serves to highlight the impossibility of moral virtue by indicating that even religion ultimately caters to a base desire that is rooted in human nature. We are once again reminded of the naturalistic treatment to which religion as such is subjected when Mandeville states just a few pages earlier that the mere belief in an afterlife would not have “found such a general Reception in human Capacities as it has, had it not been a pleasing one” (FB, i.230). Yet, when juxtaposed with the prior imagery of a society tyrannically governed by a religious establishment, this allegory indicates that a more correct application of religious practice might be beneficial or even necessary for the functioning of a healthy society in which vicious tendencies are taken as a given. For regardless of whether or not moral virtue may be

actualized, the *idea* of moral virtue remains crucial to the maintenance of social order, just as it was shown to be crucial at the founding of political society. Without the idea of virtue, the allegorical society would presumably deteriorate into drunken chaos, as each individual would stop at nothing to quench his thirst for beer in the most excessive manner. The idea of virtue would have been born of pride and social experience, among those few who first recognized that social benefits might be accrued by hiding their passionate thirst from their fellows. Religion plays an ongoing role in legitimizing this idea of virtue, effectively reinforcing ethical rules that had been established previously.

The allegory indicates that religion, when properly construed, plays a role in the ongoing moral education of individuals, allowing them to discover how strong of an influence the passions have over the heart. Although the clergymen of the allegory are well aware that the passion of thirst will not be rationally conquered by anyone, they continue to act as educators, explaining to their audience just how powerfully this passion exerts itself upon their reason and actions. Interestingly, Mandeville describes his own aim in writing *The Fable* in the same manner, claiming that he is primarily interested in teaching self-awareness: “I cannot see what Immorality there is in shewing a Man the Origin and Power of those Passions, which so often, even unknowingly to himself, hurry him away from his Reason” (FB, i.229). Much like Mandeville’s *Fable*, appropriate religious teaching can be employed to keep individuals mindful of the fact that an active approach is needed to temper their vicious tendencies - even if a complete rational conquest of those tendencies is ultimately impossible and the idea of moral virtue is little more than a noble lie concocted for the sake of expediency. Human social order is dependent on both vice, which drives economic growth and material prosperity, and the idea of virtue, which gives credence to those ethical rules that define the outer limits of acceptable

vicious behavior. Religion, properly employed, reinforces the idea of virtue and serves as an additional counterbalance to the forces of human nature, which ensure that vice will never be in short supply.

Thus, “Remark T” provides us with important preliminary evidence of Mandeville’s views on the social utility of religion. Through the imagery of two societies in which religion plays a very different role, he delivers his conception of the proper role of religion in political society. In the first case, a religion that becomes intertwined with the coercive power of the state and misguidedly assumes a tyrannical authority over its human subjects ultimately leads to the material ruin of society while miserably failing to extirpate the passions which constitute human nature. In the second case, a religion that remains separate from the temporal authority of the state, in which religious teaching is used to supplement moral education, keeps individuals mindful of their vicious tendencies while simultaneously encouraging them to pursue those tendencies with some moderation, ultimately increasing the material prosperity of society.

Having made the case that Mandeville does attach some value to the properly understood social and political functions of religion, it becomes much easier to interpret the theological messages contained in his *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness*. For the casual reader, the overtly religious nature of this work might appear to run counter to the conclusions he has reached in *The Fable*. However, placing his religious writings in the proper context of his naturalistic understanding of religiosity, as well as his views on the social utility of religion, lends coherence to his body of work as a whole.

In *Free Thoughts*, Mandeville discusses the Christian religion at length, declaring at the outset that his goal is to further “the common good and publick tranquility” (FT, xxi). He commences by defining religion in the broadest sense as “an acknowledgment of an immortal

power, that, superior to all earthly dominion, invisibly governs the world, and a respectful endeavour to discharge such duties, as everyone shall apprehend to be required of him by that immortal power”(FT, 1). Clearly this is a rather generic definition that is quite compatible with the natural theology towards which he ultimately tends in *The Fable*. After providing his true definition of religion, that is, religion understood in naturalistic terms, he immediately claims that his particular interest in this book is the Christian religion.

While his decision to treat of Christianity exclusively is certainly due to its monopolistic prevalence throughout the social and political fabric of the Western world at the time, he claims that the Christian religion is superior to others in the way that it teaches men to temper their vicious passions. While the pagan religions of old were entirely “built upon poetry and fiction,” and while Islam was “contriv’d to engage the sensual and voluptuous” and “soothe human passion,” Christianity is “grave and solid, every part of it is worthy of the most serious contemplation of a man, that can are dares think freely and thoroughly” (FT, 149-50). The social utility of the “Heathen” religions was limited, insofar as those religions “represented their Gods, not as wise, benign, equitable, and merciful; but on the contrary, as passionate, revengeful, capricious, and unrelenting Beings; not to mention the abominable Vices, and gross Immoralities, the Vulgar were taught to ascribe to them” (FB, ii.217). By contrast, “in the doctrine of Christ there are no worldly allurements to draw the vicious... nothing in it can possibly be construed so as to encourage priestcraft, or be serviceable to sooth any human passion, without doing the utmost violence to truth and good sense” (FT, 150). The comparative superiority of Christianity lies in its ability to educate individuals to the passions which so easily overpower them and to encourage the tempering of those passions by revealing to individuals the standard of Christ-like virtue, regardless of whether or not that standard is attainable, given the

limitations of human nature. Christian morality, much like the idea of virtue discussed above, operates upon natural passions and is made manifest through emulation – namely, the emulation of Christ. And, much like the illusory standard which is established by the idea of virtue, Christianity too provides a standard that is no closer to the reach of human beings.

Yet the Christian religion, despite its potential superiority in regards to social utility, is not without its faults, a fact that is alluded to by Mandeville’s reference to “priestcraft” in the last quote presented above. Indeed, the problem that occupies Mandeville’s attention throughout *Free Thoughts* is that dominant religious establishments (the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations that emerged from the Reformation) have lost sight of core teachings and general message of Christ, and Christian doctrine “has been made subservient to every bad purpose, and all manner of wickedness” (FT, 163). In particular, the rise of corporate religious establishments brought about an extreme emphasis on “outward signs of devotion,” obscuring the fact that “the chief duty... of real religion among Christians, consists in the sacrifice of the heart, and is a task of self-denial... without this inward sense of religion no outward worship, nor any act of seeming devotion or charity, can be of the least service to us” (FT, 16). The self-proclaimed purpose of Mandeville’s theological discourse is to “promote concord and *true religion*” (FT, 86, emphasis added) and true religion can be understood as one’s “inward sense of religion” (FT, 16).

In order to bring the focus of Christianity back toward this “inward sense of religion,” Mandeville argues for a privatization of religious practice, in which primacy is granted to the individual’s own conception of God, interpretation of the Bible, and personal effort to moderate vices by contemplating and emulating Christ-like virtue. Because there are no two Christians in the world who “have exactly the same sentiments about everything contain’d in the Bible,” the

dogmatic teachings of established Christian sects, which are inimical to the inward religious sentiments of the individual, ought to be avoided (FT, 235). In order to bring about this privatization of religious practice, Mandeville recommends that measures be taken to ensure that the articles of faith contained in formal doctrines are conceived of and presented in the most general terms that the Bible will textually allow for (FT, 226). Additionally, he argues that all established religions should be structured in such a way that the clergy are “kept in awe” of both the laity and the state (FT, 268). The Christian sect which ought to be imitated is that which immediately preceded the Catholic Church, in which the apostles functioned as spiritual guides and moral educators in small, localized communities of believers, and did so without falling prone to dogmatism or sectarianism (FT, 161).

All of this would seem to point to a clear theological message on the part of Mandeville, an exhortation calling for a return to the tenets of “true religion” contained in the text of the gospel, arguing for the widespread privatization of religious practice and encouraging general toleration within and among decentralized communities of believers. It is important to observe, however, that the toleration Mandeville argues for has clear limits: “When I speak up for a toleration of different sects, I mean only such as shall own the government to be the supream authority on earth, both in church and state, and have no other master abroad, that may make them plot against our safety... It is the government and the ministry of it, which ought to be watchful, and take care that the publick receives no detriment from subtle stratagems carried on under religious pretences” (FT, 269).⁹ In the final analysis, religion must always be held in

⁹See Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution* (1644), and John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), for similar yet distinct conceptions of religious toleration. While Mandeville agrees with both Williams and Locke regarding the necessity of a separation of church and state, he appropriates to the civil magistrate ultimate authority over religious matters. Locke, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on limiting the authority of the

subordination to politics, and a prudent government will vigilantly ensure that religious practice is carried out within “due bounds of obedience” to the state (FT, 158).

In summary, the potential value of the Christian religion lies in the social utility that it is capable of providing; its potential danger lies in a variety of perverse ends towards which human nature will incline men to employ it. But Mandeville is well aware that human religiosity is here to stay, given that human nature inclines all men towards a belief in powers unseen (FT, 5).

Given these circumstances, a prudent course of action is one that might maximize the potential utilities and mitigate the potential dangers, and Mandeville puts forth a proposal that is intended to accomplish just this. His proposal entails a decentralization and privatization of religious practice, in which the individual becomes the focal point of his or her own inward journey, a journey that fosters not only self-knowledge but knowledge of the passionate forces to which all are humans are generally subjected. When properly put into practice, religion can serve as a useful auxiliary in the Mandevillean system of moral education, reinforcing ethical rules of conduct and tempering vicious tendencies. Thus, insofar as Mandeville can be said to have an overtly theological message, it is one in which his theological interests extend only as far as religion might contribute to the temporal interest of society.

civil magistrate when it comes to matters of conscience and religion. Additionally, while Williams argues that toleration ought to be extended to atheists, and Locke argues that it ought not to be, Mandeville does not explicitly take a stance on this issue.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to lend my voice to a scholarly debate regarding an apparent tension in Mandeville's writings arising from his apparent fluctuation between two different points of view as he inquires into the nature and origins of human morality. I have argued that the ostensibly theological themes in his work must be placed within the context of his naturalistic understanding of human social phenomena as well as his views on the social utility that can be afforded by religion in societies that are driven by vice. Locating his overtly religious statements within this context lends a greater degree of coherence to his body of work as a whole. Furthermore, the interpretation offered here contributes to the history of American political thought by allowing us to place Mandeville more prominently among those thinkers whose ideas were borne out in practice at the time of the American Founding.

There is no question that Mandeville remained considerably influential throughout the 18th century, given that a number of subsequent thinkers – Hume, Hutcheson, Rousseau, Kant, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Bentham, to name just a few – devoted specific attention to his work in their writings. But his influence in the American context is even more direct than this. Benjamin Franklin became personally acquainted with Mandeville during an extended stay in London, describing the infamous doctor as a “most facetious entertaining Companion” (Franklin, 97). Mandeville's tendency towards natural theology would be echoed in

Franklin's own naturalistic outlook as he described it in his *Autobiography* (Franklin, 113-15). And, much like his acquaintance, Franklin not only recognized the social utility of religion but argued that such utility would best be realized through religious privatization: "I never was without some religious Principles; I never doubted, for instance, the Existence of the Deity, that he made the World, and govern'd it by his Providence... Tho' I seldom attended any Public Worship, I had still an Opinion of its Propriety, and of its Utility when rightly conducted" (Franklin, 146-47). Franklin realized that the utility of religion was maximized when individuals were free to apply the moral lessons of Christianity to their daily lives in their own way, and he judged the social value of the clergymen who he came into contact with on the basis of how well they helped to facilitate the individual's moral self-education (Franklin 147-48). In his private life Franklin embodied Mandeville's notion of "inward religion" while outwardly rejecting established dogmatism in favor of religious decentralization for the purpose of supplementing moral education. These Mandevillean ideas would be propagated by Franklin throughout the founding era.

But Mandeville's proposals concerning religion might be most thoroughly reflected in the American context by Thomas Jefferson. In a new political society that appealed to the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" as the point of departure for political and ethical discourse, Jefferson too recognized that religion, through its privatization, might serve as a valuable auxiliary to moral education. He affirmed, like Mandeville before him, "that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship" (Jefferson, "Letter to Danbury Baptists"). Additionally, a Mandevillean theological proposal was carried out in practice through Jefferson's writing of *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, known more commonly today as "The Jefferson Bible." This work was undertaken

with express intention of replacing religious dogma with a more socially beneficial form of religious teaching that would lend credence to common ethical rules by appealing to the moral teachings of Jesus.¹⁰

When Mandeville's ideas concerning the social utility of religion are taken into account along with his naturalistic approach to human social phenomena in general, it would appear that his influence extended both directly and indirectly to the American Founding and beyond. A number of intellectual and political elites in America tended towards a naturalistic understanding of God as the First Cause or Author of Nature in the same manner as Mandeville. And his practical proposals for maximizing the social utility of religion came to fruition through the efforts of a number of such prominent Americans. While Mandeville's influence may not have been as pronounced as that of Hobbes and Locke before him, or Montesquieu after him, I believe that the evidence presented here would justify placing him in a more prominent position than historians of political thought generally do.

Finally, his system, when viewed as a coherent whole, also speaks to a broader issue in moral philosophy regarding the compatibility of naturalism and religion. Can a system of morality that claims to be derived solely from the natural constitution of the human animal coexist in political society alongside systems of morality that claim to be derived from a divine order? Mandeville's work would seem to indicate that accounting for human morality in a naturalistic way does not render religious belief as such unreasonable. Rather it affirms a principle that lies at the heart of the American political tradition: the very fact that human

¹⁰See Jefferson, "Letter to John Adams" (Oct. 12, 1813), for a full account of his aim in rewriting the gospels – an aim that is very similar to that which Mandeville claims to have in *Free Thoughts*.

morality could arise as a principal component in that well-ordered system that operates according to the “Laws of Nature” legitimates the attribution of those laws to “Nature’s God.”

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