

The Fable of the Bees and Its Legacy for Social Sciences

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Abstract

This essay aims to highlight the importance of some aspects of Mandeville’s work for the subsequent development of the nascent social sciences. His contribution to the theory of unintended consequences has in fact influenced generations of scholars following him and is still extremely relevant today. The study of the unintended consequences of intentional human actions is one of the main tools of that “toolbox” from which the social scientist draws in carrying out his research work within an individualistic methodology. It is no coincidence that it has been and is still considered one of the main problems from which the social sciences originated. The paper will therefore try to deepen the understanding of the originality and innovativeness of Mandeville’s thought in relation to this aspect of the social sciences’ methodology.

Keywords

Mandeville, Unintended Consequences, Human Action, Individualistic Methodology

1. Introduction

It has been pointed out that the idea of unintended consequences of human actions can be conceived from two different points of view (Elster, 1989). On the one hand, it can refer to the strictly mental sphere if, for example, an individual action unintentionally gives rise to unexpected results in terms of desires and opportunities. On the other hand, it can instead be understood as the occurrence of social events and phenomena that arise from the interaction or, better, from the interdependence of intentional human actions (Boudon, 1979; Boudon & Bourricaud, 1982). Above all, it is this second conception of unintended consequences that is central to social research to the point of having led some social scientists to consider their study as the privileged object, or rather the specific

and exclusive task of theoretical social sciences (Hayek, 1967)¹.

It is by adopting an individualistic research methodology that we understand how the idea of unintended consequences cannot ignore the individual component: individuals act on the basis of the most diverse motivations in order to achieve a given goal and, for the simple fact of acting, directly and, above all, indirectly influence the behavior of others by unintentionally contributing to the realization of unplanned collective consequences. Therefore, it is always starting with the analysis of individual actions that we need to move forward to understand collective social phenomena.

2. The Fable of the Bees

The publication in the eighteenth century of Mandeville's main work, *The Fable of the Bees*, became at first a succès de scandale which unleashed a very lively philosophical debate, and earned its author numerous public denunciations and accusations as at the time it was judged profoundly immoral². However, the theoretical importance of the Dutch philosopher's work is beyond doubt as it has been evidenced by the opinions of many philosophers and social scientists, including, for example, those of Karl Marx and Friedrich A. von Hayek. In *Capital*, Marx refers many times to Mandeville calling him a courageous, audacious, and honest writer and adding that, in his opinion, he has tackled the fundamental themes of the nascent political economy with enormous success. For his part, Hayek credits Mandeville with having contributed to the birth of the "modern spirit". Specifically, according to the Austrian economist, it is the ideas of evolution and formation of spontaneous orders that constitute the most original and "modern" aspect of Mandevillian thought, ideas destined to pave the way for the development of central problems both for the social sciences and for biology (Hayek, 2022).

In the *Fable*, Mandeville in fact advances and develops these ideas recalled by Hayek with an ironic style and a spirit of provocation. As it is known, using a literary genre that has its roots in the ancient Aesopian tradition, and that refers to Jean de La Fontaine's moral fables (very well known to Mandeville³), he tells a story about the uses and customs of a beehive to actually refer implicitly to human society. By centering his story around what was seen at the time as a morally uncomfortable and condemnable paradox, and by adopting an approach that fully falls within the individualistic methodological criteria, he clearly high-

¹In this regard, the Austrian economist Friedrich A. von Hayek writes that if social phenomena manifested no other order than that conferred on them by conscious intentionality, there would be no place for any theoretical research of society, and everything would be reduced exclusively, as one often hears, to problems of psychology. It is only to the extent that a certain type of order emerges as a result of the action of individuals, but without having been consciously pursued by any of them, that the problem of their theoretical explanation arises (Hayek, 1952).

²On Mandeville's thought in general and, in particular, on the origins, fortunes and influences exercised by the *Fable*, see among others: Carrive (1980); Castiglione (1983); Cook (1975); Goldsmith (1985); Hayek (2022); Horne (1978); Hundert (1994); Jack (1987); Kaye (1988); Mauroy (2011); Maxwell (1951); Monro (1975); Primer (1975); Scribano (1980); Stafford (1997); Viner (1953).

³See for example: Kleiman-Lafon (2019) and Rutledge (2006).

lights the importance of the role of (individual) microsocial components in the formation of unexpected macrosocial (collective) outcomes. The starting point from which Mandeville moves is the attempt to understand whether prosperity and happiness can also develop in a hive (society) inhabited by bees (individuals) who, instead of wanting to intentionally adopt behaviors that are “useful” to the community to which they belong, are not at all interested in the realization of collective well-being but only in the satisfaction of their own selfish interests. Thus, he imagines a hive populated by immoral bees and bilges of all vices (envious, vain, selfish, proud, stingy, dishonest, etc.) that, in the wake of their passions (interests), adopt corrupt and dissolute behaviors. However, the aggregation of these behaviors, instead of jeopardizing the welfare and development of the hive, paradoxically contributes unintentionally to increase its prosperity⁴. In essence, albeit by implementing behaviors that are mostly morally reprehensible and exclusively oriented towards the pursuit of well-being or personal interest, and even though they are not at all aware that they are pursuing a collectively desirable goal, the bees of the hive with their vices imagined by Mandeville “contributed to public happiness”⁵.

The idea that passions such as vanity and pride could be the main motivations of human behavior and that similar private vices could produce public benefits was undoubtedly an unacceptable provocation and paradox for the time. That happiness could not spring from virtue and morals (identified in those days with the ascetic spirit of the Christian religion) was clearly not admissible especially among the ranks of the ecclesiastical world. It is therefore evident that the Mandevillian paradox would have attracted numerous criticisms as its own author anticipated from the “Preface” of the work. However, Mandeville was keen to underline that most of the accusations leveled at him were based on “prejudiced” opinions in front of which it was clear that no excuse or clarification could have been valid. In his eyes, the misunderstanding was that the message of the *Fable* was perceived as an offense, i.e., the idea that private vices can be elements necessary for the realization of collective benefits, and that the latter are not only the outcomes of plans intentionally designed in view of the common good which is the exclusive fruit of private virtue, but which are a spontaneous outcome not intentionally pursued by anyone. The author of the *Fable* did not at all consider

⁴Mandeville writes that in that society luxury gave work to a million poor people, and hateful pride, to another million. Even envy and vanity served the industry. Their favorite folly, fickleness in food, furniture, and clothing, this strange and ridiculous vice, had become the wheel that turned commerce. Thus, vice nourished ingenuity, which together with time and industry had brought the comforts of life, its real pleasures, and nothing could have been added (Mandeville, 1989).

⁵It has been underlined how the paradox highlighted by Mandeville was actually a specific case of a more general principle, namely the fact that in the complex order of society the results of men’s actions were very different from those which they intended to achieve, and that individuals, in pursuing their own ends, selfish or altruistic, produced results useful to others that they had not foreseen or perhaps not even known about, and furthermore that the entire order of society, and even all that we call culture, was the result of efforts made by individuals which did not tend towards this end, but which were channeled to serve these ends by institutions, habits and rules which had never been deliberately invented, but were formed to the continuation of what had proven itself (Hayek, 2022).

that this constituted a public offense. Therefore, he clarified at the time that when he maintained that vices are inseparable from large and powerful societies and that it is impossible for their greatness and wealth to subsist without them, he did not say that the individual members of such societies who are guilty of them should not be continually reproached, or that they should not be punished when such vices become crimes (Mandeville, 1989).

Taking note of the intentions of the author of the *Fable*, according to Hayek, it is the discovery of the existence of spontaneous orders that emerge from single individual actions that constitutes the great merit of Mandevillian work. In his opinion, recognizing that the consequences of human actions are often very different from what one imagines they could be, constitutes clear proof of the fallibility of the so-called “constructivist rationalism”, i.e., of that theory of society which considers the birth and evolution of institutions and social events as the result of intentional projects and actions deliberately oriented towards that end⁶. And when he talks about constructivist rationalism, Hayek thinks first of all to Cartesian rationalism (even if he looks at Baconian and Hobbesian rationalism at the same time) to which he imputes the responsibility for the emergence of an unreasonable “Age of Reason”⁷ which resulted in the *École Polytechnique* and in the diffusion of a scientistic-socialist spirit that he bitterly fought (the French Enlightenment). It should be added that the Mandevillian discovery goes hand in hand with important epistemological reflections as the unforeseen effects of individual actions are to be considered the direct consequence of the fallibility and ignorance of human knowledge. In fact, always referring to Hayek, the indisputable starting point of any theory is the hypothesis that there are only individuals who act on the basis of their knowledge which is always fallible, partial and dispersed. Given this assumption, it is therefore a question of understanding how from the interaction between individuals with partial, fragmentary and dispersed information, we arrive at situations of a “spontaneous” order, not planned by central authorities or institutions⁸. Thus, Hayek’s interest in Mandev-

⁶As regards the important critical implications that Mandeville’s reflections entail with respect to the constructivist claims typical of a large part of the history of scientific thought, see: Hayek (1952).

⁷It should be noted that Mandeville is also considered an exponent of the (English) Enlightenment despite being a sharp critic of it. In fact, the most heterogeneous positions fall under the definition of Enlightenment, and it would be a mistake to compare, for example, the Mandevillian position with that of the French Enlightenment from which, on the contrary, it clearly differs. On the Mandevillian Enlightenment see: Goldsmith (1988) and Hundert (1994).

⁸Understanding how we can achieve the optimal use of knowledge, specialization, and the opportunity to acquire knowledge dispersed among hundreds of thousands of people, but not provided to anyone in its entirety (Hayek, 2012), or the idea of diffusion or dispersion of knowledge becomes central in Hayekian thought and especially in the context of his economic reflections. Indeed, he believes it is central to investigate how the spontaneous interdependence of a certain number of individuals, each of whom possesses only a certain amount of information, can determine a state of affairs such that the good functioning of an economy is achieved; state of affairs which, through conscious and planned coordination, could only be achieved by someone who had the overall knowledge of all these individuals taken together. Hayek had already dealt with these issues since his first articles *Economics and Knowledge* and *The Use of Knowledge in Society* published in the journal “*Economica*” in 1937 and 1945 respectively. The same epistemological determinants would later have a great weight on all his social-political thought, as demonstrated by essays such as *The Counter-Revolution of Science* or *Scientism and the Study of Society*.

ville's work is understandable: as for the former, also for the latter the theme of the spontaneous onset of unforeseen institutions and orders is in fact based on the implicit reference to an individualistic methodology as well as on the idea of cognitive limitations of the human mind.

The Mandevillian contribution must therefore also be read as an attempt to demolish the presumption that all social phenomena and human institutions are the result of planning, of human reason, or as an effort tending to undermine the idea that human knowledge can be unlimited. It is this last point which was later made explicit by Hume's most famous theory, and which today has been developed from the positions of Popper's "critical rationalism". As has rightly been underlined, similar epistemological considerations do not mean wanting to diminish human reason, but, recognizing its limits, simply wanting to make it a more "effective" tool (Hayek, 1967).

3. History of the *Fable*

The study of human passions is central to the entire Mandevillian work. The Dutch philosopher was in fact also a doctor who had dedicated himself to the study of nervous and psychic diseases or, as he defined them, of hypochondriacal and hysterical passions or disorders. He supported the thesis that digestive disorders were the cause of such diseases, and at the same time paid considerable attention to the psychology of the sick. In Holland he practiced the profession of doctor, which he continued to do when he moved to London where in 1711 he published the *Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases* from which transpire some reflections on the theme of human passions which present their interest from a philosophical point of view. When he then publishes the *Fable of the Bees*, human passions will always form the core of his contribution, although they will no longer be examined with the clinical eye of the doctor, but with that of the social scientist.

The adventurous and troubled origin of the *Fable* dates to 1705 on the occasion of Mandeville's anonymous publication of the poem *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn'd Honest* some of the themes that will later be developed in the *Fable* are already present. It tells of a beehive inhabited by dishonest bees to which it owes its opulence and harmony, so much so that when the community of insects is freed from dishonesty by the will of Jupiter, the hive suddenly transforms, impoverishing itself and emptying itself of its inhabitants who go to seek their fortune elsewhere. Moral of the poem: enjoying the comforts of the world, being famous in war, and, indeed, living in comfort without great vices, is a useless utopia in our heads. Fraud, luxury, and pride must live, if we receive their benefits. Mere virtue cannot make nations live in splendor (Mandeville, 1989).

The poem reappears in 1714 when the book *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* is published anonymously in which a preface precedes a poem, then a commentary with twenty explanatory notes of the opinions expressed in the poem. But it was in 1723 that the real adventure of the Mandevil-

lian Fable began with the publication of the second edition of the book which included numerous additions of notes and two provocative texts, the *Search into the nature of society* and the *Essay on Charity and Charity-Schools*. It is above all the second of the two essays that arouses general indignation. Mandeville lashes out harshly against the Schools of charity, very widespread institutions in England at the time whose task was to provide the children of the poor with an education (mainly of a religious nature) preparatory to the exercise of a trade capable of getting them out of their state of poverty. The more general purpose of the Schools of Charity would be to bring benefit to the whole society by eliminating unbelievers and delinquents who would otherwise proliferate in a state of poverty. Now, according to Mandeville, what he defines as a fanatical passion for the Schools of Charity has completely different motivations than those publicly declared (not therefore a disinterested philanthropy, but real selfish passions). Thus, for example, he underlines how the hypocrisy of the directors of these Schools consists in claiming that they are pursuing some goals which in reality are the ones they think the least about and in acting on the contrary on the basis of motivations which they firmly deny between which excels the satisfaction one feels in giving orders and directives which originates from what Mandeville considers to be a human inclination, or rather the desire to dominate others. Challenging the “politically correctness” of the time, he also launches an attack against all those who contribute to the promotion and maintenance of these schools, first the Church of England which, in his opinion, by imparting to the boys the principles religious wants nothing but a profound veneration for the clergy and a violent aversion for all those who disagree with these principles. It is always in the same essay that Mandeville expresses his opinion on poverty, which largely justifies his aversion towards these Schools. In fact, he believes that the poor constitute an essential workforce and that their education contributes to making it disappear. It is for this reason that he believes that the children who flock to the Schools of Charity must be kept in ignorance as only by keeping them in ignorance can they get used to a very hard work without them judging it as such. Thus, in Mandeville’s eyes, a state with too many “know-it-alls” would do nothing but harm the state itself as it would increase the cost of labor and the prices of necessities, also becoming uncompetitive in foreign markets.

As it is easy to imagine, these provocative positions, based on very economic and unethical arguments, aroused an immense scandal and general indignation, translating into a condemnation of the book, which however was the “unintentional” origin of its success since it ignited a lively debate also in the newspapers that lasted for a long time. All this did not silence Mandeville who, on the contrary, published a further edition of the *Fable* in 1724 adding a Defense of the book which was followed by numerous other editions that further fueled the debate in question. Finally, it was in 1729 that a second part of the Fable appeared, written in the form of dialogues that once again address the themes for which Mandeville became famous, among which, above all, the idea of division of labor and that of the evolution of spontaneous orders.

4. Core of the *Fable*

The *Fable* can therefore be read as an attempt to unmask human hypocrisy by provoking those who refuse to recognize cowardice and vices. On the basis of these premises, the central problem is to highlight how “public benefits”, i.e., a situation of order and collective well-being, can arise spontaneously from “private vices”, i.e., from the absence of public virtue due to the fact that individuals act out of selfish and often ethically deplorable motives. The fact that, as Mandeville writes, in that hive every part was full of vice, but the whole was a paradise, constitutes a paradox for the time which demonstrates that morality on the one hand, and progress and social order on the other side may not be linked by a “cause and effect” type relationship at all. Mandevillian work therefore does not translate only into a critique of human hypocrisy as it might appear based on a superficial reading, but into the implicit formulation of much more important concepts from the point of view of social sciences. In fact, the solution to the paradox that Mandeville put forward lies precisely in the innovative intuition of considering that within a society the beneficial effects on a collective level are not subject to a predefined project and to the rational control of the actors on the consequences of their behaviour, rather they are the unintended result of the aggregation of the outcomes of their actions. In Mandeville’s eyes, even the worst of the whole multitude did something for the common good because in that hive vice nourished the ingenuity that the bees activated to produce consumer goods and comfort able to satisfy an increasing number of pleasures, which meant that unintentionally even the poorest lived better than the rich lived before. In essence, reading the problem through the lenses of methodological individualism, it can be highlighted how the industriousness of the bees imagined by Mandeville, although activated by vices and selfish desires, contributed at an aggregate level (i.e., by interacting with the industriousness of others) to increase the general well-being and to spontaneously create an economic “order” that is advantageous for the community. In the *Fable*, the most famous example that responds to this type of reasoning is that of luxury which, although it could ruin an individual and his family, can unintentionally enrich a state and give work to a million poor people who contribute to making it happen. In a similar way, Mandeville explains how even theft can contribute to the collective interest: if everyone were completely honest and nobody put their hands or nose into other people’s things, half of the nation’s blacksmiths would find themselves out of work; and both in the city and in the countryside we can see everywhere a quantity of artifacts, that would never have been invented, if we hadn’t had to defend ourselves from petty thieves and robbers.

At the basis of the paradox highlighted in the *Fable*, there is Mandeville’s conviction, a legacy of his medical training, that man is made up of “passions” (instincts, desires, emotions, feelings) that drive him to action, first among all self-love and vanity. Thus, laying the foundations for what will be the much more famous theorization by David Hume, Mandeville hypothesizes that reason

has a lower weight than passions and desires, and that it is in fact these that determine the will underpinning individual actions. According to this view, therefore, man always acts based on intentions motivated by the desire to please himself to the point that, for example, in this perspective the very purity of altruistic sentiment is lost. Even the action that does the good of others would in fact be motivated by the selfish desire to satisfy personal passions and not by the very essence of the act of doing good to the other.

By arguing that it is human nature to seek pleasure and personal happiness, Mandeville thus places himself within what has been identified as a flourishing current of thought that developed from the seventeenth century onward (Hirschman, 2013). According to this interpretation of action in a selfish key, men would abstain from private vices only for fear of possible sanctions and would act in view of the common good only to obtain some reward. It is on the basis of similar considerations that, for example, the Dutch philosopher explains the evolution of the feeling of “honor”. In *Research on the origin of honor* he writes about it that men are rewarded more if they adhere to the principle of honor, rather than that of virtue: the first requires less self-denial and the rewards that one receives, for that small renunciation, they are not imaginary but real and tangible. In the wake of the new moral and political problems that surfaced in his era with the appearance of the commercial economy, Mandeville therefore denies the correspondence between virtue and honor and essentially considers them social products based on a cost-benefit calculation basis of action tending to achieve personal happiness (action that relies on the further passion of seeking the approval of others)⁹. Virtue and honor are therefore products resulting from a process of civilization in which social coexistence and economic development are the result of a spontaneous order of passions originally in competition and incompatible with each other (Branchi, 2000). Thus, according to Mandeville, it becomes justifiable for human reason to endure annoyances, pains and sorrows, in the hope of being happy forever, and to refuse the satisfaction of pleasure, for fear of being forever miserable.

The Mandevillian belief that man is a compound of different passions each of which, if it is excited and becomes dominant, governs him from time to time, whether he wants it or not and that basically he is extraordinarily selfish is common to Thomas Hobbes. Both believe that men are driven to action by a series of passions tending to the selfish satisfaction of their desires and that they do not act in view of the common good. However, different are the implications that follow from this common premise. As is known, Hobbes does not believe that man is a social animal since, in his opinion, this connotation is acquired only when one becomes part of a state. Before entering society, in the state of nature, man lives in complete isolation at the mercy of the domain of the passions, of fear, of barbarism, which push him to be at war with his fellow men.

⁹Based on a similar vision such that happiness acquires a greater importance than virtue, luxury (understood as the satisfaction of personal happiness) for example takes on a positive value. On this point see: Goldsmith (1987).

According to Mandeville, on the contrary, men are social animals even if society originates from the human interest that drives individuals to try to satisfy their desires by trying in every way to overcome the obstacles that can get in the way of such a goal. However, human sociability is not innate, but is the result of continuous efforts aimed at satisfying one's personal interests: the development of human skills and society are the result of the evolution of passions and not of an original instinct of benevolence or a project of one mind. In fact, in the Mandevillian vision, sociality is an unintentional outcome that arises from interaction with others. Necessary interaction to satisfy one's own needs which are the cement of society. The Mandevillian thesis therefore opposes that "deist cult" that proliferated in the seventeenth century in France and England, and that became dear to the French revolutionaries, and it is also opposed to the idea of the existence of a hypothetical "state of nature" that considers the possibility that the individual is happy only if in isolation something destined to fail with the entry of man into society. According to Mandeville, man is already in society and sociality is a product of social coexistence (Castiglione, 1983). Human behavior must therefore be analyzed in the context of concrete relationships and not of a hypothetical state of nature.

The idea of the reduction of human action to an act of selfishness which often results in a competition between individuals that unites the Mandevillian and the Hobbesian vision of human nature actually gives rise to completely different conclusions (Hayek, 2022). The Hobbesian "homo homini lupus" justifies a contractualism that Mandeville does not share at all. Hobbes man enters society only by submitting to the rule of the state through a covenant of everyone with each other. On the contrary, Mandeville believes that the contract already presupposes sociality and society and not that the former is an indispensable condition for its realization: when individuals pose the problem of collective coexistence, they already enjoy the social condition. The Hobbesian Leviathan capable of defending men from mutual wrongs and reducing all their wills to a single will is by no means the resolving factor of conflict in Mandeville. Instead, he believes that this conflict can resolve itself spontaneously within the individual interaction mechanisms, and in fact, in the hive he described, the directly opposite parties helped each other, as if out of spite. Hobbes looks at the political problem of the State and identifies in it a constrictive apparatus capable of conveying towards a general interest (a state of peace and harmony) all the conflicts arising from the competition between conflicting interests. Instead, Mandeville looks at the economic mechanisms of development of society that can produce public and private profit while leaving maximum freedom to individuals (Taranto, 1982). He therefore reads the problem of order in terms of spontaneous evolution and mainly from an economic point of view, thus freeing it from the political component.

There are three fundamental steps that spontaneously lead to the constitution of the company from the Mandevillian point of view¹⁰. First, the spontaneous

¹⁰On this point see: Carrive (1980).

association of men motivated by the need to defend themselves from the threat represented by wild animals. Then the spontaneous constitution of the institution of the family motivated by the desire to defend themselves from the danger to which men are exposed by competition with others. Finally, the invention of writing which allows the continued application of the law over time and therefore the existence of governments that create laws. From these three stages originate the most important institutions such as property, security, love of peace, division of labor. The contractualist idea of a state of nature in which man lives in isolation endowed with language and reason that push him to deliberately build society and its institutions through the stipulation of a social pact is therefore incompatible with the unintentionality of the outcomes that Mandeville looks at. Any attempt to artificially build stability and order does nothing but deny the happiness that arises spontaneously from societies not subject to constraints. This concept anticipates classical liberal economics and will in fact be found in *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith.

5. Legacy of the *Fable*

As has been anticipated, the idea that collective well-being can be achieved independently of the intentions and reasoning of single individuals, that this can mainly occur within the ambit of economic mechanisms, and that, above all, this well-being can originate from vices and not from private virtues, it collides with the moral, religious and political spheres of the time. The image of a society that works “almost by itself” without a divine hand triggers criticism from many of Mandeville’s contemporaries, among whom perhaps the most illustrious is George Berkeley. The profound incompatibility that emerges from Mandeville’s work between the social model of the new “economically” oriented gentleman and the precepts of religion was not acceptable in Berkeley’s eyes. The latter did not believe that well-being resulted from economic mechanisms, but that it was the fruit of moral rules that derive from the wisdom of God and that it could therefore only be pursued by following the precepts coming from the Church. According to the bishop of Cloyne, private interests and vices lead to ruin as they break those moral rules that alone guarantee the progress of humanity. With *Alciphron*, Berkeley attacks Mandeville and, more generally, the group of “freethinkers” whom he judges to be too open-minded in the theological-political sphere on questions concerning the reason-faith relationship. It is in the second dialogue contained in this work that a specific criticism of the author of the *Fable* is developed, defined by Berkeley as one of those great philosophers who have disabused the world and proved to the point of demonstrating that private vices are public advantages (Berkeley, 2022). Berkeley was unable to accept the split operated by Mandeville between the elements of those binomials, considered inseparable and inviolable for the time, such as virtue-happiness, well-being-morality, altruism-society (Taranto, 1981). Although Berkeley also believed that calculating the results of each particular action was impossible and

that therefore well-being could not be the fruit of individual planning will and reason, he nonetheless reached different conclusions from the Mandevillian ones. Well-being cannot be the result of human will and reason, but it can however be achieved by divine will and reason which, being able to grasp the wholeness of things, can at the same time establish natural and moral rules tending to the realization of the universal welfare. Berkeley's attack on "free thinkers", and Mandeville in particular, therefore tended to reaffirm the irreplaceability of the Church (in which Berkeley was now enlisted) and the need to safeguard its power also in the economic-social sphere. In his opinion, this would have strengthened the sense of public spirit which failed with the atheist and libertine proposals to give free rein to private passions and interests.

Mandeville's positions on the matter were undoubtedly opposite. In fact, he saw in religion a weapon for the repression of passions inadequate for the management of social development which, in his opinion, should instead be considered the fruit of investment and of the tendency to satisfy one's own needs and not that of ascetic accumulation or of the repression of instincts. Mandeville tried to defend himself against Berkeley's attacks claiming that they were based on erroneous arguments and, in the same year of the publication of the *Alciphron*, he replied to its author with *A Letter to Dion* in which he tried to clear himself of the accusations made against him by asserting that his critic probably did not he had read the Fable carefully enough.

Many other criticisms were directed at Mandeville by numerous personalities of his time who mainly accused him of attributing a very low and ignoble origin to virtue and of being a supporter of vice. For his part, the Dutch philosopher, instead of being intimidated by all these attacks and watching these discussions from the sidelines, is even interested in other topical issues, fueling the public scandal even more. In fact, in 1724 he published a project to regulate prostitution with the provocative title *A Modest Defense of Public Stews* in which, once again, he recommended the public benefits of private vices. His defense of brothels (private vices) is based precisely on the idea that from their existence the community derives a series of advantages such as, for example, avoiding adultery and therefore the dishonor of wives and daughters, that of to reduce the number of abortions and infanticide, or to guarantee women constant means of subsistence.

As it has been said, returning to the *Fable*, there was most likely a misunderstanding at the basis of the attacks directed at its author. This consisted of Mandeville holding that he advocated the goodness of vicious deeds. In fact, he merely argued that it was important to "tolerate" some of these actions. Hence the misunderstanding which leads to the belief that if someone encourages tolerance, he does not discourage vice, and that, in the extreme, he even ends up encouraging it (Scott-Taggart, 1966).

However, many were also those who looked at Mandeville's work with interest and admiration as in the case of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Ferguson, and Smith. Let us briefly consider the case of the latter since he seems to

be the one who, more than any other, has absorbed the Mandevillian influence. Although in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith had severely criticized Mandeville's provocation accusing the Fable of inverted moralism, he too believed however that man could not exist outside of society which, in his opinion, provides him with that mirror that allows him to grasp aspects of himself otherwise not visible¹¹: the Smithian man is also vain and eager to be the object of attention or approval. Like Mandeville, Smith, who instead in *The Wealth of Nations* assumes different positions from those of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, does not believe that society is based on reciprocal "benevolence" and, hypothesizing the necessity of individual-society interaction, arrives at fully develop the concept of division of labor underlying that of the "invisible hand". As is well known, Smith used the metaphor of the "invisible hand" to develop a vision of an economy in which the production of goods and services, motivated solely by private profit, gives rise to the best possible outcomes for society as a whole (accumulation of wealth permanently improves the technical means of production, creates new factories and many other goods, and so on). And it is above all precisely the Smithian theorem of order and socio-economic progress that benefits from the idea that private vices can bring public benefits. By lowering his prices to attract his competitor's customers, the butcher selfishly looks out for his own interests. However, Smith points out, he will only do the consumer's interest as his competitor will do the same thing. Individual needs are therefore not satisfied thanks to the "benevolence" of others, but on the basis of the search for the satisfaction of selfish interests as even the Smithian man is moved by passions (interests)¹² (although this does not cause society to fail but on the contrary, just like the hive described by Mandeville, it is structured on this basis).

As it has been said, Smith is undoubtedly indebted to Mandeville for the concept of the division of labor which becomes the regulating principle of social dynamics. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the impression made on Smith by Mandeville's handling of the theme of the division of labor must have been considerable, as some of the most famous passages in *The Wealth of Nations* seem to be paraphrases of similar passages in the *Fable*³. And, more generally, from reading Smith's works we see not only that he had learned Mandeville's ideas, but that he had even "memorized" his language (Kaye, 1988)¹⁴. In fact, Mandeville

¹¹In this work Smith writes that there is a system, that of Mandeville, that seems to eliminate the distinction between vice and virtue. In fact, Smith considers Mandevillian ideas to be erroneous in almost every aspect, and above all he does not agree at all with the tendency to represent every passion as entirely vicious.

¹²On the coincidence between passions and interests in Smith, see Hirschman (2013) who writes that Adam Smith, in defending the free pursuit of gain, abandoned the distinction between interests and passions, and preferred to underline the benefits that interest would have procured rather than indicate the dangers and disasters that it would have prevented.

¹³In this regard, it must be remembered that Marx himself writes regarding Smith's famous passage on the division of labor that it is copied almost word for word from Mandeville's Remarks to his *Fable* (Marx, 2013).

¹⁴The thesis that Mandeville was the precursor of Smith's and laissez-faire theories (Kaye, 1988) is not shared by everyone (see Viner, 1953). On the debate relating to Mandeville's position between interventionism and laissez-faire, refer to Rosenberg (1963).

ville is the first to use the expression “division of labour”. Thus, in a passage of his work he writes that the greater the variety of trades, crafts and manufactures, the more industrious these are and the greater the number of branches into which they are divided, the greater is the number of inhabitants that can be contained in a society without harming each other with the result that the population easily becomes rich, powerful and flourishing. Work is therefore more fruitful the more it is divided. In fact, Mandeville noted that if society were organized from the outside, not even a ruthless tyrant would be able to make individuals work so much that on the contrary they do it spontaneously where they must achieve their own personal ends.

One could agree with the fact that in the *Fable* the theme of the division of labor is approached from two different points of view. On the one hand the division of labor is conceived as the strong point of modern manufacturing production, on the other it seems to emerge spontaneously as a solution found by the needy man and his family (Carrive, 1980). And in this regard Mandeville looks at the division of labor as an unintentional outcome often the result of adverse situations, just as happens in the case of a shipwreck which, it would be appropriate to say, in Mandevillian perspective does not always come as a silver lining as the occurrence of such an event gives work to all those craftsmen who repair masts and make sails and who would otherwise be left without doing anything. Like other institutions and norms, the division of labor is not the product of a superior mind nor the outcome of a predetermined project. It is an unintentional product of human actions that survives as it responds better than other systems or mechanisms to individual needs. This is what has led some scholars to see Mandeville as a precursor of Darwin (Hayek, 2022). Read from an evolutionary point of view, the theme of the division of labor allows us to show how from humble first steps sophisticated techniques and inventions were born which then benefited from the accumulation of experiences over very long periods. These are benefits for the species, and certainly not for individual workers, i.e., for that active part of society’s workforce that must always remain cheap and possibly not emancipated at a political and cultural level to prevent it from leaving the role of commodity-work which it plays to the benefit of the collective interest. Labor force which, as has been anticipated, Mandeville identifies as the poor. Mandeville’s thought on this point is extremely detailed and extends to considerations relating to the wages of the poor which, in his opinion, should not be too high. Indeed, for example, if in four working days the workers earned enough to survive, then, in his opinion, they would not consider it necessary to work on the fifth day. On the basis of the same logic Mandeville affirms that a worker must not remain with two coins in his pocket on Monday otherwise he will not go to work on Tuesday: he must not be paid too much or too little so that he is neither insolent nor discouraged. Hence the attack on the Schools of Charity which, as we have seen, aim to educate the poor by raising their intellectual level. Education can be dangerous in that it can disturb a social order causing a deleterious decrease in the workforce which, on the contrary, must

enjoy knowledge that is “restricted” within the limits of the work it is responsible for without “crossing” the border of what strictly concerns their professional duties. There is therefore a social class, that of the poor, which following the introduction of the division of labor makes it possible for the “inactive” part of society to be able to enjoy all the comforts and pleasures they desire. This happens by enduring even greater hardships than those that man had to endure in the state of nature to procure the necessary for survival. And this requires the lack of knowledge and fantasies relating to desires and a possible better life as, for example, how many things in the world and of what is unrelated to one’s work or occupation know a shepherd, a plowman or any other farmer, much less will he be able to bear the hardships and hardships of his work with joy and satisfaction. In essence, according to Mandeville, the subsistence of society is therefore entrusted to the division of labour and the division into social classes so that a large portion of individuals do not abandon themselves to idleness enjoying all the comforts and pleasures but that they work sufficiently for themselves and for other members of society. The naïveté of the Mandevillian opinions just exposed is beyond dispute in the eyes of the contemporary reader; however, it must be said that the fact that in this perspective the poor appear to be the wealth of modern societies does not mean that the Dutch philosopher attributed a morally positive value to the existence of a state of poverty: he limited himself to reading the problem from an “economic” point of view in order to indicate the recipe for prosperity and collective well-being. The idea was therefore that if everyone, poor, rich, merchants, etc., pursues their own interest, then society proceeds spontaneously towards greater well-being, i.e., towards greater luxury from which everyone, albeit in different forms, benefits.

It is now increasingly evident why Mandeville’s statements caused such a scandal and why he was regarded as an immoral monster. Nonetheless, the theme of the division of labour had enormous success, and in fact later on it was added by other philosophers and sociologists to fundamental considerations relating to the exploitation and annihilation of the workforce.

6. Concluding Remarks

Certainly, today Mandeville’s theses on the binomial “poverty-division of labour” seem to us and undoubtedly can appear in the eyes of many rather cynical and reactionary. And it is also evident that at the time of the publication of the *Fable* the idea that the majority of social benefits should be attributed to individual vices was even more scandalous. However, beyond the accusation against Mandeville of having argued that private vices were the natural cause of public benefits, it seems more relevant to look at his contribution from another more strictly methodological point of view. Despite the provocative appearance of the Mandevillian paradox that caused such a great scandal, it is in fact important to reiterate what the thought of this Dutch philosopher made us understand as fundamental for the subsequent development of the social sciences. That is, having contributed to dismantling the widespread belief at the time according to

which public benefits should be considered the exclusive fruit of individual virtues and morals through the highlighting of a concept that, as has been said, was the contribution truly fundamental brought by Mandeville: the discovery of the existence of the unintended consequences of human actions read in an evolutionary key.

However, that this makes Mandevillian work precious does not always seem to have been fully grasped by many philosophers and social scientists. With respect to the diffusion of the work abroad and the importance that has been attributed to Mandeville's intellectual legacy mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world, the Italian reception of his thought has been disappointing and the merit of having drawn attention to the thought of this philosopher belongs to a few isolated scholars who have been amply remembered and cited in the context of this essay. This is the case of those who could be defined as the "intellectual heirs" of the Austrian School of Economics and, therefore, also of the Mandevillian legacy, who dedicated acute critical studies to the thought of the Dutch philosopher. Also very recent is the publication of a pleasant summary volume of the salient features of Mandeville's entire work which represents a fundamental contribution for those who want to approach the thought of this philosopher (Branchi, 2004). The importance of the Mandevillian discovery was also explained very clearly and exhaustively by the editor of the Italian translation of the *Fable*. He writes that the large society that Mandeville hints at is not based on the civic spirit or sense of belonging to a moral community of its members, but on their "interested cooperation" (Magri, 2002). He clearly highlights the mechanism underlying this observation when he states that in his opinion the most important and original thesis of Mandeville's discussion is represented by the idea that a commercial company is not under the rational control of any or all of its members. The great Mandevillian society is therefore also in his eyes the unintentional fruit of interested cooperation: in fact, the exchange of goods and services is the basis of this commercial society in which everyone achieves their own ends by working for others. As can be read again in the Introduction to the Italian edition of Mandeville's work, the basis of this would be the double reason that on the one hand in large society there is no coincidence between the private good and the public good and that, on the other side, such a society is founded on the principle that the individual effects and the social effects of the behavior of individuals are systematically divergent. In our opinion, these considerations are not completely valid, or at least do not fully reflect the conclusions that can be drawn from the Mandevillian discovery. What we believe we should draw from the Mandevillian teaching is that a large society leaves all the necessary space for the unintended effects of human actions to occur, which makes it a free society or a "large society". If on the one hand we can agree with the fact that private good and public good may not coincide in most cases (just as the story of the famous beehive shows), on the other hand it seems a stretch to conclude that individual and social effects behaviors are always divergent. Game theory helps us to show how sometimes the optimal choices from an individual point of view

can coincide or not with the socially optimal equilibrium. In this sense, referring to Mandeville's story, the problem can therefore be reformulated by asking how a series of selfish and even asocial individuals can give rise to a society (Bianchi, 1993; Mauroy, 2011). The "invisible hand explanation" which considers social order and well-being as the unintentional outcome of individual efforts and desires relies on the idea of a slow and spontaneous evolution of a set of norms and institutions (such as the exchange and the division of labour) that connect one another and make life possible in society of selfish individuals¹⁵. It is therefore in this way that, adopting an evolutionary approach and in the wake of the Mandevillian tradition, with game theory we can try to explain the emergence of cooperative institutions and norms from non-cooperative individuals as the endogenous and unplanned result of single individual actions aimed at the satisfaction of personal interests. By adopting such an interpretation, it therefore appears clear that the solution to the problem of social coordination of individuals motivated by personal interests is identified by Mandeville in the discovery of the role of the institutional complex which he essentially traces back to the market, to the division of labour and to competition. Institutions, by channeling and reducing individual passions, stimulate and expand them, giving rise to a more cohesive community. For their part, individual passions are the engine that induces and promotes these rules of social order (Bianchi, 1993).

If therefore, albeit in different ways, a certain number of theoretical works seem to have grasped the essence of Mandevillian discovery, this is not always the case especially as regards the weight that the "philosopher of bees" has been attributed in the ambit of textbooks on the history of sociological and philosophical thought as a forerunner of the nascent social sciences. Thus, for example, one of the most widespread manuals on the history of sociological thought rightly dedicates a paragraph to the Scottish moralists who are placed among the precursors of the birth of sociology and, among the topics addressed, there is also that of unintended consequences. However, among the authors who are cited as supporters of the thesis according to which the human world is not the fruit of human construction nor of divine will, but of man himself, even though it is not the result of consciously desired and recognized projects, the name of Mandeville does not appear alongside the more famous ones of Ferguson, Smith, Millar. If then by some Mandeville is briefly mentioned as a precursor of classical political economy (Screpanti & Zamagni, 1989), by others he is identified as one of the precursors of modern sociological thought (Mongardini, 1988). In the latter case, however, we dwell exclusively on the problem of the selfish drive to action: erroneously identifying Mandevillian psychology with Hobbesian psychology, we neither notice nor that despite the common premises Mandeville radically differs from the positions of Hobbes, nor that the discussion of indi-

¹⁵In this regard, it should be remembered that in the literature on the subject there are also those who have underlined how often the realization of the general interest is not helped at all by a benevolent invisible hand that "guides" individual actions in that direction, but rather is hindered by the face malevolent of that hand (the invisible back hand (Hardin, 1982)) every time in which the pursuit of private interests prevents the realization of collective interests.

vidual selfishness turns into something much more relevant to the social sciences, namely the problematization of unintended consequences.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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