ANATOMIZING THE INVISIBLE: MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND ECONOMICS IN MANDEVILLE'S THOUGHT[1*]

ANATOMIZANDO LO INVISIBLE: FILOSOFÍA MORAL Y ECONOMÍA EN EL PENSAMIENTO DE MANDEVILLE[2]

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Abstract
Taking as its starting point the reception of the *Fable of the Bees* by the philosophers of the second half of the eighteenth century, this article seeks to examine which parts of Mandeville's system "bordered upon the truth" (Smith) and were therefore useful in contributing to the formation of the political economy of commercial societies. To this end, the article is divided into three parts that address crucial aspects of the *Fable's* moral philosophy: the quarrel over the refinement of the arts and its link with labour, trade, and inequality; the passions and the political foundation of society; and the manner in which interests are organised.
Keywords: Mandeville, Adam Smith, Political economy, Moral philosophy, Commercial society, Political philosophy.

Resumen
A partir de la recepción de *La Fábula de las Abejas* por los filósofos de la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII, este artículo pretende examinar qué partes del sistema de Mandeville "bordearon la verdad" (Smith) y fueron por tanto provechosas para la construcción de la economía política de las sociedades comerciales. Con ese objetivo, el artículo se divide en tres partes que abordan puntos cruciales de la filosofía moral de la *Fábula*: la disputa acerca del refinamiento de las artes y su relación con el trabajo, el comercio y la desigualdad; las pasiones y el fundamento político de la sociedad; y el modo de organización de los intereses.
Palabras clave: Mandeville, Adam Smith, Economía política, Filosofía moral, Sociedad comercial, Filosofía política.

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I. Introduction

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith brings forward the intricate antagonism that Bernard de Mandeville establishes between commerce and virtue[3]. Through this duality, the *Fable* intended to emphasize the selfish character, founded on self-love, to which all sound economic dynamics should conform.

But if Mandeville's commercial society is essentially predicated on vice and driven by private interest, from an economic perspective this brings several advantages. After all, for Mandeville a nation founded on commerce could never prosper from a moral point of view if one considers that a great nation must be "morally" virtuous: this is one of the main lessons contained in the maxim *private vices, public benefits*.

David Hume had already noticed this tendency to licentiousness found in the *Fable*. Indeed, in his *Political Discourses* (1752) Hume sought to reconcile commerce and luxury with virtue, or at least to mitigate their opposition, paving the path for the critique that would later be accomplished by Smith. Before referring directly to Mandeville, Hume closes his essay *Of Refinement in the Arts* as follows: "Let us, therefore, rest contented with asserting, that two opposite vices in a state may be more advantageous than either of them alone; but let us never pronounce vice in itself advantageous" (Hume, 1987: 280). Other influential readers of Mandeville, such as Jean-François Melon, author of *A Political Essay Upon Commerce* (1736), or Montesquieu contributed to the economic-political thought of the eighteenth century and were well-known to the Scottish philosophers of commercial society.

It is in this intellectual context, therefore, that Smith will sharply attack the moral philosophy presented in the *Fable*, classifying it as a *licentious system*. Dedicating an eloquent refutation that seeks to demonstrate the shortcomings of the "wholly pernicious" system of "Dr. Mandeville" (Smith, 1984: 308), Smith adds that the language employed in the *Fable* is ambiguous and sophistic. Furthermore, he points out that "it is the great fallacy of Dr. Mandeville's book to represent every passion as wholly vicious" (Smith, 1984: 312). Notwithstanding these objections, Smith then makes the following statement:

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, Mandeville's works cited herein refer to Kaye's edition [Mandeville (1924)]. We cite the references as follows: FB volume number (I or II), the title of the book, pages.

> Such is the system of Dr. Mandeville, which once made so much noise in the world, and which, though, perhaps, it never gave occasion to more vice than what would have been without it, at least taught that vice, which arose from other causes, to appear with more effrontery, and to avow the corruption of its motives with a profligate audaciousness which had never been heard of before.
> But how destructive soever this system may appear, it could never have imposed upon so great a number of persons, nor have occasioned so general an alarm among those who are the friends of better principles, had it not in some respects bordered upon the truth (Smith, 1984: 313).

During the nineteenth century, other economists and philosophers made similar remarks, albeit from different perspectives. Marx, for example, recalls a passage from *A search into the Nature of Society* which emphasizes the economic and productive character that all occupations, even the most vicious, have in a commercial society (FB I, 369 et seq.). Marx then assesses that "only Mandeville was of course infinitely bolder and more honest than the philistine apologists of bourgeois society" (Marx, 1975: 310).

This paper seeks to examine which parts of Mandeville's system "bordered upon the truth" and were therefore useful in constructing the political economy of commercial societies. To this end, the article is divided into three parts that address crucial aspects of the *Fable's* moral and economic philosophy. First, I will address the question of luxury and its associated issues, such as the role of labour and inequality in a commercial society. The second part will undertake a digression into the political foundation of human society or, more precisely, into how the passions and vices of the *body politic* are governed by human art. In the third part, I shall consider the way in which interests harmonise and the role that politics and legislation play in this arrangement. Finally, given the intersection of these three points, I will conclude with a review of Mandeville's reception by the history of economic thought. These issues will help us situate the debate concerning Mandeville's "liberalism" or "mercantilism".

I would also like to argue that the idea of "*anatomizing the invisible*" –an expression used by Mandeville to describe curiosity and the imaginative process (FB I, "Remark N")– can help us understand how the *Fable of the Bees* provided key arguments for the political economy of the last third of the eighteenth century to imagine certain aspects of the economic dynamics of a commercial society. In other words, Mandeville aspires to observe the dynamics that circulate and vivify *the body politic of commercial society* as a skilled anatomist

would do with his patient, not in order to "cure" him, but rather to understand and explain what makes him operative, to assess what may, in fact, be what keeps the body alive despite appearing to be a harmful symptom.

We might also say, in analogy to the physiological paradigm, that a certain configuration of the passions of the political body enforces its rules on the elements that restructure that body itself, producing involuntarily "healthy" results. A good example of how this model can apply to the humanities and social sciences is the interaction, carried out during the eighteenth century, between moral philosophy and economics.

II. Labour, trade, inequality: the luxury and the wealth of nations

The quarrel over luxury gathers various aspects of politics, morals, and anthropology, assembling much of the philosophical concerns of the eighteenth century. In fact, the discourse of political economy gradually earns its place within the debate on the refinement of societies, especially in matters concerning the promotion of material progress, the growth and the distribution of wealth, the stimulus of human industry (as opposed to idleness), the population's well-being, the role and importance of trade for both the state and private individuals, all considered under an apology of modernity that sustained, in comparison with the old republics, the progressive improvement of *mores* and a championing of individual freedom (Spitz, 1995: especially chapter VII). Seen from the prism of republicanism, the quarrel addressed the compatibility between commerce and virtue (Pocock, 1985). In short, the quarrel over luxury, articulated with notions belonging to moral philosophy, emerges as one of the earliest sources of expression of modern political economy[4]. As to how the issue was formulated and enunciated, the writer of *The Fable of the Bees* is undoubtedly one of its most prominent authors.

Mandeville argues that luxury is proteiform and relative to the time and society in which it is embedded, to the people on whom it operates, to the social stratum in which it circulates. Thus, luxury is an equivocal term, whose definition seems to vary according to

[4] On the relationship between commerce, economy, and luxury, see Galliani (1989), chapters 12 and 13; Meyssonier (1989), chapter IV; Monzani (1995); Spector (2006), chapter 3; Spector (2011), "La question du luxe", in which it is stated that "the question of luxury falls within the framework of the 'liberal' problem of civil society's autonomisation in relation to the state" (157).

circumstances. Acknowledging and restating this lack of precision, Mandeville sees the opportunity to lead relativism to its paroxysm. On the one hand, if we consider that everything that exceeds the basic needs of subsistence can be called luxury, then everything is superfluous. On the other hand, if everything is superfluous, then we can also say that luxury does not really exist (FB I, "Remark L", 108). From these premises, it would be possible to assert that even "savages" would enjoy luxury: any improvement –a spear, a hut, a fur coat, etc.– can be considered superfluous compared to their primitive situation (FB I, "Remark L", 107 and FB I, "Remark P",169). The vicissitudes of luxury reflect, after all, the development of human industry and labour (FB I, "Remark P", 169 et seq.).

Thus, the apology of luxury presupposes the idea of a continuous and almost imperceptible refinement that runs through history. Experience, the progress of new instruments, renewed forms of work and ceaseless resourcefulness ensure that societies gradually observe a significant improvement in the living conditions of individuals.

From that, Mandeville claims that the poorest groups of society end up, sooner or later, benefiting from this conspicuous mode of consumption: as time goes by, what was once considered luxury becomes something ordinary, even vulgar, and, consequently, cheaper, more accessible to the public. They would then have their condition bettered in comparison to the poor of past generations; they would have safer and better-built homes, improved work tools, and access to better food [as illustrated by the example of the expansion of meat consumption, (FB I, "Remark P", §186)]. All in all, luxury is one of the key elements of economic growth and wealth. Seen from a historical perspective, it contributes to the prosperity of a nation and provides for the distribution of resources that were once exclusive, thus collaborating with the general improvement of life.

However, even if one concedes that luxury brings valuable material and economic results, is it not true that luxury is also a destructive element for society? Is it not true that the prodigality which distinguishes the great commercial nations could be replaced by frugality, a virtue capable of bringing equal or better benefits to the body politic?

Mandeville develops the dichotomy between *frugality* and *prodigality* in both economic and moral terms. The first represents poverty, misery, and idleness; the second, wealth, trade, and business. In opposition to prodigality, frugality is considered an ancient virtue, which does not create employment and could only thrive in small communities. Or, as he writes, frugality is "a mean starving virtue, that is only fit for small societies of good

peaceable men, who are contented to be poor so they may be easy; but in a large stirring nation you may have soon enough of it" (FB I, "Remark K", 104-105). According to Mandeville, the rustic way of life demanded by frugality is a perpetuation of simplicity, sometimes of misery, that cannot be embraced by commercial nations, which are generally large and densely populated. Frugality can also lead to idleness and stagnation concerning inventiveness and industry, keeping the nation in languor.

However, in addition to discouraging the terrible vice of idleness, prodigality stimulates work. From the point of view of the nation's revenues, prodigality presents itself as a good passion, since it guarantees the employment, income, and profit of a large number of people while harming only one individual, i.e., the prodigal. In other words, trade may well be encouraged from the moment the prodigal decides to spend his money. Mandeville affirms that the positive effects of this *noble sin* should be observed: "as long as the nation has its own back again, we ought not to quarrel with the manner in which the plunder is repay'd" (FB I, "Remark K", 104).

Hence, social prosperity is intimately intertwined with vice, and a behaviour such as prodigality, at first considered harmful or vicious, is reassigned to the category of *beneficial action* to the extent that it favours the merchants of luxury goods and thus promotes trade and commerce. Ultimately, the exercise of private vices serves the public interest. The commerce of wine or playing cards are offered as good examples of this dynamic. On the one hand, the merchant of one of these trades (*Wine-merchants* or *Card and Dice-makers*) sells his products and manages to support his family: he pays his taxes and educates his children, that is, he creates benefits for himself and those around him, also helping the fiscal management of the political body. On the other hand, their commerce is rooted in vices that the merchant himself ends up promoting, and that make his business prosper. Namely, in the case of the *Wine-merchant* and the *Card and Dice-makers*, drunkenness and gambling, respectively. Although these merchants are "immediate ministers to a legion of vices", they "would be starv'd in half a year's time, if *Pride* and *Luxury* were at once to be banished the nation." (FB I, "Remark F", 85).

Even if one considers that luxury promotes industry and contributes to a virtuous economic dynamic, one could object that luxury is also responsible for weakening the physical body, enervating the people, and ruining individuals. In addition, by inciting luxury, one would instigate an insatiable hunger for profit (*auri sacra fames*), and soon the

body politic would find itself corrupted. Finally, public institutions would then become the object of commercial transactions: "and where they are reigning vices, offices of the greatest trust are bought and sold; the ministers that should serve the publick, both great and small, corrupted, and the countries every moment in danger of being betray'd to the highest bidders" (FB I, "Remark K", 115).

These dire consequences are not, however, effects of luxury, but rather the outcome of a *bad administration*. From the perspective of the body politics' health, the question of luxury and vices is subsumed, in Mandeville, by the problem of the good art of governing. History teaches us that a bad policy or an unskillful administration, an ill-calculated intervention of government in public affairs, is the real cause of the decline of states (FB I, "Remark L", §117, 117). A good government, mindful of the balance of trade, is fully compatible with luxury[5]. Therefore, the skillful politician must not only be able to manage passions in their favour but must also make proper considerations about domestic commerce and see the complexity of foreign trade transactions, as well as to properly manage fiscal policy and the country's finances: "what is put to the account of luxury belongs to male-administration, and is the fault of bad politicks" (FB I: "Remark L", 115-116).

Nor does luxury, as some philosophers claim[6], make men more indolent or less fit for battlefields. On the one hand, says Mandeville, the "hardships", "fatigues" "and "toils of the war" will always be borne by the "the meanest indigent part of the nation, the working slaving people", and never by the rich, who frequently do nothing more than paying taxes that finance the war. On the other hand, soldiers should not fear luxury: they are above all driven by emulation and by the love of honour and glory. As for the high-ranking, or the "people of war" with "a very high birth and princely education", already more experienced and whose main tool is strategy and intelligence, a certain refinement can rarely do them any harm (FB I, "Remark L", 119).

Emulation (which engenders a competitive quest to outdo each other, that is, it is the effort that each individual makes to look better than their fellow man by buying and flaunting new clothes, better furniture, building nicer houses, etc.), driven by pride, is a

[5] "With a wise administration all people may swim in as much foreign luxury as their product can purchase, without being impoverish'd by it" (FB I, "Remark L", 123).
[6] Rousseau, for example. For a perspective that also sets out from Smith's reading, but seeking to oppose Rousseau's system with Mandeville's, see Vargas (2019).

crucial component in stimulating commerce and trade, offering money and work to the poorest and contributing to the creation of new commodities. The public welfare is therefore constituted by vices derived from emulation and self-love (FB I, "Remark M", 133). It is all about seeking the creation of *a virtuous cycle between selfishness and wealth*.

Thus, if commerce is an indispensable mechanism for the greatness and wealth of a nation, luxury, together with *pride*, is its main cog. In "Remark L", for example, Mandeville writes that "trade is the principal, but not the only requisite to aggrandize a nation" (FB I, "Remark L", 116), and later, in "Remark M", he adds the following about pride: "[there is] no other quality so beneficial to society, and so necessary to render it wealthy and flourishing (...). Pride and Luxury are the great promoters of trade" (FB I, "Remark M", 124). In *Letter to Dion*, he writes: "to wish for the increase of trade and navigation, and the decrease of luxury at the same time, is a contradiction" (Mandeville, 1953: 49).

Therefore, a nation seeking wealth and greatness must not be content merely to possess fertile and vast land areas, in which the population must always be well distributed and kept in proportion to the extent of the territory: it must establish a (moral) policy which encourages industry and labour. Once the first necessities of life are satisfied, it is necessary to withdraw individuals from a quietude which would soon content them to linger in torpor and idleness (or, as Mandeville writes in "Remark Q", a "slothful ease"). It is necessary to develop the sciences and the arts; to make ever more refined products; to create new comforts, and, finally, to foster industry. Mandeville compares the human machine to a windmill that receives no "breath of air": without stimulus, both remain inoperative.

Furthermore, Mandeville never fails to associate trade with vicious actions such as cheating, swindling, covetousness, envy, and "where trade is considerable fraud will intrude" (FB I, "Remark Q", 185). But in a country in which frugality is the main feature, not only will men be miserable and uneasy (for neighboring nations will constantly be seen as a threat to their security), but they will not even have an opportunity to develop their virtues. After all, virtue is always relative, it can only operate in the vice-virtue dichotomy. Mandeville summarizes the situation of penury in which the frugal nations are plunged as follows:

> They must be poor, ignorant, and almost wholly destitute of what we call the comforts of life, and all the cardinal virtues together won't so much as procure a tolerable coat or a porridge-pot among them. For in this state of slothful ease and stupid innocence, as you need not fear great vices, so you must not expect any considerable virtues (FB I, "Remark Q", 183-184).

The luxury advocated by Mandeville operates in a society in which commercial dynamics are observed, performing a circulation of money that keeps the economy alive and encourages work. Finally, money should circulate in a balanced way, in a cadence between production and consumption, and it is a healthy regime for the political body that individuals spend money on the acquisition of goods as soon as they receive the remuneration for their work. Moreover, Mandeville states that workers' wages should be established in such a way that they should never earn too much (because this would discourage them from working) nor too little (because they would find themselves in a situation of penury that would prevent them from expending the required effort for work). In this way, always situated between the satisfaction of some of their desires, possible thanks to their earnings and the renewed need to obtain more money, individuals will continually keep themselves busy and industrious, willing to work.

Despite the human propensity to seek comfort and thus to obtain money, money has no value in itself: the wealth of a nation derives from work and agriculture (since it is necessary to reap the fruits that nature can produce). Hence, we read that "the great art then to make a nation happy and what we call flourishing, consists in giving everybody an opportunity of being employ'd" (FB I, "Remark Q", 197). In this sense, luxury is also beneficial ["luxury employ'd a million of the poor" (FB I, "The grumbling hive, or knaves turn'd honest", 25) of the hive, as the *Fable*'s poem puts it] because it boosts industriousness: the rich spend more than their physical body could consume or use, generating a surplus, labour, and encouraging trade[7].

In Mandeville's moral and economic philosophy, work is generally understood as the work of the poor. This premise underpins his apology of luxury: in order not to abandon their heavy labour, workers need to be kept in ignorance. In numerous passages

[7] The reasoning concerning the capacities of the physical body in terms of the economic justification of the progress of comforts has been revisited at least since John Locke's *Second treatise* (Locke, 1988). Adam Smith follows a similar line of argument in *The theory of moral sentiments* (Smith, 1984: IV, chapter I, §10) and *The wealth of nations* (Smith, 1979: I, chapter XI and II, §7, 180).

of the *Fable* we read that the underprivileged classes are responsible for the laborious efforts that support the nation and ensure the production of goods, making life more comfortable and ensuring, in short, national prosperity. In the *Essay on Charity and Charity Schools,* one reads that the work of the poor is essential for wealth, more so than the number of coins circulating in a country: "there is no intrinsick worth in money but what is alterable with the time (...). It is (as I have already hinted before) the labour of the poor, and not the high and low value that is set on gold or silver, which all the comforts of life must arise from. (FB I, "An essay on charity and charity-schools", 301). Mandeville maintains that it is also necessary to create a balance between desires and satisfactions that maintains such dynamics, i.e., to ensure that the poor can never fully satisfy their needs, at the risk of stopping working. In another example taken from "Remark Y", a passage in which some of the main arguments of the *Fable* are summarized, we read: "the poor should be kept strictly' to work, and that it was prudence to relieve their wants, but folly to cure them" (FB I, "Remark Y", 248).

As it is clear to the readers of the *Fable*, Mandeville's approach does not strive to denounce disparities between the rich and the poor, between the landowners and the wage-earners, but rather to affirm this inequality: on the one hand, in Mandeville's perspective, for a nation to prosper, the poorest ranks of the population must always perform the heavy work; on the other hand, he indicates that they must be made consumers. Modern, commercial nations, founded on free and remunerated labour[8], should be based on the work of the underprivileged groups. In this sense, although Mandeville does not address the "regulation of the bodies" –as Melon will outline in *A political essay upon commerce* (Melon, 2014: chapter 24)–, he expresses a concern to ensure that the poor have sufficient health and hygiene so that they can remain constantly available for work. As Paulette Carrive observes, for Mandeville "the poor must be preserved, with their necessities and minimum satisfactions (...); work, in short, must provide them with something to eat so that they may restore their strength in order to spend it again" (Carrive, 1994: 308).

But, according to Mandeville, even if one considers that the living conditions of the poor can improve relatively and gradually, and even if one grants the possibility of mobility between social ranks, one must always maintain, so to speak, the mathematical ratio of

[8] As we read in the passage in which work, unlike slavery, is nevertheless seen as a heavy burden to be borne by the poorest: "a free nation where slaves are not allow'd of, the surest wealth consists in a multitude of laborious poor" (FB I, "An essay on charity and charity-schools", 287).

inequality between rich and poor, preserving "a well-proportion'd mixture (…). And this due proportion is the result and natural consequence of the difference there is in the qualifications of men" (FB II, "The sixth dialogue", 353). For Mandeville, it would be natural for society to reflect differences in talents and qualities in socio-economic terms.

This argument reinforces the author's claim that the education of the poor should be limited to "the verge of their occupation" (FB I, "An essay on charity and charity-schools", 288) and that they should be confined in ignorance lest their desires become enlarged. Unlike businesses which "require such qualifications" as writing, mathematics or even some complex or specialised reasoning, the poor, kept ignorant (thus, without even the possibility of actually improving their qualifications), must nevertheless be encouraged (or obliged, if necessary) to produce for national prosperity: "every hour those of poor people spend at their book is so much time lost to the society" (FB I, "An essay on charity and charity-schools", 288), says Mandeville.

If we may for a moment use anachronistic terminology, in his analysis of the commercial society, Mandeville openly states that labour should be undertaken by a completely alienated and uneducated working class. To mitigate this complete alienation championed by Mandeville, Smith, for several reasons that we cannot elaborate on in this article, advocates elementary public education for the children of the workers: "the education of the common people requires, perhaps, in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the publick more than that of people of some rank and fortune" (Smith, 1979: II, 785)[9]. In *Capital*, Marx writes: "for preventing the complete deterioration of the great mass of the people which arises from the division of labour, Adam Smith recommends education of the people by the state, but in prudently homeopathic doses" (Marx, 1976: 484). Taking these passages into account, it could be said that Marx's statement about Mandeville's liberal bluntness was not without reason.

Finally, the debate concerning the natural inequality of talents, the ever-proportional arrangement of the different social strata, and the new employments that arise in response to new desires and material changes in production, leads to the following question: what shall be the relationship between society and state? To put it more precisely,

[9] Smith also writes: "the man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become" (Smith, 1979: II, 782).

what is the role of the state regarding the forms of organisation observed within society? For what is the meaning, after all, of the statement that one should not interfere in business and trades, that "the short-sighted wisdom, of perhaps well-meaning people, may rob us of a felicity, that would flow spontaneously from the nature of every large society, if none were to divert or interrupt the stream"? (FB II, "The sixth dialogue", 353). The answer to these questions may allow us to understand the functioning of social organisation and the dynamics of interests and passions that circulate within the *body politic*.

II. The body politic and the taming of passions

The critical literature on Mandeville's political views has intensely debated the extent to which government is allowed to interfere in forms of social organisation, and whether there is indeed the idea of spontaneous harmony of interests in the author's thought. How is it possible to explain society among individuals whose interests diverge incontrovertibly and whose main traits derive from selfish passions? This debate implies both an examination of the origins and shaping of political bodies and an analysis of human nature from the perspective of (un)sociability. Thus, it would be fruitful to observe at the outset the features that portray the Mandevillian pre-social state.

An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue opens by remarking that the book will consider individuals as they might be described in their natural state, devoid of religiosity or the qualities attributed to *civilisation*. Referring to Machiavelli, he announces that the *Enquiry* will be guided by the principle of the effective truth of things: Mandeville rebukes writers who "are always teaching men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their heads with telling them what they really are" (FB I, "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 39). But how can one investigate and identify the course of events by which men could come to distinguish the differences between conceptions of virtue and vice? Resorting to a *state of nature* (FB I, "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 40), the *Enquiry* seeks to unveil the scenario in which the genesis and gradual consolidation of these two notions take place.

Individuals in the state of nature are described as being originally endowed with interconnected passions, such as self-love and self-liking, from which derive both simple passions, such as pride, and compound passions, such as envy. These are affections that

alternate to govern them and are *in actu* from the first moment of this history that precedes sociability. The difference between *self-love* and *self-liking* is clearly explained: *self-love* concerns the efforts to achieve all that is necessary for self-preservation, while *self-liking* concerns self-esteem and the search for the esteem of others.

Calling the first men *brutes* or comparing them to an *untaught animal* (although they are "the most perfect of animals", FB I: "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 44), Mandeville argues that they possess a natural disposition to seek pleasure and well-being, and to act without concern for the external consequences that their behaviour might produce. In other words, even if their quest for satisfaction leads to an effect that is manifestly harmful to another being, at first these individuals do not refrain from carrying out their actions (FB II, "The sixth dialogue", 269-271).

But virtue, aimed at restraining natural inclinations, requires *self-denial*. In fact, the statement that there is no virtue without self-denial is repeated, with different formulations, throughout the *Fable*[10], and this issue is linked to the problem of sociability. On the one hand, Mandeville rejects, against Shaftesbury, the idea of a natural sociability already in action in the first moments of the state of nature, describing the human being as an "extraordinary selfish and headstrong, as well as cunning animal" (FB I, "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 41-42) and emphasizing the attribute of *vanity* in the list of essential properties of human nature. In *A search into the nature of society*, he writes directly against Shaftesbury: "for if by society we only mean a number of people, that without rule or government should keep together out of a natural affection to their species or love of company, as a herd of cows or a flock of sheep, then there is not in the world a more unfit creature for society than man" (FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 347)[11]. Thus, society will be the result of artifice, and sociability must be gradually cultivated and stimulated.

On the other hand, seeking to dissociate himself from Hobbes, Mandeville argues that individuals do not have a permanent inclination to unsociability, but that they are endowed with the *potentia* of becoming sociable (FB II, "The fourth dialogue", §185 et

[10] In "Remark O", for example, Mandeville peremptorily asserts this point (FB I, "Remark O", 156).

[11] According to Paulette Carrive, "society does not come from sociability; it is sociability that comes from society" (Carrive, 1980: 52). See also Petsoulas, 2001.

seq.)[12]. It follows that it is necessary to investigate how this faculty, given such a composition of human characteristics, comes into action and how individuals were finally able to find themselves in a situation in which they cohabit with others in a political body.

Given the selfish nature of human beings, the problem of peaceful coexistence in a community arises. The transition to civil society will not be accomplished through a rational agreement; rather, society will be established gradually and imperceptibly through the work of skilled politicians who are focused primarily on the passions[13]. In the *Sixth Dialogue*, Horace asks whether in an "uncivilized state" individuals would not then seek to establish a contract among themselves in order to avoid *injury* or mutual harm. Cleomenes, his interlocutor, replies: "very probably they would; but among such ill-bred and uncultivated people, no man would keep a contract longer than that interest lasted, which made him submit to it" (FB II, "The sixth dialogue", 267-268). Hence, Mandeville discredits the possibility of a rational foundation of society.

To explain the emergence of the first traits of morality that lead individuals towards cohabitation, Mandeville resorts to the *lawgivers* or *politicians*: these "wise men" use their eloquence and wit to create *imaginary rewards* and are capable of honoring pride through flattery. Discouraging individuals from following the impulse of their passions (thus establishing *self-denial*), they finally convince them to work for the common interest. According to Mandeville, the main task accomplished by these politicians was to "make the people they were to govern, believe, that it was more beneficial for everybody to conquer than indulge his appetites, and much better to mind the publick than what seem'd his private interest" (FB I, "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", §§28-30, 42-43). The processes of moralisation and socialisation stem from a long-developed artifice.

Therefore, the lawgiver's strategy involves convincing people that controlling the passions is beneficial to everyone and that it also complies with the public interest. Accordingly, the birth of politics is marked by the skillful counteraction of the passions, a task that "civilizes" society (FB I, "Remark N", 145.). Politicians employ the art of persuasion: endowed with eloquence, they use flattery to manipulate people's vanity, making them desire chimerical rewards. In doing so, these "lawgivers" praise reason, a

[12] Against Hobbes and Shaftesbury, see §195, 177 et seq.

[13] In *A search into the nature of society*, one reads in detail what are the passional motivations of individuals, such as pride, envy, greed, and self-love, which provide the necessary conditions for man to be led into society (FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 334 and 346-347).

faculty that henceforth is covered with the varnish of nobility. Once reason is elevated to the status of an attribute capable of distinguishing men from other species, making them capable of curbing their passions, we are on the verge of the awakening of virtue. The results of these discourses unfold in two new conditions.

The first concerns the emergence of two elementary categories of morality and sociability[14], *honour* and *shame*: individuals who repressed their impulses were encouraged to feel and be seen as victorious and honourable, while those who gave up trying to inhibit their desires were regarded as wild animals, unsuccessful and unworthy. In *An enquiry into the origin of honour*, one sees detailed accounts on how the notions of shame and honour are instruments of persuasion, directing men towards sociability, and how an *artful education* creates useful bonds for society (Mandeville, 1732, First Dialogue: 40 et seq.).

The second is the creation of two distinct classes (FB I, "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 43), aiming to encourage emulation and to stimulate mastery over the passions through the exercise of reason. One class is composed of those who could not satisfy their appetites without restraint, incapable of taming their passions through reason, and were then considered as untamed animals, as "the dross of their kind", relegated to vexation, dishonour, and seen as criminals. The other class is formed by "lofty high-spirited creatures" (FB I: "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 44), capable of subduing their natural inclinations using reason; they are worthy of esteem and consideration and, ultimately, they would have government and authority at their side.

The stage was set for the establishment of the notions of vice and virtue. Mandeville summarizes this new condition created by the extensive work performed by skilled legislators, thereby signing the birth certificate of *politics* and *civilisation*:

> This was (or at least might have been) the manner after which savage man was broke; from whence it is evident, that the first rudiments of morality, broach'd by skilful politicians, to render men useful to each other as well as tractable, were chiefly contrived that the ambitious might reap the more benefit from, and govern vast numbers of them with the greater ease and security. *This foundation of politicks being once laid, it is impossible that Man should long remain uncivilized* (FB I: "An enquiry into the origin of moral virtue", 46-47. Emphasis added).

[14] In "Remark C", Mandeville states that "it is incredible how necessary an ingredient shame is to make us sociable" (FB I, "Remark C", 68).

It is evident that although Mandeville does not embrace a rationalist approach, society is the result of art and requires human wisdom to exist (also see FB II, "The fourth dialogue", 186). Although the process of entering into society happens gradually, the very formation of the body politic can only thrive on a seedbed originally nurtured by artifice. In other words, the realm of morality can only fully realize its effects based on an original process, civilising as it were, whose roots trace back to a political foundation.

Thus, society can only be established as a political body in which individuals are convinced or subjugated to behave according to the norms of sociability, acting, even if unintentionally, for the public:

> I hope the reader knows that by society I understand a body politick, in which man either subdued by superior force, or by persuasion drawn from his savage state, is become a disciplin'd creature, that can find his own ends in labouring for others, and where under one head or other form of government each member is render'd subservient to the whole, and all of them by cunning management are made to act as one (FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 347. Emphasis added).

III. Private vices, public benefits: a question of method

If self-denial is essential for controlling groups of individuals and for establishing a certain degree of sociability, the exercise of private vices is crucial for optimal economic dynamics. In fact, in the concluding paragraphs (FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 369.) of *A search into the nature of society*, Mandeville claims to have proved that the basis of social and economic life is to be found in passions regarded as evil or negative, and that what is called "evil" is, in fact, the foundation of life, of trade and commodities, of sciences and employment.

The apparent paradox between Mandeville's moral philosophy and economic thought cannot be properly solved if we do not take into account the method employed by

the author: he proceeds as an anatomist[15], who, in observing and describing how a body is structured, aims to connect and render visible causes that were previously unknown. The anatomist does not make moral judgments against some malfunction he might find, he only reports it and seeks to understand what its function is or how it adjusts for the advantage of the whole. Understanding this method allows us to grasp how execrable or reprehensible conducts can result in advantages to society, according to the author of the *Fable*.

In a similar sense, throughout his work Mandeville methodically seeks to lead his readers to perceive a broad *chain of causes*, making them able to see beyond appearances or immediate effects. This implies acknowledging that a given moral conduct that is initially seen as execrable or harmful for the public, may be useful, beneficial, or even necessary for society:

> The short-sighted vulgar in the chain of causes seldom can see further than one link; but those who can enlarge their view, and will give themselves the leisure of gazing on the prospect of concatenated events, may, in a hundred places, see *good* spring up and pullulate from *evil*, as naturally as chickens do from eggs (FB I, "Remark G", 91).

This same approach guides the willingness to understand the flourishing and development of a prosperous and rich nation. As we have mentioned at the end of the first part of this paper, the assertion that happiness "would flow spontaneously from the nature of every large society, if none were to divert or interrupt the stream" opens the possibility to consider that certain social interactions follow a spontaneous order of interests. This idea leads to issues that are at the same time economic and moral: while people generally esteem virtuous actions, vicious passions are the most effective in producing good economic results.

Based on this reasoning, Mandeville will draw an extremely favorable portrait of the economic, material and technical benefits produced by negative passions, especially concerning the productivity and effectiveness of work that they motivate and create. After all, humans do not possess a natural disposition to work and, without these vices and the obstacles imposed by the natural environment, Mandeville claims not to be able to see

[15] For an analysis of this issue in Hume's work, see Salles (2020). On the relationship between anatomy, philosophy and method in Modernity, see Pimenta (2018).

"what could have put us upon the invention of clothes and houses (FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 347).

Mandeville further adds that the division and specialisation of labour is both the consequence and the achievement of a society in which vices multiply and operate towards the public good. In this sense, private interest is presented as an important factor when it comes to understanding the flourishing of a nation, especially of its wealth (FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 367).

IV. Conclusion

Mandeville's moral system gave at least two philosophical arguments that were essential to the emergence of modern political economy: first, that commerce may very well prosper without relying on virtuous conduct; second, that trade, although carried out in a social organisation created by human art, may follow the *flow of nature* and be done without much government interference.

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that government plays an important role, whether by monitoring the balance of trade, guaranteeing the enforcement of the laws, imposing certain taxes, securing property, or by ensuring the application of punishments and watching over public safety. Moreover, society functions as a political body originally formed by persuasion and political art. Having said that, and despite this political foundation, there are some economic activities where private interests are capable of ceaselessly reorganising themselves without the need for regulation. When dealing with social forms of labour organisation[16], for example, Mandeville set limits to government interventions, an idea that would most definitely interest a certain trend of economic liberalism. Paulette Carrive analyses these ambiguities present in Mandevillian thought, considering that "Mandeville hesitates between the theory of the 'natural harmony of interests' and that of 'artificial harmony'" (Carrive, 1995: II, 606). According to Carrive, for the author of the *Fable* "each one must be left to pursue their own interest, and the public interest will be better served; Mandeville anticipates here classical liberal economics (...).

[16] See, for example, FB I, "A search into the nature of society", 358 et seq.

The public interest is an unconscious result of this selfish search" (Carrive, 1980: 125-126), which would point to the birth of the spontaneous harmony of interests.

Naturally, these issues have not gone unnoticed[17]. Élie Halévy classifies the system of the *Fable* under the rubric of the natural identity of interests or spontaneous harmony of egoisms, adding, in a bit of an overstatement, that "Adam Smith's doctrine is the doctrine of Mandeville, expounded no longer in a paradoxical and literary form, but rational and scientific" (Halévy, 1995: I, 113).

It is worth mentioning that Friedrich Hayek borrows some of Halévy's terms, but without emphasizing Mandeville's economics (according to the Austrian economist, "what Mandeville has to say on technical economics seems to me to be rather mediocre, or at least unoriginal" [Hayek, 1991: III, 74-75]). Hayek chooses to highlight the psychological and moral insights that the *Fable's* philosophy provided for the constitution of liberalism; his interests lie above all in the explanations offered by the authors of commercial societies, based on principles of moral philosophy, about the forms of social organisation. In that sense, the Austrian economist claims that Mandeville's doctrine is the source of the idea of a spontaneous order of society. According to Hayek, Mandeville marked "the definite breakthrough in modern thought of the twin ideas of evolution and of the spontaneous formation of an order", and, as he continues, "perhaps in no case did he precisely show *how* an order formed itself without design, but he made it abundantly clear that it *did*" (Hayek, 1991: III, 76).

This interpretation, which considers later notions from the social sciences and biology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has not been free of criticism, as many critics point to the juxtaposition of different elements of liberalism and mercantilism that are present in the *Fable*. Besides Jacob Viner's interpretation, Thomas Horne also argues that Mandeville adopts a stance typical of the last stage of mercantilism, emphasizing the role of government in maintaining a favorable balance of trade. In his words, Mandeville's thought "while (…) consistent with the liberal elements in later mercantilism, remained fundamentally mercantilist" (Horne, 1978: 106, note 56).

[17] This question was intensely debated. As we cannot go into details here, cf. the debates between Viner (1958), Rosenberg (1963) and Hayek (1991). For a nuanced reading that affirms the spontaneous harmony of interests in Mandeville, see Carrive (1980); for Hayek's reading, see Petsoulas (2001).

In fact, arguments supporting *laissez-faire* economics would be found even in authors who lean more towards a mercantilist approach. Thus, discourses advocating greater freedom for the exercise of private interests could coexist, without seeming paradoxical, with the idea of the need for governmental intervention in some spheres of private life. This hesitation, which reveals itself as a hinge between the traditional doctrines of seventeenth-century moral philosophy and the novelty presented, in the eighteenth century, by a social thought founded on economic exchanges, is perhaps one of the traits that makes Mandeville's philosophy so disputed both among liberals and critics of political economy.

Finally, let us briefly highlight three points that we consider noteworthy. First, the term *harmony* should not be understood as a complete absence of conflict, but rather as a competition between different particular interests that nevertheless find a way to coexist in a political body. Second, there seems to be little doubt that for Mandeville the emergence and development of societies are grounded in politics and morality: with the refusal of natural sociability, government is placed as a necessary device for organising social life. This is one of the most reaffirmed assumptions of Mandeville's work, which is mainly dedicated to refuting Shaftesbury's moral philosophy, but also to critising some aspects of Hobbes' political philosophy. Third, concerning the term *natural* (or, in another particular sense, *spontaneous*), interests are organised within a regular order of things, a framework whose cornerstone is set by politics and morals; however, because of the peculiarities of large commercial societies, they end up gaining relative autonomy and begin to flow naturally.

In other words, if the foundation of the body politic stems from the art of skilled politicians, political art establishes a framework in which the social dynamic itself can subsequently become capable of self-organisation. In addition, as both Smith and Marx have noted, Mandeville finds that every economic activity can be described as productive, regardless of the negative moral judgment one might make about it. This transition is central to the idea that selfish passions and private interests can contribute, albeit unintentionally, to the public good.

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