

Bentley's Monthly Review, or Literary Argus

**(Anonymous author)
Mandeville's "FABLE OF THE BEES"**

**Followed by
Charles Caleb Colton (1780-1832).**

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1. Some passages rendering the anonymous author's opinion on Mandeville.

(...)

"In the last century, Bernard de Mandeville scandalized the British public by apologizing for the vices of man in his famous, or - as it was then called - infamous "Fable of the Bees". It is of this latter work that we purpose now to speak: a book which created a great sensation in its day, but which very few people, we suspect, in our times, are in the habit of reading."

(...)

"The scandal to which it gave rise was - to say the least of it - fully commensurate with its celebrity."

(...)

"For many years, hardly any book upon ethics or metaphysics, and not many on religion, made their appearance from the presses of England or the Continent, which did not contain some indignant allusion to the "Fable of the Bees". Machiavelli, we really believe, is the only author who has ever come in for an equal amount of reprobation; and Machiavelli himself has had the good fortune to meet latterly with a very brilliant, if not a very conclusive, apologist. His notions, we are told, of morality were the notions of all his countrymen of the epoch in which he flourished; and he was only an abler and more candid man - not a greater scoundrel than the rest of them. A modern Italian cannot, we should imagine, feel very much obliged to Mr. Macaulay for his defence of the famous Florentine.

Even in our day, a considerable writer has attempted to revive the forgotten clamour against Mandeville. "Man-devil", says Mr Colton [Charles Caleb Colton, author of *Lacon, or Many things in few words*; see below], "he deserves to be called, for his philosophy would make a devil of man".* The other of the "Fable of the Bees" was possibly not a very good man; but neither his life nor his death would suffer much by a comparison with those of the author of *Lacon*. If he had no worse sins to answer for than he charged upon him in the passage we allude to - the inculcating a feeling of pity or contempt for those who love glory more than they love life - he would not, in our times, want a good many defenders. The Manchester school would be with him to a man.

But Mr. Colton is an exception. With the world at large, neither Mandeville's reputation nor his obloquy any longer stand in the way of a just estimation of his book."

(...)

"We shall lay before our readers some of the peculiar opinions contained in these various pieces [of *The Fable of the Bees*, I and II]. But we think it right to premise, very candidly, that we are by no means disposed to join in the general and indiscriminating outcry which has been raised against Mandeville. Some of his positions, unquestionably, are as absurd as they ever well can be, and a good many others exceedingly sophistical; and he has a knack of keeping entirely out of sight anything that might militate against his argument: but the general tenour of his book certainly strikes us as being much less mischievous than it has commonly been presented. Indeed, we are of the opinion that it may sometimes be read to the advantage in an age that is very much disposed to exaggerate both our virtues and faculties. It is a salutary antidote, if not a very agreeable one, against the squeamishness of an excessive civilization, and the superciliousness of mere science. We remember to have once seen a book on one page of which was a picture of Louis the Fourteenth in his majestic wig and high-heeled shoes, such as he appeared to his courtiers - the terror and the glory of Versailles; while, on the other side, was a picture of the man such as Nature made him - a fork'd, shivering, pot-bellied little fellow, of less than the ordinary stature. What the artist did by the great king, Mandeville, we think, has done by mankind. He brings forcibly to our thoughts, what we are always very willing to forget, that we are as much a compound of vice and virtue as of mind and matter; and that if one half of us is deity, the other half is dust. He wheels round the statue from the wall, and points to the rough, unshaped stone at the back. He shews us the theatre by day-time as well as by night."

(...)

Such, taken almost at random rather than selected, are some of the opinions of Mandeville, which, repulsive as they are, would seem to have been, at least for a time, very zealously and conscientiously entertained. The singularity and boldness of most of them arrest attention; but it is impossible, without reading his book, to form a just notion of the strength of many of his arguments and the ingenuity of many of his illustrations. To compare him as an author to Swift would be ridiculous, for he has comparatively but little of the power and none whatever of the condensed bitterness of that great writer. But his views of the ingredients of our nature, and of the secret springs of many of our actions, flow from the same stern and humiliating philosophy. And this philosophy, we firmly hold, unpopular as it may be, is not, for our occasional study, either wholly noxious or without its use. The Egyptians dined in the sight of a skeleton; and we, when we feel disposed to think too highly of our species or ourselves, unduly to depreciate past ages, or extravagantly to extol our own, and to fancy that we are particularly wise and philanthropical when we are only particularly conceited, may turn for a salutary lesson to the images of the Yahoos and the logic of the "Fable of the Bees". (...)

[Bentley's note.]

*Lacon, part 2, sect. 199 [full quotation, see below]; but he gives his intellect great - indeed, extravagant - praise; for he ranks him with Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Hobbes. He seems, in truth, to think of him as Strada thought of the Calvinist Marnix that he was "*Vir ingeniosissimè nequam.*"

[Famiano Strada (1572-1649), *De Bello Belgico decades duae, 1555-1590*. Probable source: Michaud, *Biographie universelle, ancienne et moderne* (1820), article Philippe de Marnix, baron de Sainte Aldegonde (1538-1598), p. 232. "Tout en lui accordant beaucoup d'esprit, Strada l'appelle *vir ingeniosissimè nequam.*" But Strada wrote *hominis ignominiosissimè nequam*; as rightly quoted by Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, article 'Sainte Aldegonde'.]

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2. Reverend Charles Caleb Colton (1780-1832), *Lacon, or many things in few words, addressed to those who think (1820-1822)*

[Bentley's note. *Lacon, part 2, sect. 199]

"CXCIX.

HUMAN life, according to Mandeville* and others of his school, is a constant system of hypocrisy acting upon hypocrisy, a kind of double duping, where pretenders pursue virtue that they esteem not, for the sake of praises which those who proffer, value not. Thus, according to him, instead of feeling any gratitude for those who have lost their lives in the service of their country, our feelings ought rather to be those of pity, and contempt, for beings so weak as to permit the love of glory, to overcome the love of life. In conformity to this system, he asserts that all the virtues are nothing more than the political offspring that flattery begets upon pride. Were such a system to be general, with Machiavelli for our tutor, and Mandeville for our moralist, we might indeed deny a heaven, but if we denied a hell, it would not be for want of a *prototype* upon earth. Mr. Hume on the other hand seems inclined to make utility the test of virtue, and this doctrine he has urged so speciously as to draw after him "*a third part of the host of heaven.*" Paley has been in some degree seduced, but Paley's authority is on the decline. If one were disposed to banter such a doctrine, by pursuing up its conclusions to the absurdities to which they would lead us, one would say that if a building were on fire, a philosopher ought to be saved in preference to a fool, and a steam engine, or a loom, in preference to either; no parent ought to have any affection or tenderness for a child that was dying of a disorder pronounced to be incurable ; and no child ought to take any trouble for a parent that was in a state of dotage. If we met with a beggar with one leg, we ought to give him nothing, but reserve a double alms for a beggar who had two, as being the most useful animal. As to religion, all adoration would be transferred to the felt and visible source of all utility, the sun, and the religion of Persia, would be the universal faith. Another mode of accounting for human actions, is self-interest ; a

system that has more plausibility, and perhaps more proselytes than the two that precede it. It would indeed be very unfortunate for mankind if any virtuous action whatsoever could be proved to be detrimental to the self-interest of him who performed it, if the view taken of it be enlarged and comprehensive. And it is on this ground, that I have asserted elsewhere that it is much nearer the truth to say that all men have an interest in being good, than that all men are good from interest. Swift in his detached thoughts observes that there are some whose self-love inclines them to please others, and some whose self-love inclines them to please themselves ; the first he designates as the virtuous, and the second as the vicious. Rousseau** saw the difficulty of the egotistical creed, and to avoid it, divides self-love into two orders, a higher, and a lower, a sensual and a spiritual ; and labours to convince us that his higher order of self-interest is compatible with virtue, the lower not. He gives us as an '*instantia crucis*'*** the case of the juryman who was resolved rather to perish than permit the conviction of another man, for a murder which he himself had perpetrated. But that knowledge which is necessary, is seldom abstruse, and for all practical purposes, conscience is the best casuist, and to do as we would be done by, the safest rule. I believe the worst man that ever existed, never committed a bad action without some compunction, nor a good one without some delight, and he that would persuade us that both are indifferent, would approximate us nearer to the brute from our insensibility, than to the philosopher from our stoicism. Human nature may grovel, but it can also soar. We see a man deny himself to gratify others, forget himself to remember others, endanger himself to rescue others, and lastly die that others may live. Are we after this to subscribe to the moralist, and write this character down a selfish being, because he sought all his delights and gratifications in being the source and distributor, to others, of both.

[Colton's notes]

* If we were inclined to pun after the manner of Swift, on the name of Mandeville, we might lay that Mandeville was a devil of a man, who wrote a book to prove man a devil. I am rather surprised to see such men as Hobbes, Machiavelli, Mandeville, or Spinoza, receive any attention in that republic which alone is fixed and free — the Republic of Letters. They carry, it is true, their own antidote; for the absurdity of their doctrines is usually in proportion to their atrocity. I would hate them read, notwithstanding, and promulgated and examined and would give them all possible fair play. I am certain this is the most efficacious mode of satisfying ourselves how much more powerful their names are, than their pens. I shall be told that there are moments when these men evince great strength of mind, as there are times when madmen evince great strength of body ; but one is the strength of error, and the other of disease. Now we shut up the one, and clap a strait-waistcoat upon him ; but I would give the other all possible liberty, for the more they are seen and known, the fewer converts they will have, and the less mischief they will do."

** Rousseau was more fond of a paradox than Shakespeare of a pun, and it is seldom that any reliance can be placed upon his opinion, even if he possessed one; thus, at the very time he was ranting about liberty, he suffered this sentiment to escape him, in a confidential letter to a friend '*à mon avis le sang d'un seul homme est d'un plus grand prix que la liberté de tout le genre humain.*'

****The experiment of the cross* - Pub. [‘crucial instance’ ?]