

Quoting is not as easy as it may seem

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I. Ranking preachers

Quoting John Wesley (1703-1791) on Bernard Mandeville is not as easy as it may seem. Take for instance Tomas Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil, the quest for economic meaning from Gilgamesh to Wallstreet* (2011).

Sedlacek is quoting John Wesley's words "Till now I imagined there had never appeared in the world such a book as the works of Machiavel. But de Mandeville goes far beyond it". From these words Sedlacek wants his readers to believe that "the English theologian John Wesley likened Mandeville to Machiavelli in his depravity" (p. 185).

However, Sedlacek did not read Wesley. He is not quoting from Wesley's original text, but, as he states in a footnote, p. 184, from Phillip Harth's 1970 edition of Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, p. 8.

Phillip Harth writes: "John Wesley, reading *The fable of the Bees* for the first time, wrote in his journal: 'Till now I imagined there had never appeared in the world such a book as the works of Machiavel. But de Mandeville goes far beyond it.'" Harth indicates, p. 45, that he is quoting from Wesley's original. Now he may have looked into it, but considering the agreement with F.B. Kaye's quotation in Kaye's 1924 edition of *The Fable of the Bees*, ii, p. 433, Harth's quotation is essentially Kaye's. Apart from that, Harth's view that Wesley would have read Mandeville's *Fable* for the first time in 1756, when Wesley was 53 years of age, is not based on any fact, and seems to be unlikely, as will be argued below.

Now Kaye did quote from Wesley's 14 April 1756 entry in *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley...* Edited by Nehemiah Curnock, vol. iv. 157., but not fully, leaving out two sentences. He quotes Wesley as follows: "I looked over a celebrated book, *The Fable of the Bees*. Till now I imagined there had never appeared in the world such a book as the works of Machiavel. But de Mandeville goes far beyond it. ... Surely Voltaire would hardly have said so much; and even Mr. Sandeman could not have said more." (*Fable* ii, p. 433).

John Wesley's full entry for 14 April 1756 was: "I looked over a celebrated book, *The Fable of the Bees*. Till now I imagined there had never appeared in the world such a book as the works of Machiavel. But de Mandeville goes far beyond it. The Italian only recommends a few vices, as useful to some particular men and on some particular occasions. But the Englishman loves and cordially recommends vice of every kind ; not only as useful now and then, but as absolutely necessary at all times for all communities! Surely Voltaire would hardly have said so much; and even Mr. Sandeman could not have said more."

According to Kaye, his (somewhat reduced) quotation from Wesley's entry showed "the horrified amazement of John Wesley, who protested that not even Voltaire could have said so much for wickedness" (*Fable* i, Introduction, cxvi). Kaye's interpretation differs from Sedlacek's, but was Kaye right? There are serious reasons for doubt.

Wesley's entry of 14 April 1756 is standing alone, having nothing to do with immediately preceding and following entries in his *Journal*. Wesley says that he looked over *The Fable of The Bees*. But another reference to Mandeville in his *Journal* is dating from 1750. (See III below) So Wesley is more or less pretending that Mandeville's *Fable* would be new to him in 1756. No doubt it is a book he must have been acquainted with for many years, at least since his study at Oxford in the 1720's.

The subject of Wesley's 1756 entry is not Mandeville. His looking over *The Fable of the Bees* is hardly more than a literary play introducing a serious attack on the person that was overlooked by Kaye: Mr. Sandeman. Wesley is not comparing Mandeville to Machiavelli and he is not comparing Mandeville to Voltaire either. Wesley is just ranking Sandeman among the worst rogues he could imagine at the time: - Machiavelli, Mandeville and Voltaire.

Were Machiavelli, Mandeville and Voltaire virtual bogeymen to Wesley, Sandeman was the real one who bothered him: 'Even Mr. Sandeman could not have said more'. The Scot Robert Sandeman (1718-1771) was a cleric and leader of the Glasite (later called Sandemanian) sect, dissenters from the established Presbyterian Church. At the time, Wesley and Sandeman were seriously competing each other on the market of protestant preachers and followers. The battle between Wesley and his Methodists on the one hand and Sandeman and his father-in-law John Glas (1695-1773) as leaders of the so-called Glasites or Sandemanians on the other hand, was a hard one. Later Sandeman gained the following of two of Wesley's most gifted preachers, Thomas Maxfield and George Bell.

One of Wesley's companions was James Hervey (1714-1758). In 1755 Hervey published a book called *Theron and Aspasio, or a series of Letters upon the most important and interesting Subjects*. Sandeman reacted to Hervey, in his *Letters on Theron and Aspasio, addressed to the Author* (1757). Leaving aside all theological smoke-screens, the Sandeman-Hervey dispute was not really Wesley's main concern. Sandeman had attacked Wesley *ad hominem*, to the person. Wesley fought back, of course, by publishing *A sufficient Answer to Letters to the Author of Theron and Aspasio; in a Letter to the Author* (1757). Feigning that he was not sure about the last author's identity, he starts his *Answer* to Sandeman thus: "Sir, It is not very material, who you are. If Mr. Glass is alive, I suppose you are he. If not, you are at least one of his humble Admirers, and probably, not very old. So your Youth may in some Measure plead your Excuse, for such a peculiar Pertness, Insolence and Self-sufficiency, with such an utter Contempt of all Mankind, as no other Writer of the present Age has shewn." And Wesley concludes: "But I stop, God be merciful to thee a Sinner! And shew thee Compassion, though

thou hast none for thy Fellow-Servants. Otherwise, it will be more tolerable, I will not say for *Seneca* or *Epictetus*, but for *Nero* and *Domitian* in the Day of Judgment than for Thee!”

Upon Wesley’s *Answer*, Sandeman replied (in an appendix p. 440-1): “If any one would see *A Sufficient Answer to the Author of the Letters on Theron and Aspasio*, he may find a pamphlet so called, writ by no less a man than Mr. John Wesley, and to be purchased at no greater price than a penny. It appears from this pamphlet that the writer is very angry; and it must be owned, that in my letters I had said nothing to please him; for near the close of the last of them, I had, as I still think was but reasonable, apologized to the popular preachers for ranking him among them.”

How exactly did Sandeman rank Wesley among these preachers? Sandeman: “I have nowhere observed the Jewish disgust at the bare truth, or, which is the same thing, the bare work of Christ, more evident than among the admirers of the doctrine of Messrs. Marshall, Boston, Erskines, Whitefield, Wesley, and such like.” (p. 86)

And in a footnote, p. 410-1, Sandeman leaves no uncertainty as to his opinion of Wesley. He adds: “Perhaps it will be thought needful, that I should define, with greater precision than I have hitherto done, what I mean by the popular doctrine; especially as I have considered many as preachers thereof who differ remarkably from each other; and particularly as I have ranked amongst them Mr. Wesley, who may justly be reckoned one of the most virulent reproachers of that God, whose character is drawn by the apostles, that this island has produced.”

Hostile ranking as a part of the common and infinite warfare among divines, as described by Mandeville in his *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church and National Happiness*, that is what the Wesley-Sandeman battle is about. If this essence is being neglected, quoting Wesley’s reference to Mandeville is lacking sense.

II. Sandeman’s reference to Mandeville.

Looking upon Sandeman as the dog, Wesley could easily resort to the proverbially wicked Mandeville as the stick to beat him with, as he meant to in his 1756 entry. Yet it was not quite accidental that Wesley sorted out Mandeville in this case. For Wesley must anyhow have been aware of Sandeman’s opinion of Mandeville.

Sandeman had reviewed Mandeville as well in his *Letters on Theron and Aspasio*, in such a way that Kaye thought it to be an ‘intelligent criticism’, but without going into it (*Fable ii*, p. 433). Reason enough to reproduce Sandeman’s here.

Robert Sandeman, *Letters on Theron and Aspasio*, I, p. 271-3 (1757). ‘LETTER IV. Divides itself into three heads, containing Reflections on Mystery, on Reason, and on Spirit.’ Among the head Spirit we find: ‘The Spirit of the Religion of the present Age, more especially on the Point of Acceptance with

God, evinced, by producing a Specimen of the Doctrine patronized by the following names: Erasmus, Locke, Tillotson, Hutchinson, Watts, Doddridge, Guthrie, Boston, Erskines, Mandeville, &c.'

Dealing with Mandeville, Sandeman writes:

"To show the extensive influence of the popular doctrine about acceptance with God, even on the minds of those who have had abilities and courage to combat many popular opinions, I shall take notice of one remarkable instance, the author of the *Fable of the Bees*. This author's main doctrine,¹ about the corruption of human nature, being the same with that taught by the Scripture, has proved extremely provoking, both to fools and philosophers, making the latter lose all their boasted coolness of temper. The substance of all that has hitherto been advanced against it, amounts, I think, to this, that the author himself had certainly a very corrupt heart. And I reckon no friend of his will ever deny the truth of this charge: for as he intended to describe human nature in general, and not any one particular class of men, as distinguished from others, it does not appear that ever he denied himself to be a human creature. Though this author has clearly evinced the corruption of human nature, to the no small confusion of all the sons of pride, as appears from the weakness of their replies, joined with the violence of their reproaches; yet we cannot learn from him, what is that virtue or holiness of life which is well pleasing to God; because he appears to have been as ignorant of the true principle thereof, as the bulk of popular preachers. We must, then, say of this author, something like what has been already said of the learned prelate, who alarmed all England with his doctrine on the words of Jesus Christ, My kingdom is not of this world. As the learned prelate clearly demonstrates what Christ's kingdom is not; but could not show what it is, as being ignorant of the foundation on which it is erected; so this author clearly demonstrates what holiness is not; but could not show what it is, as being ignorant of the true principle or spring from whence it flows. Now let us hear him.

Free Thoughts on Religion, 2d edition, London, 1729, preface, p. 4, "I demonstrate, that what is commonly understood by faith and believing, is the easiest part of Christianity, in which very few are defective: but that the most difficult part of our religion consists in subduing our passions to the love of God, and in obedience to his commands. Page 20 of the book, Christians, then, are not bad for want of FAITH,² or of WISHING TO BE GOOD;² but because they are not able to overcome their appetites and curb their passions, or rather have not resolution enough to set about and persevere in the attempt of it, whilst they are' unassisted with the Divine grace."

Inquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn, London, 1725, chapter 5; of the regulations concerning felons in prison, and the good effects to be expected from them. After having proposed several regulations, the author proceeds thus, in p. 43, "When the condemned should, in every respect, receive the treatment I have required, and by this means, undisturbed by earthly cares, have leisure, in sober sadness, to review their

past life, and examine into the multitude, as well as enormity of their offences: then, after thorough contrition, and an open confession in behalf of justice, animated by faith, betake to constant prayer : we ought to believe, that thus exerting themselves in the work of salvation, by the good guidance of able divines, and their own unwearied endeavours, many of them would find favour in the sight of the Almighty; and that several, even as they went to death, would be regenerated and comforted from above, with a strong assurance of forgiveness."

This author does not indeed speak of the love of God and of obedience to his commands ; but as these expressions are as general, and of as undetermined meaning, as holiness or virtue, their import must always be measured by what a man holds about acceptance with God. And as to this point, it evidently appears, from the last quotation, that this author goes fully into the spirit of the popular doctrine. Part of his style about faith, indeed, differs from that of some popular preachers : yet, on the whole, it is plain, that the exercise of his penitent and theirs must be at bottom much the same. After all the noise that has been made about this author, his account of human nature, though writ in such a manner as to be read by many who have no taste for theological tracts, is really no other than what is to be found in a thousand sermons, of first repute for orthodoxy. The greatest fault I can find with him is, that on the point of acceptance with God, he turns out to be a votary of the popular doctrine, and would restore depraved human nature, by chiming in with the greatest corruption, both of it and of the gospel. From this instance we may see, that men may have very extensive views of the corruption of human nature, and of the necessity of power, more than human, for its recovery; and yet, in the matter of acceptance with God, be entirely conducted by the spirit of self-dependence."

Notes by Sandeman:

"1) I say his main doctrine. For it cannot be denied that he has strained some particular points, as in the case of luxury for instance, further than the Scripture warrants; and of this some enemies of his main doctrine, which needs no straining to support it, have not failed to take undue advantage. 2) I have taken the liberty to distinguish these words with small capitals, as they serve to show, how much even the most inquisitive men are conducted by tradition, or the religion of their country, as to any notions they have about acceptance with God."

III. *Wesley's two other references to Mandeville.*

Wesley's first reference to Mandeville, to be found in Kaye, comes from Wesley's *Letter to the Rev. Mr Baily of Cork*, 8 June, 1750 (see *The Works of Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. ix, 4th ed. 1841. Unfortunately Kaye does not tell what Wesley's real problem and context were.

Finding himself opposed to by the Mayor of Cork from "my preaching on Hammond's-marsh" and making clear that "greater men than he have endeavoured to hinder me from calling sinners to repentance in that open

and public manner”, Wesley continues, p. 82: “Some (I hope but few) do cordially believe, that ‘private vices are public benefits’. I myself heard this in Cork, when I was there last. These, consequently, think us the destroyers of their city, by so lessening the number of their public benefactors, the gluttons, the drunkards, de dram-drinkers, the Sabbath-breakers, the common swearers, the cheats of every kind, and the followers of that ancient and honourable trade, adultery and fornication. These are the undeniable motives to this opposition”.

Within the context of his long letter to Mr. Baily of Cork, Wesley’s use of Mandeville’s slogan ‘private vices, public benefits’ is no more than casual or symbolic. But taken out of this context and especially by reducing Wesley’s passage the way Kaye did, a reduction amounting to “some (I hope but few) do cordially believe, that ‘private vices are public benefits. I myself heard this in Cork, when I was there last” (*Fable* ii, p. 432), Wesley’s words may lead to a pronounced and different meaning, as we can see in Kaye. For from this shorter quotation Kaye seduced himself to infer: “A letter of Wesley’s, in 1750, indicates that the *Fable* was current in Ireland”. (*Fable* i, Introduction, cxvii).

There is another Wesley reference to Mandeville, not to be found in Kaye’s edition, dating from 1770. In *Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs, in a Letter to a Friend* (1770), p. 5 and 6, Wesley came back to his Machiavelli-Mandeville tandem. Giving herein “his *free Thoughts on the state of public affairs, the Causes and Consequences of the present commotions*”, he starts with a few questions. “What then do you think is the direct and principal *cause* of the present commotions, of the amazing ferment among the people, the general discontent of the nation? Which now rises to an higher degree, than it has done in the memory of man: insomuch that I have heard it affirmed with my own ears “King GEORGE ought to be treated as King CHARLES was.” Is it the extraordinary *bad Character* of the King? I do not apprehend it is. Certainly if he is not, as some think, the *best* Prince in Europe, he is far from being the *Worst*. One not greatly prejudiced in his favour, does not charge him with want of *Virtue*, (of this he judges him to have *more than enough*) but with wanting those *Royal Vices*, which (with MACHIAVEL and the ingenious Doctor MANDEVILLE) he supposes would be *public Benefits*. “But does he not likewise want Understanding?” So it has been affirmed. And it must be acknowledged this charge is supported by facts, which cannot be denied. ... But after all, there are some, who allowing the facts, deny the consequence...”

Here we see Wesley’s proverbial twins Machiavelli and Mandeville again. Speaking out somebody’s idea that some Royal Vices might be public Benefits and qualifying Mandeville as “the ingenious Doctor” might suggest that in his later years Wesley developed a touch of appreciation for Mandeville. For this royal occasion, Wesley might have looked over Mandeville’s *Grumbling Hive* once again, and especially re-appraised its line “*Vice is beneficial found, / When it’s by Justice lopt, and bound.*”

Anyway, who could be too old to learn to appreciate Mandeville?