

Mandeville's definition of virtue: derived from Montaigne

1. 'It has been easier to undervalue Bernard Mandeville than to understand him', according to Thomas R. Edwards Jr. (1928-2005), in *Mandeville's Moral Prose*, ELH, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Jun., 1964), pp. 195-212. And he seems to rank F.B. Kaye, who doubts Mandeville's sincerity, among those who undervalued Mandeville.

According to F.B. Kaye, Bernard Mandeville's definition of virtue is 'a definition on which Mandeville's whole speculation turns.' In order to make his point, Kaye fabricated a philosophical framework consisting of ascetism and rationalism, with rigorism on top of it. But Mandeville was not a philosopher in our contemporary sense of the word, but a trained and dedicated doctor, a G. P. Like anyone ignoring this basic fact of Mandeville's profession and professional attitude, Kaye failed to understand Mandeville.

Apart from this, it is remarkable that Kaye apparently accepted Mandeville's definition of virtue to be more or less original, in the sense that there is no indication that that Kaye seriously tried to look for Mandeville's source in this case.

2. Virtue is not easy. 'No virtue without self-denial', is the shorter version of Mandeville's definition of virtue. Mandeville's much longer definition of virtue is worthwhile recalling. He put it down in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* (ed. Kaye, I, p. 48-9). There we find also Kaye's comment.

In this extensive definition, vice and virtue are distinguished.

'It being the Interest then of the very worst of them, more than any, to preach up Publick-spiritedness, that they might reap the Fruits of the Labour and Self-denial of others, and at the same time indulge their own Appetites with less disturbance, they agreed with the rest,

to call every thing, which, without Regard to the Publick, Man should commit to gratify any of his Appetites, V I C E; if in that Action there cou'd be observed the least prospect, that it might either be injurious to any of the Society, or ever render himself less serviceable to others;

And

to give the Name of V I R T U E to every Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good.'

So virtue is a performance, strictly personal and topical, implying an inner battle, conscious and rational.

3. Mandeville repeatedly said, that in this *Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* he neither spoke of *Jews* nor *Christians*. This means that in defining virtue, Mandeville refrained from any religious connotation (ed. Kaye, ii, p. 108). It therefore seems remarkable that Kaye, dealing with Mandeville's definition, forgot to ask himself a most obvious question: what might have been Mandeville's source of his definition of virtue?

Questioning "There can be no Virtue without Self-denial", Kaye replies disputably: "This was the opinion of all the Ancients, Lord *Shaftesbury* was the first that maintain'd the contrary."

4. Mandeville's source seems to be Michel de Montaigne, *Essais / The Essays*, part II, 11, 'De la Cruauté'; 'Of Cruelty'. This essay starts like this:

"It seems to me that virtue is another and nobler thing than the disposition to good which is innate in us.

Well-regulated and well-born souls pursue, indeed, the same methods, and represent in their actions the same face that virtue itself does: but the word virtue imports, I know not what, more great and active than merely for a man to suffer himself, by a happy disposition, to be gently and quietly drawn to the rule of reason.

He who, by a natural sweetness and facility, should despise injuries received, would doubtless do a very fine and laudable thing;

But he who, provoked and nettled to the quick by an offence, should fortify himself with the arms of reason against the furious appetite of revenge, and after a great conflict, master his own passion, would certainly do a great deal more.

The first would do well; the latter virtuously: one action might be called goodness, and the other virtue; for methinks, the very name of virtue presupposes difficulty and contention, and cannot be exercised without an opponent.

'Tis for this reason, perhaps, that we call God good, mighty, liberal and just; but we do not call Him virtuous, being that all His operations are natural and without endeavor."

Then the essay continues:

"Metellus [Quintus Caecilius Metellus Numidicus (ca 160 BC – 91 BC), alone of all the Roman senators, undertook by the power of his virtue to withstand the violence of Saturninus, Tribune of the people at Rome, who was trying by main force to pass in unjust law in favor of the plebeians. Having thus incurred the dire penalties that Saturninus had provided for all dissentients, Metellus addressed those who, in this extremity, were leading him to execution, in words to this effect: that it was too easy and too base a thing to do a bad action, and that good actions involving no danger were quite common; but to act well when it was dangerous to do so was the proper duty of a virtuous man."

"These words of Metellus very clearly state the case that I was trying to prove:

that virtue refuses facility as a companion, and that the easy, smooth, and gentle slope down which we are guided by the even steps of a naturally good disposition is not the path of true virtue."

"Virtue demands a harsh and thorny road; it desires either external difficulties, like those of Metellus, to contend with, by means of which fortune is pleased to interrupt its headlong career, or internal difficulties, created by the disorderly appetites and the imperfections of our natural state."

The last two quotations rendered in the original language:

"Ces paroles de Metellus nous représentent bien clairement ce que je vouloy vérifier, que la vertu refuse la facilité pour compagne, et que cette aisée, douce, et panchante voie, par où se conduisent les pas reglez d'une bonne inclination de nature, n'est pas celle de la vraye vertu."

"Elle demande un chemin aspre et espineux, elle veut avoir ou des difficultez estrangeres à luicter (comme celle de Metellus) par le moyen desquelles fortune se plaist à luy rompre la roideur de sa course : ou des difficultez internes, que luy apportent les appetits desordonnez et imperfections de nostre condition."

5. Mandeville makes only use of the first part of the essay in which Montaigne deals with true or real virtue, by putting this in a different way. The agreement with respect to the meaning of virtue does not imply that Mandeville agreed with Montaigne in every respect connected.

In *The Fable of the Bees, Part II* (ed. Kaye, ii, p. 108-9), Mandeville expresses this notion of virtue in a different, still Montaigne-like way, when answering the question "But are there no Persons in the World that are good by Choice?"

There Mandeville (as Cleomenes) replies: "Yes, but then they are directed in that Choice by Reason and Experience, and not by Nature, I mean, not by untaught Nature. But there is an Ambiguity in the Word Good which I would avoid; let us stick to that of Virtuous, and then affirm, that no Action is such, which does not suppose and point at some Conquest or other, some Victory great or small over untaught Nature; otherwise the Epithet is improper".

ACJ