

Bernard Mandeville Biography

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Biography

The English satirist and moral philosopher Bernard Mandeville (ca. 1670-1733) is famous as the author of *The Fable of the Bees*.

Bernard Mandeville was probably born in Rotterdam, Holland, the son of a prominent doctor. In 1685 he entered the University of Rotterdam and in 1689 went on to study medicine at the University of Leiden, where he received his medical degree in 1691. Afterward he went to England to "learn the language" and set up practice as a physician. However, he had very few patients and after a short time virtually gave up medicine to devote himself exclusively to his writings.

Mandeville's best-known work is *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714), originally published as a poem, "The Grumbling Hive, or Knaves Turned Honest" (1705). This was intended at first to be a political satire on the state of England in 1705, when the Tories accused the ministry of favoring the French war for their own personal gains. In the later version, however, enlarged to two volumes, Mandeville, in agreement with T. Hobbes, declares that men act essentially in terms of egoistical interests, in contrast to the easy optimism and idealism of Shaftesbury. The material concerns of individuals are the basic force behind all social progress, while what rulers and clergymen call virtues are simply fictions that those in power employ to maintain their control. Francis Hutcheson and Bishop Berkeley wrote treatises opposing Mandeville's views. Others, including Adam Smith, as some interpreters claim, were affected in a more positive way by Mandeville's ideas.

In some of his other works Mandeville shows an intelligent and open interest in controversial and, for the time, scandalous subjects, such as whoring and the execution of criminals. On some issues, however, Mandeville seems strangely callous. In "An Essay on Charity and Charity Schools" he objects to educating the poor because the acquisition of knowledge has the effect of increasing desires and thereby making it more difficult to meet the needs of the poor. Moreover, he seems to regard even wars as valuable to the economic development of a nation since by destroying houses and property laborers are provided an opportunity to replace the destroyed goods.

On the basis of his views Mandeville is usually placed in the moral-sense school. Some interpreters insist that he is the forerunner of the doctrine of utilitarianism.