

Berkeley Contra Mandeville

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In 1705 Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) published his partially satirical and partially serious social and political poem entitled *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn'd Honest*. The poem was reprinted anonymously in 1714 with an accompanying essay entitled *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* to which were also appended remarks on the poem. The entire work was entitled *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits*. This work was expanded in 1723 with the addition of *An Essay on Charity and Charity Schools* and *A Search into the Nature of Society*. The remarks were also expanded. The work was expanded again in 1724 with an addition to the title, *A Vindication of the Book*.² It was the 1723 edition of his book that drew the greatest attention from the public. Subsequent editions of *The Fable of the Bees* were various attempts by Mandeville to defend his work. No fewer than ten books were published attacking *The Fable*. These books were written by such figures as William Law, John Dennis, Francis Hutcheson, Archibald Campbell, and Isaac Watts. Numerous shorter works were generated as well. His most formidable critic was George Berkeley in the second dialogue of his *Alciphron: or, The Minute Philosopher*. Apparently, Mandeville found Berkeley's attack most troublesome because he responded to Berkeley just a few months before his own death in his *Letter to Dion*. What I propose to do here is to examine Berkeley's arguments and assess whether they hit their mark. I shall argue that most do not.

Berkeley does not mention Mandeville by name in the *Alciphron*, however there is no doubt among students of these authors that Mandeville is Berkeley's target. For example, Phillip Harth identifies the second dialogue of the *Alciphron* as an attack on *The Fable*.³ So does David Berman in his edition of Berkeley's *Alciphron*.⁴ Thus, I will first provide some probable evidence that Mandeville's work was Berkeley's target. Mandeville gives a vivid description of the effect of gin on the poorer classes in London in the early Eighteenth Century. Nothing is more destructive, either in regard to the Health or the Vigilance and Industry of the Poor than the infamous liquor, the name of which deriv'd from Juniper in Dutch, is now, by frequent use and the Laconick Spirit of the Nation, from a word of middling length shrunk into a Monosyllable, Intoxicating Gin, that charms the Inactive, the desperate and crasy of either Sex, and makes the starving Sot behold his Rags and Nakedness with stupid Indolence, or banter both in Senseless Laughter and more insipid Jests; It is a Fiery Lake that sets the Brain in Flame, Burns up the Entrails, and scorches every part within; and at the same time a Lethe of Oblivion, in which the Wretch immers'd drowns his most pinching Cares, and with his Reason all anxious reflection on Brats that cry for Food, hard Winters Frosts, and horrid Empty House.⁵ Mandeville does not pull his punches in describing the private vices that accompany the addiction to gin. He then proceeds to describe the public benefits that result from this vice.

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² Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. Phillip Harth (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1970, Kindle edition), 1.

³ Harth, Introduction to *The Fable of the Bees*, 13.

⁴ George Berkeley, *Alciphron, or The Minute Philosopher in focus*, ed. David Berman, Routledge Philosophers in Focus Series (London: Routledge, 1993, Kindle edition), 10. Unfortunately, this edition does not contain the second, fifth, and sixth dialogues. I had to resort to using the second edition of 1732. The first and third editions were published that same year.

⁵Mandeville, 121.

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, pullulate from *Evil*, as naturally as Chickens do from Eggs. The Money that arises from the Duties upon Malt, is a considerable Part of the National Revenue, and should no Spirits be distill'd from it, the *Publick* Treasure would prodigiously suffer on that Head. But, if we would set in a true Light the many Advantages, and large Catalogue of solid Blessings that accrue from, and are owing to the Evil I treat of, we are to consider the Rents that are received, the Ground that is till'd, the Tools that are made, the Cattle that are employ'd, and above all, the Multitude of Poor that are maintain'd, by the Variety of Labour, required in Husbandry, in Malting, in Carriage and Distillation, before we can have that Product of Malt, which we call *Low Wines*, and is but the Beginning from which the various Spirits are afterwards to be made.⁶ Note that Mandeville claims that there is a causal chain that links the private vice of gin intoxication to the public benefits of jobs, the enrichment of the public treasury, and so on. The second dialogue in Berkeley's *Alciphron* involves four main interlocutors: Euphranor, Crito, Alciphron, and Lysicles. Euphranor and Crito represent the positions of Berkeley and of Christianity. Alciphron supports the positions of Lord Shaftesbury and Anthony Collins. Finally, Lysicles represents Mandeville.⁷ If Lysicles does represent the positions taken by Mandeville, then his portions of the second dialogue should reflect that. Very early in the second dialogue, Lysicles presents the following argument. Men of narrow Capacities and short Sight, being able to see no further than one Link in a Chain of Consequences, are shocked at small Evils which attend upon Vice. But those who can enlarge their View, and look thro' a long Series of Events, may behold Happiness resulting from Vice, and Good springing out of Evil, in a thousand Instances. To prove my Point, I shall not trouble you with Authorities, or far-fetch'd Arguments, but bring you to plain Matter of Fact. Do but take a view of each particular Vice, and trace it through its Effects and Consequences, and then you will clearly perceive the Advantage it brings to the Public.

Drunkness, for Instance, is by your sober Moralists thought a pernicious Vice; but it is for Want of considering the good Effects that flow from it. For, in the first place, it increases the Malt Tax, a principal Branch of his Majesty's Revenue, and thereby promotes the Safety, Strength, and Glory of the Nation. Secondly, it employs a great Number of Hands, the Brewer, the Malster, the Ploughman, the Dealer in Hops, the Smith, the Carpenter, the Brasier, the Joiner, with all other Artificers necessary to supply those enumerated, with their respective Instruments and Utensils. All which Advantages are procured from Drunkenness, in the vulgar Way, by strong Beer.⁸ In *Alciphron*, Berkeley goes on at some length to discuss not only the vice of drunkenness but other vices as well including gambling, prostitution, and so on just as Mandeville had covered them in *The Fable of the Bees*. Even these relatively short passages from both works should convince the reader that Mandeville was unquestionably Berkeley's target. The similarities in vocabulary, structure, and style are too close to be accidental. So, what are Berkeley's arguments against Mandeville's position? We shall see that he marshals a variety of arguments in response to Mandeville. The first objection to Lysicles position is placed by Berkeley in the mouth of Euphranor. Euphranor observes, "I shou'd wonder if Men were not shocked at Notions of such a surprising Nature, so contrary to all Laws, Education, and Religion."⁹ Thus, Euphranor appeals to the emotive response to Lysicles teaching. Lysicles responds that the shock is avoided by the use of euphemisms for the various vices. Lysicles explains,

Thus in our Dialect a vicious Man is a Man of Pleasure: A Sharper is one that plays the whole Game: A Lady is said to have an Affair: A Gentleman to be Gallant: A Rogue in Business to be one that knows the World. By this means we have no such things as Sots, Debauchees, Whores, Rogues, or the like in the *beau monde*, who may enjoy their Vices without incurring disagreeable Appellations.¹⁰ Euphranor responds a bit facetiously with, "Vice then is, it seems, a fine Thing with an ugly Name."¹¹

⁶ Mandeville, 123.

⁷ Berman, Introduction to *Alciphron*, 10.

⁸ George Berkeley, *Alciphron: Or, the Minute Philosopher. In Seven Dialogues. Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion, Against Those Who Are Called Free-Thinkers*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for J. Tonson in the Strand, 1732), 69-70.

⁹ Berkeley, 75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Lysicles disingenuously agrees. Before we examine some of Berkeley's more philosophical objections to Mandeville's thesis, we should look more closely at the manner in which he characterizes Lysicles, and thus Mandeville's, position.

Berkeley has Lysicles paint a picture of himself and his school of Minute Philosophers as thoroughgoing hedonists. Lysicles asserts, I love to speak frankly what I think. Know then, that Private Interest is the first and principal Consideration with Philosophers of our Sect. Now of all Interests, Pleasure is that which hath the strongest Charms, and no Pleasures like those which are heightened and enlivened by Licence. ...Happiness is the End to which created Beings naturally tend, but we find that all Animals, whether Men or Brutes, do naturally and principally pursue real Pleasure of Sense; which is therefore to be thought their supreme Good, their true End and Happiness.¹² Not only does Berkeley represent Lysicles as a hedonist, but also as person who advocates that other persons lead just such a life. For example, the Good Bishop has Lysicles continue, It is for this Men live; and whoever understands Life must allow that Man to enjoy the Top and Flower of it, who hath a quick Sense of Pleasure, and withal Spirit, Skill, and Fortune, sufficient to gratify every Appetite and every Taste. Niggards and Fools will envy or traduce such a one, because they cannot equal him. Hence, all that sober Trifling, in disparagement of what every one would be master of if he could, a full Freedom and unlimited Scope of Pleasure.¹³

Euphranor attempts to pin down Lysicles by asking, "Let me see whether I understand you. Pleasure of Sense, you say, is the chief Pleasure."¹⁴ Lysicles responds, "I do."¹⁵ Berkeley has Lysicles clearly set out his position in the following speech. A speech in which there is no mistake about what Lysicles advocates. We make Men relish the World, attentive to their Interests, lively and luxurious in their Pleasures, without Fear or Restraint either from God or Man. We despise those preaching Writers, who used to disturb or cramp the Pleasures and Amusements of Humane Life. We hold, that a wise Man who meddles with Business, doth it altogether for his Interest, and refers his Interest to his Pleasure. With us it is a Maxim, That a Man should seize the Moments as they fly. Without Love, and Wine, and Play, and Late Hours, we hold Life not to be worth living. I grant, indeed, that there is something gross and ill-bred in the Vices of mean Men, which the genteel Philosopher abhors.¹⁶ Crito responds to this nice speech with the following comment, "But to cheat, whore, betray, get drunk, and do all these things decently, this is true Wisdom and Elegance of Taste."¹⁷ Lysicles does not protest this characterization of his doctrine and does, by his silence, affirm this characterization of his teaching.

Berkeley has Crito sum up the alleged position of Lysicles and othe minute philosophers towards the end of the Second Dialogue. Lysicles' discourse runs as follows. The Point at present is the Usefulness of your principles: And to decide this Point we need only take a short View of them fairly proposed and laid together: That there is no God or Providence: That Man is as the Beasts that perish: That his Happiness as theirs consists in obeying Animal Instincts, Appetites, and Passions: That all Stings of Conscience and Sense of Guilt are Prejudices and Errors of Education: That Religion is a State Trick: That Vice is beneficial to the Public: That the Soul of Man is corporeal and dissolveth like a Flame or Vapour: That Man is a Machine actuated according to the Laws of Motion: That consequently he is no Agent or Subject of Guilt: That a wise Man will make his own particular individual Interest in this present Life, the Rule and Measure of all his Actions: These, and such Opinions, are, it seems, the Tenets of a Minute Philosopher, who is himself according to his own Principles an Organ play'd on by sensible Objects, a Ball bandied about by Appetites, and Passions: So futile is he as to be able to maintain all this by artful Reasonings: So sharp-sighted and penetrating to the very Bottom of Things as to find out, that the most interested occult Cunning is the only true Wisdom. To compleat his Character, this curious Piece of Clock-Work, having no Principle of Action within it self, and denying that it hath or can have any one free Thought or Motion, sets up for the Patron of Liberty, and earnestly contends for *Free-thinking*.¹⁸ Clearly, Berkeley thought that the position of free thinkers was self-contradictory and incoherent. The free thinker contends that man is both determined and yet champions freedom. Berkeley puts much weight in opposition to Mandeville on the supposed fact that humans are for higher things than sensuous pleasure. Much of how Berkeley argues is based on Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹² Ibid., 99-100.

¹³ Ibid., 100-101.

¹⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

¹⁷ Ibid., 102-103.

¹⁸ Ibid., 144-45.

Here Berkeley has Euphranor ask of Lysicles, "Are not Reason, Imagination, and Sense, Faculties higher one than another."¹⁹ Lysicles, of course, assents. Euphranor then presses his case "And, as it is reasonable to think, the Operation of the highest and noblest Faculty to be attended with the highest Pleasure, may we not suppose the two former to be as Gold or Silver, and the latter only as Copper? Whence it should seem to follow, that Man need not envy or imitate a Brute."²⁰ Berkeley has Euphranor continue his version of the Aristotelian function argument, "The Nature of any Thing is peculiarly that which distinguish it from other Things, not what it hath in common with them."²¹ Lysicles again agrees. Euphranor then asks, "And is not Reason that which makes the principal Difference between Man and other Animals?"²² Unsurprisingly, Lysicles once again assents. Euphranor continues his questioning along the expected line, "Reason there fore being the principal part of our Nature, whatever is most reasonable should seem most natural to Man. Must we not therefore think rational Pleasures more agreeable to Humane Kind, than those of Sense?"²³ Euphranor then turns to an argument that prefigures one in John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*. Euphranor asks, And may you not as well conceive that the Happiness of a Brute can never constitute the true Happiness of a Man? A Beast, without Reflexion or Remorse, without Foresight or Appetite of Immortality, without Notion of Vice or Virtue, or Order, or Reason, or Knowledge! What Motives, what Grounds can there be for bringing down Man, in whom there are all these things, to a Level with such a Creature? What Merit, what Ambition in the Minute Philosopher to make such an Animal a Guide or Rule for Humane Life?²⁴

Lysicles response commits the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*. Lysicles says, It is strange, *Euphranor*, that one who admits Freedom of Thought as you do, should yet be such a Slave to Prejudice. You still talk of Order and Virtue, as of real things, as if our Philosophers had never demonstrated, that they have no Foundation in Nature, and are only the Effects of Education.²⁵ In light of Lysicles' response, it appears that Crito's and Euphranor's arguments are devastating. However, has Berkeley used Lysicles as a genuine representative of Mandeville's position? Clearly, Berkeley portrays Lysicles as making normative claims, e.g., Berkeley has Lysicles urging individuals to be hedonists. We find a different approach when we turn to Mandeville himself. In the introduction to *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville explicitly states, "One of the greatest Reasons why so few People understand themselves, is, that most Writers are always teaching Men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their heads with telling them what they really are."²⁶ This should make it clear that Mandeville's intent is to be descriptive and not prescriptive. Mandeville states that his purpose is "to show, that these Qualifications [by this term Mandeville means "vices"], which we all pretend to be ashamed of, are the great support of a flourishing Society, has been the subject of the foregoing Poem."²⁷ So, in effect, he is highlighting the hypocrisy which he sees within his society. Mandeville unequivocally states, "I am far from encouraging Vice, and think it would be an unspeakable Felicity to a State, if the Sin of Uncleaness could be utterly banish'd from it; but I am afraid it is impossible. The Passions of some People are too violent to be curb'd by any Law or Precept; and it is Wisdom in all Governments to bear with lesser Inconveniencies to prevent greater."²⁸ Thus, Mandeville appears to be justified in claiming "...that Berkeley was attacking a straw man."²⁹ Berkeley, on his part, appears to have used the occasion of the publication of *The Fable of the Bees* as an opportunity to oppose a number of Enlightenment ideas that he found distasteful and incompatible with his own position. Accordingly, for Berkeley, the character of Lysicles stands as a representative not only of Bernard Mandeville but of many others as well. Berkeley is neither the first nor the last to do so.

¹⁹ Ibid., 104.

²⁰ Ibid., 104.

²¹ Ibid., 105.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 105-106.

²⁴ Ibid., 106.

²⁵ Ibid., 106-107.

²⁶ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 77. The italics are in the original.

²⁷ Ibid. Again, the italics are in the original.

²⁸ Ibid., 127.

²⁹ Berman, Introduction to *Alciphron*, 3