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# DOES MANDEVILLE MATTER TODAY?

## INTRODUCTION

Time is scarce. The time spent reading Mandeville cannot be spent reading Smith or Voltaire or Friedman. So when Irwin Primer suggests that Mandeville is "too little known and insufficiently studied,"[1] the skeptic is justified in asking: too little known compared to whom? Since contempt for intellectual complacency is the most appealing aspect of Mandeville's character, those who seek to emulate him must broach this important question, even if doing so leads to the conclusion that Mandeville today is rightly ignored.

Bernard Mandeville is know to some economists as the author of *The Fable of the Bees*, a poem that some claim to be an inspiration for Adam Smith's invisible hand.

Those who claim that Mandeville is too little read today probably never mean that everyone should read him. Rather, they must mean that some people for some purposes could better achieve those purposes by reading Mandeville. Unfortunately, the Mandeville advocate too seldom elaborates who should read Mandeville and for what purposes. As a result, some assumptions have to be made about what the advocate intends. Presumably, for instance, those thought to be making a mistake in not reading Mandeville are the intellectuals and not the general public. For it is the intellectuals who have the proximate ends (pursuit of truth, appreciation for the well-turned phrase) for which Mandeville may be the means, and it is they who have the skills (vocabulary, knowledge of history) and environment (quiet for reading) that reduce the costs of using that means.

For what purposes, then, should intellectuals read Mandeville? I will examine several, though only the first at much length:

1) to extract as yet undiscovered truth;
2) to enjoy the cleverness of his satire;
3) to understand how ideas develop and to trace the course of intellectual influence;
4) to understand the historical course of events.

The acquisition of knowledge has often been thought of as analagous to the mining of precious metal. A relevant example is Bentham's observation on the history of ideas: "The paradoxes of Hobbes and Mandeville . . . . contained many original and bold truths, mixed with an alloy of falsehood, which succeeding writers, profiting by that share of light which these had cast upon the subject, have been enabled to separate."[2] As a mine is worked, the richness of the ore generally declines and the costs of extrtaction rise. When the value of the remaining ore becomes less than the cost of extraction, the mine is closed. The question in regard to Mandeville is whether the value of the unextracted truth is worth the costs of extraction. In Mandeville, not only is the vein of unextracted truth poor, the costs of extraction, in the form of repetitive and unfocused arguments,[3] are high.

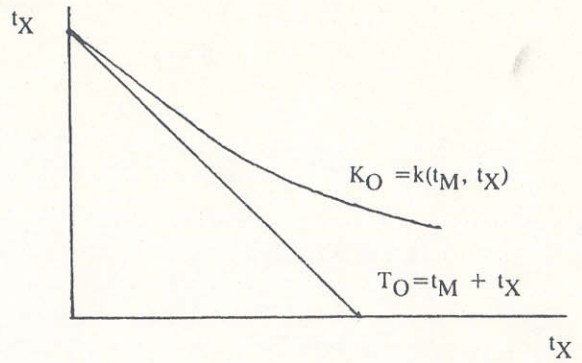
A simple formulation of the basic argument follows. Assume that Mandeville is read only for one objective, the acquisition of knowledge about society. Then every individuals has a production function of the form

(1) $K=k(t_M,t_X)$

where K is knowledge about society, $t_M$ is time spent reading Mandeville and $t_X$ is time spent in all other ways that result in knowledge about society. Assume further that for every individual the total amount in time spent gaining knowledge about society, T, is exogenously given. Then the time constraint is:

(2) $T=t_M+t_X$.

My claim is that for most intellectuals (and a fortiori for all non-intellectuals) equations (1) and (2) can be represented as in the following graph:




where the curve is one of a family of isoquants representing the combinations of $t_M$ and $t_X$ that produce equal quantities (in this case $K_O$) of knowledge about society and where the line (slope =-1) represents the combinations of $t_M$ and $t_X$ that produce equal quantities (in this case $K_O$) of knowledge about society and where the line (slope =-1) represents the combinations of $t_M$ and $t_X$ that satisfy the time constraint. An individual may choose any member of the family of isoquants that intersects his time constraint. Assume that he maximizes his knowledge about society subject to his time constraint. Then given his constraint, in this case $T_O$, he will select that member of the family of isoquants that represents the most knowledge about society, in this case $K_O$. As is clear from inspection of the graph, $K_O$ can only be achieved at a corner, i.e., where $t_X$ =T and $t_M$ = O. Thus no time would be spent reading Manderville.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In order to empirically test the argument we use current citations as a measure of the profits of mining what remains of the Mandeville load.

Silnce 1961 the *Science Citation Index* has provided a relatively easy means of determining how often any work is cited in the current literature. Considerable evidence has accumulated that frequency of citation is a good measure of the quality of a scientist's work. One example is the high correlation between receipt of the Nobel prize and having received many citations. With regard to Mandeville, my argument is as follows:

1) citations are a good measure of the importance of a work as a source of ideas at the frontier of knowledge;
2) Mandeville's few citations confirm that he is not an important source;
3) this conclusion is reinforced by the evidence that those who cite Mandeville cite more works than the average citor.

In order to measure Mandeville's contemporary importance, I did a computer search[2] of the over 700,000 publications listed in the *Social Science Citation Index* from 1972-1979 in order to find the 36 that cited Mandeville. As a standard of comparison I have in-

cluded in Table 1 the citation counts of other writers who might be considered alternate sources of the kinds of knowledge found in Mandeville. Both in regard to the enormity of the file and the record of his peers, Mandeville's performance is a sorry one. What is worse, those who cite Mandeville seemed to be more disposed to voluminous citation than the average citor. For the 36 articles, the mean number of works cited per article is 52 and the mode is 18. Compare these figures with a mean for the *Index* as a whole that ranges from 7 in 1972 to 12 in 1979. Clearly those who cite Mandeville like to cite,[7] so the value of their citations as an indication of quality is less than the value of a citation from less frequent citors.

My second argument for closing the Mandeville mine focuses on a particular vein that is claimed to be rich in Mandeville: the idea known, after Smith, as the invisible hand. Hayek, in particular, claims that the expression of this idea is what qualifies Mandeville as a mastermind.[8] Granting that Mandeville was the first to elaborate the invisible hand, it does not follow that his elaboration remains the best. Those who today would learn about the invisible hand should read, not Mandeville, but the later and better elaborations. Consider as likely candidates one or two of the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| Friedman, Milton | *Free to Choose*[9] and the earlier *Capitalism and Freedom*[10]), |
| Hayek, F.A. | "The Use of Knowledge in Society,"[11] |
| Nozick, Robert | *Anarchy, State and Utopia,* [12] |
| Rand, Ayn | *Atlas Shrugged,*[13] |
| Smith, Adam | *The Wealth of Nations*[14] (and parts of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.*[15]) |

The most common (and important) purpose for which it is alleged that Mandeville should be read is that of extracting undiscovered truth from his writings. The burden of the preceding arguments has been to show that reading the works of others is a more efficient means of extracting truth than reading Mandeville. In concluding this section, it would finally be noted that reading itself is not always the best way of achieving new truths. Often the more efficent way is through independent thought and research.[16]

A second purpose for which Mandeville is sometimes recommended is the enjoyment of his clever satire. Here my claim is that the quality of satire demanded by intellectuals can easily be supplied by wittier, more apt writings than Mandeville's. For satirical wit, consider:

George Bernard Shaw
Johathan Swift
Voltaire
Oscar Wilde
Tom Wolfe

In order to compare the number of articles on Mandeville with the number of all the others on my list (except for the too-recent Tom Wolfe) I looked at the 1970-78 *MLA Indices*[17]. The results are reported in Table 2.

The skeptical reader may by now wonder whether I have proven too much. If intellectuals are rational maximizers and if reading Mandeville is not the efficient means either for learning the truth or for being amused, then why does anyone *even read* Mandeville? Some of the observed behavior can be written off as mistakes -- the readers



had bad information about what they would find in Mandeville. But beyond the mistaken, a small residue of readers find in Mandeville what they seek. These are the tracers of intellectual influence. The extent to which reading Mandeville is efficient for them depends in part on what they trace. Some enjoy solving puzzles and because of some quirk in their human capital acquisition (perhaps they were never taught chess in childhood) find solving puzzles in the history of thought enjoyable. But even for those tracers Mandeville may not be a particularly rich source of puzzles since many Mandeville puzzles either have been settled or can never be settled because of lack of evidence.

In addition to those who trace influence as a direct consumption activity, there are those who trace for the purpose of understanding the historical course of events. Many would argue to the contrary that much of history can be explained without referring to ideas as any more than irrelevant epiphenomena.[18] A good method for testing whether ideas in general matter has yet to be found, but anyone who argues that Mandeville's ideas, in particular, matter will have to find such a method before he can make his case. The first step towrad making such tests is not further study of the lives and works of particular individuals,[19] but rather the formulation of a general theory of how ideas matter in human life and how they change.[20]

Even with a theory in hand, the importance of Mandeville's influence on policy would be difficult to prove because he made so few direct policy recommendations. Richard Cook claims[21] that the only writing devoted primarily to that purpose was the essay advocating the government operation of brothels. This clearest case of advocacy had no known effect. A more plausible case for a Mandevillian influence would be that his early idea of the invisible hand, as refined by later minds, moved Britain towards its period of relative laissez-faire.

Undoubtedly for some purposes some intellecturals are well-advised to spend some time reading Mandeville. But from this it does not follow that the entrepreneurs in the intellectual marketplace have been making systematic large-scale mistakes in the allocation of their time. To the contrary, the preceding pages have argued that there are few ends for which reading Mandeville is the most efficient means.

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## FOOTNOTES

* The paper was first presented at the October, 1980 Huntington Library Symposium on Mandeville and Liberty. I am grateful to Liberty Fund for support and to David Levy and other symposium participants for comments.

[1] Irwin Primer, ed., *Mandeville Studies* (The Hauge: Martinus Nyhoff, 1975), p. XIII.

[2] John Bowring, ed., *The Works of Jeremy Bentham,* Vol. X (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843), p. 43.

[3] A minor cost is Mandeville's occasional carlessness with quotes and facts, although I am not prepared to claim that he is worse in this regard than most of his contemporaries. For examples, see Kayes's footnotes in *The Fable* (pp. 127, 154-55, 165, 175, 186, 195, and 301.) Note in particular, Mandeville's false charge that some English colleges provided students with a monthly allowance for prostitutes (p. 99).

[4] For this and other related evidence see Jonathan S. Cole and Stephen Cole, *Social Stratification in Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 21-23.

[5] Such a search can be performed (at cost) by any research library that subscribes to the Dialog service of the Lockheed Company.

[6] Eugene Garfield, Chairman, *Social Science Citation Index* (Philadelphia: Institute for Scientific Information).

[7] Perhaps some of the frequent citors are victims of what Robert Merton calls "adum brationism" (the fanatical search for obscure forbears). See Robert K. Merton, "Singletons and Multiples in Science," in *The Sociology of Science,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 343-70. For a wonderful satire of adumbrationism see: Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

[8] F. A. Hayek, "Dr. Bernard Mandeville," in *The Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 249-66.

[9] Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

[10] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: The Univrsity of Chicago Press, 1962).

[11] Friedrich A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1972), pp. 77-91.

[12] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1974).

[13] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957).

[14] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[15] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976).

[16] If I read him right David Levy claims that in Mandeville he found a justification for the view that ethical beliefs do not influence behavior. When I read Mandeville, however, I find no such justification. Mandeville does persuasively argue that people often do not practice what they preach. But everyone grants that. To make the case that ethical beliefs do not influence behavior, a stronger argument is needed, perhaps along the Stigler-Becker line that all human values are universal and stable. Whether that line, or some other, proves fruitful, progress will probably require independent thought and research rather than reading Mandeville. See: David Levy, "Rational Choice and Morality: Economics and Classical Philosophy," *History of Political Economy* 14 (Spring 1982): 1-36; George J. Stigler and Gary S. Becker, "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum," *The American Economic Review* 67 (March 1977): 76-90; and Arthur M. Diamond, Jr., "Stable Values and Variable Constraints: the Sources of Behavioral and Cultural Differences," *Journal of Business Ethics* 1 (1982): 49-58. Incidentlly, the Editor tells me that David will write a "Reply" to my remarks in the Summer issue of the *Bulletin.*



[17] The reference for the 1978 volume is: *1978 MLA International Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Modern Languages and Literatures* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979).

[18] See, for example: George J. Stigler, "Do Economists Matter?" *Southern Economic Journal* (January 1976), pp. 347-354.

[19] See the discussion in: George J. Stigler, "The Scientific Uses of Scientific Biography with Special References to J. S. Mill," in John M. Robson and Michael Laine, eds., *James and John Stuart Mill/Papers of the Centenary Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 55-66.

[20] For a philosophical-sociological, disorganized (untestable?), but suggestive attempt in this direction see: Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding,* Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). For a couple of other attempts see: David Milton Levy, "The Content and Acceptance of Classical Economic Theory: An Estimation," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, September 20, 1977 version; and Arthur Mansfield Diamond, Jr., "Science as a Rational Enterprise," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1978.

[21] Richard I. Cook, "The Great Leviathan of Lechery': Mandeville's *Modest Defense of the Public Stews* (1724)" in Irwin Primer, ed., *Mandeville Studies,* p. 23.

## TABLE 1

## NUMBER OF WORKS IN 1972-1980 *SOCIAL SCIENCE CITATION INDEX* CITING VARIOUS SOCIAL THEORISTS

| *Theorist* | *Number of Citations* |
|---|---|
| Friedman | 3025 |
| Hayek | 534 |
| Hobbes | 371 |
| Hume | 480 |
| Locke | 527 |
| Mandeville | 36 |
| Nozick | 372 |
| Rand | 78 |
| Smith | 1307 |
| Voltaire | 94 |

## TABLE 2

## NUMBER OF WORKS LISTED IN 1970-1978 *MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION INTERNTIONAL BIBLOGRAPHY* ON VARIOUS SATIRISTS

| | Mandeville | Shaw | Swift | Voltaire | Wilde |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1970 | 0 | 51 | 71 | 38 | 21 |
| 1971 | 2 | 72 | 62 | 46 | 18 |
| 1972 | 0 | 55 | 55 | 35 | 25 |
| 1973 | 3 | 57 | 67 | 25 | 24 |
| 1975 | 2 | 43 | 65 | 67 | 13 |
| 1976 | 6 | 37 | 62 | 73 | 21 |
| 1977 | 17 | 66 | 41 | 53 | 19 |
| 1978 | 2 | 39 | 59 | 57 | 23 |
| Total | 34 | 480 | 558 | 478 | 183 |