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Bernard Mandeville's social aesthetics

Abstract

This paper aims at showing the theoretical pattern which underlies Mandeville's reflections on society and politics. In many passages of his works Mandeville refers to aesthetic classical categories such as harmony, proportion, balance; he even takes in consideration – and tries to explain – the blemishes of social structure by analogies with the work of art. Such aesthetic principles are obviously revisited and adapted to the peculiar system and social critique expressed by Mandeville, who appears nonetheless well aware of the main topics debated by the theorists of art in the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Mandeville, Society

Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) offers very few insights for the kind of research aesthetic scholars usually engage in. Indeed, he is one of the few eighteenth-century authors who resisted the temptation to venture into writing essays on taste, on art or on the beautiful. Mandeville does not normally feature in any of the historical accounts of modern aesthetics, including British ones; and the most authoritative scholars of the history of ideas have never studied Mandeville from this particular perspective. The reason being, that he has left us no writings on this specific subject from which we can derive a clear and detailed system of thought.

Yet the aesthetic debate in eighteenth-century Britain was extremely lively and no less intense or rich in contributions than the metaphysical, gnoseological or religious debates. The sheer quantity of essays and inquiries on aesthetic topics from that period is astounding, alongside an equally impressive number of prominent intellectuals actively engaged in discussions about the nature and effects of the beautiful, of taste, of the sublime, of genius and so on. If

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the “anti-aesthete” John Locke in his *Thoughts concerning education* (1693) was already urging educators not to initiate young people to the study or practice of art, it was because the current vogue was clearly reaching such proportions as to require, at least in his view, to be contained (Locke 1693: 243-4)². As a matter of fact, from the well-known *Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns* – played out by leading authors who were also in the public eye, such as William Temple, the classicist Richard Bentley, William Wotton, and particularly Jonathan Swift, who was Temple’s secretary and defended Temple’s position in his extremely popular *A tale of a tub* (1704), and even more so in his *Battle of the books*³ – the landscape of aesthetic studies ranged right through to the rampant proliferation of essays on aesthetic topics offered to the general public through non specialist, highly readable, essays. Joseph Addison’s celebrated *The pleasures of the imagination* (1712) featured in one of the most widely read and widely circulated periodicals of the early eighteenth century, “The Spectator”; and, in quite similar forms, aesthetics studies were literally flourishing throughout eighteenth-century Britain.

It is hard to imagine that Mandeville would have remained completely unaffected by this fervour of enquiry and that he did not respond to these ideas or adopt, at least to some degree, to the *forma mentis* of his time. On the contrary, I think it would be legitimate to assume that while Mandeville did not participate directly in the debate on the aesthetic issues of the day, he was aware of them through the reverberations that reached him and that he implicitly (and perhaps even unwittingly) took up some of the points under debate.

My attempt will thus be to show how Mandeville’s moral and social research⁴ seems to be underpinned by certain aesthetic assump-

² “Ill painting is one of the worst things in the World; and to attain a tolerable degree of skill in it, requires too much of a Man’s Time. If he has a natural Inclination to it, it will endanger the neglect of all other more useful Studies, to give way to that [...]. Another Reason why I am not for Painting in a Gentleman, is, Because it is a sedentary Recreation, which more employs the Mind than the Body. A Gentleman’s more serious Employment I look on to be Study; and when that demands relaxation and refreshment, it should be in some Exercise of the Body, which unbends the Thought, and confirms the Health and Strength”.

³ *The account of the battle of the Ancients and Modern books in St. James’s Library* was written as a prolegomenon to *A tale of a tub* in 1704.

⁴ About Mandeville’s *social inquiry* see: I. Primer (ed.), *Mandeville studies. New explorations in the art and thought of Dr. Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733)*, The

tions, and to ascertain, alongside the presence of such assumptions, their nature and what they were derived from. I will also set out to show how Mandeville uses the categories and classifications of the aesthetic debate of that period whenever he examines the features that define the forms of the society he is portraying.

I believe my purpose is justified, among other things, by the fact that in his social enquiry the main author Mandeville focuses on, albeit as a kind of provocative idol, is in fact Lord Shaftesbury: the very author who provided the first and greatest impulse to aesthetic inquiry in modern Britain and who freed studies on the beautiful and on art from the domains of art criticism and art theory, and made these studies the object of specific philosophical enquiry; in this respect Cassirer's definition of Shaftesbury as the first great aesthete that Britain ever produced is certainly apt (Cassirer 1951: 166).

Shaftesbury's death in 1713 was followed by the publication of the second edition of his celebrated and highly acclaimed masterpiece, the *Characteristics of men, manners, opinions, times* – the third earl's complete works⁵. In 1714 Mandeville republished his poem *The grumbling hive*, first published anonymously in 1705, to which he added some commentary *Remarks*, and gave the whole work the general title of *Fable of the bees*. In his *Remarks* Mandeville clashes openly with the optimism expressed by Shaftesbury, to whom he frequently refers throughout the text. Mandeville however gives full vent to this critique in another essay, *A search into the nature of society*, featured along with other essays in the 1723 edition of the *Fable*. Here, right from the opening pages, Mandeville summarizes Shaftesbury's position in the sphere of social theory and goes on to openly declare that: "two Systems cannot be more opposite than his Lordship's and mine. His notions I confess are generous and refin'd [...] What a Pity it is that they are not true" (Mandeville 1725: 372).

Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1975; M.M. Goldsmith, *Private vices, public benefits. Bernard Mandeville's social and political thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985; J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's fable. Bernard Mandeville and the discovery of society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; A. Branchi, *Introduzione a Mandeville*, Bari, Laterza, 2004; Id., *Bernard Mandeville e i costi morali della ricchezza. Arte, politica, onore e natura umana*, "I castelli di Yale", n. III/1 (2015), pp. 55-82; M. Simonazzi, *Le favole della filosofia. Saggio su Bernard Mandeville*, Milano, Angeli, 2008; Id., *Mandeville on corruption and law*, "I castelli di Yale", n. III/1 (2015), pp. 113-28.

⁵ The first edition of the *Characteristics* dates to 1711.

Given the open dispute initiated by Mandeville against an author who was extremely well-loved and closely followed by the public as well as the intellectuals of the period, it is not surprising that two years later Francis Hutcheson, an enthusiastic admirer of Shaftesbury's aesthetics and ethics would write his famous work, *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue* (1725), with a subtitle that read: "In which the principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain'd and Defended, Against the Author of the Fable of the Bees: and the Ideas of Moral Good and Evil are establish'd, according to the Sentiments of the Antient Moralists, &c." This subtitle, which is almost always neglected in subsequent publications of the work, in my view sets out clearly the nature of the relationship between Mandeville and Shaftesbury, something which has been studied in recent times by, among others, Irwin Primer, one of the most authoritative commentators on Mandeville. Primer, however, focuses on their different positions in the religious sphere and I don't think there are actually any studies analysing the relationship between the two authors specifically from the viewpoint of aesthetics (Primer 1975: 126-41).

I would also recall that Shaftesbury actually devotes the most extensive (and perhaps best known) section (III 2) of his major work, *The moralists* (1709), to aesthetic issues; and it is in this very section that Shaftesbury's optimism, so sharply denounced by Mandeville, finds its strongest expression and definition; we can therefore assume that aesthetic issues would have been brought to Mandeville's attention through this particular channel at least.

Now, I think there are three main elements that enable us to define the idea and character of Mandeville's social aesthetics; and, also, help to explain why – at least in my view – Mandeville's analysis of society can be more clearly understood if seen against the background of the aesthetic debate of the time.

The first element is that the description, and related assessment, of the societal structure put forward by Mandeville both in the *Fable of the bees* and in the *Search into the nature of society* is consistent with – whether intentionally or not – the principles of what Wladislaw Tatarkewicz has defined the "Great Theory": that influential and enduring theory which regards the constituent features of all beauty, whether natural or artificial, as grounded in symmetry, numerical proportions and the regular correspondence between the parts (Tatarkewicz 1972: 165-80).

This theory has its roots in the teachings of the Pythagorean School and holds that aesthetic appreciation is founded on the perception of proportions and fixed intervals in the design of musical harmony as well as of natural and artificial form. "The general theory of beauty formulated in ancient times declared that beauty consists in the proportions of the parts, more precisely in the proportions and arrangement of the parts, or, still more precisely, in the size, quality and number of the parts and their interrelations" (Tatarkiewicz 1972: 167). The Great Theory is in fact still influential and remains one the major canons in arts and crafts such as interior design and architecture. Somehow, the Great Theory even influences science, which itself seeks out harmony, regularity and proportions in the works of nature and even in the formulation of its theories, as one reads in Brian Greene's *The elegant universe* (1999).

The Great Theory was certainly in the minds of eighteenth-century Englishmen, who accepted its canons in both their assessment and their creation of works of beauty. The way they strived to reduce beauty to numbers and proportions is revealed in the academic studies of the period, and indeed in the notebooks of artists such as Benjamin West or Joseph Nollekens, in which one can find the greatest masterpieces of the ancient world dissected in terms of proportions and numerical relationships (Bignamini & Postle 1991).

Foremost among these Englishmen was Lord Shaftesbury, who regarded the Great Theory as a prerequisite, and saw regularity, proportion and symmetry as a natural – and not a cultural – source of aesthetic pleasure: something which our nature as human beings spontaneously inclines towards⁶. Moreover, equilibrium between the parts and the harmonious balancing of the passions also bring regularity to moral life: in his *Soliloquy, or, advice to an author* (1709), self-knowledge and virtue are attained through an inner dialogue that requires splitting our self in two, and creating an imaginary alter ego, a symmetrical mirror image of ourselves which is the critical counterpart of our most firmly held convictions.

This idea of the counterpart, as the balancing of positive and negative poles which enables perfect equilibrium and appreciation of the

⁶ "A round Ball, a Cube, or Dye. Why is even an Infant pleas'd with the first View of these Proportions? Why is the Sphere or Globe, the Cylinder and Obelisk prefer'd; and the irrègular Figures, in respect of these, rejected and despis'd?" (Shaftesbury 1713, vol. II: 414).

form to be achieved, seems to be extended by Mandeville to society as well; and it is on this basis that we are urged to assess, and ultimately accept, his disillusioned description of the structure of society. In his *Remarks to the Fable of the bees* he shows how good state economics lies in the balance between avarice and prodigality; this does not mean that the two characteristics need to be mutually exclusive, giving way, in Aristotelian fashion, to an average virtue; they should simply be set in symmetrical and proportional opposition to each other and thus continue to exist and co-exist harmoniously. On the one hand, "Avarice, notwithstanding it is the occasion of so many Evils, is yet very necessary to the Society, to glean and gather what has been dropt and scatter'd by the contrary Vice [...]; if none would lay up and get faster that they spend, very few could spend faster than they get" (Mandeville 1725: 101). On the other hand, Mandeville also defends, in a "symmetrical" way, prodigality: "When I speak thus honourably of this vice, and treat it with so much Tenderness and good Manners as I do, I have the same thing at Heart that made me give so many ill Names to the Revers of it, viz. the Interest of the Publick; for as the Avaricious does no good to himself, and is injurious to all the World besides, except his Heir, so the Prodigal is a Blessing to the whole Society" (Mandeville 1725: 104).

To Mandeville, the evils of society do not result from vices but from the fact that they are not proportionally counteracted by opposite vices within the social dynamics. In his view, every virtue, such as frugality, is only a vice in the absence of that counter-measure and natural balancing which the opposite vice alone can provide, in order to secure the harmony of social impulses or instincts⁷. Mandeville's syllogism seems to be the following: given that harmony and balance lead to a state of satisfaction – and that reciprocal action and the joint presence of positive and negative factors secure that harmony and balance – then a society should be regarded as satisfactory if the presence of vices is commensurate with the presence of virtues so as to secure that proportionality.

Conversely, the absence of "symmetrical" vices prevents the achievement of balance and harmony in the exclusively "virtuous" state envisioned by utopians.

⁷ "our Pride, Sloth, Sensuality and Fickleness are the great Patron that promote all Arts and Sciences, Trades, Handicrafts and Callings; whilst the great Taskmasters, Necessity, Avarice, Envy and Ambition, each in the Class that belongs to him, keep the Members of the Society to their Labour" (Mandeville 1725: 425).

It is hard to ascertain whether Mandeville's disillusioned acquiescence towards non utopian social forms is actually to be ascribed to the influence of aesthetic theories postulating coherent distribution of the parts and proportion. Yet in his *Remark K* the philosopher once again expresses himself explicitly in similar terms, alluding to a social complex that is perfectly balanced in its components and echoing the paradigms of the Great Theory. Thus, on the subjects of Prodigality and Avarice, he writes:

As to our two Vices in particular, I could compare Avarice [...] to a griping Acid that sets our Teeth on Edge and is unpleasant to every Palate that is not debauch'd: I could compare the gaudy trimming and splendid Equipage of a profuse Beau to the glistening Brightness of the finest Loaf Sugar; for as the one, by correcting the Sharpness, prevents the Injuries which a gnawing Sour might do to the Bowels, so the other is a pleasing Balsam that heals and makes amends for the smart, which the Multitude always suffers from the Gripes of the Avaricious; while the Substances of both melt away alike, and they consume themselves by being beneficial to the several Compositions they belong to. I could carry on the Simile *as to proportions and the exact nicety to be observed in them, which would make it appear how little any of the Ingredients could be spared in either of the Mixtures.* (Mandeville 1725: 107, emphasis added)

In addition to all this is the fact that in the verses of his famous poem Mandeville puts forward an openly aesthetic analogy: "This was the State's-Craft that maintain'd | The Whole, of which each Part complain'd: | This, as in Music Harmony | Made Jarrings in the main agree; | Parties directly opposite, | Assist each other, as 'twere for Spight; | And Temp'rance with Sobriety, | Serve Drunkenness and Gluttony" (Mandeville 1725: 10).

This is all the evidence I intend to give by way of showing the presence of possible reminiscences of the canons of the Great Theory in Mandeville (clearly with some adaptations); anyone who is familiar with the philosopher's text, however, will be aware that references to the theory appear in several parts of his work, such as in the concluding verses of his poem or scattered among his *Remarks*.

The principle that warrants the transposition of the aesthetics norms of the Great Theory to social analysis could also have been found by Mandeville in the "optimistic" section of the *Moralists*, which in fact constitutes one of Shaftesbury's most valuable contributions to modern aesthetic theory. I am referring to what might be called the principle of "fine ugliness": a principle that is clearly devel-

oped from, and is a modern revisitation of, the scholastic *Argument from design* which gradually became established in the eighteenth century.

In *The moralists*, the author's spokesman Theocles sees beauty and the perfect organization of the cosmos as incontrovertible proof of the existence of a Sovereign Mind, in whose perfect design even that which appears ugly or imperfect to man's peculiar vision, actually plays a fundamental role and partakes of the general beauty of the whole. So-called mistakes or "monsters" in nature thus appear to be such only from an anthropocentric perspective: in truth, Theocles observes, in creatures that are disagreeable or pernicious to man, such as crocodiles or poisonous insects, the design of the Sovereign Mind appears just as perfect in itself as it does in the forms that are most pleasing to our natural aesthetic sense; and the simplest elements show an equal degree of "art" as do complex ones: "we find minerals of different natures which, by their simplicity, discover no less of the divine art than the most compounded of nature's work" (Shaftesbury 1713, vol. II: 377): so it is only the finite and imperfect nature of our minds which, being incapable of comprehending the infinite and perfect divine plan, lead us to call "ugly" that which within that plan has its own utility and beauty: "For in an infinity of things thus relative, a mind which sees not infinitely can see nothing fully; and since each particular has relation to all in general, it can know no perfect or true relation of any thing in a world not perfectly and fully known" (Shaftesbury 1713, vol. II: 288). What happens in nature is the same as what happens in art: "In painting there are shades and masterly strokes which the vulgar understand not, but find fault with; in architecture there is the rustic; in music the chromatic kind, and skilful mixture of dissonancies; and, asks Shaftesbury, is there nothing that answers to this in the whole?" (Shaftesbury 1713, vol. II: 402). Clearly, in order to understand *fine ugliness* it is necessary to be endowed with an anything but widespread level of culture and reflective capacity, as well as a trained and expert "taste", which alone is capable of recognizing how the dark parts are as necessary as the bright parts for the beauty of the whole. "How many things shocking, how many offensive at first, which afterwards are known and acknowledg'd the highest Beautys! For 'tis not instantly we acquire the Sense by which these Beautys are discoverable" (Shaftesbury 1713, vol. II: 401).

The reader can easily perceive how in Mandeville's social analysis as well as in his approach to it, this simple principle of *fine ugliness* –

a principle Mandeville frequently encountered in the work of Shaftesbury, which was the focus of his criticism – may have been applied; and I think we can see a translation of that principle in the *noble sin* which Mandeville addresses in his *Remark K*. His observation of how society as a whole functioned, enables him to argue that what appears to be a vice or an “evil” from an individual perspective and taken in isolation, changes definition the moment we consider its contribution to the goodness of the system as a whole and the crucial part it plays in the overall organization of the social order. In Mandeville’s social analysis, too, supposed formal defects contribute to the overall beauty of the design; and the perspective of *fine ugliness* make it easier to understand how private vices (*noble sins*) may be accepted as a source of public benefits: “It is in Morality as it is in Nature, there is nothing so perfectly Good in Creatures that it cannot be hurtful to any one of the Society, nor any thing so entirely Evil, but it may prove beneficial to some part or other of the Creation. So that things are only Good and Evil in reference to something else, and according to the Light and Position they are placed in” (Mandeville 1725: 406). Like Shaftesbury, Mandeville urges the readers not to judge individual components in themselves but in the light of their contribution to overall collective advantages, ridding ourselves from moralistic anxieties or utopian romanticisms, and implicitly suggesting that private vices may bear a relationship to the goodness of the general system which could transcend our comprehension or our ability to act.

The idea of the noble sin as the counterpart of fine ugliness contains a further suggestion that Mandeville’s work should also be read *sub specie aethetica*. I am referring to the transposition to the social sphere of that cosmology which drew inspiration from aesthetics, and crystallized in the theory of the Great Chain of Being in Eighteenth-century Britain.

This theory can be seen as a kind of eighteenth-century hybridization of philosophy of nature and aesthetics – which mediated between Neo-Platonist and particularly Stoic influences, of which Marcus Aurelius and Epictet were acknowledged forerunners – with, on the other hand, the pressing issues being put forward by a form of dominant Hobbesian mechanism whose impact in the early eighteenth century was just as significant (Lovejoy 1936: chaps. VI-VIII). The main characteristics of this theory is the conception of a cosmology which essentially rests on the principle of beauty and regularity in which, as for Marcus Aurelius, all things are united. Emblems such as

the *ouroboros*, the serpent biting its tail, symbolizing (holistically) a perfectly closed circle, or the terrestrial globe encircled by a closed chain, reinforce the idea of this oneness/unity and they were sometimes adopted by eighteenth-century freethinkers, who also set up a hierarchy of existing entities stretching from the bowels of the earth through to sidereal spaces. The progression from simple entities to more complex ones within that space is gradual, constant, precisely regulated and, above all, necessary. In the same way, albeit in less metaphysical terms, Mandeville's aesthetic sociology designs an order and a government founded on the same organized concatenation; as, for example, where he sees prostitution as being the "low" mechanism upon which rests the proper functioning of the family, and where he shows how the misery of Incontinence, for instance, is suited to the glory of Temperance:

Who would imagine, that Virtuous Women, unknowingly, should be instrumental in promoting the Advantage of Prostitutes? Or (what still seems the greater Paradox) that Incontinence should be made serviceable to the Preservation of Chastity? And yet nothing is more true. A vicious young Fellow, after having been an Hour or two at Church, a Ball, or any other Assembly, where there is a great parcel of handsome Women dress'd to the best Advantage [...] he'll strive to satisfy the Appetite that is raised in him, and when he finds honest Women obstinate and uncomatable, 'tis very natural to think, that he'll hasten to others that are more compliable. (Mandeville 1725: 94)

Conversely, "If Courtezans and Strumpets were to be prosecuted with as much Rigour as some silly People would have it, what Locks or Bars would be sufficient to preserve the Honour of our Wives and Daughters?" Mandeville 1725: 95). And again, in his *Search into the nature of society* Mandeville shows how a simple crimson cloth in fact stands the top of a production chain in which all the links are mutually interdependent, and how all of them together guarantee the development of trade:

What a bustle is there to be made in several parts of the World, before a fine Scarlet or crimson Cloath can be produced, what Multiplicity of Trades and Artificers must be employ'd! Not only such as obvious, as Wool-combers, Spinners, the Weaver, the Cloath-worker, the Scowrer, the Dyer, the Setter, the Drawer and the Packer; but others that are more remote and might seem foreign to it; as the Millwright, the Pewterer and the Chymist, which yet are all necessary as well as a great Number of other Handicrafts, to have

the Tools, Utensils and other Implements belonging to the Trades already named. (Mandeville 1725: 411)

There are many more points in which the aesthetic debate seems to echo through Mandeville's pages: when describing the ideal interlocutor or the person with whom it may be beneficial to entertain a conversation, he effectively describes the eighteenth-century *virtuoso*, even with the same aesthetic features (Mandeville 1725: 387 ff.). Moreover, when Mandeville criticises the ideals of *pulchrum* and *honestum* as empty and unsubstantial, he does so by adopting the latest theories as to the impossibility of finding a standard of taste (Mandeville 1725: 373 ff.); not to speak of the relationship established between social progress and the flourishing of the arts (Mandeville 1725: 425 ff.). The analysis of Mandeville's social aesthetics could go further, but just like the author of the *Fable*, "for fear of being troublesome I shall make an End" (Mandeville 1725: 428).

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