**Bernard Mandeville on Honor, Hypocrisy, and War**

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**Abstract**

Authors from Cicero to Smith held honor to be indispensable to make people see and do what is right. As they considered honor to be a social motive, they did not think this dependence on honor was a problem. Today, we tend to see honor as a self-regarding motive, but do not see this as problematic because we stopped seeing it as a necessary incentive. Bernard Mandeville, however, agreed with the older authors that honor is indispensable, but agreed with us moderns that it is a self-interested motive. Honor might be necessary to keep society functioning, but that does not make it less self-serving. Mandeville thus combined the classical preoccupation with honor and the modern view of man as self-seeking. That our motivations are self-serving is something we wish to hide from others and ourselves; society benefits because we generally behave well in order to live up to this inflated (self-)image. Hypocrisy is the price we pay for living together peacefully. It is this sobering view on honor that sets Mandeville apart from later authors on the subject, particularly David Hume and Adam Smith.

**Introduction**

Researching the role honor, pride, and reputation plays in our lives, Bernard Mandeville earned a reputation for himself (which did not mortify him unduly) by arguing, in a somewhat blasphemous poem published in 1705 under the title *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn’d Honest*, that vanity was the minister of industry. Two volumes of elucidation and vindication, which appeared in 1714 and 1729 under the more famous title *Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, only added to his notoriety – as did his essay on honor and the usefulness of Christianity in war (none), and his defense of regulated prostitution. Infamous in his time, Mandeville later slipped back into relative anonymity. While not overlooked, his work has until recently not been the subject of much research. Perhaps that is partly because many still consider F.B. Kaye’s influential introduction to the 1924 Oxford University Press edition of the *Fable* to be the final word on Mandeville,[[1]](#endnote-1) while Mandeville’s continuous irony, satire, and at times cynicism might be another explanation. His less-than-serious style makes it difficult to establish what his ‘true’ position was on a particular matter.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nonetheless, we have seen more research on Mandeville lately.[[3]](#endnote-3) This recent research highlights Mandeville’s contributions to social theory, but has somewhat less to say on the notion that underlies his own social theory, honor, that was also central to the work of many of his contemporaries. It is absolutely silent on the question whether Mandeville’s views on honor are still of any relevance to us.

**Honor in political philosophy**

After a long period of near neglect, honor has recently received quite some attention from political philosophers.[[4]](#endnote-4) To most others the notion will probably seem somewhat out of date – sociologist Peter Berger famously wrote about honor’s obsolescence.[[5]](#endnote-5) It is easy to overlook how novel this obsolescence is. Honor was deemed very important in the West all through the nineteenth century, and the honor driven practice of dueling – getting a shot at revenge after being disrespected – even survived well into the twentieth century.[[6]](#endnote-6) Until its apparent demise, honor was always somewhat of a two-sided phenomenon, as it concerned both the value that persons allocate to themselves *and* the value others place on them.[[7]](#endnote-7) Charles H. Cooley, an American sociologist from the early twentieth century, captures this nicely in his definition of honor as

a finer kind of self-respect. It is used to mean either something one feels regarding himself, or something that other people think and feel regar­ding him, and so illustrates by the accepted use of language the fact that the private and social as­pects of self are inseparable. One’s honor, as he feels it, and his honor in the sense of honorable repute, as he conceives it to exist in the minds of others whose opinions he cares for, are two aspects of the same thing.[[8]](#endnote-8)

But especially insofar as it is seen as something that depends on the good opinion of others, honor has lost much of its appeal in our time. We wish to rely on our conscience to inform us on what is right, and tend to think that we are to do the right thing for its own sake, not for the sake of keeping face. That it allows the opinions of others to have a role in determining what is right, and that it functions as a reward for virtuous behavior, discredited honor probably more than the fact that in the past honor often endorsed rather eccentric behavior (dueling, for instance).

At the same time it is evident that many people are still concerned about (and influenced by) how others think of them, but this is seen as regrettably falling short of the ideal of autonomy. Most modern moral and political philosophy mirrors (and to some extent feeds) this ideal, which goes back to the old idea of perfect virtue, holding that an action stemming from a self-interested motive – and the concern for reputation falls under that heading – is not moral.[[9]](#endnote-9) Epicureans, Cynics, Platonists, Christians, Kantians, and Romantics all adhered to this ideal to at least some degree.

Authors from Cicero to Adam Smith (whose position on honor drew on that of Cicero) took a different position. Although we accept the principles of justice on an abstract level, in real life our partiality to ourselves prevents us from seeing and doing what is just. In their view, our sense of honor helps us in finding out what we should do, and provides the much-needed motive to actually *do* what is right. Especially in this latter aspect conscience appeared somewhat impotent to them; when we act with an eye to the general good, we mostly do so from a concern for our own reputation, and not so much from a love of virtue or a sincere concern for the public interest. Faced with a choice between selfless and selfish courses of action, honor makes one choose the former, albeit for reasons belonging to the realm of the latter. People generally will not behave morally without some reputational gain.

**Mandeville on virtue as self-denial**

As a physician specialized in nervous diseases, Mandeville was proud to be a man of science who presented man as he is, and not as he should be. He did not believe that we act virtuously for the sake of virtue alone, despite all our pretenses to the contrary. Mandeville speaks of a ‘strong habit of hypocrisy, by the help of which, we have learned from our cradle to hide even from our selves the vast extent of self-love, and all its different branches.’[[10]](#endnote-10) Society forces this hypocrisy, consisting of a disparity between the altruistic principles we proclaim (and often believe) to follow and the self-serving principles we act on, upon its members; it is the price for living together peacefully. But society only benefits if its members adjust their behavior at least somewhat to bring it into conformity with the principles they profess to follow. And often they do.

Especially those members of society who have come to believe in their own public spiritedness, no longer seeing that their actual motives are self-interested, go to great lengths in that aspect. They serve society best. Yet although their behavior is beneficial, their motivation remains egoistic: it is the desire to be well thought of that animates them. But also those individuals whose motivations are more directly self-interested and who still realize that their motivations are self-serving will find that direct and undisguised gratification of one’s desires brings worlds of troubles, and to be able to

indulge their own appetites with less disturbance, they agreed with the rest, to call everything, which, without regard to the public, man should commit to gratify any of his appetites, vice; (…) and to give the name of virtue 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.[[11]](#endnote-11)

That empty endorsement of everyday morality does not have to stop anyone from satisfying his or her desires in more covert manners, though. The benefit for society is that these more covert manners will be less harmful to society. In the case of sexual appetites, for example, one marries the object of one’s lust, instead of just having a, in Mandeville’s words, ‘go about it.’[[12]](#endnote-12) Where virtue bids us to subdue our appetites, good breeding merely asks us to hide them, and in general ‘the man that gratifies his appetites after the manner the custom of the country allows of, has no censure to fear.’[[13]](#endnote-13) This means, however, that ‘to be at once well-bred and sincere, is no less than a contradiction.’[[14]](#endnote-14)

Mandeville did not think that the world would be a better place if people lived up to the ideal of self-denial, and would successfully stifle their lust for luxury and honor. Poverty and boredom are the most likely results. But because Christian and Stoic moralists had always defined virtue in that strict way (according to Mandeville at least – one could argue that Mandeville creates a straw man here) he thought he himself should use that definition too.[[15]](#endnote-15) Mandeville therefore stuck with the by his own account impossibly strict definition of virtue as self-denial, and thus also with the view that all behavior in the slightest degree motivated by self-serving reasons as vice, however useful to society that behavior might be. He did so for polemical reasons, though: showing that our behavior is always self-regarding *and* equating virtue with self-denial at the same time, enabled him to argue with some plausibility that we all lack in virtue, at least according to his strict definition. It also enabled Mandeville to claim that our vices, such as pride, the wish for luxury, and, not in the least, our wish to be well thought of, make societies prosper and, more important, make society possible in the first place. In this view, honor is just another proof of the truth of the subheading of the *Fable*: *Private Vices, Public Benefits*.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Honor as a public benefit**

Mandeville wrote in his *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* that honor can mean many different things,[[17]](#endnote-17) but defined honor in the (earlier) *Fable* pretty straightforwardly as ‘a reward for good actions’ consisting of ‘the good opinion of others,’ thus doing away with all the ambiguity that honor had in the work of most other authors.[[18]](#endnote-18) That honor consists of the good opinions of others means that it is ultimately something artificial, a ‘chimera without truth or being, an invention of moralists and politicians.’[[19]](#endnote-19) Mandeville thought that this invention of honor had been a lot more beneficial to society than the much older invention of virtue.[[20]](#endnote-20) That honor is more beneficial than virtue is because it is more common: ‘men are better paid for their adherence to honor, than they are for their adherence to virtue.’[[21]](#endnote-21) Virtue is destined to be rare ‘because all the recompense a man has of a virtuous action, is the pleasure of doing it, which most people reckon but poor pay.’[[22]](#endnote-22) The effect of religion in promoting virtue is small and of little force, as the object of its worship is rather abstract and faraway, while by ‘worshipping honour, a man adores himself,’ an object that is never out of sight.[[23]](#endnote-23) Where the honor ethic expects us to put high value on ourselves, the Christian ethic demands humility, and for most of us the former comes a lot easier than the latter. Honor was invented ‘to influence men, whom religion had no power over.’[[24]](#endnote-24)

But not only is honor artificial, it is not even assured that its effects will be that beneficial. Because honor depends on group norms that not everyone shares, honorable behavior and moral behavior are not the same. The wish to live by rules of honor is only one of the possible results of pride – others might take pride in their utter shamelessness, as ‘the same cause produces not always the same effect.’[[25]](#endnote-25) One can speak consistently of the honor of thieves. To what degree honorable behavior and moral behavior overlap therefore depends on the peculiarity of group norms. And they can be peculiar: Mandeville noticed that a man of honor ‘must punctually repay what he borrows at play, though the creditor has nothing to show for it; but he may drink, and swear, and owe money to all the tradesmen in town, without taking notice of their dunning.’[[26]](#endnote-26) Cleomenes, Mandeville’s spokesperson in the second volume of the *Fable* and the *Enquiry*, thinks it very unreasonable

that a debauched fellow, who runs in every tradesman’s debt, and thinks himself not obliged to pay anything but what is borrowed or lost at play, should claim the same regard from us [as a man of justice, integrity, temperance, and chastity], for no other reason than because he dares to fight.[[27]](#endnote-27)

On first sight, it might thus seem that Mandeville was fairly critical on honor, exposing it as artificial and particularistic. The good thing about honor, Mandeville for instance mocks, is that

it is only to be met with in people of the better sort, as some oranges have kernels, and others not, though the outside be the same. In great families it is like the gout, generally counted hereditary, and all Lords children are born with it.[[28]](#endnote-28)

But here, too, Mandeville was, as the tone betrays, clearly polemical, as his true position on honor was positive, albeit on pragmatic grounds. Mandeville denied the reality of honor, but where the Stoics, and other promotors of perfect virtue, urged their readers to quench their longing for it, Mandeville considered honor, although not inherently good, a socially useful motive, indispensable as a check on man’s behavior.

**The Psychology of Honor: Flattery, Pride, and Self-liking**

That a mere chimera can have such an effect on us is solely by reason of our pride, ‘that natural faculty by which every mortal that has any understanding over-values, and imagines better things of himself than any impartial judge, thoroughly acquainted with all his qualities and circumstances, could allow him.’[[29]](#endnote-29) This excessive attention for ‘what others think of us, can proceed from nothing but the vast esteem we have for ourselves.’[[30]](#endnote-30) In his essay on the origin of moral virtue, part of the first volume of the *Fable*, Mandeville already gives a first explanation of how politicians and moralists exploit this to the advantage of society.

We already saw that most people consider the pleasure of acting virtuously poor pay. But because society cannot remunerate every single instance of self-denial with a material reward, ‘those that have undertaken to civilize mankind’ had to ‘contrive an imaginary one.’[[31]](#endnote-31) A solution was found in the ‘bewitching machine’ of flattery.[[32]](#endnote-32) Unable to resist this ‘witchcraft of flattery,’ man is tamed by ‘the skilful management of wary politicians.’[[33]](#endnote-33) These wary politicians tell us that man is vastly superior to the beasts, and that within mankind those who are public-spirited are morally much above those who only look after themselves. Politicians and moralists use such indirect forms of flattery because they know that only ‘children and fools will swallow personal praise,’ and that those who are somewhat cleverer ‘must be managed with greater circumspection; and the more general the flattery is, the less it is suspected by those it is levelled at.’[[34]](#endnote-34) That the ‘well-bred gentleman places his greatest pride in the skill he has of covering it with dexterity’ probably forms an extra reason for circumspection.[[35]](#endnote-35) With that circumspection, however, there is little that a gentleman or woman will not do when flattered enough. Our ‘moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride.’[[36]](#endnote-36)

Yet, pride is in the first volume of the *Fable* not much more than that what makes people spend money on fine clothes and equipages in an attempt to distinguish themselves.[[37]](#endnote-37) New in the second volume of the *Fable* and in the *Enquiry*, on the surface just more explanation and vindication of his original position, is Mandeville’s claim that our overvaluation of ourselves leads to more than just conspicuous consumption; the wish to live up to our inflated self-image, and to be reputable and well thought of, is now presented as the basis of civilised society.[[38]](#endnote-38) Compared to the more famous first volume of the *Fable*, there is more emphasis on the constructive role of vanity. In that aspect, the second volume of the *Fable* and the *Enquiry* are not only another elucidation of the 1705 poem; they also represent an important yet sometimes overlooked change in emphasis.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Comparing the first volume of the *Fable* with the second and the *Enquiry* shows that Mandeville implicitly distinguished between a Stoic and a Christian version of the ideal of virtue as self-denial. Although Mandeville’s criticism on the Christian version of that ideal has attracted more attention, in the first volume of the *Fable* he mainly positioned himself against the Stoics, who stressed the ‘vanity of honour, and popular applause,’ placing ‘true happiness in the calm serenity of a contented mind free from guilt and ambition.’[[40]](#endnote-40) While some have tried to prove that the Stoic ideal ‘exceeded all human force and possibility,’ many more agreed ‘with the Stoics in the most material points,’ and even professed to have arrived at this ‘height of self-denial.’[[41]](#endnote-41) The perennial attraction of this ideal of virtue as self-denial shows that we are prone to deceive ourselves and others.

Ask not only the divines and moralists of every nation, but likewise all that are rich and powerful, about real pleasure, and they’ll tell you, with the Stoics that there can be no true felicity in things mundane and corruptible: but then look upon their lives, and you find they take delight in no other.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Where the Stoic variety of virtue as self-denial prescribes that we should not attach too much value to luxury and prestige, the Christian version is about purity of intentions, and wants us to be genuinely self-forgetful; the wish to be well thought of should not be our motivation. Christianity denounces honor not because it is an insecure good (i.e., depending on the opinion of others), but because it is a morally impure motive.

So Mandeville was at first more critical of the Stoic equation of virtue with self-denial, which, if people were to live by it, would further an indifference to luxury and, as a consequence, lead to poverty and a general standstill of society, than of the Christian version. The latter at first glance merely indicates a regrettable lack of understanding of men’s real motives, going against the grain of human nature. Nonetheless, his attention shifted to this Christian variety – the Stoics are no longer mentioned in the second volume of the *Fable* and in the *Enquiry*. The reason might be that a closer look convinced Mandeville that the Christian ideal of self-denial is not only psychologically more interesting, but also out of our reach for most of us. Christian notions of perfection and purity of intention are even stricter and more hostile to honor than Stoicism was: an otherwise virtuous act that is seen by others is, because of that fact alone, not truly virtuous. Even contemplating on how well others would think of us if they knew about our good acts diminishes the moral value of our good deeds. But seeing that in the real world love of virtue hardly motivates, it would be societally devastating if people lived up to the Christian ideal and stopped caring about how their behavior looked to others. It might be true that without our wish for luxury societies would be less rich and glorious, but without our wish to be well thought of our relatively decent society would not exist in the first place.

To clarify better how society depends on our desire to be well thought of, Mandeville introduces in the second volume of the *Fable* the concept of self-liking, which is the ‘instinct by which every individual values itself above its real worth.’[[43]](#endnote-43) This is still not very different from his earlier definition of pride. That changes when the concept of self-liking is fleshed out in the *Enquiry*, where we read that it is this self-liking that ‘excites in us the love of praise, and a desire to be applauded and thought well of by others, and stirs us up to good actions.’[[44]](#endnote-44) Different from lower passions such as lust and greed, we can satisfy our self-liking by behaving well and being outwardly modest about it. That we inwardly may feel elevated above the rest of mankind harms no one.

Contrary to pride (and honor), the instinct of self-liking is universal. The term pride, we now learn, is to be reserved for the excessive self-liking that is ‘so openly shown as to give offense to others.’[[45]](#endnote-45) Pride, but also our feelings of shame and our sensitivity to honor, are merely the visible and fluctuating manifestations of this invisible (and hence, according to Mandeville, unnamed until he coined the term)[[46]](#endnote-46) constant of self-liking. Politicians and parents have tasked themselves with putting this self-liking to use in a manner that benefits society. Mandeville refers quite often to skilful politicians, or rulers, who more or less tricked men into submission, albeit mostly to their own advantage; the high value we have for ourselves is, although ‘the cause of endless mischiefs’ when excessive, in general a ‘very useful passion.’[[47]](#endnote-47) As for parents: resembling Locke’s claim that the sensitivity for praise and blame is ‘the great secret of education,’ Mandeville held that nothing ‘has a greater influence upon children, than the handle that is made of shame.’[[48]](#endnote-48)

**Honor and war**

But although shame is, just like pride and self-liking, and contrary to honor, ‘real,’ determined adults could conquer it with ample effort, making them immune to the censure of their fellow citizens. It is because of its detrimental effects that society will not allow this, and in practice politicians and moralists are quite successful in strengthening our sensitivity for shame.[[49]](#endnote-49) Mandeville thought, again similar to Locke, that the fear of shame can be enlarged ‘by an artful education, and be made superior even to that of death.’[[50]](#endnote-50) War forms of course a good laboratory for studying that last phenomenon; in the *Grumbling Hive*, the poem it all started with, honor is *only* mentioned as a motive that makes soldiers fight. All men ‘love glory,’ and although ‘they set out differently to acquire it,’[[51]](#endnote-51) traditionally military exploits have been the default manner.

Equally traditionally, philosophers have bemoaned this way to glory. Hume, for instance, remarked that although most people applaud military glory, those ‘of cool reflection are not so sanguine in their praises of it. The infinite confusions and disorder, which it has caused in the world, diminish much of its merit in their eyes.’[[52]](#endnote-52) That military honor can cause so much ‘confusions and disorder,’ a phrase reminiscent of the ‘endless mischiefs’ that Mandeville saw resulting from excessive self-liking, shows that honor’s bad effects sometimes outweigh its beneficial outcomes. These bad effects often result from men of ambition manipulating the soldier’s sense of honor for their own glory. The *Fable* describes how this manipulation takes place.

It is not difficult to make men fight. When the notions of honour and shame ‘are received among a society,’ one can make a soldier courageous by inspiring ‘him with as much horror against shame, as nature has given him against death.’[[53]](#endnote-53) Commanders flatter the bold, reward the wounded, and honor the dead to help soldiers overcome their fear. Uniforms, decorations, and fine phrases about the justness of the cause, despising death and the bed of honor, provide against little cost the courage money cannot buy; just ‘put feathers in their caps, and distinguish them from others (…) and every proud man will take up arms and fight himself to death.’[[54]](#endnote-54) The wish to avoid being considered a coward was in Mandeville’s judgment by far the strongest motive for courageous behavior, though: ‘One man in an army is a check upon another, and a hundred of them that single and without witness would be all cowards, are for fear of incurring one another’s contempt made valiant by being together.’[[55]](#endnote-55) Increasing their fear of shame makes soldiers mindful about their honor.[[56]](#endnote-56) Contrary to common opinion,[[57]](#endnote-57) war is not a context in which our uncivilized selves can reign. Soldiers untouched by civilization would flee.

In *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* Mandeville ties back his account of military honor to his broader theme of the infeasibility of the ideal of perfect virtue. He stresses that the Christian ethics of his day is of no use in war because it is incapable of inspiring soldiers to sacrifice their lives. Where the honor ethic expects a man to adore himself and to be prepared to fight all others if necessary, the gospel wants men to worship God and ‘to make war with themselves.’[[58]](#endnote-58) So when troops ‘are to enter upon action, to besiege a large town, or ravage a rich country, it would be very impertinent to talk to them of Christian virtues; doing as they would be done by; loving their enemies, and extending their charity to all mankind.’[[59]](#endnote-59) Every military commander will therefore take recourse to the opposite honor ethic, and hence that

the men are praised and buoyed up in the high value they have for themselves: their officers call them gentlemen and fellow-soldiers; generals pull off their hats to them; and no artifice is neglected that can flatter their pride, or inspire them with the love of glory.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Nowhere has pride been more encouraged than in the army, and ‘never anything had been invented before, that was half so effective to create artificial courage among military men.’[[61]](#endnote-61) But Mandeville himself saw honor definitely not as something worth dying for, and he cynically rhymed that ‘The soldiers that were forced to fight, If they survived, got *honour* by’t.’[[62]](#endnote-62)

Although in Mandeville’s view mostly a self-regarding drive, honor can also induce people to act against their own immediate interests. Military valor partly boils down to being more afraid of being considered a coward than of dying. It is this same artificial courage, incidentally, that explains the willingness to duel.[[63]](#endnote-63) Here we are once more reminded that honor can have various consequences. These will generally be beneficial, as we have seen, but honor can also have very destructive consequences, as a cause of war, and as a cause of atrocities in war – Mandeville mentions how in the English Civil War of 1642-1651 Oliver Cromwell turned his soldiers into enthusiastic fighters, while at the same time letting them believe they were good, pious Christians.[[64]](#endnote-64)

**Mandeville’s relevance**

Mandeville’s work influenced many, but his effect on David Hume and Adam Smith is most noteworthy.[[65]](#endnote-65) Hume clearly echoed Mandeville’s criticism of the Stoics and their contemporary followers when he wrote that there is a

grave philosophic endeavour after perfection, which, under pretext of reforming prejudices and errors, strikes at all the most endearing sentiments of the heart, and all the most useful bypasses and instincts, which can govern a human creature. The *Stoics* were remarkable for this folly among the ancients; and I wish some of more venerable characters in latter times had not copied them too faithfully in this particular.[[66]](#endnote-66)

But although Hume and Smith accepted Mandeville’s account of human motivation, and the role vanity plays in it, they did not share his conclusion that virtue therefore does not exist. When Hume emphasized that the social virtues are not an invention of politicians, as some authors maintained, he was probably referring to (and disagreeing with) Mandeville, as Hume criticized these authors for having ‘represented all moral distinctions as the effect of artifice and education, when skilful politicians endeavoured to restrain the turbulent passions of men, and make them operate to the public good, by the notions of honour and shame.’[[67]](#endnote-67) That is an exaggeration of the role of politicians, because ‘had not men a natural sentiment of approbation and blame, it could never be excited by politicians; nor would the words laudable and praiseworthy, blameable and odious be any more intelligible, than if they were a language perfectly unknown to us.’[[68]](#endnote-68)

Hume and Smith ended up defining virtue more leniently than Mandeville, judging less by the intentions than by the consequences of an act.[[69]](#endnote-69) This enabled Smith to speak quite unproblematically of ‘true glory’ in a way that Mandeville would never do. Smith also assumed that we are not only endowed ‘with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of.’[[70]](#endnote-70) Virtue and the love of praise are closely intermingled, and ‘there is an affinity too between the desire of becoming what is honourable and estimable, and the desire of honour and esteem, between the love of virtue and the love of true glory.’[[71]](#endnote-71) Although a love of virtue seems purer than a love of glory, even in that love of virtue there is ‘some reference to the sentiments of others,’ because who does not care about the opinions of others, cares very much about how other *should* think of him, and this is ‘the great and exalted motive of his conduct.’[[72]](#endnote-72) Mandeville would counter that if that is the motive, it is not virtue to begin with. The rigorist definition of virtue of self-denial might lead to hypocrisy as the principle we then pay lip service to is at odds with our selfish motivation, but according to Mandeville a more lenient definition would be ‘a vast inlet to hypocrisy’ too: it allows us to deem ourselves virtuous when we in fact are not. Mandeville considered this second form the worse form of hypocrisy. The result would be that we ‘not only deceive others, but likewise become altogether unknown to our selves’[[73]](#endnote-73) – although Mandeville suggested elsewhere that this is the case anyway.[[74]](#endnote-74)

At the same time, as we have seen, that strict definition that equates virtue with self-denial was in fact not Mandeville’s ‘true’ position on the matter, but the definition that the moralists Mandeville was aiming at used; Mandeville paved the way for Hume and Smith by demonstrating its infeasibility. Had Mandeville himself opted for a less rigorist definition of virtue, his work would have been less polemical, but perhaps also more prominent.[[75]](#endnote-75) As it stands, Mandeville got little credit. Smith was of the opinion that

it is the great fallacy of Dr. Mandeville’s book to represent every passion as wholly vicious, which is so in any degree and in any direction. It is thus that he treats everything as vanity which has any reference, either to what are, or to what ought to be the sentiments of others: and it is by means of this sophistry, that he establishes his favourite conclusion, that private vices are public benefits.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Smith concluded, however, that the *Fable* would not have made such an impact, ‘had it not bordered upon the truth.’[[77]](#endnote-77)

It is possibly as a result of the impact of ideas like that of Mandeville – despite the latter’s belief that people do not want to learn what motivates them – that Tocqueville had to notice (a century or so after Mandeville) that we tend to attribute our own behavior to self-interested motives, even when more altruistic motives are clearly at play. That this tendency to attribute behavior to self-serving motives has not softened our evaluation of honor, suggests that our self-understanding is based on a combination of economic notions and notions that stress autonomy. Those latter still prevail as far as morality is concerned; we think that people should do the right thing for other, better reasons than a concern about how one’s behavior appears to others. In that aspect we continue to adhere to the rigorist definition of virtue that Mandeville considered infeasible.

Our negative evaluation of honor as a reward for virtue perhaps explains the modern emphasis on internal honor; interestingly, the ideal of autonomy as outlined in the introduction has led to a view of honor that is more about our value in our own eyes than in the eyes of society. We already noted that most authors, from antiquity on, recognized both the internal and the external side of honor, but from the seventeenth century on many began to consider that internal element, having a ‘sense of honor,’ as a lot more important than honor based upon public codes.[[78]](#endnote-78) Honor is in that case – when we say that someone has a sense of honor – more a personal quality than something with an important external element as well. The rationale is that external honor has the drawback that all is permitted when no one is around. That one can gain fame and glory without deserving it was a reason for concern from Plato to Smith and an insight to Machiavelli, but has become a truism today. But although internal honor has the advantage that it cannot be reduced to not being found out, we lose sight of an essential characteristic of honor if we stop seeing it as something that inherently depends on how others see us. Hence that the emphasis in this article was – as it is in the work of Mandeville – on honor in its inauthentic form, that is, on external honor.[[79]](#endnote-79)

So although Mandeville preluded on the contemporary view of honor as something detached from virtue, he did not draw the conclusion that honor should, or could, be internalized. For Mandeville honor was in the first place something external; it is often (although not always)[[80]](#endnote-80) the desire to be actually approved of that motivates us.[[81]](#endnote-81) Maintaining one’s honor often *is* a matter of not being found out, and Mandeville would have questioned Smith’s claim that man also wants to be worthy of approval.[[82]](#endnote-82) Even praise we know we do not deserve pleases us, since our reason carries less weight than our pride.[[83]](#endnote-83)

**Conclusion**

Seemingly maintaining that we should act virtuously for the sake of virtue, Mandeville demonstrated the infeasibility of that stance. There is always a form of self-interest behind what looks like public-spirited behavior. In that sense, there is at times something tautological (and repetitive) in his work.[[84]](#endnote-84) Also, the controversy his work caused might partly be due to somewhat ambiguous reasoning on Mandeville’s part: vice is a public benefit, but Mandeville suggests that politicians and moralists equated virtue with self-denial because they thought that that doctrine was advantageous to society. Were they mistaken in what is truly good for the social order? That does not seem to be the case, as Mandeville himself also claimed that the opinion that there is no virtue without self-denial is more advantageous to society than the view that vice is beneficial.[[85]](#endnote-85) A possible response of Mandeville to a charge of being inconsistent would be that although practicing self-denial would be disadvantageous to society, *believing* that we should practice self-denial is advantageous. Politicians and moralists can promote self-denial as an ideal, because it only puts a lid on all too open and direct self-regarding behavior. As Mandeville rhymed: ‘So vice is beneficial found/When it’s by justice lopt and bound’ (*Fable* vol. I 24).[[86]](#endnote-86) The fact that all behaviour stems from self-interested motives, including behaviour that is beneficial to society, does not mean that *all* selfish behaviour is beneficial, of course.

What makes Mandeville’s work interesting despite these few limitations and ambiguities is the *form* of self-interest he considered to be potentially beneficial to society, namely honor, pride, and self-liking, and his description of how politicians, parents, and moralists skillfully exploit the high value we put on ourselves, mostly in a manner that advances the interests of society over that of the individual. His thoughts on war form an important reminder of the fact that this is not always the case. Both the positive and negative effects of honor are described in the *Enquiry*, the most mature formulation of his position. Most modern political philosophy, despite the recent increase in attention for honor, has in general not much to say on the wish to be well thought of as a motivator, both for the good and the bad. Undoubtedly, this is a loss; although many political philosophers have strong ideas about how people should behave, a political philosophy that does not take our actual motives into account would be excessively academic.

But if we do not pay due attention to the continued role of honor as an important motivator, we may also fail to see that even more democratic forms of honor still come with some serious shortcomings, mainly lying in its exclusiveness. In the world of today, that latter shortcoming is a rather visible one: although thinkers from Cicero to Smith thought that honor could motivate us to do what is right, and act in the general interest, honor probably cannot motivate to rise above group loyalty. As a general rule, the people whose interest we give priority to are also the people whose opinions matter most to us, that is, our own honor group, which rarely transcends national boundaries. Although every individual counts as much as another in today’s political rhetoric that holds that human rights and the fulfillment of basic needs should be secured for everyone, the result is that in reality we tend to give priority to the interests of our near and dear. Even if this is understandable to some extent, our double standards in for instance tolerating regimes with bad human rights records might suggest to the people living under those regimes that we consider them to have ‘neither concern nor capacity for human decency.’[[87]](#endnote-87)

Mandeville’s work also reminds us that, in spite of the disappearance of honor from our moral language, we still have to find our own position as to how much weight we want to, or have to, attach to how others judge our doings, and to what extent, if at all, we are willing to change our conduct to bring it into conformity with those judgments. Something we probably already do to a greater extent than we care to acknowledge: in the preface to the second volume of the *Fable*, in a character sketch of his protagonist Cleomenes, Mandeville suggests that who looks within, and at the world, cannot but become convinced of the fact that the insincerity of men is as universal as represented in the *Fable*.[[88]](#endnote-88)

1. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924). Reprinted by Liberty Fund in 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See also Hector Monro, *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for instance the spring 2016 issue of the Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics, entirely devoted to Mandeville; Tolonen, M. *Mandeville and Hume: Anatomists of civil society* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013); Edmundo Balsemão Pires and Joaquim Braga (eds), *Bernard De Mandeville's Tropology of Paradoxes: Morals, Politics, Economics, and Therapy* (Heidelberg: Springer 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See for instance Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Anthony Cunningham, *Modern Honor: A Philosophical Defense*, (New York: Routledge, 2013); Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2002); Peter Olsthoorn, *Honor in Political and Moral Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press); Robert L. Oprisko, *Honor: A Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and William L. Sessions, *Honor for Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* (New York: Continuum, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Berger, ‘On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour,’ in *Liberalism and its Critics*, ed. M. J. Sandel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 149-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See also Mika LaVaque-Manty, ‘Dueling for Equality: Masculine Honor and the Modern Politics of Dignity,’ *Political Theory*, 34 (2006): 715-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The two-sidedness of honour is especially visible in the work of Cicero, who for instance wrote that although ‘true and philosophic greatness of spirit regards the moral goodness to which Nature most aspires as consisting in deeds, not in fame, and prefers to be first in reality rather than in name’ taking the moral high ground brings us ‘on very slippery ground; for scarcely can the man be found who has passed through trials and encountered dangers and does not then wish for glory as a reward for his achievements’ (*De Officiis* I.65). Cicero’s somewhat ambiguous view point to the fact that the honour ethic only works if it consists of more than how the behaviour will look in the eyes of others. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1922), 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Fable* vol. I 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Fable* vol. I 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Fable* vol. I 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Fable* vol. I 63-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Fable* vol. I 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mandeville’s *A Modest Defense of Publick Stews* shows that his true position was not that strict: compared with rape, the seduction of honourable women, and private whoring, government controlled prostitution is the lesser evil. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Mandeville was influenced by the work of Erasmus (born in the same city as Mandeville, Rotterdam); Kaye writes in his introduction to the *Fable* that ‘Mandeville means by vice pretty much what Erasmus means by folly’ (vol. I p. cvii). In *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus asked rhetorically about the invention of the arts and sciences

    what sedentary, thoughtful men would have beat their brains in the search of new and unheard of mysteries, if not urged on by the bubbling hopes of credit and reputation? They think a little glittering flash of vainglory is a sufficient reward for all their sweat and toil, and tedious drudgery, while they that are supposedly more foolish, reap advantage of the others’ labors.

    Regarding the birth of the arts and sciences, Mandeville, in his turn, influenced Rousseau. But different from Mandeville, Rousseau held that the fact that the arts and the sciences ‘owe their birth to our vices,’ more specifically to our vanity, should make us suspicious about their benefits (*A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Enquiry* 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Fable* vol. I 52-3. According to Oprisko, the main ‘methodological difficulty within the study of honor is that the word means many things and that, because it means many things, its value as a word becomes relatively meaningless’; *Honor: A Phenomenology*, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Fable* vol. I 216. See also Harold John Cook, ‘Bernard Mandeville and the Therapy of “The Clever Politician,”’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60 (1999): 101-24 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* (London: Cass, 1971), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Enquiry* 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Fable* vol. I 246. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Enquiry* 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Enquiry* 15; see also 18-9, 30. Honor and humility both ask for a proper understanding of one’s worth, but in the eyes of those who deem humility a virtue we are, different from what we often think, just not worth that much. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Fable* vol. II. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. *Fable* vol. I 246; Tolstoy describes in *Anna Karenina* that for officers the rule is ‘that one must pay a cardsharper, but need not pay a tailor; that one must never tell a lie to a man, but one may to a woman; that one must never cheat anyone, but one may a husband; that one must never pardon an insult, but one may give one’ (Part III, Chapter 20). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Enquiry* 90. Locke wrote that ‘murders in duels, when fashion has made them honourable, are committed without remorse of conscience’ (*Essay* I.ii.9). But Appiah shows how something once honorable can be turned into something backward or laughable, as happened to footbinding in China and dueling in Great Britain. *The Honor Code*, especially 51, 100, 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Fable* vol. I 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Fable* vol. I 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *Fable* vol. I 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Fable* vol. I 28-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Fable* vol. I 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Fable* vol. I 37. Erasmus asked rhetorically: ‘what power was it that drew those stony, oaken, and wild people into cities but flattery?’ (*In Praise of Folly*). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Fable* vol. I 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Fable* vol. I 136; see also *Fable* vol. I 73, vol. II 67. The more dextrous men grew in concealing ‘the outward signs of pride (...), the more entirely they became enslaved by it within’ *Fable* II xx. Likewise, a gentleman’s ‘inward avarice, is forced to give way to his outward liberality’ *Fable* II 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *Fable* vol. I 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See also Thomas A. Horne, ‘Envy and Commercial Society. Mandeville and Smith on “Private Vices, Public Benefits,”’ *Political Theory* 9 (1981): 551-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Hume wrote that ‘men have, in general, a much greater propensity to overvalue than undervalue themselves’ (*Enquiry* VIII). According to Smith, imagining how a well-informed impartial spectator sees our conduct is the only way to correct ‘the natural misrepresentations of self-love’ (*Theory* III.3.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. See also Edward J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 176; Tolonen, *Anatomists*. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *Fable* vol. I 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Fable* vol. I 160-161. Mandeville knew the Stoic teachings as well as Seneca did, but was unsure how ‘philosophically’ he would react if someone ‘made the least motion of spitting in my face.’ *Fable* vol. I 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Fable* vol. I 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. *Fable* vol. II 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *Enquiry* 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *Enquiry* 3. Hence, wrote Hume, that ‘custom has established it as a rule, in common societies, that men should not indulge themselves in self-praise,’ and that modesty is ‘immediately agreeable to others’ (*Enquiry* VIII). According to Appiah, ‘modesty may be part of the honor code’ (*Honor Code*, 17). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. *Fable* vol. II 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. *Fable* vol. II 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Locke, *Thoughts* §56; Mandeville *Fable* vol. II 78. See for a comparable remark Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* VI.iii.46. Locke held that ‘if thou can once get into children a love of credit, and an apprehension of shame and disgrace, you have put into them the true principle, which will constantly work, and incline them to the right’ (*Thoughts* §55). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. *Fable* vol. I 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Enquiry* 40. See also Bert Kerkhof, ‘A fatal attraction? Smith’s “theory of moral sentiments” and Mandeville’s “fable,”’ *History of Political Thought* 16 (1995): 219-33. But it is impossible to increase the fear of shame without increasing pride ‘in the same proportion.’ *Fable* II 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *Fable* vol. II 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. *A Treatise of Human Nature* III.iii.ii. See also Andrew Sabl, ‘Noble Infirmity,’ *Political Theory*, 34 (2006): 542-68 . [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. *Fable* vol. I231-2. Modern military sociology echoes this old insight. See for instance John Dollard, *Fear in Battle* (Washington DC: The Infantry Journal, 1944), 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. *Fable* vol. I 233. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *Fable* vol. I 233. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *Fable* vol. II 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. ‘View but an army at the sacking of a town, and see what observation or sense of moral principles, or what touch of conscience for all the outrages they do. Robberies, murders, rapes, are the sports of men set at liberty from punishment and censure’ (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* I.ii.9). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *Enquiry* 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *Enquiry* 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. *Enquiry* 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. *Enquiry* 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *Fable* vol. I 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. *Fable* II 78. Mandeville was lenient on dueling: ‘those that rail at duelling don’t consider the benefit the society receives from that fashion: if every ill-bred fellow might use what language he pleased, without being called to an account for it, all conversation would be spoiled’ (*Fable* vol. I 242-3). Many apologists emphasized the civilizing effect of dueling (see also Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 32). Hume and Smith opposed the practice (ibid., 33-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. *Enquiry* 163-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. See also Friedrich von Hayek, ‘Dr Bernard Mandeville’ in *New Studies in Philosophy: Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 264; Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable*, 3; Louis Schneider, *Paradox and Society: The Work of Bernard Mandeville* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987); Tolonen ‘Politeness, Paris and the *Treatise*,’ *Hume Studies* 34 (2008): 21–42. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. *Of Moral Prejudices*. The Stoic philosophy has ‘a very bad effect on those, who indulge in it.’ These indulgers might have self-serving motives, finding an excuse in Stoicism for their natural indolence (Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* V.i; see for a similar opinion Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* XI.xvi). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. *Treatise* III.iii.i. According to Hume, too, politicians and parents try to bolster the esteem for justice, and inducing people to behave accordingly. Although ‘natural, and even necessary,’ the progress of the sentiments of justice is pushed ‘by the artifice of politicians, who, in order to govern men more easily, and preserve peace in human society, have endeavoured to produce an esteem for justice, and an abhorrence of injustice’ (*Treatise* III.ii.ii). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. *Treatise* III.iii.i. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Mandeville suggests that our common sense morality is quite utilitarian: ‘when we pronounce actions good or evil, we only regard the hurt or benefit the society receives from them, and not the person who commits them’ (*Fable* vol. I 274). [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. *Theory* III.2.7. In this aspect, Smith’s impartial spectator is a ‘consciencelike faculty.’ Fonna Forman-Barzilai, ‘Sympathy in Space(s) Adam Smith on Proximity,’ *Political Theory*, 33 (2005): 189-217. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. *Theory* VII.ii.4.10. see also Daniel Luban, ‘Adam Smith on Vanity, Domination, and History,’ *Modern Intellectual History*, 9 (2012): 275-302. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *Theory* VII.ii.4.10. Virtue has ‘an immediate reference to the sentiments of others. Virtue is not said to be amiable or to be meritorious, because it is the object of its own love, or of its own gratitude; but because it excites those sentiments in other man’ (*Theory* III.1.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. *Fable* vol. I 380. See also David Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 52-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. See for instance *Fable* vol. I 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Schneider, *Paradox and Society*, 212. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. *Theory* VII.ii.4.12. See also Herfried Münkler and Karsten Fischer, ‘Common Good and Civic Spirit in the Welfare State: Problems of Societal Self–Description,’ *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10 (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. *Theory* VII.ii.4.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Frank H. Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 44-5. Appiah writes that ‘a person of honor cares first of all not about being respected but about being *worthy* of respect.’ *The Honor Code*, 16. In a chapter on dueling, that seems an overstatement. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. See Oprisko *Honor: A Phenomenology*, and Sessions, *Honor for Us*, for the different meanings of honor; see Krause, *Honor and Liberalism*, for honor codes and for honor as a ‘quality of character.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Mandeville saw, for instance, shame as ‘*proceeding from an apprehension that others either do, or might, if they knew all, deservedly despise us*’ [emphasis in original]. *Fable* vol. I 53-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. See also Markku Peltonen, *The duel in early modern England: civility, politeness and honour* (Cambridge University Press, 2003),267-8, 284 . [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. See also Hundert, *The Enlightenment Fable*, 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. *Fable* vol. I 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. See also Monro, *Ambivalence of Mandeville*, 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. *Enquiry*, preface. See for ambiguities in the Fable also Luban, Daniel. ‘Bernard Mandeville as Moralist and Materialist,’ *History of European Ideas*, 41 (2015): 831-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. See for another possible response of Mandeville: Schneider, *Paradox and Society*,109. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Lewis, B., *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 80. Honor and shame are still very much alive in some of these societies notions, and the worrying fact is that a strong sense of honor sometimes comes with a tendency to do whatever is necessary to even the score, in the hope that revenge will lift some of the dishonor felt. Some have even speculated that Western cultural and economic hegemony, insensitivity to migrants at home and military presence abroad, have produced a sense of humiliation that is a root cause of modern-day terrorism. See for instance Stern, J., *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. *Fable* vol. II xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)