

“A Great and Honest Hive”: Mandeville’s Subversion of the Classical Apiary

[“Uma Grande e Honesta Colmeia”: A Subversão do Apiário Clássico em Mandeville]

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Abstract: Bernard Mandeville built his two-volume masterwork, *The Fable of the Bees*, around a largely ignored poem originally published in 1705, his “Grumbling Hive.” This piece attempts to provide the literary context for Mandeville’s choice of apian metaphor. We examine ancient and early modern examples of social and political theory informed and articulated by reference to the organization and structure of apiaries and their denizens. Considering this context, we argue, demonstrates in a new way the subversive character of “The Grumbling Hive” and its subsequent iterations as *The Fable of the Bees*. Mandeville turns inside out the time-worn assumptions about the natural harmony of hives, their relation to human society, and the role of speech and reason in their flourishing.

Keywords: Mandeville. Early modern political thought. Social theory.

Resumo: Bernard Mandeville construiu sua obra-prima de dois volumes, *A fábula das abelhas*, em torno de um poema largamente ignorado originalmente publicado em 1705, sua “A colmeia resmungona”. Este artigo tenta fornecer o contexto literário para a escolha da metáfora apiana de Mandeville. Examinamos exemplos antigos e modernos de teoria social e política informados e articulados por referência à organização e estrutura dos apiários e seus habitantes. Argumentamos que a consideração desse contexto demonstra de uma nova maneira o caráter subversivo de “A colmeia resmungona” e suas iterações subsequentes como *A fábula das abelhas*. Mandeville vira do avesso as suposições desgastadas pelo tempo sobre a harmonia natural das colmeias, sua relação com a sociedade humana, e o papel da fala e da razão em seu florescimento.

Palavras-chave: Mandeville. Início do pensamento político moderno. Teoria social.

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I. Introduction

Bernard Mandeville is widely recognized as a pivotal figure in the history of political and social thought, marking a transition from 17th-century concerns with the nature and limits of political obligation to 18th-century concerns with sociability and commerce. The formula “private vices, public virtues,” first appended to the 1714 first edition of *The Fable of the Bees*, loomed large in the moral, social, and political thought 18th-century figures ranging from Hutcheson to Rousseau to Smith to Kant. In this paper, we argue that his originality is even more striking when read against what we call the “classical apiary.” By this term, we have in mind the rich tradition of political and ethical theorizing in which bees, their virtues, and their organizational forms served as exemplars through which one might evaluate human forms of political organization. Broadly speaking, the classical apiary imagined bees as intrinsically social and political creatures, characterized by a selfless devotion to the common good, ruled by beloved monarchs, and embodying rational order in their organization. This classical apiary can be found in Greek writers like Aristotle, Roman authors like Seneca and Pliny, and in a considerable number of early modern texts, and it is this classical apiary that Mandeville turns inside out in his “Grumbling Hive.” In doing so, however, he encounters a second and related theme within traditional political theoretical discussions of bees: their relative lack of language, the comparative role of language in human society, and the origins of language in the course of the development of civil society. Thus we examine Mandeville’s innovative naturalistic account of the origins of language in volume II of *The Fable of the Bees* and argue that it should be read as his attempt to resolve a problem that his subversion of the classical apiary brings about: namely, how and why humans come to develop language.

We make this argument in three stages. The first stage (Section II) focuses on a range of representative Greek and Latin texts in which we encounter the classical apiary. Section III turns to a variety of early modern texts in which bees served as a locus of political and ethical theorizing. In all of these texts, classical and early modern, we show that a cohesive portrait of the apiary emerges; we then show, in Section IV, that Mandeville turns this tradition upside down. Rather than portray bees as selfless contributors to the common good—bees as models of sociability and evidence of the rationality of the universe—Mandeville’s bees are selfish individuals induced to cooperate not by reason but instead by the passions. This subversion of the classical apiary creates a problem, however, and in Section V we show how he solves through his

development of a naturalistic theory of language origins.

II. The Classical Apiary

A rich variety of classical texts provide us with numerous accounts of the ways in which humans and bees are similar. Despite the variety of texts – by language and genre – they cohere on several themes. Broadly speaking, these accounts hold that bees, like humans, are social creatures who, in their organization, display models of politics and sociability from which humans can learn. Perhaps the foundational treatment of the apian metaphor in ancient social and political thought is to be found in Aristotle. In *Politics* I.2 he famously writes that “man is more of a political (*politikon*) animal than a bee or any other gregarious (*agelaiou*) animal”; thus, with respect to their political qualities, humans differ from bees in degree (“more”), rather than kind. What differentiates them in kind, though, is the distinguishing feature of “speech” (*logon*): humans have speech, while animals have “voice” (*phone*) alone. Speech is *more* than voice; it signifies not just what is “the perception of pleasure and pain” – something of which animals and their voices are capable – but what is “expedient and inexpedient,” and therefore “the just and the unjust” (ARISTOTLE, 1984b, 1253a7-a19). This passage is imprecise – Hobbes, as we will see, seems to misinterpret it on a number of occasions – but from it we may nonetheless conclude that humanity is *more* political than bees, who are in turn *more* political than other creatures. This seems to be consistent with Aristotle’s treatment of bees in the *History of Animals*, where he classifies bees –along with humans, wasps, ants, and cranes – as “social creatures” (the actual term he uses in Greek, which Thompson renders as “social,” is *politika*). Moreover, Aristotle writes, such creatures “have some one common object [*koinon ergon*] in view,” while other, merely “gregarious” creatures do not necessarily have such an object (ARISTOTLE, 1984a, 488a3-10). This is another key element of the apian imaginary that we will continue to see as we move forward: that bees are by nature exemplars of the communitarian ideal, oriented (generally, if not always) towards the peace and health of the hive.

Echoes of this account can be found in Roman thought. Cicero’s bees in *On Duties*, for instance, are also social:

And again, as swarms of bees do not gather for the sake of making honeycomb but make the honeycomb because they are gregarious by

nature, so human beings – and to a much higher degree – exercise their skill together in action and thought because they are naturally gregarious (CICERO I.157, 1913).

Cicero's Latin here is instructive: bees are, by nature, *congregabilia*, or congregating, creatures; humans, like bees, are also *natura congregati* creatures, and it is our social nature that gives rise to human thought and action (*agendi cogitandique*). Cicero's contemporary, Varro, makes similar claims in *De re rustica*: "Bees are not of a solitary nature, as eagles are, but are like human beings." Bees enjoy "fellowship in toil and in building," and – unlike with Cicero, who does not specify their form of government – Varro notes that bees inhabit a monarchy: "Their commonwealth is like the states of men, for here are king, government, and fellowship" (*Haec ut hominum civitates, quod hic est et rex et imperium et societas*). Varro's bees are both devoted to their king and admirably industrious:

They follow their own king where he goes, assist him when weary, and if he is unable to fly they bear him upon their backs, in their eagerness to serve him. They are themselves not idle, and detest the lazy; and so they attack and drive out from them the drones, as these give no help and eat the honey, and even a few bees chase larger numbers of drones in spite of their cries (VARRO 1934, III.16).

The bees we find in Cicero and Varro are social and industrious; we see the same qualities in Virgil's *Eclogues*, specifically Book IV, but Virgil gives far more emphasis to the way in which bees do not always get along and stand in need of an external power to bring about peace. Virgil's bees, like his humans in the *Aeneid*, are passionate creatures (he refers to "the fury of the crowd" at IV.69, and his bees even engage in "idle play" at IV.104), and his apiary includes martial metaphors – he describes "chiefs [*duces*] great-hearted, a whole nation's character and tastes and tribes and battles" (VIRGIL 1936, IV.4-5). While Virgil writes, in part, as if he were directing his addressee, Maecenas, on where and how to set up a hive ("First seek a settled home for your bees" at IV.8), he is nonetheless intensely interested in bees from a socio-political perspective. Virgil's bees are social and industrious, and generally can run their own affairs, but they are also intensely warlike, rallying around "their king" (*circa regem* at IV.75) and going forth for battle. Like humans – or at least like Virgil's Romans of the 1st century BCE – Virgil's bees do not fare par-

ticularly well in a situation of contested sovereignty, with the result that the beekeeper must intervene to eliminate “the meaner of look, that he prove no wasteful burden,” and thus “let the nobler reign in the palace alone” (IV.89-91). The battles themselves are “storms of passion” (*motus animorum*), and the role of the beekeeper is to bring peace “by the tossing of a little dust” to settle down the insects. The beekeeper’s intervention leads to the killing of one king and thus eliminating rival claims to the throne, ensuring that “the nobler reign in the palace alone” (IV.90). That said, Jupiter has endowed bees with certain “qualities” (*naturas* at IV.149): “They alone have children in common [*communis natos*], hold the dwellings of their city jointly [*consortia tecta urbis habent*], and pass their life under the majesty of law [*sub legibus*].” Virgil’s bees are like humans, too, in that they “alone know a fatherland [*patriam solae*] and fixed home” (IV.155). So, too, do they have a division of labor (“some watch over the gathering of food...some...lay down the narcissus’ tears...others lead out the full-grown young. To some it has fallen by lot to be sentries...”); so, again, do they divide up their activities by “fixed covenant” (*foedere pacto*). And these bees are marked by tremendous devotion to the king [*rege*]:

While he is safe, are all of one mind [*mens omnibus una est*]; when he is lost, straightway they break their fealty, and themselves pull down the honey they have reared and tear up their trellised combs. He is the guardian of their toils; to him they do reverence [*illum admirantur*]; all stand round him in clamorous crowd, and attend him in throngs. Often they lift him on their shoulders, for him expose their bodies to battle, and seek amid wounds a glorious death (IV.212-18).

Underlining the political upshot of this depiction, Morley suggests that “Virgil’s choice of perspective” served to underline “the need for the management of an otherwise vulnerable and unstable society, and thus to highlight the absence of a benevolent higher power that could intervene to solve Rome’s problems” (MORLEY 2007, 464).

Seneca’s bees, unlike Virgil’s, are not prone to civil war or in need of an external agent to quell conflict when their passions go astray. Moreover, his bees are evidence of the fact that “kingship has been devised by nature herself” (SENECA 1995, I.19.2). Seneca’s bees are warlike, to be sure, but they are less prone to civil warfare than Virgil’s bees; “highly irascible and...highly pugnacious,” yet their king “has no sting” and thus serves as an “example for

great kings.” And while they are warlike, they have the advantage over human beings in that they can only sting once and thus cannot “do harm more than once” (I.19.3-4). Seneca’s king, unarmed with a sting, is instead armed by the love of his subjects, and their form of rule is itself a product of nature.

Mandeville would likely have been in a position to know Aristotle, Cicero, Varro, Virgil, and Seneca; he quotes Virgil’s *Eclogue*’s and refers to Seneca in *Remark O*, quotes Seneca in the third and sixth dialogue of *Fable of the Bees* Vol. II, quotes Cicero’s *De haruspicum responsis oratio* in *A Vindication of the Book*, and makes a likely allusion to Pliny in *An Enquiry in to the Origin of Moral Virtue* (MANDEVILLE 1988, I.148, II.115, II.346, I.50 fn. 1); in any case, both Aristotle and Cicero were in wide circulation and widely read in Mandeville’s day, and Mandeville would have been in a good position to know them, just as he would have been in a position to know Pliny’s *Natural History*, copies of which were held in the Leiden library.¹ Pliny’s account of bees is, as Morley suggests, fruitfully read as a 1st century response to “Virgil’s now-authoritative account” (MORLEY 2007, 468). Whereas both Varro and Virgil are deeply interested in the status of bees as producers of honey, Pliny goes somewhat further, in that his account is explicitly anthropocentric—“they alone of this genus have been created for the sake of man” (PLINY 1949, XI.IV.11). Pliny’s bees are not simply naturally industrious (“they endure toil, they construct works”), but they are also, like Aristotle’s bees, naturally political. Unlike Aristotle, who does not mention the bees having a *politeia*, however, Pliny holds that they have a republic, or rather a commonwealth (*republicam habent*) (XI.IV.11). They have, according to Pliny, “a system of manners [mores] that outstrips that of all the other animals,” and they rival and indeed “excel” humans in their rationality (*ratione*; cf. *ratio operis* at XI.VIII.20), given “that they recognize only the common interest” (*nihil novere nisi commune*) (XI.IV.12). If Pliny’s bees can be described as rational, or having reason, this is another departure from Aristotle. Their collective decision making operates by unanimity, evident in their “vote” to eliminate all “kings” but one when there are rivals, and they cooperate and devote themselves to “the king bee” even though the ruler does not have any coercive capacity (“the ruler does not use a sting”) (XI.XVII.51-2).

Aristotle, Cicero, Varro, Virgil, Seneca, Pliny: all of their bees are naturally

¹The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Department of Special Collections is fortunate to have just this edition of the catalog, which we consulted (*Catalogus* 1674).

sociable, engage in some form of politics (when specified, typically monarchy), frequently divide up labor amongst themselves, cooperate out of service to the common good, and serve as a sort of model for human affairs. When they do talk about the way in which bees communicate with each other, they generally differentiate bees from humans in kind rather than degree. To be sure, bees in these sources do not always get along – they can be warlike and, in Virgil, they are prone to civil war. But the bees imagined in the classical apiary are virtuous models, fit for human emulation.

III. The Early Modern Apiary

We have, thus far, briefly surveyed a range of ancient views on bees and the ways in which they serve as models for human sociability and political life. We hope now to show that the early modern apiary, along with its medieval predecessor, provide a similar thematic treatment of bees. These themes appear and reappear throughout the medieval period in the works of Isidore of Seville, Ambrose of Milan, Alexander Neckam, and especially in Thomas of Cantimpré, whose 13th-century *Bonum universale de apibus* features an extended and fully developed allegory between the organization of bees and the life of the church. Debra Hassig describes medieval bestiary entries for bees as “remarkably uniform,” in their “exalt[ing] the creature in terms of human civic values.”

Bee virtues...include their communal lifestyle, in which they share labor, food, leisure activities, and even offspring. They are to be commended as well for their complete lack of interest in sex...[which] leaves them free to concentrate on the good of their community and to serve their king, to whom they pay the greatest devotion. They work hard but are completely happy because although they are under the rule of a king, they remain free (HASSIG 1995, 52-61, 53; see McCULLOCH 1962, 95-6; GULDENTOPS 1999).

Medieval authors appended a number of Christian themes – including most notably monastic organization and chastity – to the apian image, but the classical themes of industry, orderliness, communitarianism, rationality, and obedience to a monarch remain. As Hassig puts it, “the figure of the bee in the [medieval] bestiaries... provides first and foremost a guide for good citizenship in the secular world” (HASSIG 1995, 61; on chastity, see WOLFSON 2010,

295-300).

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the classical conception of the apiary – organized, industrious, cooperative – remained viable in early modern England and France. In Thomas Muffet’s 16th-century *Insectorum sive Minimorum Animalium Theatrum* – an expansion of previous insectarium manuscripts, translated into English and published in London as an appendix to Edward Topsell’s *Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* (itself an English translation of Gesner’s *Historia Animalium*, the most widely read bestiary of the Renaissance) – bees are fashioned as the “soverainty and preheminance” of venomous insects (MUFFET 1658, 637). Examining the “rare and admirable contexture and fabrick” of honeycombs – and citing Aristotle, Virgil, and Pliny – Muffet attributes to them “imagination, fantasie, judgement, memory, and some certain glimpse of reason”; he finds in observing them “a wonderful order and form in their Common-wealth and government.” God made bees for “the use and service of Man” in at least two ways – first, as a source of food, wax, and medicine, but, far more importantly, so that “they should be unto us patterns and presidents of political and oeconomical vertues,” and “Teachers and School-masters instructing us in certain divine knowledge” (644). Their political virtues are, perhaps unsurprisingly, those fitted to moderate monarchy, and they reflect in somewhat obvious ways the political debates of 16th-century England letters. Bees “are governed” and “live under a Monarchy, not under a tyrannical State”; they “elect” their kings, however, and “although they willingly submit their necks under a Kingly government... they still keep their ancient liberties and privileges, because of a certain Prerogative they maintain in giving their voices and opinions, and their King being deeply bound to them by an oath, they exceedingly honour and love” (651). These kings are marked by a kind of “law of nature,” a natural temper marked by “eminent stature, and goodly corporature” and which “excelleth in mildness and temperateness.” Bees have ethical and economical virtues beyond their political organization, Muffet argues – they are “esteemed most servicable and profitable” among beasts, renowned for “moderate frugality and temperance,” and serve as “examples to men of Political prudence and fidelity but also presidents for them to imitate in many other vertues” (640, 642). Bees are the most excellent of the “*Zooa agelaia*” – a phrase that looks back to Aristotle – performing as they do “all things for the common good.” Into this account Muffet weaves frequent references to Virgil “the Poet” and Aristotle the “Philosopher Prince”; the account is thoroughly continuous with what the classical apiary in its conceiving the apiary as a site of natural political, moral, and economical virtue, one meant for human emula-

tion.

In his landmark work of apian science, 1609’s *The Feminine Monarchie* (which incidentally popularized for the first time the idea that hives were ruled by queens rather than kings), Charles Butler strikes a similar note: “Among all the Creatures which our bountifull God hath made for the use and service of man, in respect of great profit with smal cost, of their ubiquitie or being in all Countries, and of their continuall labour and comly order, the Bees are most to be admired” (BUTLER 1609, I.i). Here too, the text is replete with citations to Pliny and Aristotle, and bees are exalted for their economy and their industry; “in valour and magnanimitie they surpasses all creatures,” Butler writes, proceeding to praise them still further for their fortitude, prudence, temperance, justice, chastity, and cleanliness (I.xlviii-liv). Ecclesiastical emphases abound: Butler even relates at length the story of a “simple woman” who claims to have witnessed bees construct a “Chappel... with an altar in it,” constructed around a “consecrated Host” she had earlier procured (I.I). Even here, in a text offering itself as a practical guide to beekeeping, the political interpretation of apian behavior remains – indeed, remains entirely undiluted by Butler’s empirical approach to apiculture: as to their “order,” it “may well be said” that they “have a Common-wealth, since all that they doe is in common, without any private respect... They worke for all, they watch for all, they fight for all” (I.iv-v). Here again, they live “under the government of one Monarch, of whom above all things they have a principall care and respect, loving, reverencing, and obeying her in all things”; bees “endure no government, but a Monarchie,” moreover they “abhorre as well Polyarchie, as Anarchie, God having shewed in them unto men, an expresse pattern of A PERFECT MONARCHIE, THE MOST NATURAL AND ABSOLUTE FORME OF GOVERNMENT” (I.vi, I.viii).

A number of additional apiary manuscripts appear in London between 1657 and the publication of Mandeville’s first penny-pamphlet, “Grumbling Hive,” in 1705 (PURCHAS 1657; WORLIDGE 1676; WORLIDGE 1698; GEDDE 1675; T.R. MED. Dr. 1681). With very few exceptions, they reproduce the thematic pattern described above. More than this, and important for our purposes here, is the way that 17th-century authors weave traditional themes concerning the nature of bees into a highly practical project of apiculture; in other words, what comes out clearly in these 17th-century texts is that the rehearsal of these classical themes – alongside some modern commentary on monarchy, usually – was necessary for apiculturist’s understanding of his charge. To be a gifted keeper of bees meant to understand, for example, their virtues and their “gov-

ernment.” An exemplary case is 1679’s *A Further Discovery of Bees; treating of the Nature, Government, Generation, and Preservation of the Bee*, written by Charles II’s official “beemaster,” Moses Rusden. While something as humble as the bee may seem a trifle – particularly considering the importance of a king’s time – it nonetheless “speaks knowingly and by experience, of Kings, and Chieftans; of War, and Peace; of Obedience and Subjection, of Government and Discipline, of Ingenuity and Labour, and the good effects arising from them. . . even in this well form’d Commonwealth of the Bees”; Rusden wishes that “all [his] Majesties Subjects may be as loyal to your Majesty, as conformable to your laws, and as beneficial to the Publick, as these little People are to their Sovereign, to their customs, and their republick.” All the marks of classical and medieval apiary are here: references to Aristotle, Pliny, and Virgil; the praising of the virtues of bees, in particular their “admirable Industry, that appears by the indefatigable pains they take for the good of the Commonwealth”; their living peaceably under a monarch (though Rusden abandons the idea of a *queen* bee and emphasizes the “severe, just, and absolute qualities of kingly rule”), the idea that apian society is “deserving [of] our imitation,” and “gives us variety of Lessons not unworthy, in many things, of Princes and of States-men, of good Subjects, and such as would grow rich, and prosper.” Despite this, however, Rusden insists that, *unlike* Aristotle, Pliny, or Virgil, he has elected not to “describe with Fancy, and fine invention these little people”; instead,

My business, by the good helps I have had, is to shew Nature, and Truth naked, and unadorn’d, with Metaphors or suppositions; for I would be considered only as a Traveller who hath carefully, studiously, and faithfully visited and examined other Nations, to bring home to publick use, & information, the observations he hath made, of their living and subsisting, their Laws & Government, their Arts and Manufactures, and the strengths, and pollicies by which they preserve themselves upon all occasions. . . whilst I manifestly shew how Bees may be best understood, enjoied, and preserv’d alive, to the benefit of. . . Mankind (RUSDEN 1685 [1679], Epistle Dedicatory).

We see here the perspective of political economy whereby a nation is understood as a household – or a hive – ready and needful of order and a steady hand to guide it to prosperity.

There are two final cases worth considering. As is often the case, we see a very different take on received accounts when we come to Hobbes. Hobbes, according to Farrell, “rejects the standard view that humans can live socially as bees and ants do” (FARRELL 1985, 514), and he does so in particular because human beings differ fundamentally from what Hobbes calls, in the Latin, “*Animalia quaedam bruta*” (HOBBS 2012, XVII.259). Precisely because humans are by nature competitive and egotistical, and because humans have the “art of words” (*verborum... arte*) that even social animals lack, humans cannot spontaneously cooperate in the way that these creatures do (XVII.258). Among humans we agree only by means of covenant, whereas among bees and ants the agreement is natural.

Inspired perhaps by his aversion to Aristotle, or at least to what he understood as Aristotle’s influence in 17th-century England, Hobbes discusses the differences between human society and that of bees in all three of his major works (HOBBS 1994, XIX.5.105-6; HOBBS 1998, V.5.71-2; HOBBS 2012, XVII.258-60).² Moreover, he brings them into his analysis at precisely the same juncture in each case: in a chapter on the origins of commonwealth, and in order to refute a specific objection to the need for an absolute sovereign. If Aristotle is right that humanity shares with their apian cousins a natural *political* character, then how can it be that humans – and *not* bees – require so profoundly a government as powerful as Hobbes suggests? He produces the same list of six reasons, in the same order, in all three works: first, that bees are not subject to competition with regards to status (“Honour and Dignity”); second, that private interest and the public interest *align* among bees, whereas they do not among men; third, that bees lack reason (*ratione*) and thus cannot critique political arrangements in order to prove their cleverness, in the way men do; fourthly, that bees have insufficient use of “voice [*vox*],” or anyway lack the “art of words [*verborum... arte*]” that men use in disputation; fifth, that bees do not distinguish between right and wrong but only between pleasure and pain (they “cannot distinguish between *Injury*, and *Damage*”), and thus are not, like men, prone to conflict even when they are otherwise comfortable and well-provided-for; sixth, that bees exist in a state of “natural justice” and concord – for men, of course, all covenants are “Artificial.”

²In *Leviathan* (XVII.258-60), Hobbes indicates his intention to dispute Aristotle by misattributing to him the view that bees are in the *Politics* “numbred amongst Politicall creatures (*Animalibus Politicis*)” In her side-by-side rendering of Hobbes’s three major works (HOBBS 2017, 200-1), Deborah Baumgold has lined up these passages.

Several things fall out of this discussion when placed next to the previous discussion concerning the classical and modern apiaries. First, Hobbes rejects entirely the classical view that humans and bees are *alike* in ways that are relevant to social and political analysis: bees merely “live sociably” (Hobbes’s Latin has them “living peaceably together in the same hive [*Apes... quae pacificè in eodem Alveari... inter se vivunt*]”), but, further, even “social” arrangements like these are utterly foreclosed to their human counterparts. Second, Hobbes argues that humanity’s inability to align “public” and “private” good is not primarily (or perhaps even at all) a problem to do with material *resources*; rather, humans are status-seekers in ways that bees and ants are not, and thereby pathologically belligerent. Lastly, Hobbes reformulates the relationship between reason, speech, and political life. Here – and, of course, in many other places besides – Hobbes underlines the ways in which reason (“*ratione*”) and speech make the frictionless community found in the apiary *impossible*: it is reason that goads us into thinking we are more clever than our rulers and thus unjustly neglected when our suggestions are not heeded; it is speech that multiplies the sources and thus the frequency of disputes. Hobbes differs from his predecessors insofar as they tended to think that humans could be understood as fundamentally similar to bees; where he does not differ, however, is in describing bees themselves as naturally social creatures.

Meanwhile, language, which clearly delineates bees and other social creatures from humans, is a key feature of the human organism by virtue of it being a creature made by God in his image, a point Hobbes makes in an unusually orthodox fashion in Chapter IV of *Leviathan*, where he refers to Adam having been given the gift of speech by God himself. And while speech counts against the possibility of natural human sociability in Chapter XVII, it is nonetheless the case that, in chapter IV, the absence of speech would have made men as unsocial as bears, lions, or wolves.

Finally, there was an important apian text published almost simultaneously with Mandeville’s “Grumbling Hive”: François Fénelon’s posthumously-published *Fables composez pour l’éducation d’un prince* (FÉNELON 1725; first English translation FÉNELON 1722). Though the *Fables* were composed before “The Grumbling Hive,” during Fénelon’s time (1689-1697) as the tutor of the Duke of Burgundy, they went unpublished until his heir produced them alongside another didactic work, *The Dialogues of the Dead*, in 1718. They were translated into English in 1722 and proved sufficiently popular to warrant two additional translations in England before 1750 (JOOST 1950). Though

Mandeville could not have been familiar with Fénelon's *Fables* when he wrote "The Grumbling Hive" – or, for that matter, when he issued his two editions of his own translation of la Fontaine's *Fables* – he was almost certainly familiar with Fénelon and his masterpiece, *The Adventures of Telemachus* (FÉNELON 1699), which first appeared in English translation in 1699 and quickly became one of the most widely read works of the English 18th-century (MISH 1981) and the "most-read book in eighteenth-century France after the Bible" (HANLEY 2020a, 1). Indeed no less an interpreter than Istvan Hont has claimed that Mandeville's early work was motivated in large part by his reading of Fénelon (HONT 2006).

The circumstances surrounding its publication aside, Fénelon's fables are worth examining side-by-side with Mandeville's "Grumbling Hive" – in particular, the fable titled "*Les Abeilles*" ["*The Bees*"].³ In Fénelon's, as in Mandeville's apian fable, the hive is found (in this case, by a young prince walking in a garden) to be "[une] petite République" characterized by an astonishing degree of "l'ordre, le soin & le travail" (FÉNELON 1725, 330). Unlike Mandeville's hive, however, Fénelon's apian republic preserves these qualities through a strict observance of civic discipline: "l'oisiveté" and "la paresse" are banned in this "petit État," and the lower orders obey their superiors "sans murmure & sans jalousie" (330-1). When the queen bee emerges to instruct the young prince, she insists that "nous ne souffrons point parmi nous le desordre ni la license" (331). For Fénelon, the hive is a symbol of republican virtue of an older sort: it represents order, discipline, and especially public spiritedness. The queen continues:

...on n'est considerable parmi nous que par son travail, & par les talens qui peuvent être utiles à notre République. Le mérite est la seule voye qui élève aux premieres places. Nous ne nous occupons nuit & jour qu'à des choses dont les hommes retirent toute l'utilité (331-2).

This use of "*les hommes*" at the end of the queen's speech is a curious slip: "we occupy ourselves night and day only with things from which *men* draw utility." She closes by entreating the prince to introduce the virtue and order into the human world that he observes in the hive.

³"The Bees" is one of three apian fables that appear in Fénelon's *Fables*.

In *Telemachus*, Fénelon describes Telemachus visiting several cities that had managed, through enlightened laws and statesmanship, to bend commercial activity to republican mores (HONT 2006, HANLEY 2000b, Ch. II). Several of these cities – for example, Bétique (Book VII) and Crete (Book V) – fit the classical ascetic republican mold that would later inspire Rousseau; the citizens of Bétique, for example, live lives of bucolic simplicity, use their gold and silver stock to make plowshares, and believe that material luxuries “weaken, intoxicate, torment those who possess them... Can a superfluity that serves only to render men bad really be called good?” (FÉNELON 2020, 85). As Ryan Hanley has recently argued, Fénelon’s republican political economy derives much of its force from a fundamental distinction between “true” and “false” riches – between “useful” goods and mere “luxury,” a distinction that Mandeville would famously reject (HANLEY 2020b, Ch. II).⁴

Fénelon’s description of the Phoenecian city of Tyre – a stand-in for contemporary Amsterdam – touches on similar themes in a way that calls to mind more readily the busy hive of “*Les Abeilles*.” Like the young prince marveling at the busy hive on his garden stroll, the young prince Telemachus cannot “tear [his] eyes away from the magnificent spectacle of the great city, where all was in motion” (FÉNELON 2020, 75). There “all the citizens apply themselves to commerce” (74) and thereby exhibit the virtues of Tyrian citizens in being “industrious, patient, laborious, clean, sober, and frugal...never was there a people more firm and steady, more candid, more loyal, more trusty, and more kind to strangers” (75). Tyre appears the model of the early commercial republic, despite being ruled by the tyrant Pygmalion, and, crucially, its bustling markets nonetheless depend on a kind of social harmony: “there is no discord among them,” reports their representative Narbal, and “should discord and jealousy be introduced; should luxury and laziness get a footing...you would soon see this power, that now is so much the object of your admiration, dwindle away to nothing” (FÉNELON 1994, III.36-8). Fénelon’s fabulist treatment of bees, considered in light of his descriptions of commercial republics in *Telemachus*, suggest that the classical vision of the apiary could serve early modern theorists of republican virtue just as easily as it did the English monarchists surveyed above. We now turn to consider Mandeville’s intervention in this history of apian-political thinking.

⁴Mandeville and Fénelon make frequent appearances in the so-called “luxury debates” of early modern Europe and in particular France (JENNINGS 2007, MENDHAM 2014).

IV. Mandeville's Subversive Apiary and the Problem of Language

A particularly frustrating element of Mandeville scholarship is that there exists comparatively little evidence for contextualizing his thought: we have no correspondence, for example, and Mandeville provides little in terms of autobiographical detail. There is no indication in "The Grumbling Hive" that he had been reading this apian literature, nor does he return to bees or even mention in subsequent work why he chose the apian metaphor for "The Grumbling Hive."

Of potential interest, however, is the appearance in 1704 of another edition of Charles Butler's 1609 treatise *The feminine monarchie*, which had not been published in English since 1634 (it had appeared in Latin in 1673 and 1682) (SARTON 1943). Of note here is that this new printing of Butler's work – in fact, a new translation from the Latin by "W.S." – was undertaken and sold by "A. Baldwin...in Warwick Lane." This refers to Abigail Baldwin, the noted Whig publisher with whom Mandeville collaborated during his time writing entries for *The Female Tatler* from 1709-1710 (GOLDSMITH 1999, 46-8), and with whom Mandeville printed "The Grumbling Hive" the year after the new edition of *Feminine monarchie* appeared. Whether Mandeville read Butler's work before or while writing "The Grumbling Hive" can only be guessed, but passages like the following certainly indicate that classical apiary imagery was certainly on hand during its composition: "the Labour and Industry of the Bee," Butler writes, "may be of Excellent Use, by not only setting a Pattern to Men in both kinds, but stir them up to an Emulation in imitating their private and publick Affairs to thrive in the World, for...their Labour and Industry is incessant; and for their Order, it is such that they may well be said to hold a little Common-wealth among themselves." Bees, the London public was reminded in 1704, labor "without any private Respect or particular Ends...They know nothing but what is for the Common Benefit" (BUTLER 1704, 2-3).

More generally, and given the extensive discussion provided thus far, Mandeville's uses and abuses of classical and modern apian themes in "The Grumbling Hive" can be much more fully appreciated. Mandeville's hive is a well-governed monarchy "circumscrib'd by Laws"; it is a "great" and "fruitful" and "glorious" home to "Vast Numbers," a "great Nursery of Sciences and Industry," sufficiently industrious to have "furnish'd half the Universe" (MANDEVILLE 1988, I.17-8, 32, 36). More than this – and despite the ironic way in which Mandeville intends it – the bees of the grumbling hive were *good citizens* of a certain sort: even the very "worst of all," he writes, "did something

for the Common Good,” and the “whole Mass” was a “Paradise” (I.24). In this way, Mandeville trades on the apian themes of industry, material abundance, and even civic spiritedness.

But as anyone familiar with Mandeville’s thought knows, these nods to apian virtues are entirely ironic. Mandeville’s hive borrows the classical and modern apiary’s *external* shape – what we might call its *political economical* dimension – but inverts completely its treatment of the *internal state* of bees – what we might call its *moral economical* dimension. It is from selfishness and spite that these bees “assist each other”; it is from self-regard and avarice that they serve the common good. The “worst” bees contribute to the “Common Good” not through sacrifice or dutiful industry, but rather through prostitution, gaming, or even outright theft: even the most vicious practices play a role in stimulating trade and in increasing the demand for goods and services. It is luxury, “odious Pride,” and “the Root of Evil, Avarice,” that “Employ[s] a Million of the Poor”; it is “Envy it self, and Vanity” that serve as “Ministers of Industry”; it is “Fickleness” that becomes “the very Wheel that turn’d the Trade” (I.25).

Interpreters have emphasized this straightforwardly economic dimension of Mandeville’s early thought; his intervention in the early modern luxury debates has been understood as a prefiguring of demand-side economics (ROSENBERG 1963, CHALK 1966). But, in a way that prefigures arguments he would revisit at great length in his mature work, the Mandeville of “The Grumbling Hive” attribute to vicious motives even the perfection of the hive’s social and political institutions. The constant churn of greed, luxury, and fashion require near-constant adaptations in mores and laws, Mandeville argues, thus “while they alter’d thus their Laws, Still finding and correcting Flaws, They mended by Inconstancy/Faults, which no Prudence could foresee” (MANDEVILLE 1988, I.25). This is what he calls the “State’s Craft” (I.24) – the work of the “skilful Politicians” cited a decade later in “The Origin of Moral Virtue” (I.47) – to make “Jarrings in the main agree” as “in Musick Harmony”; to make “Virtue” a “Friend [] with Vice” (I.24) and by so doing channel the worst behavior into productive ends. Mandeville’s use of apian imagery is in this way profoundly subversive; the time-honored connection between *moral virtue* – the virtuous if unconscious motivations of the civic-minded bees – and the *political virtues* of which modern commercial states must avail themselves is, in “The Grumbling Hive,” put asunder. Subjects and leaders of modern commercial states must choose: the hive can have honesty or greatness, but not both.

In this way, Mandeville turns inside out the moral and civic character of the classical and early modern apiaries. As noted above, however, there is a further socio-political dimension to the apian metaphor: the way it illuminates the connection between social and political organization, on the one hand, and speech, on the other. For figures like Aristotle and Cicero, the social, political, and linguistic powers of bees and humans point in the same direction: sociability and speech lead to harmony, and speech reinforces and even perfects this tendency. Hobbes disputes this account on both fronts: we are *not* naturally sociable, he argues, and, more than that, our capacity for speech only makes things *worse*. It is speech that sows complaints, rivalries, and disputes; it is speech that unsettles and enflames the social order. Bees can live together without absolute government, Hobbes argues, in part *because* they lack these distinctly human capacities of speech and reason. Mandeville, as we have seen, complicates this scheme by arguing that harmony is created through self-interested behavior and the alignment of cross-purposes through institutions and moral schemes—but how does speech fit into his scheme?

As it happens, Mandeville offers an innovative account of the origins and role of speech. Mandeville’s account of the origins and formation of language in *Fable of the Bees*, Part II is striking: Kaye describes his account as “preco-cious” (KAYE 1924, 138) while Schreyer terms Mandeville’s theory “highly original” (SCHREYER 1978, 17; cf. Kaye footnote in Mandeville 1988, II.258 fn1). It is original not only because he distances himself from the widely held view that speech was simply gifted to Adam by God (HUNDERT 1994, 170; SCHREYER 1978, 20), but also because he offers a very early attempt at a purely naturalistic explanation of the origins of language: “Nature has made all Animals of the same kind, in their mutual Commerce, intelligible to one another, as far as is requisite for the Preservation of themselves and their Species” (MANDEVILLE 1988, II.285). The upshot is a theory of language that complements the discussion of selfishness and harmony above: according to Mandeville, language grows out of our desire to communicate *and persuade* others. It reflects no special moral capacities and no divine origins – it is, rather, a tool for pursuing interests and thus a tool that makes social life possible.

As we have seen already, Mandeville sits here in a curious position between the ancient conception of language and its role in society, on the one hand, and the materialist views he inherited from Hobbes (and Descartes), on the other. Against the ancients, who saw between men and other gregarious animals a common longing to communicate with others, moderns like Hobbes

and Descartes insisted that humans *alone* exhibited something recognizable as speech. For Descartes, animals have voice but not speech. The reason why non-human animals “cannot put words together in a manner to convey their thoughts,” he argued, is that it is not a function of the absence of the appropriate “organs, for we see that magpies and parrots can pronounce words as well as we can, and nevertheless cannot speak as we do.” Humans without the ability to speak, by contrast, “usually invent for themselves some signs by which they make themselves understood.” This is due to the fact “not merely that animals have less reason than men, but that they have none at all” (DESCARTES 1960, 42). To the extent that we can see animals behaving in ways that are, say, reflective of “industry,” this is not because of their rationality, but instead because “nature makes them behave as they do according to the disposition of their organs” (43).

Hobbes likewise draws a sharp line between humanity and the animals. We have already seen above what Hobbes has to say about those creatures “Aristotle numbered amongst Politicall creatures”; again, speech is unnecessary for bees and other social animals, since agreement between non-human animals “is Naturall” (in the Latin, “Animalium illorum consensio a Natura est”), while among humans it is “Artificiall” (HOBBS 2012, XVII.258, 260). Hobbes – perhaps surprisingly – appears to accept the “talking Adam” model in *Leviathan*, writing that “the first author of Speech was God himself, that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight; For the Scripture goeth no further in this matter.” Having been given the rudiments of speech, Hobbes speculates that Adam would have gone on to “adde more names”; with the “succession of time, so much language might be gotten, as he had found use for” (IV.48). The original, unitary, Adamic language would have persisted until the dispersal of human beings following the construction of the Tower of Babel. Babel, however, explains “the diversity of Tongues”; it does not explain the origins of language. Hobbes, then, subscribes to the largely orthodox view of the origins of human language with the act of creation itself.

Mandeville, on the other hand, accounts for the origins and uses of language not by rooting them in a *special* quality of human beings, but rather by emphasizing – at least partly in keeping with the ancient approach – the basic congruity between animal and human behavior. In the *Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*, he includes human beings as among those “untaught Animals” which are characterized fundamentally in their being “only solicitous of pleasing themselves, and naturally follow the bent of their own Inclinations, without

considering the good or harm that from their being pleased will accrue to others” (I.41). This is not to say that human society can be understood as an extension of animal communities; we are a particularly quarrelsome species, since “those Creatures are fittest to live peaceably together in great Numbers, that discover the least of Understanding, and have the fewest Appetites to gratify” (I.41). Because humans have more understanding and more appetites than classical examples of socio-political creatures – bees or ants, say – they are more in need of “the Curb of Government” than their non-human counterparts (I.41). What is required in order to make humans sociable, then, is something beyond “Force,” and that something, for Mandeville, is famously the claim that “Lawgivers and other wise Men” have sought to persuade that “it was more beneficial for every Body to conquer than indulge his Appetites, and much better to mind the Publick than what seem’d his private Interest” (I.41). It is in the course of the civilizing process, Mandeville thinks, that language is developed.

Mandeville does not avail himself of the speaking Adam model, nor does he – or could he – follow the Cartesian path when it comes to language. Instead, Mandeville develops something very original: a naturalistic account of the origins of language that would go on to deeply influence both Rousseau and Smith. Mandeville’s account of the origins of language is embedded in the sixth dialogue of the second volume of the *Fable*, where he claims that “the third and last Step to Society is the Invention of Letters” (MANDEVILLE 1988, II.269). Crucially, the invention of letters – and, prior to letters, speech – is rooted in the same set of passions that explain most human behavior for Mandeville: “Pride and Ambition” or, as he later puts it, the human “Instinct of Sovereignty, which teaches Man to look upon every thing as centring in himself, and prompts him to put in a Claim to every thing, he can lay his Hands on” (II.266, 271). This invention, Mandeville suggests, despite its importance, does not represent a break with the animal world: the difference between humans and animals with respect to our capacity for communication is one of degree rather than kind. Thus Cleomenes’ remark that “it was with Thought as it is with Speech; and that, tho’ Man was born with a Capacity beyond other Animals, to attain to both”—beyond does not entail different altogether, but rather something more (II.269; cf. II.286). Moreover, when it comes to human instinct, humans are fundamentally similar to other animals: take what Cleomenes says a few pages later: “Man, in his Anger braves himself in the same manner as other animals” – “the Desire of untroul’d Liberty, and Impatience of Restraint, are not more visible in [Horses], than are in [Man]”). So, humans, like all animals, are passionate creatures, and humans, like other animals, would have been rendered

by nature “intelligible to one another, as far as is requisite for the Preservation of themselves and their Species” (II.285). Just as “Brutes make several distinct Sounds to express different Passions by,” so, too, would have Mandeville’s savage couple; Cleomenes agrees with this claim, though he notes that this does not mean that “Nature has endued Man with Speech” (II.285, 286). Prior to humans having need for anything beyond “dumb Signs” and “Gestures,” humans would have not turned to speech at all.

It is tempting to view, and not without some plausibility, Mandeville’s naturalistic move here as *entirely* without precedent, though this is likely an overstatement. Certainly, Mandeville could have encountered a naturalistic account in Epicurean thought, chiefly as seen in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, a poem to which Mandeville alludes in the fifth dialogue of the second volume of the *Fable*, where Cleomenes exclaims “*O mentes hominum caecas! O Pectora caeca!*”, an allusion Kaye traces to *De rerum natura* II.14 (II.252).⁵ Whereas all of the other thinkers surveyed view the differences between humans and non-human animals as a matter of kind rather than degree, Lucretius sees human beings as different from non-human animals in degree. To be sure, he twice mentions bees only in passing – in both instances referring to their taste for honey (III.11, IV.679) – he does not discuss them in the context of an account of sociability or language. He does, however, provide a naturalistic account of the origins of language in Book V, which Mandeville may well have known. Rather than posit that the difference between humans and non-human animals is one of kind with respect to communication, Lucretius posits: “As for the various sounds of speech, it was nature that prompted human beings to utter them, and it was utility [*utilitas*] that coined the names of things [*nomina rerum*]” (LUCRETIUS 2001, 5.1028-1030). Lucretius likens the process to that of infants (*infantia*) turning instead to “gesture” in the absence of language. This is because “every creature is instinctively conscious of the purpose for which it can use its peculiar powers [*vis*]” (5.1032-1033). Lucretius’ examples are all non-human animals – cows, big cats, birds. Lucretius dismisses the possibility of a single wise inventor having created language, and continues to

⁵In a characteristically learned footnote (fn. 1 on 288), Kaye remarks of Mandeville’s naturalistic account that there were “anticipations,” but that they were “relatively slight,” in Lucretius (V.1026-1030), Diodorus Siculus (I.i), and also Vitruvius (II.33). With respect to other sources in the Epicurean tradition, Long and Sedley gather them together in the first volume of *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, with passages from, in addition to Lucretius, Epicurus, Diogenes of Oenoanda, Erotianus, Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, and an anonymous commentary on Plato’s *Theaetetus* (LONG and SEDLEY 1987, 97-100). A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, eds. *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 97-100. Though it is possible that Mandeville might have known some of these sources, we are more confident in pointing to the possible influence of Lucretius.

suggest that humans would have been like “domestic animals and the species of wild beasts, despite their dumbness, regularly utter distinct and different sounds according to whether they are afraid or in pain or full of joy” (5.1059-1061). Communicative forms, even in the absence of language, are perfectly capable of expressing emotions – *metus* and *dolor* are his examples – and it is thus not anything to wonder at (*mirabile*) that humans, equipped with “power of voice [*vox*] and tongue [*lingua*]” should have developed language to communicate “their different feelings [*vario sensu*]” (5.1058-1059). Human language, like the communication of “*animalia...muta*,” is rooted in a natural capacity and developed through utility.

If, then, we ask *why* humans have speech and non-human animals do not, the answer would not seem to be reason, as it was for Descartes, nor would it be because God created Adam with speech, as with Hobbes. For Mandeville—all creatures, by nature, communicate with each other, and Mandeville’s “wild Couple” would have gotten along just fine (“there would be a very good Understanding” (II.285)) without spoken language, since the “State of Simplicity” that was theirs would have required little in the way of communicative sophistication. Humans have, according to Mandeville, “a Capacity beyond other Animals” for both thinking and speaking, but he does *not* say that other animals lack the capacity altogether (II.269). What explains the formation of language, then, is the greater capacity for thinking and speaking that characterizes human beings *and* time: language would have developed “By slow degrees, as all other Arts and Sciences have done, and length of time” (II.287). Mandeville has Cleomenes speculate that after the passage of some time, the wild couple would “find out Sounds, to stir up in each other the Idea’s of such things, when they were out of sight” (II.288). Teaching these sounds to their children, who had more in the way of “Volubility of Tongue, and Flexibility of Voice,” the children would refine and improve language. Mandeville here remarks, to be sure, that he is only talking about language “not taught by Inspiration,” but his gesture to the speaking Adam model is slight enough to give it the appearance of an afterthought.

The other key point to note about Mandeville’s social theory of language formation is that the aim of language – or rather, the original motive behind speaking – was “to persuade others, either to give Credit to what the speaking Person would have them believe; or else to act or suffer such Things, as he would compel them to act or suffer, if they were entirely in his Power” (II.225). The invention of speech, that is to say, was not, as Horatio puts it, “to make our

Thoughts known to others,” unless by this phrase we mean that those speaking “desire that the Purport of the Sounds they utter should be known and apprehended by others.” In this regard, the inventor(s) of language are, like “All Men uninstructed,” prone only to “follow the Impulse of their Nature, without regard to others” (II.225). This again denies to speech – and, likewise, to reason – any special moral status or any role in identifying human beings as standing in some fundamental way *outside* the world of bees and other animals.

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