

## DOGMAS

# The Fable of the Bees: Private Vices, Public Benefits and the origin of homo economicus

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The *Fable of the Bees* <sup>1</sup> is a political fable by [Bernard Mandeville](#) (1670–1733), published in 1714. The moral of *The Fable of the Bees* has been summed up in a famous phrase: **private vices make public good**,<sup>2</sup> deeply transgressive at the time of the book's publication. For Mandeville, vice, which leads to the pursuit of wealth and power, frees the appetites and thus brings an opulence that is supposed to trickle down from the top to the bottom of society. He is thus one of the **precursors of the trickle-down theory**, and of the concept of **rational homo economicus**.

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01

## Summary and analysis of The Fable of the Bees

As summarized by [Dany-Robert Dufour](#) <sup>3</sup> this fable “tells the story of a flourishing beehive where not only all trades prosper, but also and above all all vices, the cause of its prosperity being precisely that all its inhabitants are thieves, more or less. Haunted by guilt, they decide to become honest. As a result, the (very many) activities that make a living from other people’s misfortune disappear, and the hive withers. The message is clear: to make your fellow citizens happy, be dishonest and rid yourself of all scruples...”

(You can view the full text of the bee fable and download it as a pdf from [Wikisource](#)).

In the eyes of Dany-Robert Dufour <sup>4</sup> this fable marks a turning point in Western history. Far from having left religion behind, we have fallen under the sway of a new, conquering religion, the [Market](#) , operating on the principle revealed by Bernard Mandeville.

Mandeville argues that war, theft, prostitution, alcohol and drugs, greed, etc. ultimately contribute “to the advantage of civil society”. “Be as greedy, selfish, spendthrift for your own pleasure as you can be, for thus you will do the best you can for the prosperity of your nation and the happiness of your fellow citizens”.

He makes theft a possible source of economic life: “If one steals 500 or 1,000 guineas from an old miser who, rich with nearly 100,000 pounds sterling, spends only 50 a year, (...) it is certain that as soon as this money is stolen, it comes to circulate in commerce and that the nation gains from this theft. It derives the same benefit as if the same sum had come from a pious archbishop who had bequeathed it to the public”.<sup>3</sup>

According to Mandeville, human actions cannot be separated into noble and vile: private vices contribute to the public good, while altruistic actions can actually harm it. A libertine acts out of vice, but “his prodigality gives work to tailors, servants, perfumers, cooks and women of ill repute, who in turn employ bakers, carpenters, etc.”. So the rapacity and violence of the libertine benefits society in general.

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## Scope of the bee fable: trickle-down theory and liberal economics

The idea that “private vices make for public good” inspired many authors, including [Adam Smith](#) (1723-1790), who reaffirmed Mandeville’s basic principle, stripping it of its sulphurous and provocative dimension. In *The Wealth of Nations* <sup>4</sup> he replaces the word “vice” with “self-love“. This is his famous phrase: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we must hope for our dinner, but from their own interest “.

Similarly, Mandeville’s legacy can be seen in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964) by Ayn Rand, a philosopher whose writings have had, and continue to have, great influence on conservatives and proponents of liberalism and ultraliberalism in the USA.

[Friedrich Hayek](#) (1899-1992) <sup>5</sup> sees Mandeville as a precursor of economic liberalism.

More generally, it can be said that the body of economic literature that adopts a representation of the human being as a "[rational](#)" [calculating](#) "[homo economicus](#)" <sup>6</sup>, behaving in such a way as to maximize his interest (called "[utility](#)" <sup>7</sup>), is the heir to Mandeville.

[Homo economicus](#) <sup>8</sup> (or the "economic man") is the basis of neo-classical economic theory. This concept enables economists to translate human behavior into simple equations, thus facilitating the mathematical modeling of the economy.




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- <sup>1</sup> Published in 1714, Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, includes: a satirical poem published in 1705, "*The Grumbling Hive, or Knaves Turn'd Honest*", to which a prose commentary and essay (*An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*) have been added. <sup>9</sup>
- <sup>2</sup> Also known as "*Private vices make public virtue*". <sup>10</sup>

- 3 View article [The prosperity of vice](#) by Dany-Robert Dufour, *Le Monde diplomatique* (01/12/2017). 
- 4 See the works of Dany-Robert Dufour: [Le Divin Marché, la révolution culturelle libérale](#) Gallimard, 2012 and [Baise ton prochain Une histoire souterraine du capitalisme](#) Actes Sud, 2019. 
- 5 Published in 1776, [Investigations into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations](#) is Adam Smith's most famous work. It is considered the first modern book on economics. 
- 6 [Lecture on a Master Mind: Dr Bernard Mandeville](#) lecture given by Friedrich Hayek at the British Academy on March 23, 1966. 