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HONOUR AND THE ART OF POLITICS

Abstract. Bernard Mandeville developed a coherent theory on the origin of society and the spontaneous evolution of institutions and of social rules, grounded in the constant characteristics of human nature. But he also assign a decisive role to the “dextrous Management” of “Skilful Politicians” in creating and maintaining social harmony. Given the spontaneous process, by definition outside of a rational control, through which society and sociability itself has developed what is the place of the Art of Politics in the spontaneous order? In order to answer this question the article examines Mandeville’s use of the notion of honor in relation to politics, in particular the “Political use of passion” in Mandeville’s *Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*.

Keywords. Honour, Politics, Spontaneous Order, Skilful Managment, Conjectural history.

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fenc'd with wholesome Laws, that Fear and
Prudence may supply the place of Honesty.

(B. Mandeville, «The Female Tatler», Friday, Dec. 2, 1709, 64).

In his very last work, *A Letter to Dion*, Mandeville further elaborates his apology for the influential sub-title of *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), that so much appalled his contemporaries: *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. He candidly admits to have used it as a catch-phrase to advertise his book¹. But, as he already has made unmistakably clear in other references, the well-known formula is to be always read in its entirety. The sentence doesn't stand without this clause: «Private Vices by the dextrous Management of a skilful Politician may be turned into Publick Benefits»². The key component to ignite the process that makes the transformation of self-interested actions into general, public advantages is the well-planned actions of a prepared Politician, a skilful manager of social passions. Self-interested behaviour may, but does not necessarily lead to the collective good. It all depends on the ability of those in power to play on the simultaneous presence of different passions at the roots of human action, never denying them, but channelling them in the right direction.

But there is a problem here. All this is to be made consistent with the fact that for Mandeville all human institutions are the result of the actions of individuals pursuing their own self-interest over a long period of time, without having previously agreed on a plan. As recent scholarship, in particular, Mikko Tolonen's last book, has abundantly shown, the legacy of Bernard Mandeville to the philosophy of the Enlightenment is to be identified mainly in his theory of the evolution of institutions and of social rules, in his reconstruction of an unintended, long term process grounded in the constant characteristics of human nature³. Given this spontaneous process, by definition outside of a rational control, through which society – and sociability itself – has developed, the question is: what

¹ B. MANDEVILLE, *A Letter to Dion*, London, J. Roberts. 1732, p.38

² Cfr. Id., *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) ed. by F.B. Kaye, Indianapolis, Liberty Classic, 1988, vol. I, pp. 369, 412; vol. II, p. 319 (hereafter *Fable*).

³ M. TOLONEN, *Mandeville and Hume: Anatomists of Civil Society*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2013.

is the place of the Art of Politics in the spontaneous order? How is it possible that “dextrous Management” which Mandeville is so eager to defend?

The issue of the identity and role of the politician in Mandeville’s work, is a vexed question, an issue that has intrigued and divided scholars, and it is worth reconsidering in light of the new awareness of the features and influence of Mandeville’s evolutionary account of sociability. Mandeville’s theory on the gradual development of sociability and of human values and institutions appears already in his early writings, but in his *Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*, (in *The Fable of the Bees*) Mandeville attributes the “invention of morality” to “Skilful Politicians” that, rather than operating as public benefactors or founders of states and religions (as the civic humanistic tradition claimed), are expert manipulators of psychological characteristics. Moreover, in various other places in Mandeville’s writings “Politicians” and “Legislators” are clearly to be read as a shorthand explanation to refer to the evolutionary process of civilization⁴. Leaving aside here the issue of the internal evolution of Mandeville’s thought on this regard, this essay focuses on the years in which Mandeville is decidedly evolutionary in particular in the ten dialogues between Horatio and Cleomenes that Mandeville wrote in 1729-31, the first six published as *The Fable of the Bees* part two, and the following four as *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*. How do we find room for dextrous management in the perspective of the “Spontaneous Order”? Where does Politics stand in Mandeville’s evolutionary account of the origin of social institutions?

1. The art of government in the conjectural history of civilization.

The transition from the state of nature to civil society is built by Mandeville in a close confrontation with other theories, from which emerges a peculiar characterization of the relationship between nature and artifice. In contrast to the natural law tradition, Mandeville characterizes the state of nature not only with the

⁴ Cfr. M.M. GOLDSMITH, *Private vices, Public benefits. Bernard Mandeville’s social and political thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1985, pp. 49-53.

absence of any form of pre-political principle but of all cultural acquisitions, even the most basic, including language and rationality. Man is not naturally sociable, as Shaftesbury wants, but, on the other hand is not born unfit for society, as Hobbes maintains. The error – both of Shaftesbury and of Hobbes – is to attribute to men in their “natural” condition, skills and capabilities that are themselves a result of the of the civilization process «Nature had design’d Man for Society, as she has made Grapes for Wine» all human features can be defined as natural but it is «human Sagacity that finds out the Uses we make of them»⁵.

The Works of Art and human Invention are all very lame and defective, and most of them pitifully mean at first: Our Knowledge is advanced by slow Degrees, and some Arts and Sciences require the Experience of many Ages, before they can be brought to any tolerable Perfection. Have we any Reason to imagine, that the Society of Bees, that sent forth the first Swarm, made worse Wax or Honey than any of their Posterity have produced since⁶?

The society of the bees – and here Mandeville leaves aside the allegory that gave the title to his work – is born, grows, reproduces itself and produces honey, following, fixed and unalterable laws of nature, unlike human society. For humans, it took centuries of trials and errors, the accumulated experience of generations after generations to develop the ability to reason, to express themselves, to live in societies⁷.

In Mandeville’s reconstruction the first step towards society is motivated in general by humans weakness and vulnerability, and in particular by the threat of wild animals that pushes families, disunited and deeply conflictual, to bond together in common defence. Once men are related, the innate search of superiority and domination over the others enters into play⁸. The second step is thus marked by the forming of a shared system of sentiments of approval and disapproval, the establishment of prohibitions and

⁵ *Fable II*, p. 185.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 186 s.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 189. Cfr. M.E. SCRIBANO, *Natura umana e societa competitiva: studio su Mandeville*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1980, pp. 109-117; T. MAGRI, *Introduzione a La Favola delle Api*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1987, pp. XVIII-XIX; D. FRANCESCONI, *Mandeville sull’origine della società*, «Il Pensiero Politico», XXVIII.3, 1996, pp. 407-433.

⁸ Cfr. A. SMITH, *Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review* (1756).

penalties upon certain actions within the group. The third step in Mandeville's conjectural history of the origins of society is the establishment of written laws, with the invention of writing, paramount to fix rules and laws that otherwise would lose effectiveness⁹. It is not a sudden jump, but the outcome of a long process of development.

Laws are collective works; like language itself, they are indifferent to the efforts of the individuals. They are a concentration, a distillation, of human knowledge and wisdom, the outcome of a selection by trials and errors. And here too are the "vile ingredients" that produce the most effective systems of rules for a prosperous society: «the wisest Laws of human Invention are generally owing to the Evasions of bad Men, whose Cunning had eluded the Force of former Ordinances, that had been made with less Caution». The major contributions to the improvement of laws comes precisely from those who have tried to circumvent them, thus stimulating further adjustments¹⁰. This shows the place of politics in this evolutionary account of human institutions: «All sound Politicks, and the whole Art of governing, writes Mandeville, are entirely built upon the knowledge of human nature» which in itself is "child of time"¹¹. Here too there is no room for noble fathers, founding heroes or supremely benevolent leaders: Solon, Lycurgus, Socrates, Plato were not isolated genius, but rather diligent scholars, researchers who traveled and were able to use the wisdom accumulated by their predecessors. It took ages before the mechanisms of human nature were rightly understood, «it is the Work of Ages to find out the true Use of the Passions, and to raise a Politician, that can make every Frailty of the Members add Strength to the whole Body, and by dextrous Management turn private Vices into publick Benefits»¹².

Mandeville develops a number of similarities between the art of politics and other machineries, other complex human constructions, the result of many persons acting independently without a common pre-arranged plan over a long period of time. And as there is no need for intelligence, skill or experience to weave a pair of socks or wind

⁹ *Fable II*, p. 269.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 383.

¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 320-332.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 319.

up a clock, so, to administer a city like London, where a prodigious number of ordinances and regulations have stratified and evolved over time, the Magistrates just have «to follow their nose»¹³. The first safeguard of the interests of the community are constitutions, written laws refined by countless adjustments, collective works of accumulated wisdom¹⁴. The most effective ones are those that take into account a negative anthropology: «That is the best constitution which provides against the worst contingencies, [...] and preserve itself firm and remain unshaken, though most men should prove knaves»¹⁵ or as he had written twenty years before on the pages of «The Female Tatler»: «Happy is the Land, whose Constitution is so well fenc'd with wholesome Laws, that Fear and Prudence may supply the place of Honesty»¹⁶.

Political actors do not stand apart from the stream of the evolving, spontaneous order. Yet, we have to understand the part they play in the art of politics. How do they correct the direction, the route of this spontaneous order of which they are themselves part and expression? As a matter of fact they do so, and for this reason they are highly praised: «To be a consummate Statesman is the highest qualification human Nature is capable of possessing [...] he must have read Men as well as Books, and perfectly understand human Nature and the perfect use of the Passions»¹⁷.

II. *The "Use of Passions": Virtue, Religion & Honour.*

If the right "Use of Passions" is the core of political activity, how it is actually performed? What should a proficient statesman know about the "use of passions"? If we have learned the lesson, according to Mandeville even if men and women are not endowed with natural sociability, they can learn to live in large groups simply because their desire for approval by others overcomes self-interest, and their self-denial in controlling their passions is rewarded by

¹³ Ivi, p. 323.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 335.

¹⁵ B. MANDEVILLE, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church and National Happiness* (1720), ed. by I. Primer, New York-London, Transactions Books, 2000, p. 167.

¹⁶ B. MANDEVILLE, «*The Female Tatler*», Friday, Dec. 2, 1709, 64.

¹⁷ *Fable II*, p. 330.

public approval. The passion of Self-Liking, that sentiment of overvaluation of one's self which is constantly reliant on other people in order to be confirmed and reassured, is the key natural disposition which develops in artificial values, codes, and unwritten institutions of social intercourse¹⁸. In sum, for Mandeville human behaviour, in its apparent variety of motivations, can generally be traced back to the passion of self-liking, its effects and the efforts carried out to control, hide and gratify it. This is what he calls the "Philosophical Reason" of the changes occurred in the conduct of men over the ages: «the Art of good Manners has nothing to do with Virtue or Religion, tho' it seldom clashes with either. It is a Science that is ever built on the same steady Principle in our Nature, whatever the Age or the Climate may be, in which it is practis'd»¹⁹.

The different forms of mutual flattery that have occurred in the history of the processes of civilization have their motivating strength in this constant passion of human nature²⁰. How then should the art of governing deal with those system of values, those artificial human institutions evolved upon the natural disposition of passions? The most articulated reflections on political management, both in terms of principles and practices, are found in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour*. If in the Second Part of *The Fable of the Bees*, Cleomenes and Horatio discussed the way in which sociability in all its forms originated from human nature's basic disposition, it is in *An Enquiry on the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* that they address the issue of the political "Use of Passions" by developing an articulated account on the main notions of Virtue, Religion and Honour in Medieval and Modern Europe and their recent history and their practice. The whole Preface to *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* is indeed an enquiry into the etymology of the word "Virtue" and a significant remark on its linguistic drift. According to Mandeville, the primitive sense of the term "Virtue" refers to an individual's strength and ability in coping with deadly risks. In the preface to *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* he claims that applause for self-control originates from the esteem accorded to courage and warlike virtues

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 130.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 155.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 151. Cfr. A. BRYSON, *From Courtesy to Civility, Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England*, Oxford, Clarendon Pr., 1998, p. 273ff.

in the early stages of human history. Courage was thus not estimated as a demonstration of attachment to society and to the common good, but as an expression of self-control, the victorious struggle over the most powerful of passions, the fear of death, the fear of annihilation of our own, dear self²¹. Only later the term virtue gained a wider meaning, always preserving the root of self-domination, of self-denial in Mandeville's words. «There is no virtue worthy of this name that does not restrain, regulate or subjugate any specific passion of human nature»²². Moral language is irreducibly human, artificial, earthly. It has no other origin than the game of human passions, and attributing the virtues to a divinity is to be reckoned a form of blasphemy. «The sublimest Virtues are indeed as eternal as the taste for well-roasted Mutton», Mandeville writes. Ideals of virtue are no different from standards of honourable conduct, systems of symbols for the social promotion of the self. Virtue and Honour are of the same origin: the hypersensitivity of human nature to other's people judgment²³. Mandeville makes use of the word Honour, in his general meaning, «ancient as the oldest language», to refer to those different ways and expressions of the original self-liking that have evolved over time and space, in a continuous and spontaneous process of modification of the pattern of gestures, attitudes and appropriate linguistic expressions of deference. Honour: «is a technical word in the art of civility and signifies a means by which men by conversing together have found out to please and gratify one another on account of a palpable passion in human nature than as no name and which therefore I call Self-liking»²⁴ Honour in its general sense, in its broader meaning; as a verb, as a noun and as an adjective; refers to those system of unwritten values based on pride and shame that humans have developed from the constant mechanisms of self-liking.

It is important to remember the full title of Mandeville's last philosophical work is *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the*

²¹ B. MANDEVILLE, *'An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour, and the Usefulness of Christianity in War. By the Author of the 'Fable of the Bees'*, London, John Brotherton, 1732 (hereafter *Honour*) p. v; Cfr. MONTAIGNE, *Essais* II, VIII (1595): *Des recompences d'honneur*.

²² *Honour*, p. 30.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 55.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 14.

Usefulness of Christianity in War, that is to say, it is an enquiry into the political use of Religion. Religion too is explained by Mandeville exclusively in terms of the dynamics of passions, and here the author of *The Fable of the Bees* distances himself from his master and intellectual mentor, Pierre Bayle. Religion, Mandeville argues, is not the invention of Politicians. It originates from the innate fear of an invisible cause that all men are born with. Certainly it is not in the power of the Politicians to «contradict the Passions or deny the Existence of them»²⁵. But they, and the whole of society, can benefit from guiding men to indulge in an existing passion. When rulers manipulate the fear of an invisible cause that all men are endowed with, making that invisible power object of public worship, they obtain a formidable tool of social control. «For these purposes all religion are equally serviceable, and the worst is better than none»²⁶. In these terms Mandeville distinguishes between the origin of religion and its socio-political function²⁷. He stresses, in contrast to the Deist tradition, the impossibility of rationalizing the true message of the Gospel and reconciling it with social utility, in order to unmask the hypocrisy of those religions, first of all Christianity, which have distorted and exploited the original principles. The original passionate dispositions on which basis the artificial institutions of Virtue, Religion and Honour have developed can be identified, respectively in the “Fear of Death”, whose praise, the praise of self-control in the face of a deadly risk, gave origin to the praise of self-control in general; the “Fear of Shame”, at the basis of the various codes of virtuous and honourable conduct; and the “Fear of an Invisible Cause”, institutionalized in a “civil religion”. The two volumes of *The Fable of the Bees* are devoted to demonstrate the impracticability of ideals of virtue as social ties and means of effective social control. Here, in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*, Mandeville offers a survey of the dynamics of Christianity and Modern Honour in the recent stages of the civilizing process and their successful outcome in shaping the history of Western Civilization.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 28. Cfr. *Fable II*, p. 206ff.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 24.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 28.

III. *Modern Honour.*

Mandeville carefully distinguishes between Honour in a general sense as the constant, universal mechanism of human passions; and “Modern Honour”, the form it took in Western Civilization, the values shared by the European elites for centuries; the code of conduct that formed the core of aristocratic ideology: a peculiar blend of classical political thought, Christian virtues and martial virtues which formed the chivalric ideal of conduct. Christianity, like other religions, originates from the game of human passions, and similarly to other structures of social interaction, it has developed without any design, without any deliberate intent, through the permanence of what, from time to time, seemed functional to collective well-being or the maintenance of social order. Mandeville singles out two major steps in the dynamics of Religion and Honour in shaping idealized social models of promotion of the self. The first took place in the early centuries of the Christian Era, when the Church of Rome demonstrated a «Formidable worldly wisdom». Thanks to the «stratagems of the Church of Rome to enslave the Laity» rudiments of barbarian courage were codified in the morality of honour. By blending rites seemingly sacred with the Emblems of vain glory, creating a mixture of “pomp and superstition”, the Church of Rome managed to reconcile in the outward shew the principle of Honour with Religion, making the «Height of Pride not inconsistent with Christian humility»²⁸. The notion of honour was then of capital importance to educate an aristocracy given to the use of arms; to stimulate in them that “artificial courage” needed to make them fight as fearless warriors, regulating at the same time violence in the whole society. In this way honour in medieval and post-medieval Europe has been not only an instrument for the defence of the interests of a privileged elite but also as a means for social regulation²⁹.

Rulers, military and religious leaders, as in the case of the religious wars of the Seventeenth century, have conveniently preached the doctrine of Christ to inspire warlike enthusiasm and conceal its clear incompatibility with a code based on martial courage. The Usefulness of Christianity in War is none, if we speak

²⁸ Ivi, p. 58.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 100; cfr. p. 121ff.

of the true evangelical message, but the original principles of purity and negation of worldly values has been distorted by priests and skilful rulers for political ends. The preachers in the armed forces made a “political use” of religion, distorting the message of the Gospel to inspire courage in battle, and convince the soldiers of the rightness of their cause³⁰. An everlasting Maxim in Politics is indeed to convince the fighters «how small soever the differences may be between the contending Parties» that «their Enemies are likewise the Enemies of God», that God is on their side³¹. Oliver Cromwell is the only “Political hero” named by Mandeville. A significant example of “clever politician” in a literal sense; not just a connoisseur of human nature, but also a statesman able to take into account the “humour of the Age” and the circumstances of the time in which he lived: «the most disinterest[ed] Patriot never watch’d over the public welfare, [...] with greater cure and assiduity [...] than this usurper»³². Cromwell was able to masterfully exploit religion for its own purposes.

The second major step in Mandeville’s “global history of pride” took place at the beginning of the Seventeenth century, with the reform and extension of the new standard of Modern Honour & Politeness. Modern Honour, writes Mandeville, is «a principle of courage, virtue and fidelity which some men are said to act from and to be awed by as other are by religion»³³. In radically altered social conditions the methods employed by the Medieval Church to tame expressions of courage had lost their psychological force, and a display of martial courage, by means of a challenge to a duel, regardless of the outcome of the fight, became a widespread practice of great symbolic value in the whole of Europe.

What in Oliver’s day [Cromwell] was intended by a Mask of Religion and a shew of Sanctity, is now aim’d at by the Height of Politeness and a perpetual attachment to the principles of Modern Honour. There is a Spirit of Gentility introduced among military Men, both officers and soldiers [...] which now shines thorough all their Vices and Debaucheries³⁴.

³⁰ Ivi, pp. 130-142.

³¹ Ivi, p. 159 s.

³² Ivi, p. 232.

³³ Ivi, p. 14. Cfr. *Fable I*, p. 63f; *Honour*, p. 20ff.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 232.

Polite, modern manners are nothing but the last stage in the history of pride. The traditional virtues of male and female honour, courage and chastity, are far from being original, natural tendencies, they are rather the result of education and socialization. They are an exemplary expression of that spontaneous, “artificial” order growing out of a “natural” disposition of passions.

Mandeville opened his career as a prose writer with a female identity. He began to question the relativity of human values by addressing notions of female honour, and maintained in all his writings a keen interest on the effects of contemporary sexual morality upon the lives of women, claiming, as a physician and a philosopher, that all standards of virtuous and honourable conduct are the result of social conditioning, and no scale can be based on presumed anatomical differences: chastity, in other words, is an artificial virtue.

As for male honour, the practice of duelling «where the lust of praise makes men destroy that same being who strives to please», the legislative attempts to curb it, its vitality especially among those polite gentlemen who are supposedly better equipped with moral and civic virtues, are for Mandeville all evidence that the true motivations of man’s behaviour are to be found in pride, vanity, “self-liking” rather than in benevolence or virtue. The test case is the inner conflict that a man challenged to a duel ought to face. As a matter of fact, it concerns exclusively self-love and self-liking, that is to say, the fear of death and the fear of shame³⁵. Duelling is not a Gothic atavism oddly surviving in 18th century polite society; rather, it is a perfectly coherent expression of a code based on courage and the cult of the self, of the self-liking which is the engine of human sociability. In this way, writes Mandeville, «the vices of a few» are «descriptive of the entire species» and have a paradigmatic value for the scientists of human nature³⁶.

«Man is a Selfish Creature», which neither loves nor esteems any thing so well as his own individual self. He has nothing «Constantly before his Eyes, as his own dear Self». On this basis “Politics” encouraged a “Religion of Honor”, a cult of the self.

Human Wisdom is the Child of Time. It was not the Contrivance of one Man, nor could it have been the Business of a few Years, to

³⁵ *Fable II*, p. 92.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 275; cfr. p. 347.

establish a Notion, by which a rational Creature is kept in Awe for Fear of it Self, and an Idol is set up, that shall be its own Worshiper³⁷.

This passage is a paradigmatic example of Mandeville's use of the notion of the "Politician". Once again the focus is on the features of human nature, the passions, on which the action is directed. The laws of honor work differently to all other laws; for, rather than aiming at the control and repression of those passions that are at the origin of frictional behaviors, they strive to prevent evil by allowing individuals to indulge in them. In all social spheres, this peculiar relationship between the laws of honor and the passions on which they are based make them particularly attractive and easy to follow. Provocatively showing the incompatibility of honour with virtue and religion, Mandeville enhances its function as a hierarchical principle and as a social tie, and suggests that the passion of self-liking is a much stronger and more widely diffused and practiced motivation for "virtuous" or pious behaviour than any ideal of virtue itself. «Honour is of the same Origin with Virtue [...] [But] the invention of honour as a principle is of a much later date, and I look upon it as the greater Achievement by far». It is a point that doesn't escape the attention of his contemporaries. A review of Mandeville's *Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* published in Rome in 1743 remembers to the readers that the English had written the most dangerous works, because in some matters they are the most learned and profound. Among them «The late dr. Mandeville goes further [...] in The Fable of the Bees and on the Enquiry on Honour he foolishly endeavours to prove that Vices are necessary and useful devices to govern and make states flourish – and that the point of honour is the most ingenious invention of Politics»³⁸.

³⁷ *Honour*, p. 41; *Fable II*, p. 142.

³⁸ *Notizie letterarie ultramontane*, «Giornale De' Letterati», Roma, novembre 1743, II, 2, p. 321f: «il fu dottor Mandeville va più lungi [...] nella Favola delle Api e nelle Ricerche su 'l punto d'onore e sull'utilità del Cristianesimo in guerra, s'impegna scioccamente a provare che i vizj sieno machine necessarie, ed utilissime per governare, e far fiorire gli Stati: che 'l punto d'onore sia un'invenzione la più ingegnosa della Politica».

IV. Conclusions.

For Mandeville the general outcome of the self-interested behaviour of the inhabitants of a large commercial society may become the collective good; this is not, however, a foregone conclusion. Mandeville is not a theorist of the spontaneous harmony of interests. His constant suspicion of any teleological perspective, or providential view on nature, and especially of human nature, works also for political and economic balances. Mandeville's thought is characterized by the idea of an impersonal process, an unintentional development of human institutions, a natural selection of systems of shared feelings of approval and disapproval that give rise to the ability to live in society, the development and stabilization of a language related to recognized values: virtue, honor, respectability. The art of politics itself, is the result of a gradual process, of cumulative experience. Rulers and administrators are and remain part of a network of relationships, a hierarchy of mutual services, wheels of vast systems, machineries forged over time³⁹. As a matter of fact, even if the possibility and usefulness of a rational control of social processes in view of the public good are limited, still, rulers must possess the ability to recognize, to identify the passions at the basis of human actions and, wherever possible, direct them in the right direction, by humoring, encouraging and promoting existing trends; systems of symbols for the promotion of the self. The harmony of interests is thus not independent from the actions of the legislators. Politicians cannot change human nature, but they must possess the ability to understand it, in order to turn into public benefit the individual self-interested attitudes, exploiting precisely those idealized representations of human nature that most dominate at different times. The Christian saint, the citizen of the Ancient Republics, the learned Courtier and the noble warrior are all anachronistic ideals in the competitive commercial society of the early 18th century, but the principles shared in the last centuries by the ruling elites are still paramount in their function of social bond. By distinguishing the form of honourable conduct which characterized the moral history of post-medieval Europe, Mandeville is able to identify those new social disciplines by means of which the citizens of commercial

³⁹ *Fable II*, p. 184; MANDEVILLE, *Free Thoughts on Religion*, cit., p. 188.

societies could sublimate the primary demands of self-liking in materially productive and psychologically rewarding ways. Political obligation, for Mandeville is grounded on the love of the self and not on reason, and it can only develop within a system of values that cannot be reduced only to written laws, nor to the mere economic advantage.