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## HYPOTHETICAL THOUGHT IN MANDEVILLE'S DECONSTRUCTIVE GENEALOGY OF SOCIABILITY\*

ABSTRACT. – In the critique he makes of commercial society, Bernard Mandeville often resorts to the use of conjectures about the origins of human nature, and it may even be said that without them, it would not be possible to substantiate the reasons for such critique. Two of the main targets of this paper are, precisely, to show how Mandeville's hypothetical thought supports the critical observation that eighteenth-century society makes about itself, and, at a purely theoretical level, to point out the similarities and differences that bind it to the so-called "conjectural history".

There is, in all the Mandevillean *oeuvre*, a clear attempt, repeatedly reiterated by its author, to describe and criticize the evolution of social life according to the principles of empirical observation. Focusing largely on the observation of human passions and their forms of expression, allows Bernard de Mandeville to exceed the artifices of imagination and to reinforce reason with the true reality of life in society. The fact that *The Fable of the Bees* begins with the satirical poem *The Grumbling Hive* already shows the author's concern to "naturalize" his observation method. Putting aside a purely theoretical approach, based solely on ideal assumptions, he

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views the life forms of the commercial society of his time. It is from nature, in other words, that reason is built, and not the reverse. The claim of this maxim is intrinsically programmatic. Mandeville comes into his own as an anatomist of society: he fights against all the fictions that obscure self-knowledge, aiming to show human beings for «what they really are», rather than as «what they should be». (MANDEVILLE 1988, 1, p. 39). In his thought, these two modalities issue in a paradoxical tension between the primordial dimensions of the state of nature and the artificial dimensions of civil society, a tension invariably sustained by his criticism of morals and the semantics of virtue and good-manners of the eighteenth-century commercial society. This paradoxical tension between “natural” and “artificial” derives, in part, from the hypothetical character that pervades the anatomical thought of Mandeville and the several conjectural contents derived from it. Hence, the question of what is the true nature of men – *what they really are* – appears, inevitably, linked to the hypothetical reconstruction of the past, and may be expressed in the question *what must have been the case*.

It is thus inside this temporal bond of the present with the past that the objectification of human self-knowledge takes place, whereas reference to the future appears more concerned with the moral codification of society. As the moral virtues conceal more than properly reveal, Mandeville proposes a genealogy of sociability that has the capacity, in the long run, to rebuild the natural principles of human behavior and deconstruct the delusive myths that have been imposed on it. The latter purpose, of course, is inextricably linked to the author’s satirical vein. By exposing in the past all that is condemned in the present, all that is socially repressed and disciplined, it becomes feasible for him to caricature, simultaneously, the morphologies of his social context. About that, we can even say that the Mandevillean genealogy of sociability brings together a certain “jocular ontology”, similar to that found in many William Hogarth paintings, where those human dimensions hitherto considered ridiculous, rude and tasteless appear now as integral to humankind.

As rightly noted by Frank Palmeri, all these hypothetical reconstructions of Mandeville, far from being mere conjectural elements scattered throughout his work, served to boost decisively the development of the so-called “conjectural history” in the second half of

the eighteenth century (PALMERI 2015)<sup>1</sup>. So John Locke – as afterwards Dugald Stewart and Immanuel Kant – tell us that, in the construction of historical knowledge, conjectures are needed to fill the gaps left by the absence of reliable information, especially documented fact, thus making feasible the expansion of time's history and the narrative sequentiality of its own events. Nevertheless, Kant cautions that history cannot be traced only by the conjectural history, since, if that was the case, it quickly would become a mere novelistic fiction. The origins of human action must therefore be drawn in accordance with the natural dispositions of human beings – and this is a speculative exercise in which the surveillance of reason must impose on the imagination itself (KANT 1963).

The conjectural history of the eighteenth century sought to take a secular view of the primitive origins of human life that led to artificial forms of civil society. Therefore, that the main goal of the paths of conjectural history has been the reconstruction of the state of nature and, in its most anthropological versions, the imposition of a normative gap between barbarism and civilization, seem to be an unmistakable fact. Kant, for example, will use historical and conjectural hypothetical thought to draw out the emancipation of man from his natural instincts and passions. But, once attained, the Enlightenment cultural ideals of *Bildung*, of society and of its major institutions are now described through purely rational principles, which, in turn, exclude the somatic dimensions of individuals in the realization and understanding of their actions. Western thought, fully bonded to this new theoretical trend, conceived those phenomena associated with the body and its less conventional expressions as mere ethnographic traces, primitive and exotic, provided by oral cultures, devoid of written language and fully articulated laws. One of the major philosophical manifestations of such a trend – whose influence is felt in the recognition and development of aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline – is, precisely, the debate on judgments of taste. Whether David Hume or Kant embraced the project to find a solid foundation for the appreciation of beauty, with the main objective of regulating the natural dispositions of perception and emotions, and thereby make beauty a

<sup>1</sup> For comments about this influence of Mandeville in the eighteenth-century philosophy, see, for example STEPHEN 1976, vol. II, 40.

properly communicable fact. The rationalization of passions and the formation of good taste are the two major steps that, supported by aesthetic theory and the artistic production itself, were given to distinguish the *Hochkultur* from the so-called “primitive culture”.

However, given these theoretical directions that conjectural history normally has followed, it is appropriate here to ask if the same teleological dimension well represented by Kantian conjecturalism also forms the basis of the Mandevillian hypothetical thought. Or rather, put as a question, is really the intention of Mandeville to use conjectures as a product of hypothetical thought only for the purpose of narrating the origins of humanity and its major social institutions and thereby overcome the narrative breaks of historical discourse?

As can be inferred from the explanations of Dugald Stewart on the work of Adam Smith, conjectural history – *theoretical history* or, in its French version, *histoire raisonnée* – works as a method of comparison between uncultivated and civilized worlds<sup>4</sup>. Historical conjectures, given the impossibility of reliable documentary sources and also instruments of symbolic mediation of the facts, are able to rebuild a natural scenario, which embraces the emergence of organized society and its major institutions. Thus, this natural scenario has in it already projected the absence of a symbolically mediated factuality, and shows, so to speak, a kind of “symbolic void” of the unrepresentable, leaving open only the door to the formulation of hypotheses typified by the question “what must have been the case”. Mandeville does not put in question the method of conjectural comparison. Where he differs, however, is in refusing to weave a compliment to – or to lay on a panegyric of – the progress of the so-called civilized society. Rather, what we find in his thought is the idea that the origins of society show us what gradually was denied by society and hidden from all humankind. As he asserts, «all Nations must have had mean Beginnings; and it is in those, the Infancy of them, that the Sociableness of Man is as conspicuous as it can be ever after»(MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 180). The (conjectural) origins of the main social institutions – such as, for instance, religion, justice, the state – are used by Mandeville in order to evaluate and specify their functions. As the “function” does not always make visible the “origin”, the typical author of conjectural history intends to highlight the major steps that embrace the birth and the develop-

ment of each institution, particularly those phases where there is an initial transparency between the spheres of the individual and the society. This aim is rather central to Mandeville, since it allows him to form the discursive basis for the fierce satire of the deceptive behavior of his contemporaries – such behavior is, indeed, well represented by the moral claims of the *Societies for the Reformation of Manners*.

Mandeville differs, then, from many other authors in foregrounding an inevitable and implicit tension between knowledge of the origins of human society and pride in its present social status. Human beings generally reveal, as he sees it, deceptive behavior in relation to their natural origins. And this paradox is expressed by him in the following terms: «We see likewise that Men, who are come to be great in the World from despicable Beginnings, don't love to hear of their Origin» (ibid., 301). As he metaphorically puts it, the human being no more likes to recognize or acknowledge what enabled his rise as a social being than an architect wishes to remove the scaffolding before he has finished his building (ibid., 303). And here, at this particular point, Mandeville does form an assertive critique of the historians themselves, since, if the man «was made of a Lump of Earth» (MANDEVILLE 1732, 131), there is no reason for the likes of them who study the origin of Ancient Rome, to put out of sight the true nature of human beings. Given this premise, deceptive behavior increases when the individual exhibits a higher civilized level (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 303). On the other hand, and here is one of the main principles of Mandeville, the passions of civilized man obstruct the reconstruction of the state of nature, since in this they show strong simplicity and weak pleasure levels – then these characteristics are unable to be fully imagined by individuals who saw their passions fragmented and multiplied by pleasure and luxury. The greater the degree of social composition of human passions, the lower the degree of their analytical determinability. The anatomist of society is more precisely one who is able to dissect the main physiological structures that are at the core of each compound of passions. Mandeville's aim is always to find how basic emotions give rise to the articulation of more complex impulses.

The issue of “simulation”, presented here – and which, as we know, runs through the Mandevillean criticism of the social hypocrisy of commercial society – has an almost pathological effect on the

formation of a primordial explanation of human nature. One way to provide an origin of human life that keeps most humans away from their true passions lies, precisely, according to Mandeville, in the creationist theories of the universe. All religious explanations of the origin acquire a primacy on natural causes, since, being «more agreeable to good Sense», they attribute to the origin an «incomprehensible creative Power» that arose from one transcendent force (ibid., 316). However, and as in other cases in which society tends to create fictions about itself, even such an “incomprehensible” aspect of the divine hides what is most natural in man. Both negative determinations of their environment – which, according to the influence of Hobbesian thought in Mandeville, potentiate fear and make this passion a turning point for the establishment of an invisible power, especially one connected to religion – as their vicious imperfections are originating impulses for the creation of arts, sciences, commerce, and the social institutions in general. Without all these imperfections and negative determinations – the «Evil» in the ordinary language adopted by Mandeville – the very existence of the social nature of human being would be compromised to the point where it can be destroyed. With this view also quickly becoming blurred some points that mark the society development ideals fixed in those artificial divisions between primitive stage and civilized stage.

Contrary to the hypocritical pretensions of commercial society and in the same line of the hypothetical reasoning which will subsequently be followed, for example, by the Scottish historian William Robertson<sup>2</sup>, Mandeville believes that «there is no Difference between the original Nature of a Savage, and that of a civiliz'd Man: They are both born with Fear» (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 214). This last assertion must be still contextualized within Mandeville's theory of the passions. Fear or other basic human passions are, strictly

<sup>2</sup> Robertson does not establish a normative basis, anchored on the anthropological binomial “barbarian-civilized”, to his conjectural formulations. As Mandeville, also he believes that human nature, no matter how socially evolved, always remains unchanged in its genesis: «A human being, as he comes originally from the hand of nature, is everywhere the same. At this first appearance in the state of infancy, whether it be among the rudest savages, or in the most civilized nation, we can discern no quality which marks any distinction or superiority» (ROBERTSON 1800<sup>9</sup>, vol. 2, 221).

speaking, structurally unchanged, with only substantial differences in how they are integrated with each other – the integration potentially giving rise to the properly social passions, for example, hypocrisy. David Hume seems to share the same view when he asserts that «Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind» (HUME 2007, 75). Like Mandeville, also, he follows the maxim that human nature – particularly the passions – has a uniform and unchanging character, not being therefore fully affected by the cultural determinations and impositions of each nation. Such a maxim makes it possible to defend conjectural history as an inquiry into the genealogical principles that sustain the basis of social life and the main human social institutions, because, as the philosopher points out, «Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular» (ibid., 76). Human nature thus presents since its beginnings an unwavering physiological and psychological determinism, regardless of the several regional, climatic, religious circumstances that are imposed to every nation in the world. So, concludes Mandeville, we should not expect major significant changes in this regard (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 1, 229). However, owing to the hybrid forms that passions can assume within a society, it is not always easy to determine their most intrinsic elements.

Before the beginning of the eighteenth century, there already existed a significant European debate on the psychological causes of human behavior and its importance for the understanding of historical phenomena. For some authors, a history built *by* and *for* the memory was a true obstacle to such implication. In his writing *De l'usage de l'histoire*, Abbé de Saint-Réal, for example, tells us that historical knowledge should not only have a *mnesic* purpose, since to know the events of the past is to know their causes right through the motives and passions of man. Only the passionate motives are able to allow full knowledge of the human spirit, and not alone the facts that are them purely external (ABBÉ DE SAINT-RÉAL 1671, 3-4). In a similar vein, in Mandeville's usage, conjectures are, in most cases, to establish the "principles which Men act from". But, as a good

empiricist, Mandeville always advocated that human knowledge comes only from the facts of sensation and perception. «All our Knowledge comes *a posteriori*», and, therefore, adds the author, «it is imprudent to reason otherwise than from Facts» (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 261). Knowledge *a priori* is only a privilege of God, being the common man condemned to accept the uncertainties derived from his reasoning *a posteriori*.

From this human inability redounds a clear opposition between “works of art” and “works of nature”. While, for Mandeville, the last are unchanging in its stability and wholeness – both impossible to be absolutely understood by reason and by human senses –, the former, due to the imposition of our knowledge *a posteriori*, «are all very lame and defective», and therefore require a gradual improvement over time (ibid., 186-187). And this idea help us to confirm the inferences that Mandeville made from the thought of John Locke, namely that rationality is not just innate to human beings, but, being an explicitly temporal process, always requires various levels of evolution and practice. However, Mandeville's empiricism does not prevent him, of course, from questioning the origins of human nature and its social implications, as well as making use of hypothetical thought when there are no clear empirical facts to go on. Because, as he insists, «it is not possible to know any thing, with Certainty, of Beginnings, where Men were destitute of Letters» (ibid., 231). Through the mouth of Cleomenes, Mandeville also confesses that «When Things are very obscure, I sometimes make Use of Conjectures to find my Way» (ibid., 128). But this use of hypothetical thought is, according him, devoid of a purely epistemic purpose, and is, consequently, not (as later projected by Jean-Jacques Rousseau) a proper mean to *découvrir la vérité* (ROUSSEAU 1755). Mandeville admits that its use should not, under any circumstances, jeopardize the use of rational capacities themselves. As it can be seen in the following excerpt taken from the *Third Dialogue* between Horatio and Cleomenes:

HOR.

Do you argue, or pretend to prove any thing from those Conjectures?

CLEO.

No; I never reason but from the plain Observations which every body may make on Man, the Phænomena that appear in the lesser World (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 128).



With this, we find here a reason to justify and differentiate the use of hypothetical thought in Mandeville. It shows, at the same time, the creative force and the mysterious works of nature, as well the total inability of the human mind to have a completely and utterly objective view of them. With this stress on the inscrutability of the first causes, Mandeville intends precisely to reinforce the idea of knowledge *a posteriori*, particularly based on a thorough, empirical observation typical of his narrowly anatomical method. “Observation” means, in this semantic context, an analysis form strictly social – that is, socially rooted –, whose main empirical support is the outward signs that each body reveals to every body. In this sense, Mandevillean observations are, above all, true interactions between observer and observed; the theoretical framework of his hypothetical formulations is not allegedly made of scientific abstract concepts, but rather of the bodies of both; and the theory itself returns, so to speak, to the Greek etymology of the “contemplation” *in loco*.

As it can be inferred from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, the hypothetical thought, typical of abductive processes, enables us to form suggestive explanations about something that, being outside the range of our senses, does not have a particular factual dimension. Because it involves, strictly speaking, a proto-logical reasoning (not yet fully conditioned by inferential rationality), we owe to this way of thinking the equation of “new ideas”. In this regard, Peirce tells us that this kind of natural intelligence is similar to animals’ instincts, and can be, hence, described as a form of thought that carries in itself the “rational instinct” of human beings. “Instinct” because abductive suggestions are a kind of «flash», «an act of *insight*, although of extremely fallible insight» (PEIRCE 1934, vols. V-VI, 113), which, as in all instinctual manifestations, reveal that *something may be the case*; “Rational” because the development of conjectures always strongly depends on evaluations and selections of the several possibilities in play.

This analogy between instinct and conjecture drawn by Peirce allows us better to understand the naturalistic character that pervades the Mandevillean hypothetical thought. In Mandeville, this mental model of the hypothetical thought is mirrored, in an evident way, in his own conjectures about the origin of human nature. And this is a significant fact that pervades the whole work of Mandeville. There is, here, in this particular aspect, a clear symmetry between

form and content, between thought and subject. So, too, in *The Fable of the Bees* there exists a latent symmetry between its satirical vision and the social vision of the period. At this point, it should be stressed again that Mandeville's conjectures are almost always naturalistic projections of empirical observations that the author makes of certain social behaviors, certain expressions of human emotions as well as the animal's own behavior, and even the entirely natural life. Mandeville's use of hypothetical thought is a truly intuitive use, which does not depend either of any widespread speculation about the origins of the concerned phenomena, nor about the geographic location of them. Instead – and as the author tells us about the political inventions –, he goes «directly to the Fountain Head, human Nature itself», intending thereby to investigate «the Frailty or Defect in Man, that is remedy'd or supply'd by that Invention» (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 28). Thus, this naturalistic conjectural method of Mandeville can later be found in the observations of Dugald Stewart on the thought of Adam Smith, particularly when the author states that «when we cannot trace the process by which an event has been produced, it is often of importance to be able to show how it may have been produced by natural causes» (STEWART 1829, 31). Owing to his empirical method Mandeville gradually objectified these natural causes with respect to human life. Such research must always bear the various stages in the lives of individuals, from birth to death, since the psychology of human mind is formed and revealed over time in an interpolated way.

Mandeville's hypothetical thought has, in this sense, and to a large extent, a very explicit *analogical profile*. Statements on human sociableness like these, «Nature had design'd Man for Society, as she has made Grapes for Wine» (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 185), and «we have more Reason to imagine that the Desire as well as Aptness of Man to associate, do not proceed from his Love to others, than we have to believe that a mutual Affection of the Planets to one another, superiour to what they feel to Stars more remote, is not the true Cause why they keep always moving together in the same solar System» (ibid., 178), inhabit the speculative universe of the author, as well as its rhetorical form. Thus, if we consider this naturalistic basis, Mandevillean conjectures tend to have a “deistical dimension”, since, devoid of providential action and historical transformation, they expose change within a natural psychological

framework, in which the passions prevail as true causes of human sociability. However, unlike the “deistical histories”<sup>3</sup>, Mandeville does not cease to give importance to the correlation of passions with the economic mechanisms of the social system. In fact, it is these same passions – particularly those influenced by luxury and “vicious” behaviors – that underpin the economic system of commercial society. Without them, it would be difficult to sustain commercial dynamics able to ensure the enrichment of the great nations, it would be difficult, too, to provide a common well-being for citizens, governable only by state laws. As well evidenced in the poem *The Grumbling Hive*, frugality only leads to the creation and governance of small communities, closed in themselves, without any propensity for openness to the world. It is, on the contrary, the excessive passions, triggered by the desire of luxury, those that nourish and reproduce the sphere of social relationships of powerful nations. In these, prodigality brings forth a structural isomorphism between human relations and trade relations, to the point of ceasing to be a clear line of demarcation between them. If there isn’t any distinction here, there will also not be an intermediate point to introduce a regulation, based on purely ethical principles and values, of the two interactive forms. That is why moral and good manners only survive in the social imaginary at the expense of a kind of collective *mise en scène* – largely supported by hypocrisy – of human behavior. Despite this point of view, we must not confuse the influence of vicious behavior in the social sphere with that of the individual sphere. These are, strictly speaking, two different planes. According to Mandeville, any man can adopt virtuous behavior even when he is a citizen of a rich kingdom. The reverse, however, can not be claimed. No powerful nation is able to exclude human vices and continue to subsist in its magnitude for any length of time.

In the search for explanatory principles that justify man’s social behavior, as well as the role of social institutions, Mandeville is forced to reverse almost all relationships that had until his day been attributed to the *binomium* “natural-artificial”. Supporting such programmatic reversal is the well know Mandevillean maxim that «Men become sociable, by living together in Society» (MANDEVILLE 1988, vol. 2, 189). It is following this maxim that the author departs

<sup>3</sup> About the conjectural features of “deistical history”, see, for example, EMERSON 1984.

from both the conception defended by Shaftesbury that human beings have, *ab aeterno tempore*, a common social profile, like the radical Hobbesian conception that eliminates any natural disposition for sociability. Quite to the contrary. For Mandeville, the natural condition of human beings enables, step by step – and entirely spontaneously – the common sociability of mankind, not being therefore either the artifices of virtue or moral, nor the linguistic competence, those who genuinely begin to raise the man to the condition of social being. In Friedrich August von Hayek's view, the “spontaneous order” introduced by Mandeville leads to the idea of an open historical evolution, devoid of any project determined *a priori* (HAYEK 1996). From this point we can also infer that one consequence of the conjectural versions of the origin of society redounds, in Mandeville, in an exclusion of the predictive devices of historical science.

Before the third step he attributes to life in society – that which occurs with the invention of writing, and, by extension, with the development and establishment of laws – there are two other previous major steps involving the instincts of preservation and competition, from which result a propulsion to union and social order: “preservation” of mankind against the dangers posed by wild animals; “competition” among men, mainly motivated by pride and ambition. Through the conjectures about the origin of sociableness it is possible to discern the primacy of the passions on human rational activity (these, in fact, never cease to determine all the various manifestations of social life, even those that concern the law, the political sphere and the moral behavior of individuals). In this narrow sense, rationality, as can be inferred from Mandeville, is a kind of circular calculus dictated by passions and imputed to the passions themselves. One of the aspects that confirm this Mandevillean idea lies in the conjectural formulation about the origins of language. In Mandeville, as somewhat similarly in Étienne Bonnot Condillac too, language, not being derived from any providential invention, has to be approached from through its natural elements. These natural elements are given essentially by action and not, conversely, by reflection. The first signs have a symptomatic performative dimension, generated by the expression of basic passions and instinctive gestures. And it is for the use of the action that language has, since its first manifestations, a persuasive purpose.

In short, the Mandevillean conjectures on the origin of human organized life have, in general, an implicit counterfactual dimension of psychological order: they suppose a certain innateness of human passions, whose effect prevails throughout human life and that can only be concealed by social life. With the term “counterfactual” I do not want to illustrate here those cases of “conditional counterfactual” – *if it had been the case that, then...* –, although they can also be found in Mandeville, as, for example, the poor and ascetic society of bees that in the verses of *The Grumbling Hive* is suggested by the author as the opposite model of commercial society. Counterfactuality should already be seen as a structural and implicit dimension of conjectural thought, since, regardless of the ideological content that determines it, it is only possible with the suspension of those historically documented facts pertaining to the past and the present of society. Looking beyond the facts therefore calls for the negation of intelligible reality, the assumption that, for example, before the creation of language, human beings had forms of transparent communication, fully natural, that are the opposite of the persuasive essence of discourse in general. The non-artificial approach of the past appears to us as well, as a prerequisite for its degree of conjecturability. Moreover, the nature of the passions, in Mandeville’s view, already has in itself a sort of natural counterfactuality *in potentia*, which competes – though unavailingly – with the counterfactual artificial imposition of moral and political laws. In so far as the development of social life goes toward the suppression or concealment of its expression, the passions never get to fully adhere to the facts, keeping up, therefore, as authentic and transparent sources of the observation of human sociableness. Already laws, as much as moral standards, are deceptive by their very nature, since the virtuous behavior they require can only be achieved through a self-denial of basic passions. Hence, also, that vice, contrary to virtue, is, for Mandeville, one of the fundamental aspects that reveal the human passions in their most natural state.

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