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Abstract

Starting by analysing the atheist’s character, Mandeville gets gradually closer to Bayle’s thesis on virtuous atheism, but he takes a different turn, and maintains that a society without religion cannot exist because atheism goes against a natural passion, fear of invisible causes. In order to understand Mandeville’s position on this last point, in the second part of this essay I will consider his reflection on the origin and on the social and political functions of religion.

Keywords

Atheism - Society without religion - Origin of religion - Religion and politics - Passions and society - Mandeville - Bayle - Fear - Virtuous atheist
Chapter 17
Atheism, Religion and Society in Mandeville’s Thought

Mauro Simonazzi

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17.1 Introduction

So there can be many different types of atheist, but for the purpose of legislation they need to be divided into two groups. The dissembling atheist deserves to die for his sins not just once or twice but many times, whereas the other kind needs simply admonition combined with incarceration. [...] Those who have simply fallen victim to foolishness and who do not have a bad character and disposition should be sent to the reform center by the judge in accordance with the law for a term or not less than five years, and during this period no citizen must come into contact with them except the members of the Nocturnal Council, who should pay visits to admonish them and ensure their spiritual salvation. When his imprisonment is over, a prisoner who appears to be enjoying mental health should go and live with sensible people; but if appearances turn out to have been deceptive, and he is reconvicted on a similar charge, he should be punished by death. (Plato, The Laws, 908e10–909a10)\(^1\)

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I would like to express my gratitude for his comments to Irwin Primer.

\(^1\)Plato 1997, 1565.

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In the tenth book of *The Laws*, Plato severely condemns atheism considering it dangerous for society and stemming from ignorance. The Greek philosopher’s proposal consists in the establishment of a special detention institution called *Sophronisterion*, that is “wisdom creator”, even though for the most serious cases he advocates the death penalty. This conception reflected Hellenic culture’s common attitude towards atheism and impiety in general, but Plato gave a new philosophical depth to the condemnation of atheists and their persecution by making a link between the denial of the existence of the gods and of the immortality of the soul with immorality, political and social subversion and diseases. Atheism is considered a vice because the idea that God doesn’t exist and the soul is mortal loosens the link with virtue. It is therefore dangerous for the *polis*’ safety, as politics without virtue lack their foundation. In fact justice, like health, consists in the harmony of the parts, and this harmony falters if we exclude religion and morals.

When Pierre Bayle, at the end of the seventeenth-century, reflects upon the possibility of a society of atheists, he still has to deal with the rooted conviction that atheism is a vice, an illness, and, more than anything else, a social liability. Bayle asks his contemporaries two tightly related questions: can an atheist be virtuous? And if atheists can be virtuous, can society without religion exist? In other words, Bayle was wondering whether it was possible to break the exclusive bond between morals and religion and to theorise the existence of lay morals, morals that would then constitute the basis of a society where religion would be politically irrelevant.

These questions generate at least three problems. The first was about God’s reaction towards those societies who would decide to tolerate atheism. In this perspective, the persecution of the atheist was necessary as a form of society’s self-defence, not to prevent the damage done by the atheists themselves, but as a safeguard against God’s wrath that would inexorably hit such a society. Therefore the problem was that of a vindictive God, not the social danger caused by atheists.

The second problem, instead, was of an epistemological nature: it regarded the foundation of morals without religion. Would reason suffice to found the distinction between vice and virtue? And would the absence of God necessarily generate conventional and relativistic morals?

The third problem regarded the relationship between virtue and behavioural motivations. If God didn’t exist, then everything would be possible: virtue would not gain any reward nor vice any punishment. In this state of affairs, evil and vice would rule and good and virtue would be nothing else than a con to keep the ignorant and

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2This work, known as *Pensées diverses écrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne à l’occasion de la comète qui parut au mois de décembre 1680*, appeared for the first time in 1682 by a different title: *Lettre à M.L.A.D.C., docteur de Sorbonne, où il est prouvé par plusieurs raisons tirées de la Philosophie et de la Théologie que les comètes ne sont point la présage d’aucun malheur. Avec plusieurs reflexions morales et politiques erreurs populaires*, A Cologne, chez Pierre Marteau, MDCLXXXII. See in particular §172. Its first English translation was made in 1708.

3On virtuous atheist and society without religion, see Lussu 1997, 57–99; Israel 2001, 331–341; Cantelli 2001, 679–706; Harris 2003, 229–254; Robertson 2005, 256–324; Mori 2011, 41–60; Bianchi 2011, 61–80.
the fools subjugated. The absence of eternal reward or punishment would also have consequences on a strictly political plan: without God no oath could be considered valid, and an oath was the seal of all important commitments. Without fear of perjury any promise would be a lot less binding, and so any agreement stipulated with atheists could not be considered valid because atheists were not bound by their word.⁴

Bayle concluded that atheism did not constitute an obstacle to the birth of society; that lay morals could exist; that an atheist could be virtuous and that a society without religion was therefore possible.⁵ In his analysis of society, Bayle boldly asserted that the Christian religion, if adhered to in all its moral precepts, could cause damage to a society’s wealth and power.⁶

In 1723 the second edition of the Fable. Part I⁷ by Bernard Mandeville appeared in London, and within a few years a series of works aimed at confuting its most radical theses followed.⁸ On January 20th 1724, William Law published an essay of about a hundred pages called Remarks upon a late Book entitled The Fable of the Bees,⁹ in which he put great effort into criticising some of the main mandevillean theses, in particular the ideas that passions are at the origin of human actions, that reason cannot act as guide to human behaviour, that morals are a human invention and that the belief in the immortality of the soul results from pride. It is rather significant that in the final pages of this essay dedicated to the Fable of the Bees, William Law adds a postscript of seven pages, in which two of Bayle’s theses are also criticized: the first is the conviction that virtue and religion can be explained as “blind effects” of human passions (Law: 100); the second is the belief in the possible existence of a society of virtuous atheists (Law: 101–102).

We cannot relay here the whole of William Law’s confutation, which follows from a conception that reflects the orthodoxy of the time, but I would like to underline that in 1724 Mandeville had already been accused of being close to Bayle’s positions.¹⁰ Scribano noticed that in the second edition of Free Thoughts,
published after Law’s accusations and the Grand Jury’s censorship, «Mandeville becomes more cautious, and adds to his preface a new passage (pp. XIX–XX) in which he declares that he referred to Bayle only as a source, without passing judgement on the truthfulness of the facts and opinions expressed by him, about which he declines any responsibility».  

A few years later Archibald Campbell tarred Bayle and Mandeville with the same brush, calling them atheists and libertines.  

Mandeville, in truth, shares only some of Bayle’s positions, while he distances himself from them on a few very significant points. Among Bayle’s conclusions was the view that religion is not necessary for social life, and it is therefore possible to imagine a society of virtuous atheists; and that religion could have negative effects on a social level too. Bayle used the hypothetical existence of a society of virtuous atheists to support his opinion that religion is not necessary for man and society.  

Mandeville also states that religion is not necessary for life in society, but on the other hand he cannot imagine a society without religion; he asserts not only that religion can be damaging to society, but that virtue itself, intended in its radical sense, is incompatible with the very existence of society. It becomes therefore apparent that Mandeville disagrees with Bayle right on the most crucial point: the hypothesis of the possible existence of a society of virtuous atheists.  

In the pages that follow we will see how Mandeville’s argument on atheism and religion develops. Starting by analysing the atheist’s character, Mandeville gets gradually closer to Bayle’s thesis on virtuous atheism, but having admitted the possibility of the existence of the apparently virtuous atheist, the Dutch physician takes a different turn, and maintains that a society without religion cannot exist. In

of Monsieur Baile, without mentioning him. I confess, he is the learned Man I speak of in Page 93. The Citations likewise which I have borrow’d from that Author, without naming him, are many». See Mandeville 2001. See also F. B. Kaye, Introduction, in Mandeville 1924a, xlii–lxxix, lxx–lxxxii, ciii–cv; James 1975; Horne 1978, 19–32; Scribano 1980, 21–46; Carrive 1980, 155–194; Scribano 1981, 186–220; Wong 1984, 394; James 1996; Primer 2001; Robertson 2005, 261–283.

11 Scribano 1981, 187n. The English translation is mine.

12 A. Campbell, Arete-logia. An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue; wherein the false notions of Machiavel, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Mr. Bayle, as they are collected and digested by the Author of the Fable of the Bees, are examin’d and confuted; and the eternal and unalterable nature and obligation of moral virtue is stated and vindicated, Westminster, J. Chier, A. Campbell, B. Creake, B. Barker, 1728 (Edinburgh, 1733; London-Bristol, Routledge-Thömmes Press, 1994). In 1726, the reverend Alexander Innes had taken a manuscript from Archibald Campbell, promising that he would see to its publication. Instead, he published it in his name, adding a long forward addressed to the author of the Fable of the Bees. In 1730 Campbell, who taught History of the church at St. Andrews and was a colleague of Hutcheson, whose criticism of the Fable of the Bees he shared, publicly denounced the fact that Innes had published his manuscript and then decided to re-published it in his name. The new version, much broader and with amendments, came out in 1733. I was able to consult the microfilm version of the 1728 edition, kept in Heidelberg’s library. For a list of the works of the time where the closeness between Bayle and Mandeville is remarked, see Scribano 1981, 188, n. 8. On Campbell and Mandeville, see Maurer 2014. Mandeville has also often been compared with Machiavel; on the presence of Machiavellian elements in Mandeville see Simonazzi 2009.
order to understand Mandeville’s position on this last point, in the second part of this essay I will consider his reflection on the origin and on the social and political functions of religion.

17.2 Atheism and Society

The theme of atheism is present throughout Mandeville’s works and gains increasing importance in time, as can be noticed by the fact that the argument gets more and more articulated starting from the first edition of the *Fable of the Bees* (1714), through *Free Thoughts* (1720), the *Fable of the Bees. Part II* (1729), and *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* (1732).

Mandeville’s analysis of atheism fits into his more general interpretation of human behaviour within the framework of the passion system. Atheism, like faith, is not a matter of choice; it depends on one’s upbringing and one’s own emotional structure. According to Mandeville, in fact, man is not granted free will. The most technical definition of free will was given by Mandeville in *Free Thoughts*, in the chapter in which he reflects upon the existence of free will and predestination: «what we call the Will is properly the last Result of deliberation» (Mandeville 2001, 61). It is a definition that Mandeville borrows from Hobbes, and that he comments as follows: «The reason, why every Body imagines that he has a Free-Will, is, because we are Conscious that in the choice of Things we feel a Power [...] to determine our Judgment either way. [...] If we reflect on this, I say, our Will shall not seem to be as free, as is commonly imagin’d» (Mandeville 2001, 61). In another passage, Mandeville is even more explicit: «Every Man may be convinc’d within himself, that Believing is not a Thing of Choice» (Mandeville 2001, 49–50). But if freedom is not as free as commonly thought, what determines individual behaviour? Mandeville thinks that passions determine actions; but passions are not all alike. Some are more important than others, and one in particular is the most important of all, namely,

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13 The quotation is taken from the Preface to the French edition written by the translator Etienne de Silhouette. See W. Warburton, *Dissertations sur l’union de la religion, de la morale, et de la politique*, Londres, Guillaume Darrès, 1742, vol. I, pp. 5–6.

14 On this subject see also Mandeville 1924b, 229: *Horace*: « Is it not in our choice, to act, or not to act?». *Cleomenes*: «What signifies that, where there is a Passion that manifestly sways, and with a strict Hand governs that Will?». On Free-Will, see Scribano 1980, 75–89.
pride or self-liking,\textsuperscript{15} which Mandeville defines as the desire to be esteemed and that using modern terminology we could define as a desire of social recognition.\textsuperscript{16}

All human actions therefore depend on the passional structure.\textsuperscript{17} Even the first Christians’ martyrdom, and that of famous atheists like Giordano Bruno, Giulio Cesare Vanini and Mahomet Effendi, that get analysed in the \textit{Fable Part I} (Mandeville 1924a, 214–215), have the same cause: pride and vanity. In this case Mandeville doesn’t attribute any moral value to the martyrdom of atheists, intended as honesty, consistency or truth-seeking. Mandeville’s introductory words to the passages about Vanini leave no ambiguity:

\begin{quote}
So silly a Creature is Man, as that, intoxicated with the Fumes of Vanity, he can feast on the thoughts of the Praises that shall be paid his Memory in future Ages with so much ecstasy, as to neglect his present Life, nay, court and covet Death, if he but imagines that it will add to the Glory he had acquired before. (Mandeville 1924a, 213–214)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15}Mandeville makes a distinction between Pride and Self-Liking starting from \textit{Fable Part II} and then in \textit{An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour}.

\textsuperscript{16}In Mandeville’s anthropological conception there are two main passions: self-love and self-liking. Self-love is an expression of self-preservation, while self-liking is the passion from which the desire to be esteemed comes from. Self-liking therefore is a relational passion as it has its foundation in other people’s judgement and it is stronger than self-love as demonstrated by the case of suicide. See. Mandeville 1990, 6–7: «In understanding perfectly well what mean by Self-liking. You are of Opinion, that we are all born with a Passion manifestly distinct from Self-love; that, when it is moderate and well regulated, excites in us the Love of Praise, and a Desire to be applauded and thought well of by others, and stirs us up to good Actions: but that the same Passion, when it is excessive, or ill turn’d, whatever it excites in our Selves, gives Offence to others, renders us odious, and is call’d Pride. As there is no Word or Expression that comprehends all the different Effects of this same Cause, this Passion, you have made one, \textit{viz.} Self-liking, by which you mean the Passion in general, the whole Extent of it, whether it produces laudable Actions, and gains us Applause, or such as we are blamed for and draw upon us the ill Will of others». See Scribano 1978; Jack 1989, 40–50; Hundert 1994, 52–55; Peltonen 2003, 263–302; Force 2003, 57–67; Guion 2004; Simonazzi 2008, 134–181; Blom 2009; Tolonen 2013, 22–30 and 82–102.

\textsuperscript{17}In the first edition of the \textit{Fable Part I}, published in 1714, Mandeville made clear that his intent was first of all descriptive, and that his analyses started from the premises that the will of man was not free, but determined by passions: «As for my Part [. . .], I believe Man (besides Skin, Flesh, Bones, &c. that are obvious to the Eye) to be a compound of various Passions, that all of them, as they are provoked and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or not» (Mandeville 1924a, 41). Though Mandeville often changes his opinions in time, when it comes to free will, instead, he remains faithful to this first definition; in fact in 1732, in his \textit{An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour}, we find a formulation that is very similar to that of 1714, even in the words he chose: «So most of the Passions are counted to be Weaknesses, and commonly call’d Frailties; whereas they are the very Powers that govern the whole Machine; and, whether they are perceived or not, determine or rather create the Will that immediately precedes every deliberate Action» (Mandeville 1990, 6).
Differently from Bayle,\textsuperscript{18} Mandeville states that there is no such a thing as a virtuous atheist, but there are indeed vain atheists: «yet it is certain, that there have been Men who only assisted with Pride and Constitution to maintain the worst of Causes, have undergone Death and Torments with as much Carefulness as the best of Men, animated with Piety and Devotion, ever did for the true Religion» (Mandeville 1924a, 214).

This is Mandeville’s opinion in 1714. A few years later, in \textit{Free Thoughts}, his work that was most influenced by Bayle, Mandeville introduces a distinction between two types of atheists:\textsuperscript{19}

Atheists are either Speculative or Practical; Speculative Atheists are those unhappy People, who, being too fond of Knowledge or Reasoning, are first deluded into Scepticism, till, unable to extricate themselves from the Mazes of Philosophy, they are at last betrayed into a Disbelief of every Thing they cannot comprehend, and become the most convincing Evidences of the shallowness of Human Understanding. The Number of these has always been very small; and, as they are commonly studious, peaceable Men, the Hurt they do to the Publick is inconsiderable. […]

Practical Atheists are generally Libertines, who first have been guilty of all manner of Vice and Profaneness, and afterwards, not daring to reflect on the Enormity of their Sins, or the Punishment they deserve from the Vengeance of Heaven, lay hold on Atheistical Arguments, to skreen themselves from their own Fears, and only deny a God, because they wish there was none. Practical Atheists, as they commonly spend their Lives in Riots, and ridiculing every thing that is holy, generally dye (unless they happen to repent) in uncommon Agonies and Despair. (Mandeville 2001, 16–17)

This distinction seems to introduce Bayle’s thesis about a difference between virtuous and vicious atheists, a difference that a few years before he had not taken into consideration. In fact, the speculative atheists are men that behave virtuously even though they don’t believe in «an Immortal Power, that, superior to all Earthly Dominion, invisibly governs the World» (Mandeville 2001, 15). Atheists can be virtuous and Christians can be vicious because the reasons for their actions do not descend from the principles that are professed but from the passions and individual inclinations. Mandeville writes: «And therefore it ought not to appear more strange to us, that an Atheist should be a quiet moral Man, than that a Christian should lead a very wicked Life» (Mandeville 2001, 15). Practical Atheists, instead, are sinful and vicious men, who deny the existence of God because they hope not to have to account for their behaviour.

In order to avoid ambiguity, we need to specify the way in which Mandeville makes use of the term virtue. This word is used by Mandeville with two different

\textsuperscript{18}Bayle’s judgment on the reason for Vanini’s martyrdom moves from the attribution of a “certain idea of honesty”, that would make of him a virtuous atheist, to considering Vanini as a man “animated by a ridiculous point of honour”, which would make of him only an extremely proud man. See P. Bayle, \textit{Pensées diverses}, § 182.

\textsuperscript{19}Mandeville takes from Bayle the distinction between speculative atheists (athées de théorie) and practical atheists (athées de pratique). As noted by M.E. Scribano, the difference between Bayle and Mandeville is that the first describes the atheist as a heroical and militant man, while the second presents him a library mouse, completely defenceless and pacific. See Scribano 1981, 213.
meanings that can be identified as “real virtue” and “apparent virtue”. Real virtue is defined as “every Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good” (Mandeville 1924a, 48–49). Apparent virtue, instead, is the exterior behaviour that respects common values within a social context, but whose real reasons is the passion of self-liking, and not the “rational ambition of being good”.

In the end, real virtue cannot be practiced because it is contrary to human nature, which is passion. Apparent virtue, instead, is a behaviour that on the exterior level produces the same effects as real virtue, but is motivated by selfish reasons.

This distinction between virtuous and vicious atheists seems to have disappeared in Mandeville’s later works. He may have used it simply to distinguish virtuous atheists, who are not dangerous for society, from vicious atheists, who reject not just the existence of God, but also society’s shared values.

Consequently, nobody can be really virtuous, because virtue requires free will, which is denied to human nature. It is on this level that Mandeville distances himself from Bayle: an atheist who is truly virtuous does not exist. Having clarified this point, Mandeville proceeds by explaining that men can be divided in two categories: those who satisfy their passions behaving as if they were virtuous, that is respecting shared social codes, and those, instead, who satisfy their passions as if they were vicious, that is breaking shared social codes.

Going back to the problem posed by Bayle regarding the existence of the virtuous atheists, Mandeville’s position is now more understandable. On the one hand, he thinks that we can distinguish two categories of atheists, the apparently virtuous ones, and the vicious ones.

In the Sixth Dialogue of the Fable. Part II Mandeville reiterates what he had affirmed in Free Thoughts regarding speculative atheists. The only difference is that the attitude of his description is more generous, but the subject is dealt with only after reassuring his readers that «Multitudes are never tainted with Irreligion» (Mandeville 1924b, 313). The atheist is described as a talented, spirited, reflexive and well-adjusted person, and a defender of freedom. He is fascinated by maths or natural philosophy, is keen on research, he is disinterested, and he lives a good healthy life. Mandeville especially notes that most of those who become atheists are proud and full of themselves, especially if they did not receive an adequate religious education when young.²⁰

The atheist’s image that emerges from the pages of the Fable Part II is one that resembles more and more a defence from an accusation of debauchery. In truth,

²⁰Mandeville 1924b, 313: «Men of Parts and Spirit, of Thought and Reflection, the Assertors of Liberty, such as meddle with Mathematicks and natural Philosophy, most inquisitive Men, the disinterested, that live in ease and Plenty; if their Youth has been neglected, and they are not well grounded in the Principles of the true Religion, are prone to Infidelity; especially such amongst them, whose Pride and Sufficiency are greater than ordinary; and if Persons of this sort fall into Hands of Unbelievers, they run great Hazard of becoming Atheists or Scepticks». 
the definition of the atheist as a vain man does not change, but the attitude of the author appears more sympathetic, as is made evident by his choice of adjectives, and in his description of the atheist as a moderate and freedom-loving man. Besides, Mandeville specifies that virtue does not depend on having faith or being atheist: «and if Men were sway’d in their Actions by the Principles they side with, and the Opinion they profess themselves to be of, All Atheists would be Devils, and superstitious Men Saints: But this is not true; there are Atheists of good Morals, and great Villains superstitious» (Mandeville 1924b, 314).

This description of the atheist opens the way to the explicit defence of atheism that we find in the *Enquiry into the Origin of Honour*, which is the work in which Mandeville dedicates the most space to this subject.

In this work, after having confirmed what sustained in previous ones, that is the impossibility to make atheism universal21 (because it is contrary to a natural passion, the fear of invisible causes) and the importance of religion for what concerns oaths (believers have an extra deterrent in comparison to atheists), Mandeville explicitly states that faith is not a better guarantee of virtue than atheism. If vice means indulging in one’s passions, then a miscreant is no more vicious than a believer, on the contrary:

Wickedness consisting in an unreasonable Gratification of every Passion that comes uppermost, it is so far from implying Unbelief, or what is call’d Atheism, that it rather excludes it Because the Fear of an Invisible Cause is as much a Passion in our Nature, as the Fear of Death. (Mandeville 1990, 189)

Thus it appears that in 1732 Mandeville’s conclusions were closer to those of Bayle than they were in 1714. If in 1714 Mandeville considered atheism to be an excess of vanity, in 1732 he seemed to concede something more. The atheist fights one of his own passions, the fear of invisible things, and this opposition is in itself a principle of virtue. Mandeville doesn’t mention pride anymore, even though, to be consistent with his psychological approach, it remains the only explanation for atheism.22

21Mandeville 1990, 27: «There is a greater Possibility that the most Senseless Enthusiast should make a knowing and polite Nation believe the most incredible Falsities, or that the most odious Tyrant should persuade them to the grossest Idolatry, than that the most artful Politician, or the most popular Prince, should make Atheism to be universally received among the Vulgar of any considerable State or Kingdom, tho’ there were no Temples or Priests to be seen». See also Mandeville 1990, 189: «Believe me, Horatio, there are no Atheists among the Common People».

22Regarding this aspect, it is quite significant to have a look at what Mandeville writes about the accusation of atheism. See Mandeville 2001, 15: «I would have no Man so uncharitable as to think any Man guilty of Atheism, who does not openly profess it». See also Mandeville 1990, 154–155: «For how flagitious soever Men are, none can be deem’d Atheist but those, who pretend to have absolutely conquer’d, or never been influenced by the Fear of an invisible Cause, that over-rules Human Affairs; and what I say now has been and ever will be true in all Countries, and in all Ages, let the Religion or Worship of the People be what they will».
17.3 The Origin of Religion

We will now set aside the reflection on atheism to analyse the origin and function of religion. The idea of religion in Mandeville is not straightforward. The first problem has to do with Mandeville’s general philosophy. In the 1740s his works were interpreted in two different ways. In the first, born in the mid-twenties as a result of the controversy that originated with the publication of An Essay on Charity and Charity Schools, Mandeville appeared to be an atheist and a free-thinker. In the second perspective, which originated from the French translation of the Fable of the Bees in 1740, Mandeville was regarded as an important philosopher and, in some cases, a good Christian. These two different interpretations will re-emerge in the twentieth century, and have been characterising the historiographical debate until now.

The second difficulty concerns the language and the argumentative structures used by Mandeville in tackling the specific theme of religion. Kaye was the first, in 1924, to address the dilemma of whether the passages on religion should be considered literally or whether they should be interpreted ironically. According to Kaye, Mandeville in The Fable of the Bees. Part II, when approaching religion, swapped the characters’ roles. An objection to this has been that Kaye’s hypothesis attributes to Mandeville intentions that cannot be demonstrated. Still, even sticking to a literal reading, the problems are no less, because inconsistencies and internal contradictions emerge (Goldsmith 1985, 65).

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23 See, for example, Bibliothèque Raisonnée, Amsterdam, 1729, p. 445: «S’il se trouve dans cet Ouvrage des pensées fausses, hâtardées & dangereuses, il y se trouve aussi des réflexions justes, ingénieuses & peut-être nouvelles» and Mercure de France, Amsterdam 1750, pp. 124–126, p. 126: «un ouvrage lumineux & profond, qui intéresse la Politique, la Philosophie & la Religion».

24 See, for example, Advertissement des libraires, in Mandeville 1740 t. 1, 4: «En effet, dans un Ouvrage qu’il a publié quelques années après celui dont nous donnons la traduction, il enseigne expressément que la Vertu est plus propre que le Vice pour procurer le bonheur général de la Société; maxime qui parait directement opposée à la doctrine de la Fable, dans laquelle il semble que l’Auteur veut prouver qu’une Société ne fauroit fleurir s’il n’y règne de grands vices. Pour sauver cette contradiction apparente, nous disons que Mr. Mandeville badine dans la Fable, où l’ironie faute aux yeux en tant d’endroits, & qu’il parle sérieusement dans ses Recherches». The publisher-translator was probably Jean Bertrand (1707–1777). On Mandeville’s reception in Francia see Gai 2004.

25 Kaye was the first to make the hypothesis that Mandeville swaps the characters’ roles when addressing religion. See Mandeville 1924b, 21–22 n. 2. Kaye thinks that Cleomenes’ references to the biblical story of creation, in contrast with the scientific story told by Horace are to be interpreted ironically, especially the frequent references to miraculous and providential interventions that would explain history. John Robertson instead suggested that Mandeville intended to stay close to Bayle positions, who had sustained that the most debated christian doctrines could be accepted only believing in the literal truth of Scripture (doctrines of revelation, divine providence, and the perfection of God). See Robertson 2005, 273–277.

26 See James 1975, 51: «On this basis, the interpretation of the dialogues becomes a highly delicate matter and liable to subjectivity».
Mandeville’s interpreters are therefore divided between those who recognise in his thought the idea of Anglican orthodoxy (Chiasson 1970; Pinkus 1975) or, on the contrary, the defence of radical Calvinism (James 1975, 1996); those who place him within the libertine tradition, or those, last but not least, who recognise an ambiguity in his works, remarking on the elements that make one think that Mandeville was both «a pious Christian, an ascetic, and an unusually austere moralist» and, at the same time, «at best an easy-going man of the world, at worst a profligate, a cynic, a scoffer at all virtue and religion» (Monro 1975, 1).

Not much about this can be deducted from his philosophical and political works; more perhaps can be found in his Treatise. In particular, the comparisons between the first and the second edition of the Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases and some passages of the Fable of the Bees. Part II, in my opinion (Simonazzi 2004, 321–345; 2011, 129–140), suggest that Mandeville’s ideas were not distant from Hobbesian materialism or the mortalist doctrine (see Burns 1972), a theory according to which the soul would resurrect together with the body and therefore was not immortal for the period between earthly death and eternal life. Such a position, in England, was most of all supported by the Arminians.

The mortalist theory (or soul-sleeping doctrine) was rather popular among English physicians at the beginning of the eighteenth-century, as demonstrated by the case of a friend of Sir Hans Sloan, the medical doctor William Coward (like Mandeville, a specialist in digestive disorders), who became associated with members of the Royal College of Physicians in London, and whose books were sentenced to be burned in 1704 for having upheld the mortality of the soul and for having supported vitalistic materialism. The sentence was passed by a Jury instituted by the House of Commons of which Bolingbroke was also a member.

However, this is just an interpretative hypothesis and, on the other hand Mandeville’s main interest in religion was not of a theological nature. In fact, Mandeville analyses religion as a human phenomenon, that is as a product of passions. From this point of view, we can distinguish three levels on which his research develops. At the first level we have the relationship between religion and anthropology (and all religions are considered); at a second level the relationship between religion and society (and this analysis is restricted to Christianity); at the third level the relationship between religion and politics (and this analysis moves from a

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27 This interpretation is popular especially in Italy, see Olivetti 1980; Sabetti 1985; Costa 2008.

28 Irwin Primer, in his Introduction to Free Thoughts, recalled that «his enemies called him atheist, infidel and deist, but nowhere in his writings do we find him explicitly revealing the details of his personal religious belief» and that «whatever Mandeville may have believed, it is known that he was married in the Church of England and that at least the first of his two children was baptized in that church» (Mandeville 2001, xxxiii).

29 William Coward (1656/7–1725). Coward 1695, 1698.

30 Coward 1702, 1703, 1704. See Pfanner 2000. William Coward published his books under the pseudonym of Estibius Psychalethes. Before Coward, as highlighted by Dario Pfanner, the Anglican Henry Layton published between 1694 and 1702 twelve voluminous tomes in defence of the mortalist doctrine.
critical-description of mainly protestant Christianity to a propositional level, where Mandeville theorises a reformation of the relationship between Church and State in Britain).

First of all let’s see what is religion in Mandeville’s perspective: «Religion in General consists in an Acknowledgment of an Immortal Power, that, superior to all Earthly Dominion, invisibly governs the World, and a respectful Endeavour to discharge such Duties, as every one shall apprehend to be requir’d of him by that Immortal Power».  

In the fifth dialogue of The Fable of the Bees. Part II and in the first dialogue of An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour, Mandeville addresses the problem of the origin of religion. Religions are all considered on the same level and any religious phenomenon is analysed in a historical perspective and in a comparative way. This way, the Dutch physician could exalt his anthropological method and give an explanation that was strictly psychological, without resorting to any kind of revelation. Mandeville not only makes no distinction between Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, but he doesn’t even make distinctions between monotheistic and polytheistic faiths or any other form of superstition or idolatry. What is therefore the origin of religion? Fear.

Hor. [...] when I ask’d you, how Religion came into the World, I meant, what is there in Man’s Nature, that is not acquired, from which he has a Tendency to Religion; what is it, that disposes him to it?

Cleo. Fear. (Mandeville 1924b, 206–207)  

The Origin of Religion, as stated in Hobbes’ epicurean thesis, is the fear of invisible causes in absence of a rational explanation. At this first level, Mandeville explicitly rejects the theory of political imposture to explain the origin of religion. Religion is conceived as proceeding from a natural passion: fear (Mandeville 1924b, 206–214). This doesn’t deny that the natural passion of fear may have been exploited for political ends by individuals capable of channelling other people’s passions to their advantage.  

31See Mandeville 2001, 15.

32And in the Introduction to The Fable of the Bees, Mandeville warned the reader that the analysis would have been a purely anthropological one, independent of religious beliefs. See Mandeville 1924a, 40: «And here I must desire the Reader once for all to take notice, that when I say Men, I mean neither Jews nor Christians; but meer Man, in the State of Nature and Ignorance of the true Deity». See also Mandeville 2001, 15–16: «This Definition [of Religion] comprehends whatever Mahometans or Pagans, as well as Jews or Christians, understand by the Word Religion [...] He who believes, in the common Acceptation, that there is a God, and that the World is rul’d by Providence, but has no Faith in any thing reveal’d to us, is a Deist; and he, who believes neither the one or the other, is an Atheist».

33Mandeville 1924b, 218: «The Word Religion itself, and the Fear of God, are synonymous; and had Man’s Acknowledgment been originally founded in Love, as it is in Fear, the Craft of Impostors could have made no Advantage of the Passion; and all their boasted Acquaintance with Gods and Goddesses, would have been useless to them, if Men had worship’d the Immortal Powers, as they call’d their Idols, out of Gratitude».
Cleo: [...] I don’t deny the Usefulness which even the worst Religion that can be, may be
of to Politicians and the Civil Society: But what I insist upon, is, that the temporal Benefit
of it, or the Contrivance of Oaths and Swearing, could never have enter’d into the Heads of
Politicians, if the Fear of an invisible Cause had not pre-existed and been supposed to be
universal, any more than they would have contrived Matrimony, if the Desire of Procreation
had not been planted in Human Nature and visible in both Sexes. (Mandeville 1990, 24–25)

This investigation on the origin of religion allows Mandeville to conclude that
religion is not a crucial factor in the birth of society (as, instead, are morals, which
are detached from religion; we can behave morally independently of our religious
beliefs) and yet it is a necessary and non eliminable component of human nature.
Therefore society doesn’t need religion (as Bayle remarks), virtue is enough, and
yet it is impossible to think of a society without a religion.

This is the first level of analysis: religion is born of fear, as such it is a non
eliminable component of human nature, so a society of atheists is not possible.
Let’s come now to a second level of analysis: the relationship between religion and
society.

17.4 The Social Function of Religion

Mandeville develops his first theory on the origin of society in 1714, when he
resorts to the theory of political imposture, then abandoned in 1728, presenting an
evolutionary theory of men and society. In both these formulations, Mandeville
makes a distinction between the origin of religion and its social function. Regarding
its social function, in 1714 Mandeville held that religion is not necessary for life
in society, and in 1728 he stated that it is part of the structure of an impersonal
power that creates a more or less stable balance without need for the purposeful
project by a single will. This means that religion has no determinant function in
society, sharing the same religion is not the necessary social glue for community
life, but it is nonetheless useful to reinforce social bonds through a grid of shared
values and to reinforce political obligation when Church and State come to coincide.

But in practice, so to speak, what is the social function of religion?

The subject is addressed by Mandeville at different times and with slightly
different acceptions throughout his works. However, if we take into consideration
the last of Mandeville’s work, An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the
Usefulness of Christianity in War, we see that he leaves his comparative-historical
method in the background to concentrate all his attention on Christianity (as already
suggested in the title).

34 On the differences between the first and the second part of The Fable of the Bees see Scribano
1980; Simonazzi 2011; Tolonen 2013, 1–146.

35 Mandeville 1924b, 50: «I affirm, that the idolatrous superstitions of all other nations, and the
pitiful Notions they had to the Supreme Being, were incapable of exciting Man to Virtue, and good
for nothing but to aw and amuse a rude and unthinking Multitude». 
The analysis on this point becomes more precise, and Mandeville makes a distinction between the religion of the Gospels and the religion of the priests. The religion of the Gospels is Christianity as it was shaped in the first two centuries, while the religion of the priests is the result of the transformation that it underwent as an official state religion. The religion of the Gospels is the first Christians’ set of original values, values that are incompatible with the possibility of the institution of a society, while the religion of the priests is the adaptation that those values went through in time so that Christianity may survive.

In the Beginning of Christianity, and whilst the Gospel was explain’d without any Regard to Wordly Views, to be a Soldier was thought inconsistent with the Profession of a Christian; but this Strictness of the Gospel-Principles began to be disapproved in the Second Century. The Divines of those Days were most of them become arrant Priests, and saw plainly, that a Religion, which would not allow its Votaries to assist at Courts or Armies, and comply with the vain World, could never made National; consequently, the Clergy of it could never acquire any considerable Power upon Earth. In Spirituals they were the Successors of the Apostles, but in Temporals they wanted to succeed the Pagan Priests, whose Possessions they look’d upon with wishful Eyes; and Wordly Strenght and Authority being absolutely necessary to establish Dominion, it was agreed, that Christians might be Soldiers, and in a just War fight with Enemies of their Country. But Experience soon taught them, that [ . . . ] there could be no Religion so strict, no System of Morality so refin’d, nor Theory so well meaning, but some People might pretend to profess and follow it, and yet be loose Livers, and wicked in their Practice. (Mandeville 1990, 33–34)

The problem posed by Mandeville has therefore a dual nature: on one hand there is the impossibility to conciliate the message of the Gospels with social usefulness (a polemic against the deists); on the other hand, we have the churches’ hypocrisy, about which Mandeville makes no distinction between Catholics and Protestants, who would like to make their religion, Christianity, worldly rather than unworldly.36

The distinction between religion of the Gospels and religion of the priests has therefore the function to highlight the contrast between Christian values in themselves and their political exploitation.

If we go back for a moment to the Baylean hypothesis of the possible existence of a society of atheists, we see that Mandeville follows Bayle’s thesis and states that a society of virtuous Christians cannot exist, as Christian values are incompatible with the development of a rich and powerful society («Religion is one Thing, and Trade is another»37). As for a society that is neither rich nor powerful, that would be doomed in the game of international competition: «T’enjoy the World’s Conveniencies,/ Be fam’d in War, yet live in Ease,/ Without great Vices, is a vain/ Eutopia seated in the Brain./ [. . . ] Bare Virtue can’t make Nations live/ in Splendor; they, that would revive/ A Golden Age, must be as free,/ For Acorns, as for Honesty» (Mandeville 1924a, 36–37).

36 From this point of view we can say that Calvin and Luther did not take into account human nature, so «their Successors, after Two or Three Generations, would make wretched Figures, if they were still to continue to preach Christianity without Deceit or Evasions, and pretend to live conformably to the Rules of it». See Mandeville 1990, 99.

37 Mandeville 1732, 68.
Mandeville, therefore, states that Christianity does not constitute a social binding agent, but must instead adapt to worldly needs. In Mandeville’s perspective the real social binding agent is honour, that is the set of those values that satisfy the true innate passion of human nature which is self-liking, defined as the desire to be esteemed.

### 17.5 Religion and Politics

The third level of analysis of the religious phenomenon deals with the negative effects of churches from a political perspective. While Mandeville’s reflection on religion is rather cautious, often disguising his real positions, his analysis of the secular power outright shows his anticlericalism. The clergy are accused of favouring radical positions and of being responsible of the schisms and persecutions in English history. In *Free Thoughts*, for example, we read that «the Doctrine of CHRIST plainly forbids Malice, Hatred and Revenge, and every where exhorts us to Meakness, Patience, Humility, Peace and Charity to all Men, so a Christian, who is really such, can never hate others upon any religious Account, tho’ they were Mahometans or Pagans» (Mandeville 2001, 22). Consequently «Religion is not the Cause of the unhappy Breaches, that divide Great Britain; and that therefore all Divines of what Perswasion soever, who would insinuate the contrary to us, and perverting the Word of GOD, make a handle of it to breed Quarrels and Animosities, or any way disturb the publick Peace, are evil Teachers and Seducers of the People» (Mandeville 2001, 22).

Mandeville states that there is no Christian principle that a skillful politician cannot exploit for anti-Christian aims. In this perspective, all churches must be considered impostures and this explains Mandeville’s open anti-clericalism. A common mistake that is made while judging the clergy is to believe that priests are better than ordinary men, instead «we ought to consider, that Clergy men are made of the same Mould, and have the same corrupt Nature with other Men; that they were born with the same Infirmities, and that consequently they were subject to the same Passions, and liable to the same Temptations» (Mandeville 2001, 153).

Mandeville insists:

[... ] That Power and Authority were dangerous Tools in the Hands of Church-men: That whenever they were warmly opposed they could never forbear making use of them, and that

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38 See Monro 1975, 121–147; Cari 1980, 68–70; Hundert 1994, 69–74; Simonazzi 1999; Branchi 2000; Peltonen 2003, 263–302; Branchi 2014.

39 Mandeville thinks that the secular advantages of religion more modestly consists «in Promises of Allegiance and Loyalty, and all solemn Engagements and Asseverations, in which the invisible Power, that, in every Country, is the Object of the Publick Worship, is invoked or appeal’d to. For these Purpose all Religions are equally serviceable; and the worst is better than none: For without the Belief of an invisible Cause, no Man’s Word is to be relied upon, non Vows or Protestations can be depended upon» (Mandeville 1990, 23–24).
how Just, Humane and Compassionate soever their Natural Temper might be, all Clergy-
men in Power turn’d Persecutors, as soon as they were thoroughly anger’d. (Mandeville
2001, 130)

Bayle had already sustained that only by controlling children’s upbringing since
infancy the church had managed to make the strangest ideas acceptable, such as
trinity or transubstantiation, and that no adult brought up outside Christianity would
ever have accepted ideas so openly unreasonable. Mandeville shares Bayle’s thesis
and expands it, accusing the pervasive power of the clergy on all stages of an
individual’s life:

For, besides their officiating every Day at Divine Service, we can do nothing of moment
without them, and they assist us through every Stage of Life. As soon as we are born they
come to Christen us, and when the Nurse has had the greatest trouble with us, and we can
help our selves, the Clergy desire to have the Tuition of us, till we are Men. The next then
to be thought on his Matrimony, which we can’t enter into without them. In Sickness they
come to Comfort us, and claim a Right to examine our Consciences when we are in Health.
They still visit us on our Death-Beds, even when the Physician has left us; and, after we
have taken our leaves of them and the whole World, they won’t yet part with us before they
have seen us in the Grave. (Mandeville 2001, 156)

The political solution identified by Mandeville in Free Thoughts consists in
proposing a national church that allows a broad internal tolerance. Such a proposal
substantially “de-socialises religion”, making the church irrelevant on a social
and political level. M. Emanuela Scribano showed how, at the beginning of the
eighteenth-century the defence of religious tolerance took the shape of a war against
the power of the church and, in particular, against the threat of an alliance between
the High church and the Tories’ reactionary fringes, part of which was very close
to the Jacobites (Scribano 1980, 47–74). In the past many proposals had been
advanced against this threat, but two main attitudes could be identified: that of
the Latitudinarians, who conceived a single comprehensive church encompassing
conceptions even quite different among them, and that of Independents, who
advocated a multiplicity of churches, all equally subordinated to the civil power.

Mandeville’s position is neither, but can be seen as a sort of compromise. He
advances the idea of a national church with a few privileges, such as exemption from
taxes on its income or control of temples and public schools (Mandeville 2001, 141–
142). At the same time though, these privileges must not interfere with the existence

40See Mandeville 2001, 55–56: «There is hardly a Truth more convinc’d of, than that Two and Two
make Four: Yet were Men to be taught from their Infancy that it was a Mystery, that on a certain
occasion Two and Two made Seven, with an addition to be believ’d on pain of Damnation, I am
perswaded, that at least Seven in Ten would swallow the shameful Paradox, and that if they had
always seen others ill treated for disbelieving of it, by that they were come to Years of Maturity,
they would not only assert it themselves, but likewise dislike, if not hate those, who should call it
in question. We must suppose, that it had been inculcated to them with Application and Assiduity
by Parents, Nurses, Masters, and all that had the Tuition of, or any direction over them».

41On the historical context in which Free Thoughts appeared, see Scribano 1980, 11–89; Schochet
2000; Prior 2000b; Primer 2001.
Atheism, Religion and Society in Mandeville's Thought

of minority churches, who nonetheless must acknowledge the legitimacy of the civil government. Besides, the national church clergy do not have a right to persecute heretics. It is in fact up to the government, not to the clergy to evaluate whether a religious sect is dangerous for the state:

\[\text{\ldots} \text{When I speak up for a Tolleration of different Sects, I mean only, such as shall own the Government to be the supream Authority upon Earth, both in Church and State, and have no other Master abroad, that may make them Plot against our Safety. It is on this Head only that Papists and Non Jurors ought to be excluded; but this being the Business of the State, the Clergy has nothing to do with it.}\]

IT is the Government and the Ministry of it, which ought to be watchful, and take care that the Publick receives no detriment from subtle Stratagems carried on under Religious pretences. (Mandeville 2001, 140)

The argument used by Mandeville in defence of religious tolerance can be divided in an epistemological consideration, on the one hand, and into the statement of a principle of social usefulness. From the epistemological point of view, the author observes that any church is fallible and that «it is evident then, that there is no Characteristick to distinguish and know a true Church from a false one» (Mandeville 2001, 136). Therefore, it is not possible to propose a single interpretation of the Scripture that may end the dispute. Mandeville states that:

Our Church pretends to no Infallibility, which implies a liberty, in every Member of it, of re-examining whatever has been said or done before him. No Man therefore ought to be too dogmatical in Matters of Faith: What to my Understanding is difficult and obscure, cannot be made otherwise to me by another’s saying, that it is clear and easy to him; and let us hear what we can, every one at last must judge for himself to the best of his Ability. (Mandeville 2001, 50)

From the point of view of social usefulness, Mandeville holds that tolerance of dissenters is the best way to safeguard peace and safety within the State.42 In fact, it is the nature of any religious dispute to result in a political conflict if not restrained by the government:

The great Danger there is in the Quarrels of the Clergy is, that there can be no drawn Battle among them, being in all their Contests both Judges and Parties, one side must fall, and there can be no Peace without a Conquest. (Mandeville 2001, 52–53)

The central point of Mandeville’s thesis about religion and politics is the idea that the clergy must be controlled by the state. The Dutch physician adopted many of the points of freethinkers and deists, in particular the idea that there isn’t a single interpretation of the Scriptures and the consequent fallibilistic conception, the criticism of fanaticism, the necessity of a national religion, and the conviction

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42In truth, Mandeville, in polemic, states that even persecution can safeguard peace and safety but only in those cases where the church is capable to nip in the bud any dissent, as is the case in a few catholic countries. See Mandeville 2001, 139: «In Italy, Spain, and Portugal, where an Heretic is knock’d down the moment he rises, and the Church has a proper Power obey’d by the Government, to enquire into a Man’s Conscience before he opens his Mouth, and punish him for what her Holy Officers shall fancy him to think. A strict Conformity in manner of Worship, once establish’d, may be maintain’d with little Bloodshed». 
that the clergy must be kept under control by lay people. The proposal he makes in *Free Thoughts* is that of a nation with a national Church in which the clergy act as if they were social civil servants. The model he proposes is that of Holland, where all the clergy, not just that of the official church, are paid by the State, respect the government’s absolute authority and do not interfere in political matters. Furthermore «they are allow’d to inveigh against Sin and the Vices of great Men, as much as they please, without pointing at particular Persons» (Mandeville 2001, 158).

Mandeville, therefore, takes from Bayle the rehabilitation of the atheists and seems to suggest, in a few passages, that a society without a religion would perhaps be less vulnerable to internal conflicts; but his basic conviction is that religion, being an anthropological need, cannot be erased from human society. Civil power must acknowledge that and act consequently: «No Discourses nor even Prayers, which have the least tendency to Sedition, should be suffer’d in any Assembly: ’Tis the business of a careful Ministry to look into these Matters, and the least Conventicle ought no to be neglected» (Mandeville 2001, 141). In conclusion, religion can act in two different ways: on one hand, it can constitute one of the main reasons of internal unrest; on the other, Mandeville is aware of the opportunity that may arise from the manipulation of religious feelings for political purposes.

This ambiguity, highlighted earlier more than once, is well expressed by Mandeville himself in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* where he discusses the political function of religion and clergy in case of war:

In all Wars it is an everlasting Maxim in Politicks, that whenever Religion can be brought into the Quarrel, it ought never to be neglected, and that how small soever the Difference may be between the contending Parties, the Divines on each Side, ought to magnify and make the most of it; for Nothing is more comfortable to Men, than the Thought, that their Enemies are likewise the Enemies of God. [...] However Morality is often preach’d to them, and even the Gospel at seasonable Times, when they are in Winter Quarters, or in an idle Summer, when there is no Enemy near, and the Troops perhaps are encamped in a Country, where no Hostilities should be committed. But when they are to enter upon Action, to besiege a large Town, or ravage a rich Country, it would be very impertinent to talk to them of Christian Virtues; doing as they would be done by; loving their Enemies, and extending their Charity to all Mankind. When the Foe is at Hand, the Men have Skirmishes with him every Day, and perhaps a main Battle is expected; then the Mask is flang off; not a Word of the Gospel, nor of Meekness or Humility; and all Thoughts of Christianity are laid aside entirely. (Mandeville 1990, 159–161)

17.6 Conclusion

Mandeville states that all the motives for human actions can be explained with two human passions: self-liking and fear, and that reason and rational principles have no impact on human behaviour. Atheism and religion are not explained by Mandeville in moralistic terms, but in psychological ones. Faith is not a matter of rational choice or predestination, but is a psychological response to fear of invisible things or fear of
death. An atheist is one who overcomes this fear and does not conform to the socially accepted explanations for life mysteries. A society of virtuous atheists would be hypothetically possible, because society is based on honour and law, not on religion, but in reality it cannot exist because religion is the answer to an innate passion. Religion therefore is not necessary to society, but it is necessary to man. It is on this point that Mandeville more explicitly differs from Bayle, as it clearly emerges from this passage that seems to refer directly to him: «But whatever Philosophers and Men of Letters may have advanced, there never was an Age or a Country where the Vulgar would ever come into an Opinion that contradicted that Fear, which all Men are born with, of an invisible Cause, that meddles and interferes in Human Affairs» (Mandeville 1990, 27).

In Mandeville’s perspective, religion is a natural need and therefore a society of atheists cannot exist. He advocates an Erastian model of Church, subordinated to the political power, in which religion is relegated to the private sphere and the clergy are kept under strict control by the state.

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