

# The Fable of the Bees

Bernard Mandeville

## MANNERS AND MORALS

*A Dutchman who spent most of his life practicing medicine in England, Mandeville (1670-1733) wrote this poem, titled "The Grumbling Hives or Knaves Turn'd Honest," in 1705. Its shocking defense of the moral legitimacy of self-interest was reinforced in 1714 when he added an accompanying prose text and the new title, The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits.*

A Spacious Hive well stock'd with Bees,  
That lived in Luxury and Ease;  
And yet as fam'd for Laws and Arms,  
As yielding large and early Swarms;  
Was counted the great Nursery  
Of Sciences and Industry.

No Bees had better Government,  
More Fickleness, or less Content.  
They were not Slaves to Tyranny,  
Nor ruled by wild Democracy;  
But Kings, that could not wrong, because  
Their Power was circumscrib'd by Laws.

These Insects lived like Men, and all  
Our Actions they perform'd in small:  
They did whatever's done in Town,  
And what belongs to Sword, or Gown:  
Tho' th' Artful Works, by nimble Slight  
Of minute Limbs, 'scaped Human Sight;  
Yet we've no Engines, Laborers,  
Ships, Castles, Arms, Artificers,  
Craft, Science, Shop, or Instrument;  
But they had an Equivalent:  
Which, since their Language is unknown,

Must be call'd, as we do our own.  
As grant, that among other Things  
They wanted Dice, yet they had Kings;  
And those had Guards; from whence we may  
Justly conclude, they had some Play;  
Unless a Regiment be shewn  
Of Soldiers, that make use of none.

Vast Numbers thronged the fruitful Hive;  
Yet those vast Numbers made 'em thrive;  
Millions endeavoring to supply  
Each other's Lust and Vanity;  
Whilst other Millions were employ'd,  
To see their Handy-works destroy'd;  
They furnish'd half the Universe;  
Yet had more Work than Laborers.  
Some with vast Stocks, and little Pains  
Jump'd into Business of great Gains;  
And some were damn'd to Sythes and Spades,  
And all those hard laborious Trades;  
Where willing Wretches daily sweat,

And wear out Strength and Limbs to eat:  
Whilst others follow'd Mysteries,  
To which few Folks bind 'Prentices;  
That want no Stock, but that of Brass,  
And may set up without a Cross;  
As Sharpers, Parasites, Pimps, Players,  
Pick-Pockets, Coiners, Quacks, Sooth-Sayers,  
And all those, that, in Enmity  
With down-right Working, cunningly  
Convert to their own Use the Labor  
Of their good-natur'd heedless Neighbor.  
These were called Knaves; but, bar the Name,  
The grave Industrious were the Same.  
All Trades and Places knew some Cheat,  
No Calling was without Deceit.

The Lawyers, of whose Art the Basis  
Was raising Feuds and splitting Cases,

Opposed all Registers, that Cheats.  
Might make more Work with dipt Estates;  
As were't unlawful, that one's own,  
Without a Law-Suit, should be known.  
They kept off Hearings willfully,  
To finger the refreshing Fee;  
And to defend a wicked Cause,  
Examin'd and survey'd the Laws;  
As Burglars Shops and Houses do;  
To find out where they'd best break through.

Physicians valued Fame and Wealth  
Above the drooping Patient's Health,  
Or their own Skill: The greatest Part  
Study'd, instead of Rules of Art,  
Grave pensive Looks, and dull Behavior;  
To gain th' Apothecary's Favor,  
The Praise of Mid-wives, Priests and all,  
That served at Birth, or Funeral;  
To bear with th' ever-talking Tribe,  
And hear my Lady's Aunt prescribe;  
With formal Smile, and kind How d'ye,  
To fawn on all the Family;  
And, which of all the greatest Curse is,  
T'endure th'Impertinence of Nurses.

Among the many Priests of Jove,  
Hir'd to draw Blessings from Above,  
Some few were learn'd and eloquent,  
But Thousands hot and ignorant:  
Yet all past Muster, that could hide  
Their Sloth, Lust, Avarice and Pride;  
For which they were as famed, as Taylors  
For Cabbage; or for Brandy, Sailors:  
Some meager look'd, and meanly clad  
Would mystically pray for Bread,  
Meaning by that an ample Store,  
Yet lit'rally receiv'd no more;  
And, whilst these holy Drudges starv'd,  
The lazy Ones, for which they serv'd,  
Indulg'd their Ease, with all the Graces  
Of Health and Plenty in their Faces.

The Soldiers, that were forced to fight,  
If they survived, got Honor by't;  
Tho' some, that shunn'd the bloody Fray,  
Had Limbs shot off, that ran away:  
Some valiant Gen'als fought the Foe;  
Others took Bribes to let them go:  
Some ventur'd always, where 'twas warm;  
Lost now a Leg, and then an Arm;  
Till quite disabled, and put by,  
They lived on half their Salary;  
Whilst others never came in Play,  
And staid at Home for Double Pay.

Their Kings were serv'd; but Knavishly  
Cheated by their own Ministry;  
Many, that for their Welfare slaved,  
Robbing the very Crown they saved:  
Pensions were small, and they lived high,  
Yet boasted of their Honesty.  
Calling, whene'er they strain'd their Right,  
The slipp'ry Trick a Perquisite;  
And, when Folks understood their Cant,  
They chang'd that for Emolument;  
Unwilling to be short, or plain,  
In any thing concerning Gain:  
For there was not a Bee, but would  
Get more, I won't say, than he should;  
But than he dared to let them know,  
That pay'd for't; as your Gamesters do,  
That, tho' at fair Play, ne'er will own  
Before the Losers what they've won.

But who can all their Frauds repeat!  
The very Stuff, which in the Street  
They sold for Dirt t'enrich the Ground,  
Was often by the Buyers found  
Sophisticated with a Quarter  
Of Good-for-nothing, Stones and Mortar;  
Tho' Flail had little Cause to mutter,

Who sold the other Salt for Butter.

Justice her self, famed for fair Dealing,  
By Blindness had not lost her Feeling;  
Her Left Hand, which the Scales should hold,  
Had often dropt 'em, bribed with Gold;  
And, tho' she seem'd impartial,  
Where Punishment was corporal,  
Pretended to a reg'lar Course,  
In Murther, and all Crimes of Force;  
Tho' some, first Pillory'd for Cheating,  
Were hang'd in Hemp of their own beating;  
Yet, it was thought, the Sword she bore  
Check'd but the Desp'rate and the Poor;  
That, urged by mere Necessity,  
Were tied up to the wretched Tree  
For Crimes, which not deserv'd that Fate,  
But to secure the Rich, and Great.

Thus every Part was full of Vice,  
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise;  
Flatter'd in Peace, and fear'd in Wars  
They were th' Esteem of Foreigners,  
And lavish of their Wealth and Lives,  
The Balance of all other Hives.  
Such were the Blessings of that State;  
Their Crimes conspired to make 'em Great;  
And Virtue, who from Politicks  
Had learn'd a Thousand cunning Tricks,  
Was, by their happy Influence,  
Made Friends with Vice: And ever since  
The Worst of all the Multitude  
Did something for the common Good.

This was the State's Craft, that maintain'd  
The Whole, of which each Part complain'd:  
This, as in Musick Harmony,  
Made Jarrings in the Main agree;  
Parties directly opposite  
Assist each oth'r, as 'twere for Spite;

And Temp'rance with Sobriety  
Serve Drunkenness and Gluttony.

The Root of evil Avarice,  
That damn'd ill-natur'd baneful Vice,  
Was Slave to Prodigality,  
That Noble Sin; whilst Luxury  
Employ'd a Million of the Poor,  
And odious Pride a Million more.  
Envy it self, and Vanity  
Were Ministers of Industry;  
Their darling Folly, Fickleness  
In Diet, Furniture, and Dress,  
That strange ridic'ous Vice, was made  
The very Wheel, that turn'd the Trade.  
Their Laws and Clothes were equally  
Objects of Mutability;  
For, what was well done for a Time,  
In half a Year became a Crime;  
Yet whilst they alter'd thus their Laws,  
Still finding and correcting Flaws,  
They mended by Inconstancy  
Faults, which no Prudence could foresee.

Thus Vice nursed Ingenuity,  
Which join'd with Time, and Industry  
Had carry'd Life's Conveniencies,  
It's real Pleasures, Comforts, Ease,  
To such a Height, the very Poor  
Lived better than the Rich before;  
And nothing could be added more:

How vain is Mortal Happiness!  
Had they but known the Bounds of Bliss;  
And, that Perfection here below  
Is more, than Gods can well bestow,  
The grumbling Brutes had been content  
With Ministers and Government.  
But they, at every ill Success,  
Like Creatures lost without Redress,

Cursed Politicians, Armies, Fleets,  
Whilst every one cry'd, Damn the Cheats,  
And would, tho' Conscious of his own,  
In Others barb'rously bear none.

One, that had got a Princely Store,  
By cheating Master, King, and Poor,  
Dared cry aloud; The Land must sink  
For all it's Fraud; And whom d'ye think  
The Sermonizing Rascal chid?  
A Glover that sold Lamb for Kid.

The least Thing was not done amiss,  
Or cross'd the Public Business;  
But all the Rogues cry'd brazenly,  
Good Gods, had we but Honesty!  
*Merc'ry* smiled at th' Impudence;  
And Others call'd it want of Sence,  
Always to rail at what they loved:  
But Jove, with Indignation moved,  
At last in Anger swore, he'd rid  
The bawling Hive of Fraud, and did.  
The very Moment it departs,  
And Honesty fills all their Hearts;  
There shews 'em, like th' Instructive Tree,  
Those Crimes, which they're ashamed to see;  
Which now in Silence they confess,  
By Blushing at their Uglynness;  
Like Children, that would hide their Faults,  
And by their Color own their Thoughts;  
Imag'ning, when they're look'd upon,  
That Others see, what they have done.

But, Oh ye Gods! What Consternation,  
How vast and sudden was th' Alteration!  
In half an Hour, the Nation round,  
Meat fell a Penny in the Pound.  
The Mask Hypocrisie's flung down,  
From the great Statesman to the Clown;  
And some, in borrow'd Looks well known,

Appear'd like Strangers in their own.  
The Bar was silent from that Day;  
For now the willing Debtors pay,  
Ev'n what's by Creditors forgot;  
Who quitted them, that had it not.  
Those, that were in the Wrong, stood mute,  
And dropped the patch'd vexatious Suit.  
On which, since nothing less can thrive,  
Than Lawyers in an honest Hive,  
All, except those, that got enough,  
With Ink-horns by their Sides troop'd off.

Justice hang'd some, set others free;  
And, after Goal delivery,  
Her Presence be'ng no more requir'd,  
With all her Train, and Pomp retir'd.  
First march'd some Smiths, with Locks and Grates,  
Fetters, and Doors with Iron-Plates;  
Next Goalers, Turnkeys, and Assistants:  
Before the Goddess, at some distance,  
Her chief and faithful Minister  
Squire Catch, the Laws great Finisher,  
Bore not th' imaginary Sword,  
But his own Tools, an Ax and Cord:  
Then on a Cloud the Hood-wink'd fair  
Justice her self was push'd by Air:  
About her Chariot, and behind,  
Were Sergeants, Bums of every kind,  
Tip-staffs, and all those Officers,  
That squeeze a Living out of Tears.

Tho' Physick lived, whilst Folks were ill,  
None would prescribe, but Bees of Skill;  
Which, through the Hive dispers'd so wide,  
That none of 'em had need to ride,  
Waved vain Disputes; and strove to free  
The Patients of their Misery;  
Left Drugs in cheating Countries grown,  
And used the Product of their own,  
Knowing the Gods sent no Disease  
To Nations without Remedies.



Their Clergy rouz'd from Laziness,  
Laid not their Charge on Journey-Bees,  
But serv'd themselves, exempt from Vice,  
The Gods with Pray'r and Sacrifice;  
All those, that were unfit, or knew,  
Their Service might be spared, withdrew:  
Nor was there Business for so many,  
(If th' Honest stand in need of any.)  
Few only with the High-Priest staid,  
To whom the rest Obedience paid:  
Himself, employ'd in holy Cares,  
Resign'd to others State-Affairs:  
He chased no Starv'ling from his Door,  
Nor pinch'd the Wages of the Poor;  
But at his House the Hungry's fed,  
The Hireling finds unmeasur'd Bread,  
The needy Trav'ler Board and Bed.

Among the King's great Ministers,  
And all th' inferior Officers  
The Change was great; for frugally  
They now lived on their Salary.  
That a poor Bee should Ten times come,  
To ask his Due, a trifling Sum,  
And by some well-hir'd Clerk be made,  
To give a Crown, or ne'er be paid;  
Would now be call'd a down-right Cheat,  
Tho' formerly a Perquisite.  
All Places; managed first by Three,  
Who watch'd each other's Knavery,  
And often for a Fellow-feeling,  
Promoted one another's Stealing;  
Are happily supply'd by one;  
By which some Thousands more are gone.

No Honor now could be content,  
To live, and owe for what was spent.  
Liv'ries in Brokers Shops are hung,  
They part with Coaches for a Song;

Sell stately Horses by whole Sets;  
And Country-Houses to pay Debts.

Vain Cost is shunn'd as much as Fraud;  
They have no Forces kept Abroad;  
Laugh at th' Esteem of Foreigners,  
And empty Glory got by Wars;  
They fight but for their Country's Sake,  
When Right or Liberty's at Stake.

Now mind the glorious Hive, and see,  
How Honesty and Trade agree:  
The Shew is gone, it thins apace;  
And looks with quite another Face,  
For 'twas not only that they went,  
By whom vast Sums were Yearly spent;  
But Multitudes, that lived on them,  
Were daily forc'd to do the Same.  
In vain to other Trades they'd fly;  
All were o'er-stock'd accordingly.

The Price of Land, and Houses falls;  
Mirac'lous Palaces, whose Walls,  
Like those of *Thebes*, were raised by Play,  
Are to be let; whilst the once gay,  
Well-seated Household Gods would be  
More pleased t'expire in Flames, than see  
The mean Inscription on the Door  
Smile at the lofty Ones they bore.  
The Building Trade is quite destroy'd,  
Artificers are not employ'd;  
No Limner for his Art is famed;  
Stone-cutters, Carvers are not named.

Those, that remain'd, grown temp'rate, strive,  
Not how to spend; but how to live;  
And, when they paid their Tavern Score,  
Resolv'd to enter it no more:

No Vintners Jilt in all the Hive  
Could wear now Cloth of Gold and thrive;  
Nor *Torcol* such vast Sums advance,  
For *Burgundy* and *Ortelans*;  
The Courtier's gone, that with his Miss  
Supp'd at his House on *Christmass* Peas;  
Spending as much in Two Hours stay,  
As keeps a Troop of Horse a Day.

The haughty *Chloe*, to live Great,  
Had made her Husband rob the State:  
But now she sells her Furniture,  
Which th' *Indies* had been ransack'd for;  
Contracts th' expensive Bill of Fare,  
And wears her strong Suit a whole Year:  
The slight and fickle Age is past;  
And Clothes, as well as Fashions last.  
Weavers that join'd rich Silk with Plate,  
And all the Trades subordinate,  
Are gone. Still Peace and Plenty reign,  
And every Thing is cheap, tho' plain:  
Kind Nature, free from Gard'ners Force,  
Allows all Fruits in her own Course;  
But Rarities cannot be had,  
Where Pains to get 'em are not paid.

As Pride and Luxury decrease,  
So by degrees they leave the Seas.  
Not Merchants now; but Companies  
Remove whole Manufacturies.  
All Arts and Crafts neglected lie;  
Content the Bane of Industry,  
Makes 'em admire their homely Store,  
And neither seek, nor covet more.

So few in the vast Hive remain;  
The Hundredth part they can't maintain  
Against th' Insults of numerous Foes;  
Whom yet they valiantly oppose:  
Till some well-fenced Retreat is found;

And here they die, or stand their Ground.  
No Hireling in their Armies known;  
But bravely fighting for their own,  
Their Courage and Integrity  
At last were crown'd with Victory.  
They triumph'd not without their Cost;  
For many Thousand Bees were lost.  
Hard'ned with Toils, and Exercise  
They counted Ease it self a Vice;  
Which so improved their Temperance;  
That, to avoid Extravagance,  
They flew into a hollow Tree,  
Blest with Content and Honesty.

#### THE MORAL

Then leave Complaints: Fools only strive  
To make a Great an honest Hive.  
T' enjoy the World's Conveniencies,  
Be famed in War, yet live in Ease  
Without great Vices, is a vain  
*Eutopia* seated in the Brain.  
Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live  
Whilst we the Benefits receive.  
Hunger's a dreadful Plague, no doubt,  
Yet who digests or thrives without?  
Do we not owe the Growth of Wine  
To the dry shabby crooked Vine?  
Which, whilst its Shutes neglected stood,  
Choak'd other Plants, and ran to Wood;  
But blest us with its Noble Fruit;  
As soon as it was tied, and cut:  
So Vice is beneficial found,  
When it's by Justice lqpt, and bound;  
Nay, where the People would be great,  
As necessary to the State  
As Hunger is to make 'em eat.  
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.

FINIS