

Skepticism and Politics in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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Introduction 1

John Christian Laursen and Gianni Paganini

1. Neither Philosophy Nor Politics? The Ancient Pyrrhonian Approach to Everyday Life
17

Emidio Spinelli

2. La Mothe Le Vayer and Political Skepticism 41

Daniel Brunstetter

3. Hobbes and the French Skeptics 67

Gianni Paganini

4. Questionnements sceptiques et politiques de la fable: les ‘autres mondes’ du
libertinage erudite 100

Jean-Charles Darmon

5. Obeying the Laws and Customs of the Country: Living in Disorder and Barbarity. The Powerlessness of Political Skepticism According to the *Discours sceptiques* of Samuel Sorbière 139
Sylvia Giocanti
6. Bernard Mandeville's Skeptical Political Philosophy 161
Rui Romão
7. David Hume: Skepticism in Politics? 184
Andrew Sabl
8. Denis Diderot and the Politics of Materialist Skepticism 219
Whitney Mannies
9. Rousseau: Philosophical and Religious Skepticism and Dogmatic Politics 254
María José Villaverde
10. Skepticism and Political Economy 286
Pierre Force
11. Can a Skeptic be a Reformer? Skepticism in Morals and Politics during the Enlightenment: the Case of Voltaire 305
Rodrigo Brandão
12. From General Skepticism to Complete Dogmatism: Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville 324
Sébastien Charles
13. Karl Friedrich Stäudlin's Diagnosis of the Political Effects of Skepticism in Late 18th Century Germany 348
John Christian Laursen

6 Bernard Mandeville's Skeptical Political Philosophy

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Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), one of the most famous and controversial pamphleteers, satirists, and thinkers of his time, was seriously opposed by most of his contemporaries, including George Berkeley, George Bluet, and Francis Hutcheson, and only posthumously recognized as a remarkable political and moral philosopher by, among others, David Hume and Adam Smith.¹ After a period of relative oblivion generally corresponding to the nineteenth century, some noteworthy scholars such as Arthur Lovejoy and Frederick Kaye wrote important articles on him, generating a Mandeville revival, especially since the 1920's.² The critical edition of *The Fable of the Bees* edited by Kaye and first published in 1924 remains a landmark of the initial phase of this revival.³ In the second half of the twentieth century Mandeville's work and theories became the focus of special attention from economists and sociologists who proposed him as a forerunner of conceptions only developed much later.⁴

¹ For a concise and well-informed account of Mandeville's reception, with updated bibliography, see M. Simonazzi, *Le Favole della Filosofia. Saggio su Bernard Mandeville* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2008), 19-28.

² See Simonazzi, *Le Favole*, 23 (who mentions Karl Marx's interest in Mandeville as an exception); see also F. B. Kaye, "Introduction", in B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* ed. F. B. Kaye (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), LXVIII-CXIII. Other exceptions include Leslie Stephens.

³ B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. F. B. Kaye.

⁴ Nevertheless, the first book entirely devoted to Mandeville published since the eighteenth Century was Hector Monro, *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

At present, most scholars accept that late Renaissance and early modern philosophers like Montaigne and Charron, as well as the French moralists of the seventeenth century, including the “erudite libertines”⁵ and the “divines” attached to Port-Royal (like Pascal and Nicole), and figures related to the Dutch Enlightenment, such as Spinoza and Pierre Bayle, exerted some kind of influence over Mandeville.⁶ We can thus find among this group of influences in the background of his thought a considerable number of philosophers related to the early modern skeptical tradition. Early on, two years after the publication in 1723 of the much enlarged and successful third edition of *The Fable of the Bees*, Bluet stressed Mandeville’s links to the ancient Pyrrhonians as well as to Montaigne and French thinkers influenced by them: “From this *Pyrrho*, *Scepticks* were called Pyrrhonians, or Pyrrhonists; and from hence that treatise of *Sextus Empiricus* [...] had its name; in one part of which he endeavors to overturn the Certainty of Right and Wrong, Virtue and Vice, by collecting a great many monstrous Opinions and Customs of People contrary to the common ones. From hence, or rather from *Montaigne* [...], who has borrowed it from hence, has our Author again borrowed what he has given us to the same Purpose, and in the Pursuit of the same laudable End”.⁷ Bluet here clearly declares that Mandeville belongs to the skeptical tradition, at least regarding ethical issues. For him, this tradition, conferring an overwhelming importance on the notion of custom and obfuscating the differences

⁵ The famous expression coined by the French scholar René Pintard [cite his book by title and publisher and year] in the 1940’s and since then almost consecrated.

⁶ See, especially, J. Lafond, *L’Homme et son image; morales et littérature de Montaigne à Mandeville* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996).

⁷ G. Bluet, *An Enquiry whether a General Practice of Virtue tends to the Wealth or Poverty, Benefit or Disadvantage of a People* (1725), excerpted in J. Martin Stafford, ed., *Private Vices, Publick Benefits? The Contemporary Reception of Bernard Mandeville* (Solihull: Ismeron, 1997), 298.

between values, leads to a radical moral relativism. In spite of its biased nature and its oversimplifications, this testimony has the merit of showing a contemporary author correctly identifying an important part of Mandeville's "borrowings" and seeing them as tied to a specific philosophical tradition.

Two centuries later, Kaye explicitly called Mandeville a Pyrrhonist, though what he meant by this designation does not necessarily coincide with what the majority of scholars now understand as such.⁸ He emphasized the link between Mandeville's anti-rationalism and a similar element in the skeptical tradition and asserted that "[...] the Sceptics were among the intellectual grandparents of Mandeville".⁹ More recently, other commentators have related Mandeville either directly or indirectly (especially through his kinship with the foremost undeniably skeptical philosophers like Pierre Bayle, for instance) to skepticism. Notwithstanding this, there still seems to be no consensus about the exact nature of the relation of his thought to skepticism. In the present chapter I am trying to clarify this relation, focusing on some crucial elements of skepticism that permeate his philosophy in general, and his moral and political philosophy in particular.

Before entering into the core of my subject, I shall present a few preliminary remarks on the hypothesis that there was a scission between two kinds of skepticism precipitated by the Cartesian attack on traditional skepticism. In spite of its heterogeneity and its historical discontinuity since antiquity, some common traits can be used to identify a skeptical philosophical tradition. Among them are (1) that it is a philosophy that uses certain kinds of argumentation, (2) that it claims an attitude of searching for truth, (3) that it stresses antitheses and antilogies and (4) that it

⁸ Kaye, "Introduction", lxi-lxii, lxxvii-lxxxvii, lxxix, cxxxii.

⁹ Kaye, "Introduction", lxxix, note 1.

possesses practical aims, seeking a sort of wisdom of which the main element is *ataraxia*. Traditional skepticism thus seems not only livable but propitious to wise living.

What we may claim to be the most relevant branch of the early modern skeptical tradition in moral and political philosophy arguably derives from the reinvention of Pyrrhonism carried out by Montaigne.¹⁰ The Cartesian skeptical tradition inaugurated what Anglophone philosophers commonly call modern skepticism, basically concerning epistemological and strictly theoretical issues. In fact, we may consider Descartes's approach to skepticism as aimed at dissociating the skeptical posture from any practical standpoint, turning it into an unlivable challenge both to common sense and to the findings and theories of mainstream philosophy. When he created his version of skepticism, based upon an instrumental reduction of *skepsis* to universal doubt, capable of becoming hyperbolic, he did not conceive it as a philosophical attitude but as a problem that carried along with itself its own overcoming. Such a conception of *skepsis* as a purely hypothetical and absurd stance cannot be properly understood except as originating in the context of a refusal of any previous kind of skepticism. Descartes can thus be considered to have really belonged to an ancient tradition parallel to skepticism: the anti-skeptical tradition.¹¹ As a consequence of this way of fabricating a version of skepticism that allowed him to deal with doubt and incertitude by eradicating them completely by rational means,

¹⁰ See, especially, Rui B. Romão, *A Apologia na Balança. A Reinvenção do Pirronismo na Apologia de Raimundo Sabunde de Michel de Montaigne* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 2007).

¹¹ See, especially, Rui B. Romão, *Caminhos Caminhos da Dúvida – cepticismo, protomodernidade e política* (Lisboa: Vendaval, 2010). What I call the anti-skeptical tradition should not be simply taken as dogmatism in general. Instead, it is a tradition developed around a core of arguments used by the adversaries of skepticism and perfected as well as updated to face the evolution of the skeptical positions.

Descartes (eventually provoked the aforementioned splitting in the early modern skeptical tradition between two kinds of skepticism, which often crossed paths with each other: one was the theoretical skepticism conceived in the molds fashioned by Descartes and the other one was the livable and moderate one.

Thus, the early modern thinkers who continued to consider the skeptical posture compatible with everyday life and common sense focused primarily upon political and moral issues and, generally speaking, avoided classifying themselves as skeptics. They felt free to accept Descartes's claims against theoretical nihilistic doubt, while characterizing this doubt as a preposterous position not seriously adopted by any philosopher. Most of them did not eschew dealing with epistemological and other theoretical problems but they always dealt with them from a point of view related to a moderate form of skepticism.¹² Before Descartes, one could find those two types of skepticism joined together, in several versions, as a livable and somewhat coherent albeit unorthodox philosophy.¹³ Jonathan Barnes and Myles Burnyeat sustained in celebrated articles a different view, claiming a separation, since antiquity, between two kinds of Pyrrhonian skepticism, a rustic Pyrrhonism and an urbane Pyrrhonism. For them, Montaigne is a typical representative of the latter subspecies of Pyrrhonism in the sixteenth century.¹⁴ This artificial distinction, based upon a somewhat free interpretation of observations made by Galen, a thinker who

¹² The expression "mitigated skepticism" is only conceivable after Descartes, referring to these skeptical attitudes.

¹³ There was indeed before Descartes a kind of theoretical skepticism, in spite of being not extreme, for it was conceived as a sort of philosophy guiding life and not made up as an untenable position only imagined from an antagonistic standpoint.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Barnes, "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* N. S. 28, 1982, 1-29; M. Burnyeat, "The Sceptic in his Place and Time", in R.H. Popkin and C. B. Schmidt, eds., *Scepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Wiesbaden: Olms, 19xx), 13-43.

was an adversary both of the Pyrrhonist school of philosophy and of the empirical school of medicine, is one that only became perfectly conceivable after Descartes. Barnes and Burnyeat also seem to misunderstand Montaigne's reinvention of ancient Pyrrhonism. They, indeed, tend to present it as a forerunner in many aspects of the conception of skepticism imposed by Descartes.¹⁵

The two most important arguments of the adversaries of ancient skepticism were the *apraxia* and the *self-refutation* claims, both of them also held against many other schools of philosophy. The first type of argument asserts the impossibility of living strictly according to the tenets of the professed philosophy. The other kind refutes a specific philosophy as self-contradictory. One can easily see that anti-skeptics, in using these two arguments or others derived from them, followed a strategy of *reductio ad absurdum* of the position the skeptics put forward. The Pyrrhonists have always replied to these two objections. In fact, all skeptical traditions may be envisaged trying to find a way out of the reach of the attacks of their adversaries.¹⁶ And curiously, the ancient skeptics, as well as late Renaissance figures like Montaigne, Charron, or Sanchez, conceived of skepticism as a therapeutical philosophy and used against their opponents some form of those two same objections. Nonetheless, the adversaries of several sorts of skepticism systematically have kept using variants of these two arguments throughout the ages since antiquity until now. For instance, contemporary philosophers like Jules Vuillemin and Martha Nussbaum recur to them when criticizing ancient pyrrhonism.¹⁷ Descartes, with his instrumental

¹⁵ See Romão, *Caminhos Caminhos da Dúvida*, passim.

¹⁶ See Romão, *A Apologia na Balança*, passim.

¹⁷ J. Vuillemin, "Une morale est-elle compatible avec le scepticisme?", *Philosophie* 7, 1985, 21-51; M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 313-315.

version of *skepsis*, implicitly merges these two kinds of argument, adding to it a new nihilistic dimension.

This reading of ours can be somehow conciliated with Richard Popkin's brilliant account of Descartes's struggle with skepticism, in spite of involving a slight revision of certain elements of it. Popkin emphasized that the French philosopher "saw that only by admitting the full and total impact of complete Pyrrhonism, could one be prepared"¹⁸ to overcome the *crise pyrrhonienne* of his time.¹⁹ Putting the stress on Descartes as part of a tradition of philosophy antagonistic to skepticism from the start, as I am here doing, carries as a consequence that he could not really admit a "complete Pyrrhonism",²⁰ but, instead of it, only a distorted one associated with his invented hyperbolic doubt. The anti-skeptics always took Pyrrhonism as having to be overcome by an exaggeration of their main elements, such as *epoche*, *metriopatheia*, *isostheneia* and *arrepsia*. Cartesian skepticism, as we have above suggested, seems to stem from this anti-skeptical tradition. Descartes's innovation resides essentially in conflating arguments used as leading to *epoche* and in exaggerating them to the extreme point of transforming it into a *nihilistic* stance, which could be employed against itself as part of a methodical procedure designed to provide absolute certainties upon which a dogmatic building of philosophy and science could be erected. Thus, in a way, he tried to take advantage of the Pyrrhonian use of

¹⁸ Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 142.

¹⁹ The notion itself of *crise pyrrhonienne*, independently from its historical justification, should be taken *cum grano salis*, for it derives from an anti-skeptical conception, according to which pyrrhonism should never be envisaged but as a crisis that has to be overcome.

²⁰ The Pyrrhonism of the skeptics Descartes fought against was, considered as such, complete in itself.

peritrope.²¹ This maneuver was eventually self-defeating, as Popkin demonstrated in the chapter of *The History of Skepticism* titled “Descartes, sceptique malgré lui”.²² Nevertheless, Descartes’s way of perceiving and trying to defeat skepticism from an anti-skeptical trend was effective in influencing the later skeptical tradition, obliging it to transform itself. An aspect of that transformation consisted in the aforementioned splitting of skepticism; another is that skeptical philosophers afterwards had to accept some Cartesian claims.²³

²¹ The *peritrope* is an ancient Greek term that signifies the very same kind of argument used by anti-skeptical philosophers when accusing their skeptical adversaries of self-refutation whenever they present their philosophical attitude. I have been upholding for some years now a theory according to which ancient Sceptics of all tendencies developed in varied forms and degrees a kind of thinking I call *peritropical* thinking, involving simultaneously debating techniques and a sort of intellectual *ascesis* grounded on a complex process that has as its centerpiece the exploration of what can be construed as a perverse effect device (cf. Romão, *A Apologia na Balança*, 200-202, 485-492). A crucial point of this theory is precisely that better than any other element what explains the continuity of the skeptical tradition is the assimilation of self-contradiction as part of the dynamics of skepticism. Montaigne perfected *peritropical* thinking, giving it a larger scope than that conferred on it by the ancient skeptics. In the “Apologie de Raimond Sebond”, the openly philosophical chapter of the *Essais*, and in many ways its center, the structure, as I have analyzed elsewhere, follows a progression that reveals a characteristic conceptual figure of skeptical thought: what I called the *peritropical metamorphosis*. Its presence in Montaigne’s *Essais* (in general, and not only in the Apologie) is more striking and more complex than its previous presence in any other skeptical writing.

²² Popkin, *The History of Skepticism*, 43.

²³ Until recently (perhaps 15 or 20 years ago), most philosophers and historians of philosophy have studied preferentially the theoretical branch of early modern skepticism as such. Even Richard Popkin and his first disciples, such as Charles B. Schmitt or Craig Brush, did not greatly (at least at the beginning of their research) counter that traditional tendency. They took ethical issues into due consideration, but they seemed to perhaps overplay the purely theoretical interpretation. The pioneer work of John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume and Kant* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) directed our attention to the ethical and political aspects. See Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*, where Mandeville is said to be at “the roots of a number of Hume’s ideas” (p. 174).

In Mandeville's philosophy two families of thought related to ancient skepticism converge. One, as mentioned above, corresponds to the early modern currents of thought that stemmed from the reinvention of Pyrrhonism by Montaigne and other thinkers who followed his trail, independently from being directly or indirectly influenced by him. We can precisely name among them two philosophers whose reading recognizably marked Mandeville's thought: La Rochefoucauld and Pierre Bayle. But one should not ignore Montaigne himself as having exerted an important and direct influence on Mandeville.

The other family of skeptical thought to which Bernard Mandeville belongs is the medical one.²⁴ The specific medical outlook that he endorsed, which he himself described as akin to that of the sect of the "Empiricks", is striking in Mandeville's moral and political theory.²⁵

The crisscrossings of skepticism and medicine have been so frequent throughout history since the inception of philosophical skepticism in Ancient Greece till now that they cannot but be considered important. Mandeville outstandingly illustrates in the early modern age this relation between skepticism and medicine, of which the most remarkable example in antiquity is none other than the philosopher

²⁴ Discontinuity characterizes the history of skepticism both in antiquity and in the Renaissance and early modern age. But we can still refer to it (and to the ties between ancient skepticism and its renewal) as a tradition, albeit varied and many-sided. We hardly can hardly say the same about what I have called the family of medical skeptical thought. Though tied to the skeptical tradition, it does not seem to constitute a tradition. The members of this "family" produced extremely personal and idiosyncratic versions of skepticism. They include neo-Galenists and anti-Galenists. The most outstanding members of it in the late Renaissance and early modern period are, perhaps, Francisco Sanches, Robert Burton, and Mandeville, to whom we could add the Spanish thinker Martín Martínez, studied by J. C. Laursen, "Martín Martínez.

²⁵ Mandeville, *A Treatise*, 48-50; 2nd edition, 1730, 56-58.

and doctor to whom we owe the most complete account of ancient Pyrrhonism, Sextus Empiricus, a leader of the school of the Sceptics or Pyrrhonists in the second century A.D., and also a physician related to the empirical school of medicine. In what we can classify as Mandeville's most ambitious and important work besides *The Fable of the Bees*, titled *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions* [...],²⁶ he calls the character that admittedly represents his own views Phylopirio, a direct reference to his empiricism: "In these Dialogues I have done the same as Seneca did in his *Octavia*, and brought my self upon the Stage; with this difference, That he kept his own Name, and I changed mine for that of *Philopirio*, a Lover of Experience, which I shall always profess to be".²⁷ In this book he amply shows his profound knowledge of the history of medicine, his engrained anti-rationalism, and his distrust of speculative theories such as hypotheses made up to plausibly explain the symptoms of a distemper and not to examine its real causes,²⁸ as opposed to knowledge by "Use, Practice and Experience".²⁹

Scholars generally recognize the strong influence of Cartesianism in Mandeville's medical thought, although they add that the impact of this influence

²⁶ The complete title of the first edition of this treatise in three dialogues is: *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions, Vulgarly call'd the Hypo in Men and the Vapours in Women; In which the Symptoms, Causes and Cure of those Diseases are set forth after a Method intirely new. The whole interpreted, with Instructive Discourses on the Real Art of Physick itself, And Entertaining Remarks on the Modern Practice of Physicians and Apothecaries: Very useful to all, that the Misfortune to stand in need of either* (London: David Leach, 1711). The title of the 2nd edition is: *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases. In Three Dialogues* (London: J. Tonson, 1730).

²⁷ Mandeville, *A Treatise*, 1711, xi.

²⁸ Cf. Mandeville, *A Treatise*, 105-106. See, also, e.g., 139-140.

²⁹ Mandeville, *A Treatise*, 68.

tended to weaken from his first known dissertation to his latest writings.³⁰ One instance of this concerns the Dutch physician's different ways of expressing his endorsement of the first two truths of Descartes's metaphysics in the 1711 edition of *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions [...]* and in the 1730 enlarged and corrected edition of it under the title of *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases in Three Dialogues*.³¹ Mauro Simonazzi acutely highlights the alterations between the 1711 and 1730 texts in the passages referring to that endorsement.³² Mandeville seems to accept the *Cogito* and the consequences immediately drawn from it by Descartes as metaphysical principles but just because they enable us to have necessary certitude upon which we may cautiously ground our own observations derived from experience. On the other hand, he also often insists on the imperfection of our scientific knowledge and on "the greater use of observation than reasoning in Physicks".³³

Most likely Mandeville's medical training (like that of so many skeptics), associated with his experience as a citizen involved in political affairs in Rotterdam,³⁴ also contributed to the shaping of the pessimistic anthropological conceptions he developed. For the Dutch author, human nature is flawed and imperfect. On his account, man cannot be considered naturally sociable. Human will and human reason are deemed incapable of achieving what we want, mere chance being far more potent than both of them. Indeed, in his moral and political writings Mandeville intertwines anthropological pessimism with moderate anti-rationalism just as he did concerning

³⁰ Cf., e.g., M. Simonazzi, *Le Favole*, 36ss; R. Donati, *Le Ragioni di un pessimista: Mandeville nella cultura dei Lumi* (Firenze: Edizioni ETS), 2011, 86-87.

³¹ Cf. Mandeville, *A Treatise*, 1st ed., 124-125; 2nd ed., 154-155.

³² See M. Simonazzi, *Le Favole*, 121.

³³ See, e.g., Mandeville, *A Treatise*, 32, 37, 47, 51.

³⁴ See Simonazzi, *Le Favole*, 33-48.

medical issues. According to his views reason, though subject to the superior force of the passions, does play a role of some importance as such in guiding human behavior.

The core of Mandevillian philosophy seems to be essentially ambiguous and ambivalent and for that reason particularly open to varied and new readings.³⁵ His contemporaries, such as Hutcheson, already highlighted this characteristic. This can be understood as very aptly prolonging the early modern skeptical tradition and Pyrrhonian procedures of opposing notions, theories, opinions, facts, and points of view.³⁶

Another trait characterizing the early modern skeptical tradition in moral and political philosophy that we find in Mandeville has to do with literary form. Even when they do not expressly follow Montaigne's sophisticated and quite difficult to imitate example, most authors linked to that tradition tend to write in a fashion compatible with an unorthodox, open-ended, and unsystematic doctrine. Though Mandeville's relatively coherent and compact philosophy presents some systematic features, we can hardly call it a system comparable to Hobbes's, Locke's, Spinoza's, or Leibniz's. It is true that he more than once uses the term "system" to refer to his doctrine, but I take that he rather does it by analogy with the philosophies he opposes and that he simply means by that term a cogent philosophical whole centered on one or two principles and not a really an organic set of coordinated theories. Anyhow, he adopts for the exposition of his thoughts forms clearly preferred by skeptical philosophers: small relatively digressive essays, commentaries, and dialogues, even when he calls a collection of them a treatise. We can include among those forms his verses constituting the original *Grumbling Hive*. The open-ended character of the

³⁵ The classic study of Mandeville's ambivalence still remains Hector Monro's *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville*.

³⁶ [supply note]

ever-expanding *Fable of the Bees*, built on that initial poem, augmented from edition to edition like Montaigne's *Essais* or Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, forms a clear example of the skeptical inconclusiveness related to *zetesis* and to some particular epistemological doctrines. If in some places, such as, for instance, "Part Two" of the last edition of *The Fable of the Bees*, he occasionally adopts a less skeptical tone, even there, the frequent humorous touches, the judicious use of irony, and a quite ingenious way of using dialogue devices prevent the work from showing a dogmatic style.

Although, as we have seen above, some of Mandeville's contemporaries highlighted the kinship of his thought with Montaigne's, and many present-day scholars confer importance to the relation between the two authors, it seems to me that even their accounts underestimate too much that relation. The very subtitle of the *Fable of the Bees* is based upon a correlation of private and public, vice and virtue, which bears some resemblance to remarks in the *Essays*. Mandeville could not perhaps make central to his philosophy the distinction between self-liking and self-love without having studied Montaigne's passages on *philautia*, on self-knowledge, and on the self-preservation instinct in men and animals.

We have also to remark that some important features of Montaigne's Pyrrhonism can be found in Mandeville's philosophy. We may list, besides those already mentioned, the following ones among others: the combination of a pessimistic anti-anthropocentric *Weltanschauung* with moderate anti-rationalistic conceptions and arguments; an unorthodox form of political conservatism; a mitigated epistemological skepticism; diffidence towards unattainable ideals such as those of stoicism or some Christian or other religious ascetics (in both philosophers we find expressions of the refusal of self-denial); a quite crucial role imparted to passions as springs of human

behavior; a curious blend of pragmatic realism and rigorous moralism; the constant use of paradoxes; the valorization of contingency; some kind of attenuated naturalism; the observation of the intertwining of good and evil in almost every human action; and enormous attention to perverse effects.

These traits, which show themselves as striking affinities between both authors, are far more important than signs of mere influence. They reveal that each of these two authors, developing an original and innovative philosophy, works out his ideas within a common framework that envelops them, that of the skeptical moral and political philosophical tradition.

Most early modern skeptical authors in the wake of Montaigne share the consideration that passions subdue reason and will and that they fundamentally govern human action and conduct. Mandeville, exploring similar views, develops a rather sophisticated theory of passions founded on the valorization of the self.³⁷ Mandeville also emphasizes that his viewpoint is descriptive rather than normative.

Joining together self-examination with the study of the passions and of human behavior, Mandeville conceives the former as a kind of therapeutic procedure possessing some similarities with the identical role played by self-knowledge in Montaigne's neo-Pyrrhonian philosophy or in the philosophy of other skeptical thinkers of the seventeenth century like La Mothe Le Vayer or La Rochefoucauld. For Mandeville self-study constitutes the background against which his analysis of human nature and his discussion of the interplay of vice and virtue are set. Without duly

³⁷ The following passage taken from the "Introduction" of the 1732 edition of *The Fable of the Bees* shows perfectly how Mandeville sees man as completely subject to passions: "[...] 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 no", Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 39.

observed self-examination, which could almost seem an end in itself for the pleasure it gives, a man falls prey completely to the empire of the passions and to the power of social games of dissimulation. So Mandeville's valorization of the individual has two complementary traits: the free individual, having to be considered as such, becomes the most important asset of a free society; men, as they are unwillingly driven by passions, must recognize their role and understand their functioning as springs of action and guides to conduct in order to overcome their power.

The valorization of contingency, along with expressions of anti-rationalism, form an essential part of what we could call the pattern of early modern skepticism in relation to moral and political philosophical issues. Renato Lessa has explored the idea that the "Sceptics established a form of thinking about sovereignty as grounded on accidents, traditions and beliefs".³⁸ This idea and the related notion of "operators of circumstance, circumscription and finitude" as characteristic of skeptical philosophers are inspired by St. Anselm's ontological argument and Bodin's conception of sovereignty as developed by the late Portuguese philosopher Fernando Gil.³⁹ A belief in "limits and circumscription" replaces the Anselmian and Bodinian belief in the unbound.⁴⁰ I do not fully endorse this interpretation, despite its fecundity and the brilliance with which Lessa defends it. It seems to me that the undeniable importance conferred by the early modern skeptical tradition in moral and political philosophy upon contingency and the role played by circumstances is better construed as corresponding to a rejection of belief in finitude.

³⁸ R. Lessa, "The Philosophical Form of Scepticism in Politics", in <http://blog.estudoshumanos.com/the-philosophical-form-of-scepticism-in-politics/>, 2008, 3.

³⁹ See F. Gil, *La Conviction* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

⁴⁰ Cf. Gil, *La Conviction*, xx.

An important issue in the interpretation of Mandeville's thought concerns his alleged foreshadowing of modern liberalism capitalism. According to a quite common view he defended some form of spontaneously ordered free market. The famous subtitle of the *Fable of the Bees*, "*Private Vices, Public Virtues*", forms an appropriate summary of his basic notion that if people pursue their own self-interest (which he calls "vices") a sort of harmonious equilibrium producing benefits for society as a whole will eventually turn up as an unexpected result (due to more or less complicated chance mechanisms). The most important point here seems to consist in the circumstance that the uncoordinated single efforts pursued by individuals pursuing their own interests and following their own "vicious" inclinations are paradoxically beneficial to the whole. And analogously, according to Mandeville, the coordination of those very efforts made willingly in order to achieve a common good is far less efficient than that later called "spontaneous order". This view seems to imply that a planned large-scale human intervention is doomed to fail due to chance and to the interplay of factors that cannot be controlled by human reason. But that does not mean that spontaneity magically begets order, either.

We see here at work a clearly paradoxical effect. It seems rather unlikely that Mandeville would in truth dream of straightforwardly sustaining any economic and social system like modern capitalistic ones. In the first place, there is not a single known form of modern capitalism that really renounces some kind of rational order and deliberate interference with what the ancients called the whims of Fortune and the Christians called the mysterious designs of divine Providence. In the second place, there has never been any government that really endorsed the kind of realism claimed by Mandeville. Moreover, no historical known system officially sustains the objectives ascribed by Mandeville to his "grumbling hive". To the objection that

forms of government that are really guided by such a set of values have prevailed throughout history though people in power hypocritically proclaimed other public objectives, while in reality pursuing those aims, one may reply that if that is true it does not only apply to liberal systems but also (albeit in perhaps a somewhat more recondite way) to other sorts of systems, including socialist ones. The point is that if we base our reading of society entirely upon the assumption of hypocrisy or dissimulation, we are at a loss because we will lack an adequate criterion to distinguish dissimulated statements from sincere ones.

That does not mean however that we have to put aside interpretations of Mandeville's economic and political thought such as the famous one sustained by Hayek in 1951 (which was followed by many others in its wake) somehow claiming the Dutch physician and philosopher as a forerunner of liberal economics.⁴¹ Those interpretations have legitimacy as long as they limit themselves to admitting that they are expressing a conception of Mandeville that foreshadows future conceptions that he could not have conceived because they are based upon realities that had not yet come completely to form in his own time. I would like to emphasize that those interpretations are only partially true, disclosing just one among many other contradictory aspects of Mandeville's philosophy. As Keynes himself (among others) pointed out, Mandeville can also be seen as a forerunner of interventionist theories like his [footnote].

Independently of the particular kinds of influence exerted by some thinkers on others, one can find in some authors more or less strong affinities of thinking. Thus, to find in author traces of his partaking of *peritropical* thought or at least elements

⁴¹ Cf. F. A. Hayek, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

that connect him with it does not mean that they are the product of direct influence. I believe Mandeville to be such a case. He certainly read Montaigne's *Essais* and seems to have held them in the highest esteem, as we have above seen. However, one cannot infer from that circumstance the exact nature and extent of the influence he received from the French philosopher. We may suggest that the sum of the elements and features authors share with each other may suffice to consider them somewhat akin. In addition to the other elements I have referred to above, the one to which I would like to call your attention consists precisely of a variant of a basic element of *peritropical* thinking. This is the use Mandeville makes of perverse effects as a ground for a theoretical construction trying to explain complex structures and institutions.

The central paradox of Mandeville's masterpiece *The Fable of the Bees* in any of its editions is epitomized in the subtitle of the work: *Private Vices, Public Benefits*. A first hint of this famous formula appears also as a subtitle qualifying the original poem (published for the first time in 1706, and reprinted in all editions published during the life of the author): *The Grumbling Hive, or Knaves Turned Honest*. In this case, two sorts of individuals are contrasted: the knavish ones and the honest ones. The Author puts here the stress on the passage from one condition to the other through the past participle of the verb "turn". An operation of metamorphosis makes a bridge between the two opposed qualities, one seen as a point of departure, the other envisaged as the arrival point. Mandeville thus gives relevance to the process of change itself. Interestingly enough, he observes the alteration as unilateral and not as reciprocal: while knavish individuals become honest, honest people do not become knaves. And the contrast alluded to in the subtitle has two faces, so to speak. The first one, which performs only a circumstantial function, is that the Author shows in the

poem the bees engaging in knavish conduct and behaving honestly. The second one, the most impressive and important one, is that individuals acting as rogues may form a strong and wealthy collective, thus becoming elements of a sound society and consequently honest as long as they are taken as parts of a whole.

The poem itself explores the intertwining of this famous Mandevillian thesis, expressed as a paradox, with its also paradoxical counterpart: a hive stocked with corrupt and vicious bees was prosperous and powerful; once the hive, because of a divine intervention, became free of fraud and the bees acquired virtuous habits, it lost its prosperity and power. According to the first part of the paradox, when the insects followed their vices (or, as we normally translate Mandeville's use of that term, self-interest) and behaved knavishly, business flourished and thrived, instead of decaying. As Mandeville says:

Thus every Part was full of Vice,
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise;⁴²

In spite of this flourishing, hypocritical bees, simulating love for virtue, display discontent:

[...]all the Rogues cry'd brazenly,
Good Gods, had we but Honesty!⁴³

⁴² Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 24.

⁴³ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 27.

Mandeville's depiction in the fable of the hive turned honest after Jove answered prayers asking for a complete moral reform has to our modern ears clear dystopian overtones. In fact, the author in the often-quoted verses of the conclusion of the poem openly declares that the wish to entirely banish from society the vices that constitute an integral part of it and that may contribute to its prosperity is a rationalist utopian desire:

[...] 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.⁴⁴

Note that he does not say that the mentioned vices will always entail beneficial consequences for the societies, but that we have to endure them and be contented with their role in society *as far as* they turn into benefits.

I have thus far spoken of the first presentation of his paradox by Mandeville in 1705. I must here insist that though the editions of *The Fable of Bees* (of which the most important are those from 1714, 1723, and 1729) are much bulkier than the original one, containing the addition of long comments and essays, and even in the

⁴⁴ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 24.

case of the last edition published during the life of the Author, an entirely new second part, they actually reprint the poem as it was initially published.

The readings Friedrich Hayek made of Mandeville's theorizing on social sciences issues since the 1940's constitute a landmark in the modern appreciation of the thought of the author of *The Fable of the Bees*, having much contributed to the reevaluation of it. Hayek's famous "Lecture on a master mind" of 1966 is his last word synthesis on the subject. There we can read that the poem "gives yet little indication of his [Mandeville's] important ideas" and that "The idea that

The worst of all the multitude

Did something for the common good

was but the seed from which his later thought sprang"⁴⁵

For Hayek "[Mandeville's] main original thesis emerges only gradually and indirectly, as it were a by-product of defending his initial paradox that what are private vices are often public benefits" [Hayek 1978: 252 move to footnote]. That gradual process had begun with *The Grumbling Hive* and, after the important landmarks constituted by the first and second editions of *The Fable of the Bees*, culminated in the 1729 publication of the Second Part.

The paradox itself would not then have been immensely original. Hayek expressly says so. The most important Mandevillian innovation, according to him, resides in the theoretical developments concerning the spontaneous ordering of complex social institutions it gave rise to. Explaining the evolutionary processes by which language and the laws were formed from the time of the origins of society is

⁴⁵ Hayek, *New Essays*, 251.

Mandeville's remarkable feat. The fact that his highly imaginative and plausible hypotheses and theories are, as we have already hinted, made out of a single principle seems even more admirable.

Hayek's interpretation of Mandeville highlights two important aspects of his thought: the enormous development it shows from the first to the last text of the author and the circumstance that the bulk of the original contribution by him to the posterity of the social sciences lies in the exploration that essentially takes part along the six dialogues of the second part of *The Fable of the Bees*. Yet the most innovative feature of Hayek's rereading of Mandeville consists in shifting the emphasis from the famous paradox to an explanation of the formation of complex social institutions through a naturalistic evolutionary process. We can observe, however, in both these notions (the paradox, and the process) an unchanging element that somehow binds them together: the use for theoretical purposes of the consideration in a more or less large scale of a mechanism involving perverse effects.

A striking example of the use Mandeville makes of that mechanism is a passage of the Fourth Dialogue of the Second Book of *The Fable of the Bees*, where Cleomenes, the character the Author mainly speaks through, presents an analogy between the long sought after perfect happiness and the philosopher's stone that leads him to the observation of curious and precious side-effects of the pursuit of some unsuccessful searches:

It is with complete Felicity in this World, as it is with the
Philosopher's Stone: Both have been sought after many different
Ways, by Wise Men as well as Fools, Tho' neither of them has been
obtain'd hitherto: But in searching after either, diligent Enquirers

have often stumbled by Chance on useful Discoveries of Things they did not look for, and which human Sagacity laboring with Design *a priori* never would have detected.⁴⁶

Readers of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* may easily recall a somewhat similar story told by Sextus about Apelles. The famous painter was looking for a special effect, a naturalistic depiction of foam in a horse's mouth. After having for some time tried in vain to produce it, he quitted renouncing to attain his aim. In despair he threw his sponge at the painting.

That story is crucial to the Pyrrhonians. By an analogy with it Sextus explained the purpose or end of their philosophy, for they claimed suspension of judgment (*epoche*) was first attained in a similar way – only after having expressly renounced the attainment of their aim, they eventually attained it in fact through the suspension of judgment.

“So, too, the Sceptics were in hopes of gaining quietude by means of a decision regarding the disparity of the objects of sense and of thought, and being unable to effect this they suspended judgment; and they found that quietude, as if by chance, followed upon their suspense, even as a shadow follows its substance.”⁴⁷

This may stand as a metaphor for Mandeville's understanding of society and politics as well.

⁴⁶ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, II:179].

⁴⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, tr. R. G. Bury, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 21.