

# THE BEEHIVE AND THE STEW: PROSTITUTION, RISK AND COMMERCE IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF BERNARD MANDEVILLE<sup>1</sup>

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In *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) and *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724), Bernard Mandeville confronts public outcry over prostitution and suggests that the effort to banish brothels reveals, at bottom, collective anxiety and speculation about the hazards of belonging to a commercial society and, in particular, of participating in Augustan London's political economy. He recognizes the uneasiness that motivates this effort as a primarily moral one, and part of his aim in engaging the prostitution debate in *The Fable* is to force his readers not to turn away from the underside of commerce. Instead, he wants them not only to face up to the harsh and morally dubious aspects of life in a commercial society but also to acknowledge their own involvement in the system that troubles them. Mandeville takes this approach to secure commerce because he emphasizes that commercial society, at least as he finds it, cannot be supported by other means. Rather, he argues that if commerce is to prosper, it must be conducted by way of the right combination of seemly and unruly practices. Furthermore, he suggests that those who live in societies dedicated to commerce and who reap the benefits of commercial prosperity must learn to live in a morally complex and difficult terrain.

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Mandeville's views on prostitution, situated in his broader account of morality and commercial politics, are of historical and theoretical interest. First, they offer a window into early eighteenth-century British debates about morality and society. Furthermore, some of Mandeville's suggestions for how the risks of prostitution ought to be managed through policy prefigure later Victorian efforts to regulate prostitution, namely the nineteenth-century Contagious Disease Acts. Some of the ambiguities of his work on prostitution also foreshadow subsequent proto-feminist debates about whether these legislative acts protected or subjugated and scapegoated the people they targeted, most of them impoverished women and prostitutes.

Mandeville's discussion of attitudes towards prostitution as well as his own argument regarding how it ought to be viewed and handled as a social and commercial practice also offer an interesting theoretical sketch of how risks are understood and experienced culturally and socially. His arguments suggest that integral to understanding *how* particular risks are selected is addressing the question of *why* they are chosen. Mandeville notices that prostitution is understood and presented as a kind of filth, and reformers marshal an array of literal and figurative arguments to demonstrate its status as a social pollutant. In some sense, Mandeville recognizes that prostitution can pose "real" or material dangers for a society, concerns which he addresses. As a practice, it may spread disease and result in unwanted children not easily cared for. But Mandeville also notices that arguments for prostitution as a risk have a social component, as perceptions of risk normally do. He thereby examines even more closely prostitution's power as a figurative contaminant.<sup>2</sup> As a practice that weds sexual and economic exchange, it is seen to pollute a largely clean political economy with moral vice, and arguments for banning it focus on this moral aspect of prostitution as bearing the

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<sup>2</sup> This paper draws in part on the work of anthropologists Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky. See especially Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Douglas and Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

greatest capacity for threat and the future demise of commercial society. In other words, prostitution is depicted as capable of rendering political economy “dirty” at the deepest level possible, and Mandeville interprets efforts to legislate prostitution out of commercial society as attempts to offer a balm for the moral aches and pains of commerce.

Mandeville’s thoughts on prostitution may thus be read as a pointed answer to those who wish to purify political economy. While he thinks this purification project is an impossible one, he investigates here what kind of work the selection of prostitution as a risk does socially and psychologically. He suggests that how societies identify and attempt to contain risks reveals the shape of collective social and political projects and even deeper worries than those immediately apparent. In this case, Mandeville suggests that perhaps living in a commercial society is what is risky, and the ensuing anxiety to be soothed is one about commerce’s potential for engendering widespread immorality. He implies that drawing a border around prostitutes and brothels as the loci of this immorality makes the rest of the community feel clean and keeps its self-image intact. Identifying prostitution as a source of moral uncleanness and risk fortifies a project not of self-preservation, but more so one of self-presentation.

While Mandeville demands in *The Fable* that his readers recognize what exactly they are doing when they scapegoat the prostitute, his own attempt in *The Defence* to rehabilitate her as a full-fledged member of commercial society is complicated and ambiguous. In *The Fable*, he refuses the assertion that prostitution poses a special risk to society or commerce, and he argues that the prostitute is one commercial actor among many. But in the pages of his more elaborate defense of prostitution, when he begins to detail how prostitution might be incorporated into the daily flow of commercial activity, it is only by way of rules and regulations that set prostitutes apart from other workers and that appear to rest on the idea that they must be confined and sanitized. Mandeville’s reversion to this position indicates that even as he suggests that risks are foremost a product of human

imagination and construction, he reaches the limits of his own theoretical arguments as he tries to translate them into concrete works of policy.

This paper will proceed in three parts, each an exploration of how Mandeville thinks about prostitution, its relationship to social norms and institutions, and its status as a risk worthy of social concern and legislation. Part One examines how Mandeville situates criticisms of prostitution in a broader account of the moral risks of living in a prosperous commercial society, to argue that prostitution, as with other forms of vice, actually contributes to the stability of social and economic institutions in eighteenth-century Britain. Part Two considers Mandeville's highly ambivalent effort to legalize and regulate prostitution, and suggests that in spite of his efforts to liberate and protect prostitutes from public scapegoating, he endorses a political project that compromises the agency of and autonomy of prostitutes as one group of commercial actors among many. Part Three suggests that we may take from Mandeville's analysis of prostitution—notwithstanding its complexity and ambiguities—a trenchant point about the risks of a politics driven by risk management.

## **I. Exposing Private Vice: Prostitutes and Other Characters in *The Fable of The Bees***

Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* may be read as a rejoinder to what he saw to be the anxieties and insecurity accompanying burgeoning affluence in early eighteenth-century Britain. He understood his contemporaries as clinging to the hope and pursuit of material prosperity while shrinking from particular elements of the moral or social landscape in their increasingly urban trading and commercial environment. Discomfort with luxury and the growing disparity between rich and poor, as well as a preoccupation with public indecency and the literal and figurative filth flowing through the streets of London, marked the social and political pursuits of many of Mandeville's contemporaries. In *The Fable*, he addresses these worries directly, especially those pertaining to morality and purity.

Mandeville advances the novel argument that the material benefits of living in a commercial society are grounded in human vice, not virtue. He urges his readers to adopt a different perspective, insisting that “those who can enlarge their View, and will give themselves the Leisure of gazing on the Prospect of concatenated Events, may, in a hundred Places, See *Good* spring up and pullulate from *Evil*, as naturally as Chickens do from Eggs.”<sup>3</sup> Mandeville does not wish to inculcate or encourage vice in his readers, but rather intends to strip commercial society of its attractive moral veneer and expose the ways in which “private vices” rather than virtue yield “public benefits.” To prove his point, he draws causal connections between socially recognized vices and prosperity to claim that all who enjoy prosperity are somehow complicit in vice. Moreover, he tries to demonstrate that even what humans understand to be virtue is in fact merely pride redirected in the interest of generating public goods. By extension, the virtuous institutions that support and are supported by polite society are also denaturalized by Mandeville’s analysis. By disrupting the perceived natural moral order underpinning commercial society and its constituent institutions in this way, he also raises the question of whether moral criticism of commercial society and its practices is even possible.

Mandeville’s brief analysis and subsequent defense of prostitution in *The Fable* is perhaps his best empirical case for illustrating this theoretical argument about the relationship between vice and benefit.<sup>4</sup> His fleeting attention to prostitution in *The Fable* was unusual enough to warrant disproportionate attention in subsequent attacks on the book.<sup>5</sup> Mandeville’s comments on

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 90. All further citations from *The Fable of the Bees* will refer to the Kaye edition and will be cited by paragraph number.

<sup>4</sup> See E.J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 216.

prostitution are by and large confined to *The Fable's* "Remark H," a short explication of a few lines of the text's centerpiece, the satirical poem "The Grumbling Hive." Here he illustrates in greater detail one of the central theoretical claims of his broader social theory: the apparently conflicting forces of virtue and vice in fact work together to promote the health, harmony and prosperity of commercial society.<sup>6</sup> In this vein, he argues that there exists a mutually beneficial relationship between virtuous women and prostitutes that keeps social order and decorum intact. He notes that while it may seem strange to think so, the posture of women of virtue generates financial advantage for prostitutes and, in return, prostitution preserves the virtue of chaste women. Mandeville stresses the latter point and argues that allowing prostitution—what he here calls the "Sin of Uncleanness"—to continue unchecked ensures purity for those who value and depend on it. He advises, rather harshly with respect to prostitutes themselves, that

The Passions of some People are too violent to be curb'd by any Law or Precept; and it is Wisdom in all Governments to bear with lesser Inconveniences to prevent greater. If Courtezans and Strumpets were to be prosecuted with as much Rigour as some silly People would have it, what Locks or Bars would be sufficient to preserve the Honour of our Wives and Daughters?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Consider the Middlesex Grand Jury's 1723 condemnation of *The Fable*, which asserts that "studied Artifices and invented Colours have been made use of to run down Religion and Virtue as *prejudicial* to Society, and detrimental to the State; and to recommend Luxury, Avarice, Pride, and all kind of Vices as being necessary to the *Publick Welfare*, and not tending to the *Destruction* of the Constitution: Nay, the very *Stems* themselves have had strained Apologies and forced Encomiums made in their Favour and produced in Print, with Design, we conceive, to debauch the Nation." In Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 445.

<sup>6</sup> "Parties directly opposite,/ Assist each other, as 'twere for Spight;/ And Temp'rance with Sobriety,/ Serve Drunkenness and Gluttony." *The Fable of the Bees*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

He proceeds to note that without “Harlots to be had at reasonable prices,” male sexual desire would probably run rampant, and innocent women would be tempted or, worse, attacked. Prostitution should thus be tolerated as a “lesser inconvenience” to offset the risk of other greater social ills, which include unwanted acts of interpersonal violence as well as the undesirable deterioration of sexual roles and norms.

Mandeville argues against contemporary moral reformers (the aforementioned “silly People” aiming to prosecute prostitutes) that the risks of prostitution need not be brought to light and exposed. Rather, he claims that the security prostitution provides for a commercial society is, in fact, what is hidden from view. Prostitution does not necessarily undermine but, rather, supports widely held sexual mores, according to Mandeville. Moreover, it reinforces the clearly defined gender roles that he notices are integral to the smooth functioning of commercial society. As such, Mandeville wants here not to investigate the risks prostitution poses to commercial life, but instead aims to draw out prostitution’s tight relationship to the benefits he anticipates that few will be willing to give up—especially cherished norms like chastity, clearly defined gender roles, and social order more generally.

To show how prostitution shores up the practices of a polite society, Mandeville first aims to denaturalize popular habits, customs and norms. Much of this effort centers on ideas of chastity and differentiated roles for men and women in matters of sex and sociability. Contrary to popular belief, Mandeville insists that when it comes to lust, men and women are quite alike—the appetite for sex is “innate both in Men and Women, who are not defective in their formation, as much as Hunger or Thirst,” but this fact is kept a secret for the “Peace and Happiness of the Civil Society.”<sup>8</sup> While all members of polite society are encouraged to repress these instincts with “Care and Severity,” women are expected to reject them altogether. It is, he notices, in “the Interest of the

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<sup>8</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 97.

Society to preserve Decency and Politeness; that women should linger, waste and die, rather than relieve themselves in an unlawful manner.”<sup>9</sup> Here he identifies a double standard, for while men are also supposed to control their passions, the entire system of social decency apparently depends on the preservation of feminine chastity.

Mandeville notices that “equal Harshness of Discipline” has not been imposed on men and women when it comes to sexual education. Men are thought to have greater appetite, and hence to be unable to follow rules as easily; therefore it is up to women to accept a heavier burden. This distinction between men and women is drawn in early childhood well before boys or girls might even feel the first inkling of sexual desire. Mandeville writes,

The Multitude will hardly believe the excessive Force of Education, and in the difference of Modesty between Men and Women ascribe that to Nature, which is altogether owing to early Instruction: *Miss* is scarce three Years old, but she is spoke to every Day to hide her Leg, and rebuk’d in good Earnest if she shews it; while *Little Master* at the same Age is bid to take up his Coats, and piss like a Man. It is Shame and Education that contains the Seeds of all Politeness.<sup>10</sup>

Mandeville notes repeatedly in *The Fable* that it is no easy task for women to preserve their chastity and live under threat of shame, particularly since their male potential partners are not held to the same standard and may pursue sexual gratification with less fear of public shaming. Women are perpetually spurning advances to protect themselves and their honor, and prostitutes can, Mandeville argues, offer some aid on this front. In effect, they are useful not only for the protection of women’s chastity, but also for the smooth functioning of a polite society, a collective which

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<sup>9</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.



depends for its own stability on the normative distinctions between men and women that Mandeville at once denaturalizes and enforces in his analysis of the relationship between upper- and middle-class women and prostitutes.

If Mandeville's argument that the vice of prostitution curbs harmful lust and insulates chaste women from corruption is unconvincing on its own, he also attempts to calm the anxieties of his readers by emphasizing that prostitutes and their attendant dirtiness are a contained threat. He argues that brothels stand in notorious streets and neighborhoods that are easily avoided, and that the women themselves are so ill bred and garishly clad as to be unattractive to "the better sort of people."<sup>11</sup> In other words, prostitutes are physically apart from the rest of the population, and even if they think to mingle with polite society, they are noticeably different from other women and thus easily identified and avoided.

Thus far, Mandeville has not undermined the image of the prostitute as an unclean figure. Rather, launched what amounts to a two-pronged practical appeal to his readers to turn a blind eye to prostitution precisely by calling on their moral sense that as a practice, it is dirty or threatening. First, he suggests that perhaps prostitution is a moral risk worth accepting because it offsets other foreseeable, more terrible harms, and second, he suggests that since it is a relatively contained risk, decent people need not fear letting it persist. Neither of these claims appears so terribly radical on the surface, for neither actually unsettles his readers' ideas about social roles and propriety. Both depend immediately on a public perception of the prostitute as a lesser sort of woman and, more deeply, on the widely held view that a woman's honor and social status are direct consequences of her chastity, whereas a man's need not be. While Mandeville in part uncovers the plight of the

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<sup>11</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 97.

prostitute and seeks to rescue her from persecution at the hands of moral crusaders, he also does little to undermine public perception of her.

When Mandeville begins to depict what goes on in houses of ill repute, however, *The Fable's* account of prostitution suddenly becomes more complicated and subversive. He adopts the language of commerce to describe prostitutes, their activities, and the places where they work. Brothels are “Markets of Love,” and “the Trade that is drove in them” is governed by internally developed rules and regulations; prostitutes are “Female Traders” whose sexual encounters Mandeville describes as “Evening Exchanges.” In Italy, where prostitution is legal, Mandeville observes that “Impurity is a kind of Merchandize and Traffic” subject to taxes in the same way other trades are.<sup>12</sup> In the context of Mandeville’s broader project—an exposé and perhaps a celebration of the ways moral vice generates benefits in a commercial society—the characterization of prostitutes as commercial actors and sex as work is notable. In a few short phrases, he blurs the distinction between prostitution and other forms of commerce by emphasizing that it adheres to the same model of production and consumption as any other kind of exchange. This move to normalize prostitution as a commercial practice suggests that claims about the vicious character and moral risks of prostitution really are not central to his argument, even while he instrumentally appeals to these claims to argue for the “Necessity of sacrificing one part of Womankind to preserve the other, and prevent a Filthiness of a *more* heinous Nature.”<sup>13</sup> By emphasizing the social benefits of prostitution, a practice understood by the public as vicious, he is ultimately able to render it comparable to other forms of already socially acceptable work. Mandeville accomplishes this move not only by using the language of commerce to describe the practice of prostitution, but also by arguing throughout the

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<sup>12</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 96-99.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

rest of the text that respectable professions, and indeed the system of commerce more generally, are also tinged with vice.

Mandeville exposes the vicious aspects of other mainstream professions either by directly naming the immoral habits or practices endemic to them or by showing how prosperous workers of all varieties benefit indirectly from vice. In the first case, one of the best examples from *The Fable* is his analysis of the trader, whom he brands a dishonest knave. He sardonically invites his readers to contest this charge in the following passage:

To pass by the innumerable Artifices, by which Buyers and Sellers out-wit one another, that are daily allowed of and practiced among the fairest of *Dealers*, shew me the *Tradesman* that has always discover'd the Defects of his Goods to those that cheapen'd them; nay, where will you find one that has not at one time or other industriously conceal'd them, to the detriment of the *Buyer*? Where is the Merchant that has never against his Conscience extoll'd his Wares beyond their Worth, to make them go off the better?<sup>14</sup>

Even the most respectable and fair tradesmen, he argues, allow and practice dishonesty in their exchanges with one another either by blatant lying or omission of important information.

While a claim about the darker aspects of trade might not have been terribly revelatory to Mandeville's readers, his efforts to forge connections between apparently honest work and vice or even crime were more startling. In effect, he asks his readers to think about the sources of their own livelihoods. In one particularly striking example, he traces the ways in which the labor and wealth of people in various stations depend on the activities of known villains. He begins by noting that thieves are known to spend their loot on food, drink and women. Those minor proprietors

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<sup>14</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 50.

who serve them food and drink profit directly from dirty money and do so either from innocence or in many cases willful ignorance. Further back, the man who stocked the pub with alcohol accepts the pub owner's money for it, thinking it "no Business of his" to uncover the source of his client's income. Finally, the brewer, who lets his employees manage his brewery, is too far removed from any of this activity to understand much of the circumstances under which he turns a profit. Rather, he "keeps his coach, treats his Friends, and enjoys his Pleasure with Ease and *a good Conscience*, he gets an Estate, builds Houses, and educates his Children in Plenty, without ever thinking on the Labour which Wretches perform, the Shifts Fools make, and Tricks Knaves play to come at the Commodity, by the vast Sale of Which he amasses great Riches."<sup>15</sup> Mandeville urges his readers to see that their systems of exchange is, in fact, shot through with vice, and even those who have good reason to believe their prosperity is yielded by the work of clean hands are, he thinks, gravely mistaken. As it turns out, the prosecution of prostitution is easily deemed "silly" twice over by Mandeville, not only because such a pursuit undermines valuable social order but also because its attempt to target and eradicate vice misses the point: moral risk cannot really be contained in or eliminated from commercial society. The pursuit of profit in general turns out to be hounded by the kind of moral filth previously thought to be easily located in bands of thieves or houses of prostitutes.<sup>16</sup>

Mandeville thus argues that vice, while productive, has always contaminated commercial society. The very structure of exchange and the division of labor that support commerce make it impossible to fend off the long reaching effects of vicious activity. Furthermore, Mandeville works

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<sup>15</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> One of *The Fable's* other pointed examples of how vice widely infects commerce involves an interaction between a robber and a prostitute—a single encounter that ultimately embroils hundreds of workers. The highwayman decides to spend his money outfitting a favored prostitute, and by the time this project is complete, everyone from the seamstress to the linens shopkeeper to any number of textile traders profits from theft. See 85.

to transform his readers' views about their own moral character by arguing throughout *The Fable* that the bedrock of commercial society is not made of virtues like honesty and goodwill, but of the darker passions like lust that worry his audience—namely envy and pride. Flattery and the promise of reward have taught us to channel or suppress our passions and perform virtue, as it were. Here the example of the little girl's struggle to hide her ankle while the little boy is free to expose his penis is instructive. We need not be conscious of the choice to avoid shame and pursue reward, for our behavior may be something that we have simply been socialized to adopt over time, perhaps by "the excessive force of education." Whether we know it or not, hypocrisy is the hallmark of commercial society and, as E.J. Hundert argues, "artifice and imposture [are to] be understood as the moral price of commercial prosperity."<sup>17</sup> What are thought to be morals are, in fact, simply manners.<sup>18</sup> Mandeville no doubt means to disturb here both by challenging his readers' most basic assumptions about moral order and by severing any connection between purity and prosperity.<sup>19</sup> Although

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<sup>17</sup> Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> This claim—that we can be trained to behave well by education and incentive—rebutts the claims of two strains of moral theory that Mandeville knew well—rigorist approaches that argue that we can achieve virtue by overcoming our passions with reason; and arguments that claim that human beings are good by nature. For accounts of this two-pronged attack, see Danielle Allen, "Burning *the Fable of the Bees*: The Incendiary Authority of Nature," in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Fernando Vidal and Lorraine Daston (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 79-81; and Phillip Harth, "The Satiric Purpose of *the Fable of the Bees*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 2, no. 4 (1969): 334-40.

<sup>19</sup> How Mandeville accomplishes this move rhetorically is the subject of argument in the literature. *The Fable* is read as satirical and not, strongly moralistic and not, and often simply paradoxical. Regardless, there does seem to be some general agreement that the work, whatever its rhetorical flavor or ethical stance, is meant to be subversive. For a few examples of differing arguments about the rhetorical and ethical position Mandeville takes, see Allen, "Burning *the Fable of the Bees*"; M.M. Goldsmith, *Private Vices, Public Benefits: Bernard Mandeville's Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Harth, "The Satiric Purpose of *the Fable of the Bees*"; Anne Mette Hjort, "Mandeville's Ambivalent Modernity," *MLN* 106, no. 5 (1991); Thomas A. Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville: Virtue and Commerce in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable*; D.H. Monro, *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); and Laura J. Rosenthal, *Infamous*

Mandeville suspects that “men, who are come to be great in the World from despicable Beginnings, don’t love to hear of their Origin,” his project in *The Fable* is to demonstrate that ideas about virtue (and hence our virtues themselves) are the products of politics, education and culture.<sup>20</sup>

The point of *The Fable* is to show not only that the character of commerce makes it impossible to avoid profiting from vice, but also that the very categories of virtue and vice are human constructs. This does not, however, mean that Mandeville takes these categories or the prevailing moral order of commercial society to be unstable; in fact, he suggests throughout the text that understandings of virtue and vice have become quite ossified, thanks to the overt work of cunning rulers or perhaps the less obvious work that a system of commercial interaction is able to do over time.<sup>21</sup> But his refusal to accept these categories as natural, and his particular treatment of prostitution, invite his readers to think about how and why human beings work to stabilize these categories.

In *The Fable*, Mandeville treats prostitutes as one category of commercial actors among others, and he takes pains to argue that their activities yield benefits for all, even for those who condemn them so harshly. Further, he suggests that what are thought to be vicious passions—pride, envy—in fact keep the system of commerce running smoothly. The purification of commerce is impossible and undesirable, he argues, and yet it is an ongoing project—one drawn into focus by his own examination of the bases of commerce and his refusal to look away from commerce’s barely

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*Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 359.

<sup>21</sup> Mandeville notes that we learn how to gratify our passions in a socially acceptable way over time and through experience. This process can of course produce differences across time and space, but the ordering mechanism is always the same. For a succinct account of how Mandeville thinks a self-sustaining system of commerce and luxury develops, see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 130.

hidden “repulsiveness, amorality, exploitation, unpredictability, and pleasure founded on pain.”<sup>22</sup> When the different strands of his particular arguments about prostitution and his broader ethical arguments about commerce come together, it becomes clear that prostitution is marked an unclean practice and a risk in part to support a popular understanding of commercial success as the outgrowth of virtuous habits and practices. Mandeville suggests that anxieties about commerce’s entanglement with vice or moral filth are successfully organized in collective social and political views on prostitution and efforts to put a stop to it as a practice. As Mandeville soothes his readers’ worries about how prostitution pollutes commercial society, he also may unearth greater anxiety about a deeper problem—the inability to rid commerce of vice definitively. As he works to undermine the idea that prostitution is an objective danger *simpliciter*, he also challenges the dominant view that commerce and commercial society can be rendered clean and tampers with the borders of virtuous commerce, borders that are in part maintained by viewing prostitutes and their houses as holding pens for dirtiness and vice.

By drawing out the conditions under which prostitution is conceptualized as a threat to commercial society, Mandeville helps us understand more clearly how societies collectively determine what kinds of dangers to perceive as risks.<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes the idea that collectives may identify risks contingently and culturally, and further, that when they decide what counts as a risk, they are simultaneously signaling what is of value to them. The selection of which dangers to worry

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<sup>22</sup> Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> I have benefited from Ian Hacking’s work on the connections between ideas of pollution, the development of risk portfolios and the maintenance of borders. See Hacking, “Risk and Dirt,” in *Risk and Morality*, ed. Richard V. Ericson and Eric Doyle (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2003). He argues that while we can see examples of how this works all across the contemporary world, there is no reason to think that collectives have not been forging these connections for quite some time. Elaine Freedgood’s work on how British Victorians perform this triangulated set of moves support this view. See Freedgood, *Victorian Writing About Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

about and how to confront or manage them is part of the project of shoring up collective understandings of or aspirations for what societies should be. In the case Mandeville analyzes, harping on the prostitute as a moral reprobate unsuitable for life in a commercial society preserves an ideal of this society as a particularly virtuous and clean one. When Mandeville insists in *The Fable* that prostitution poses no natural risk to commercial society, he is also pointing out that deeply held social mores are not natural, either, but instead the products of human artifice. Thus far, Mandeville's account of prostitution and his interrogation of why it is viewed as a risk emphasizes the cultural dimensions of how dangers are selected as those most worth fearing.

## II. Defending Prostitution? Mandeville's Project of Regulation

Mandeville's writings on prostitution in *The Fable* do not constitute his final remarks on the relationship between prostitution and commercial society. In response to the Middlesex Jury's condemnation of *The Fable* and their particular attention to its defense of "even the stews," Mandeville crafted a quite elaborate retort.<sup>24</sup> *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* expands in much greater detail some of his remarks on prostitution in his earlier writings. The *Defence* is partly meant to satirize public views on prostitution; Mandeville signs the dedication "Phil-Porney" ("Lover of Whores"), and the dedication itself is to the men of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, who were actively uncovering and prosecuting moral offenders, including prostitutes.<sup>25</sup> The *Defence*

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<sup>24</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "stew" as either a single brothel, or a group of brothels confined to a single neighborhood. "Stew," in this sense, appeared in English vocabulary as early as the 1370's and retained this meaning until the late nineteenth century. This use of "stew" can be connected to another of its early meanings: a hot bath or bathhouse. See "Stew," in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). For the Grand Jury's condemnation see fn. 4.

<sup>25</sup> For an especially helpful account of the activities of the societies and their impact on sexual mores in eighteenth-century London, see Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 101-124.



also offers, however, a serious treatment of prostitution as a form of labor and a practical consideration of how society might accommodate prostitutes and their customers through policy—a fuller development of what Mandeville only suggests in *The Fable*. Ultimately, we see something quite different happening across the pages of the *Defence* than what we find in the earlier work. Legalizing prostitution amounts to regulating it, and when Mandeville details how this might work, he revisits the tendency to view prostitution as a risk to commercial society. Here he parses the risk into what might be called “real” and “imagined” future harms generated by prostitution. His serious treatment of “real” or material harms potentially generated by prostitution suggests that he accepts the perception of prostitution as a risk as rooted in objective dangers that might be easily managed. Mandeville’s policy prescriptions do not stop, however, with a study of how to preempt the material dangers posed by prostitutes. As in *The Fable*, he also confronts prostitution as a perceived social or moral threat, but here he stops short of arguing that this point of view can be explained easily and dismissed. Rather, he suggests that the vicious and risky aspects of commerce that he embraced in *The Fable* are to be controlled and managed, particularly when we find them in the practice of prostitution. By showing how policy might preempt these harms, whether they be material or moral, he redraws the boundary between the stew and the rest of the hive, as it were, and reveals a view of the prostitute as an unpredictable profiteer to be managed even when her work is deemed legal.

The *Defence* is thus not only a careful examination of the conditions of prostitution and public stews as Mandeville observes them in his own time but also an extensive argument for political management of prostitution, by way of legalizing and regulating it.<sup>26</sup> As he explains, he hopes to prove a proposition:

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<sup>26</sup> There is some debate about whether Mandeville meant for his readers to take this proposal seriously. Most commentators seem to think not, or simply sidestep this question altogether to

That publick Whoring is neither so criminal in itself, nor so detrimental to the *Society*, as private Whoring; and that the encouraging of publick Whoring, by erecting *Stems* will not only prevent most of the ill Consequences of this Vice, but even lessen the Quantity of Whoring in general and reduce it to the narrowest Bounds which it can possibly be contain'd in.<sup>27</sup>

In part, this proposal corresponds to Mandeville's defense of prostitution in *The Fable*. He aims again to argue that prostitution ought not to be criminalized, and suggests that it is not as detrimental to society as is commonly thought. Public stews should discourage "private whoring" (such as rape or adultery) because men can legally satisfy their rampant sexual desires by visiting a prostitute.

As in *The Fable*, the *Defence* appears to argue that prostitutes are useful because they can bear the brunt of unmanageable sexual desires, but the metaphors for brothels and prostitutes that Mandeville uses to suggest how his argument will go reveal a surprising development in his thought.

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examine the moral implications or gender politics of the tract. For an argument that the tract is strictly satire and not an earnest policy proposal, see Richard I. Cook, "'The Great Leviathan of Lechery': Mandeville's *Modest Defence of the Public Stews*," in *Mandeville Studies: New Explorations in the Art and Thought of Dr. Bernard Mandeville*, ed. Irwin Primer (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975). Rosenthal assumes that it is a serious work of policy, and that this forces Mandeville to hit the limits of his theoretical arguments in *The Fable*. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 61. I want to straddle these two views in my argument, to claim that while Mandeville deploys some of the common rhetoric or arguments surrounding prostitution ironically and cleverly, we should also examine the policy proposal seriously, if only because some of his recommendations were realized in Victorian political projects aimed at the regulation of prostitution. Second, reading the text strictly as only an ironic send-up of contemporary views does paper over some of the ambiguities in Mandeville's tone as well as some of the tensions in his argument. *Note to readers*: I would like to develop these interpretive points in a future draft, but I'm not quite sure how to work them into the flow of the argument yet. I may try to think about these issues by comparing the text to another notoriously satirical but serious "modest" proposal: Jonathan Swift's tract on what should be done with the poor.

<sup>27</sup>Bernard Mandeville, "A Modest Defence of Publick Stews," in *Bernard Mandeville's "A Modest Defence of Publick Stews"*, ed. Irwin Primer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 55. All further citations from the *Defence* will refer to this edition and will be cited by page number.

He pushes his argument further to suggest rather harshly they may *rightly* be used to contain sexual vice because they are already ruined by it. To show why brothels should be allowed to stand, Mandeville recalls a story of “a certain Over-nice Gentleman, who cou’d never Fancy his Garden look’d Sweet, till he had demolish’d a Bog-house that offended his Eye in one Corner of it; but it was not long before every Nose in the Family was convinc’d of His Mistake.”<sup>28</sup> The brothel is represented as an outhouse, a container of waste and subsequent stench that must exist apart from the rest of the estate to keep it clean and pleasant. It is possible that Mandeville derives this particular metaphor from popular usage of the term “stew,” for some of the meanings in circulation around the time he writes evoke bad smells.<sup>29</sup> Regardless, the message is clear: the stew confines vice and keeps the rest of society free of it.

The sanitation metaphor is followed by another, more explicit one. Mandeville asks his readers to

Observe the Policy of a Modern Butcher, persecuted with a Swarm of Carnivorous Flies: when all his Engines and Fly-flaps have prov’d ineffectual to defend his Stall against the Greedy Assiduity of those Carnal Insects, he very Judiciously cuts off a Fragment, already blown, which serves to hang up for a Cure; and thus, *by Sacrificing a Small Part, already Tainted, and not worth Keeping, he wisely secures the Safety of the Rest.*<sup>30</sup>

The prostitute is figured here as a rotting piece of meat, “tainted and not worth keeping.” She is sacrificed as a matter of policy in the interest of preserving what is as of yet untainted, presumably not only other women but also perhaps the entire fabric of polite society. She is cut off from the

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<sup>28</sup> Mandeville, “Defence,” 49.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, others involve images of animals being confined to pots until they can be consumed. See “Stew.”

<sup>30</sup> Mandeville, “Defence,” 50. Emphasis added.

rest of society and strung up, as it were, to preempt what might ail social life if not for the vigilance of policy makers—the “greedy assiduity” of men who cannot control their desires. The grasping tendencies of human beings are accepted here as a permanent problem, and the question is not how to rid us of these passions altogether but instead how to organize and manage them. As such, the prostitute is volunteered as a “cure” or, rather, as a passive object designated to receive and hold what might harm the rest of society.

Much later in *The Defence*, Mandeville finally turns to the most familiar of metaphors in social and political theory—the body politic as a human body—in a passage worth quoting at length:

We may look upon *Whoring* as a kind of Peccant Humour in the Body-Politick, which, in order to its Discharge, naturally seizes upon such external Members as are most liable to Infection, and at the same time most proper to carry off the Malignity. If this Discharge is promoted by a Licence for *Publick Stews*, which is a Kind of legal Evacuative, the Constitution will certainly be preserv'd: Whereas, if we apply Penal Laws, like violent Astringents, they will only drive the Disease back into the Blood; where, gathering Strength, and at last assimilating the whole Mass, it will break out with the utmost Virulence, to the apparent Hazard of those found Members, which otherwise might have escaped the Contagion.<sup>31</sup>

The body politic is apparently figured as a male body here, and “whoring” a diseased fluid that must be released from that body rather than driven back into the bloodstream. Criminalizing prostitution is named an ineffective cure for the contagious disease of sexual desire; it will only push it back into the body politic and infect those who might otherwise escape it. The contagion needs somewhere to go, however, and Mandeville suggests that those who are already most vulnerable to infection are likely to be those who can keep it away from the rest. Confining the illness, as it were, to the brothel

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<sup>31</sup> Mandeville, “Defence,” 84.

keeps the uninfected clean and healthy. Again, Mandeville suggests that the prostitute is marked for sickness, but here it is not by her intrinsic dirtiness but by her vulnerability and status as an outsider. Presumably it is her profession that renders her so; she is already exposed to harm and social derision by her professional activities. Of course, the prostitute's male customers put themselves (and in some instances, their wives) at risk as well, but it is worth noting that she alone is set apart to bear the danger of the "peccant humour" that sickens society in this scenario.

As in *The Fable*, we find Mandeville trying to soothe his readers' anxieties about prostitution, but in *The Defence* he takes a different and more particular approach. He still points to the social benefits that prostitution can produce and claims that prostitutes are feared or persecuted arbitrarily. He again adopts the assumption that sexual vice is a potential risk for societies (and especially those chaste women who are the bedrock of a virtuous family and, by extension, a virtuous society) and offers the prostitute and her brothel as a means of displacing this risk. He does not go so far as to argue that sexual vice is a real or natural risk; indeed, he remains committed to the idea that it is socially perceived and constructed as one. That said, he now begins to focus more closely on the downsides of sexual activity and the potential losses that it can bring, and he suggests that these must be brought under control by political means. For him, this means devising policy to eliminate what could be called the objective dangers posed by prostitution, so as to protect it as a form of work or an industry.

A closer look at the details of Mandeville's plan to legalize and regulate prostitution reveals an engagement with the nature and extent of the possible tangible harms of sexual activity. Mandeville tries to alleviate through policy some of the tangible or material ills associated with prostitution—disease, violence, and neglected children—in hopes of rendering prostitution as little more than a form of commercial transaction, i.e., the exchange of sex for money. The work he does to identify and remedy these harms captures an important feature of risk perception, as it raises the

question of whether socially constructed risks do have, at bottom, material or “real” harms that societies *should* worry about. Even as Mandeville unpacks the claim that prostitution is a risk and argues that much of such a claim depends on perception (and the particular forms of social anxiety and the work of public imagination that shape perception) he recognizes that there are particular, material dangers at the core of risk perception—dangers that we can attempt to study, measure, or perhaps even eliminate with some planning. Part of his project in *The Defence* is to address these directly in his model for a regulated and legal practice of public prostitution.

Mandeville’s plan is for each city or town to have a designated area for a collection of brothels of twenty prostitutes per house. Each house is to be headed by an appointed mistress responsible for teaching the women to keep themselves “decent” and entertain men politely with a stock of alcohol provided tax-free by the state. Each community of houses will have one large infirmary staffed by doctors and surgeons and a board of superintendents to draft and enforce rules as necessary and to hear complaints.

As any good doctor might, Mandeville addresses the problem of disease straightaway. Part of the danger of unregulated “whoring” in both its public and private forms is that it may spread disease. Mandeville tries to defuse the charge that public brothels will be cesspools—even though he, by way of metaphor, has already suggested that they are—by arguing that if promiscuous sexual activity is confined to a few women who can easily be monitored for illness, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases should decrease. This argument depends on two claims: first, that public whoring is what generates the initial infection that could spread throughout the whole of society; and second, that while men and women *may* infect each other reciprocally, women are liable to be the source because they are much more likely to sustain relations with multiple partners. He suggests that “if but a few of these Women are unsound, they can infect a great many Men: whereas

these Men have neither Power nor Inclination to infect the like Number of Women.”<sup>32</sup> This claim comes on the heels of a statement that public stews may offer a single young man the opportunity to satisfy his desires with more than one mistress if he so chooses. The weird disjuncture between these two assertions reveals something odd about how the distribution of the risk of disease is understood. While both prostitutes and their clients are risking their health, only the prostitute is perceived as both a taker and a generator of risk in this scenario.

Mandeville wants to argue that disease is a risk because a prostitute’s health is neglected, a claim which renders disease prevention and management more possible. He envisions a medical staff for public stews that should be able to treat infection as soon as it appears in any prostitute. Moreover, the body of rules he devises for regulating the behavior of prostitutes provides incentives for them to stop working at the first sign of infection and turn themselves over to the infirmary: “If any Gentleman complains of receiving an Injury, and the Woman, upon Search, be found tainted, without having discover’d it to the Mistress, she shall be stripp’d and cashier’d. But if a Woman Discovers her Misfortune before any Complaint is made against her, she shall be sent to the *Infirmary*, and cured at the Publick Charge.”<sup>33</sup> While these regulations do promote the health and safety of prostitutes, Mandeville’s views on how disease is spread and his final decree that no woman who has fallen ill twice will be allowed to work again suggests that his concern for the health of prostitutes is instrumental to the aim to keep men clean, men who have families and notably participate in the system of commerce out in the open and not only within the confines of the stew.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Mandeville, “Defence,” 65.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Mandeville’s suggestions for how to handle the problems of unwanted children and public lewdness by regulating the stews are not dissimilar to his treatment of disease.

Once the problem of disease, along with other potentially discomfiting results of prostitution like child neglect and public indecency, are contained and regulated, there appears to be little to suggest the prostitute is more threatening or vicious than other commercial actors. Indeed, Mandeville expresses some sympathy for her and argues at points that her sole motive is need. He considers how women find their way to the profession of prostitution and suggests that they are girls “utterly abandon’d by their Parents, and thereby reduc’d to the last degree of Shifting-Poverty.” They turn to prostitution rather than to other forms of criminal activity, not because they are any more lustful than respectable men and women, but because they have been left to support themselves by the means they have available.<sup>35</sup> He emphasizes that they are locked into their profession by unfortunate circumstance and “want of Money.” In fact, he claims that they “in Reality utterly abhor” their work, and that “there appears nothing in it so very alluring and bewitching, especially to People who have that Inclination to Lewdness intirely extinguish’d, which is the only thing that could make it supportable.”<sup>36</sup> Mandeville ultimately justifies his view of prostitution as a non-threatening form of everyday commerce by depicting the prostitute as a quite extraordinary commercial actor. She is not only that rare individual without lust, but it also seems here that she works not to experience the pleasure that comes with accumulating profit, as her customers do when they are practicing their trades. Rather, she works only to earn enough to fulfill her basic needs and engages in the risk-taking elements of her form of commerce only to survive. It seems that once the material risks produced by her activities are eliminated, there is nothing left to fear from her. If anything, she renders society more livable by her activities. Mandeville suggests throughout the text that the uncontrollable and risky sexual elements of society can be controlled and rendered more predictable by a legally sanctioned form of prostitution. This claim is nowhere

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<sup>35</sup> Mandeville, "Defence," 59.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 62.



more evident than in Mandeville's promise that the public stews will deliver a kind of precision absent in other sites of trade; he claims, perhaps sardonically, that the trick is to gauge male sexual desire so accurately that not one more (nor one less) prostitute will be allowed to work than is absolutely necessary to keep society-wide sexual corruption at bay.<sup>37</sup>

Mandeville's further, perhaps more social, guidelines for regulating public stews suggest, however, that this is not quite the case yet—predictability is still a problem within the walls of public brothels. Under his direction, brothels are subjected not merely strict to health codes but also to codes of manners that encourage polite behavior. All exchanges are to be supervised by the headmistress of a stew—not to protect women from harm, but to ensure that they entertain their visitors in a manner deemed civil and socially acceptable. Perhaps more surprisingly, the value of the exchanges that take place between prostitutes and their customers will themselves be fixed from the outset. When the stews are organized, the women in each house will be sorted into one of four different classes on the basis of “Beauty, or other Qualifications.”<sup>38</sup> The lowest class of women will be allowed to charge half a crown per customer; the second a crown; the third a half a guinea, and the fourth and highest class a guinea. While women may presumably take as many customers as they can handle, they will only be able to charge so much, and further, some of their income will go to the salaries of those who monitor them.

Prostitutes are thereby denied the freedom to conduct their commercial activities as they please, and are allowed to indulge in none of the unruliness that Mandeville celebrates in his treatment of commerce in *The Fable*. His concern instead is to elaborate the benefits of having “a considerable Number of [the Nation's] most disorderly Inhabitants brought to live after a regular

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<sup>37</sup> Mandeville, “Defence,” 86-87.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

civiliz'd Manner.”<sup>39</sup> In this spirit, prostitutes are to be regulated not only economically but also socially, so as to inculcate virtuous habits that can be found in few of their fellow commercial actors.

Mandeville suggests that prostitutes will

have more Inducements to Honesty than any other Profession whatsoever...A *Lawyer* cheats you according to Law; and you may thank the *Physician*, if you live to complain of him. *Over-reaching* in Trade, is *prudent Dealing*; and *Mechanic Cunning* is stiled *Handicraft*. Not so fares the poor Courtezan; if she commits but one ill Action...she can hardly escape Detection; and the first Discovery ruins her.<sup>40</sup>

Whereas before Mandeville suggested that the prostitute was devoid of her customer's sexual viciousness and hence a rather unthreatening figure, now it seems that she is quite ordinary but held to a different standard. Mandeville gives nod to the vicious aspects of commerce and suggests that they are allowed to pass in most cases. It seems that the prostitute's vices are scrutinized more carefully, however, so he devises regulations that will ensure that her behavior will be tightly monitored and controlled so as to render her above reproach. Her labor produces social benefits, but she is not allowed to follow her dishonest streak in search of profit in the same way other participants in commerce are, or indeed as she was in *The Fable*. Moreover, she is not permitted to spend her earnings as freely on luxury goods; her single contribution to the economy is the alleviation of the sexual desires of men, who participate in commerce much more fully.<sup>41</sup> As Laura Rosenthal puts it, prostitutes generate benefits for society without “pleasure, mobility, freedom, autonomy, or most of all, the opportunity to indulge in the tempting range of vices that for

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<sup>39</sup> Mandeville, “Defence,” 62.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 64-66.

Mandeville define humanity itself.”<sup>42</sup> Mandeville works instead to render the prostitute predictable, even as he argues that allowing her to pursue profit helps render society more livable. The underlying belief that she is a particularly unruly entrepreneur and a bearer of probable negative social consequences has apparently crept back into Mandeville's analysis, or perhaps it never completely left.

### III. Conclusion

Mandeville obviously does not offer the same story about prostitution in *The Fable* and *The Defence*, although his accounts converge at points. In both texts, he wishes his readers to view prostitutes as commercial actors and brothels as marketplaces, and he supports this argument indirectly by exposing the hypocrisy of other members of commercial society who believe that vice is confined to these women and other criminals. Instead, he argues that vice underpins a bustling commercial society, and that all actors are tainted by it. This is not a criticism on his part, for in fact, he apparently celebrates vice for its connection to productivity, prosperity and profit. Mandeville's analysis of vice and moral filth is not unlike his discussion of the literal filth and dirt that covers the streets of Augustan London in the preface to *The Fable*. He admits of the unpleasantness that comes with walking along London's dirty streets but thinks that “dirty Streets are a necessary Evil inseparable from the Felicity of *London*” with its “Plenty, great Traffick and Opulency.”<sup>43</sup> Clean streets would, for him, mark the absence of trade, consumption, and a flurry of social activity. A perfectly virtuous society would also be unable to support these activities and the profits they yield. It is better, he thinks, to face up to our moral failings and live in the “vast, potent and polite

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<sup>42</sup> Rosenthal, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, xii-xiii.

Societies” we are capable of sustaining.<sup>44</sup> If we do so, the problem of how to cope with the omnipresence of vice persists.

Mandeville exposes the vicious roots of a prosperous order in *The Fable*, but more importantly for the purposes of this paper, he also exposes how much work is devoted to stabilizing this order and rendering its vices hidden or palatable. As part of his argument for the legalization and regulation of prostitution, Mandeville uncovers what is troubling about not only about prostitution but also about commercial society: unchecked desire, rapacity, dishonesty, risk-taking, and speculation. While Mandeville argues that these elements are highly productive and beneficial for a society, he also recognizes them as sources of anxiety when he scrutinizes the strategies members of a commercial society deploy to cope with them and secure themselves—in this particular case, the strategy Mandeville analyzes is the apparent scapegoating of prostitutes.

Mandeville’s views on the prostitute are complicated and ambiguous, however, because he is considering her from multiple vantage points. As a social theorist, he sees that she is simultaneously a scapegoat for public anxiety about moral filth and disease and a figure whose activities produce benefits for those who scorn her. When he sits to formulate a detailed political plan for how to incorporate prostitution into the fabric of commercial society, he ultimately treats her as a site of unpredictability that is somehow anathema to the smooth operation of a marketplace, even though this marketplace is characterized by unpredictability itself. In other words, he treats her as a risk to be managed and controlled, even as he celebrates the productivity and prosperity of a society that is characterized by risk-taking. In effect, even as Mandeville works to protect the prostitute from disease, violence, and exploitation, he harshly seeks to truncate her agency and render her an instrument to be used in support of commercial prosperity, rather allowing her to remain a full economic participant in the ever-changing terrain of a commercial society.

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<sup>44</sup> Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, viii.

Mandeville's practical and theoretical account of prostitution, however much it reaches its own limits, offers an unusual and new engagement with risk, its perception, and management. Mandeville's argument for the legalization of prostitution depends on the idea that risks, particularly collective ones, are socially produced matters of knowledge and interpretation rather than as simply or only "real" harms. His argument, however, suggests that even if we are able to explain the risks we perceive as largely matters of social construction and subsequently to undertake or avoid them, we are still left with the difficult work of coping with the downsides of this choice. Mandeville's treatment of prostitution is ultimately a consideration of what it would mean to embrace risk-taking as an integral part of social life—a move that he views as an opportunity for profit and social benefit. His analysis admits, however, that if embracing vice is a risky endeavor with productive possibilities, it is also one that bears the potential for negative consequences. Indeed, his suggestion that the existence of brothels be endorsed and secured by the state is followed by an argument that they, and the workers they house, must be tightly regulated and controlled by the same means for the good of all.

But what are the consequences of such regulation, or risk management as a way of doing politics more generally? In the final pages of Mandeville's *Defence*, he offers a final, and quite revealing, metaphor that may further underscore his already ambivalent position on these questions. Mandeville seeks to justify his claim that the state should legalize and regulate prostitution by addressing a strong objection: governments should not engage in vicious activities, such as permitting prostitution to continue, on principle even if the consequences are desirable. He argues that while we may agree that an act is base in and of itself, we must interpret it as a moral act and the right choice if it produces a balance of good in the end. In support, he offers the following metaphor: "A Ship performing Quarantine and known to be infected, is sunk by a Storm; some of the Crew, half drown'd recover the Shore, but the moment they stand, the *Government* orders them to

be shot to Death.” While Mandeville describes the executions as “unchristian” acts of murder, he also describes the choice the government makes as “a severe precaution” meant to secure the “Health and Safety of the Nation,” and therefore “not only justifiable, but in the strictest Sense of Morality Just.”<sup>45</sup> Mandeville offers a defense of what we might wish to call an extreme form of risk management, extreme in that he recognizes that it violates traditional moral norms. Moreover, it seems to generate new risks for those involved. In this case, an aversion to the risks of disease demands a response that exposes the executioner of the diseased to serious moral risk—he must commit a grievous act for the good of all.

Mandeville’s metaphor on the surface appears a clean illustration of what he aims to argue in *The Fable* and *The Defence*. But on a second look, it also emphasizes the complexity of how we understand risks and cope with them socially and politically. On the one hand, the above metaphor offers no graphic depiction of the danger aboard the ship; we get no details of the disease, its consequences or the difficulty of traveling in a contaminated vessel. Put another way, Mandeville does not ask us to imagine the magnitude of the risk the disease and the diseased pose. Instead, he draws our attention to the travails and pain of those aboard the ship—infected, shipwrecked and then nearly drowned, they find their way to shore only to be put to death. While he defends their execution for the purpose of ensuring a safer society and suggests there is no other way to cope with the possibility of widespread contamination, we are still allowed by the metaphor’s images to contemplate the sufferings of those who are executed even as we are presented with the argument that they should be. As such, the metaphor offers an interesting, slightly more compassionate corrective to his otherwise instrumental treatment of prostitutes in *The Defence*, and the graphic metaphors he uses early in the text to support this view. On the other hand, Mandeville’s metaphor suggests that once we undertake risk—in this case, the moral risks posed by the execution—we must

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<sup>45</sup> Mandeville, "Defence," 90.

learn to live with it if we can acknowledge its potential for benefit. This position recalls the *Defence's* larger argument, in which he urges his contemporaries to legalize prostitution for the safety of society in spite of their suspicion that such a move is an act of moral depravity with serious consequences. He stresses that security depends on firm decision-making under uncertainty, but he also insists that taking action may generate new and undesirable risks that may themselves invite further attempts at management and control. Mandeville's metaphor illustrates a central intuition of the problem of risk most starkly: we may manage some risks politically, but as with all practices of risk management, a political confrontation with risk generates new ones of its own.

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