

Does Mandeville succeed in showing that virtuous behaviour is not virtuous?

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Introduction

Moral ethics can be considered as a pertinent subject with regards to a social fabric that holds the society together. The concept of moral ethics provides a suitable environment for criticism as illustrated by Bernard Mandeville in his commentary *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* (Oliveira, 20). Much of the elements attached to morality stem from the definition of rationality which is considered as “superior human faculty from which moral distinctions are possible” (Oliveira 2015, p. 213. Other than rationality perception in distinguishing moral ethics, subject and whole gratification qualify actions to be considered as vicious or virtuous. In this case, the argument is that whatever gratifies the desires of a subject is considered vicious whilst that which satisfies the whole is defined as a virtue. With respect to an individual, natural desires or impulses do exist, and they need to be satisfied (self-gratification) albeit the non-natural demand (rational ambition) of being good conquer an individual’s passion hence a conflict. Using insights from ethical philosophers, the arguments posed in this essay attempt to critique the theory of apparent virtuous behaviour as to whether it is virtuous or not.

Historical background

Discussion and widespread attention were triggered by Bernard Mandeville’s moral theories as captured in *The Fable of the Bees* in the early 18th century (Vandenberg and De Hart, 2015). Surprisingly, his arguments were against the grain where vices such as greed and vanity were thought to be beneficial to the public while virtues were considered as self-seeking/self-interested hence vicious. Some considered him as a supporter of egoism because of promoting behaviours such as vanity and pride which, according to him, were sources of benevolence. This was based on his criticism of the moral system claiming that human beings have natural feelings such as pity and compassion towards one another.

The ‘private vice-public virtue’ paradox

Two key themes come out strongly from Mandeville’s work; private vices and public benefits. Contemporaries in his time thought that he was promoting vices as a precondition for economic growth of the society. According to him, discontent over private vice (moral corruptness) was hypocritical since such a vice played a significant role in the growth of trade and industry thus economic improvement (public benefit). Vandenberg and De Hart (2015) mention Mandeville’s opposition to social virtues in his claim that,

“The desire to create a purely virtuous society was based on “a vain EUTOPIA seated in the

Brain”: fancying that a nation can, with virtues like honesty, attain great wealth and success, when in fact it is the desire to improve one’s material condition in acts of self-indulgence that lies at the heart of economic productivity” (*The Fable*, pg. 36).

Paradoxically, the controversial philosopher disguises vice as a virtue concerning achievement of collective benefits. One of the illustrations provided to support this argument is the essence of pride in the history and development of the fashion industry. Pride is closely associated with the creation of ‘impression’ to the peers. Thus, fashion enables an individual to indulge in purchases of expensive and new products. Consequently, the growth and expansion of fashion industry lead to the creation of many jobs and economic growth. Contrary to this, the clothing industry would shut down, supply and distribution companies collapse causing mass unemployment hence economic turmoil. Another example is the presence of thieves or burglars on an ‘acceptable’ scale which creates jobs for locksmiths, attorneys, security personnel etcetera.

The element of self-liking

In one of his reviews on *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* (Oliveira, 2015), Mandeville implies that “moral virtue” can be criticized legitimately since there is no immutable truth to state that virtues are always better than vices (Oliveira, 2015). A good example is posited by Mandeville who utilizes the concept of self-liking rather than self-love. Naturally, self-liking is a phenomenon present in all mortals since their birth though it can be excessive or moderate. However, the level of self-liking determines whether the person is virtuous or not. If this quality is moderate, then an individual is thought to be good and practices good behaviour. Conversely, excessive self-liking turns out to be pride according to the vocabulary on morals (Mandeville, B. 1988). In actual sense, the private *vice*-public *virtue* paradox is not claimed by Mandeville in absolute terms. This argument is premised on the fact that public benefits are morally compromised because of private self-seeking actions or decisions. However, this has been taken as a complicated philosophical commitment in terms of interpretation.

Utilitarianism and moral ethics

Still, on the subject of conflict on moral ethics, Maxwell indicates that Mandeville’ dwelt on utilitarianism extensively (Teulon, 2014). According to Maxwell (1951), “there is a utilitarian flavor about the way he discusses social problems” (p. 246). In this case, actions are referred to as bad or good with regards to the benefits or loss the society gets rather than who is committing them. For example, the decision by the government to construct a water dam to serve

many people takes a utilitarianism approach. This is because that decision will hurt few people whereas many will reap the benefits (Murove, 2005). Therefore, few individuals are allowed to suffer hurt and losses which is not considered vice by the government or community at large. The philosopher's interest in this context is the question of utility which is a "tendency to speculate on what are the consequences of such-and-such an action and the necessary conditions of such-and-such a state of affairs" (Maxwell, n. d., p. 247).

Another doctrine of morality proposed by Mandeville in line with Thomas Hobbes, his predecessor, was egoism. Using a scenario of skillful politicians who interact with their masses, Vandenberg and De Hart (2017) showcase a playful satire by indicating that,

"skillful politicians originally flattered the masses into believing that actions were vicious when done to gratify selfish passions, and virtuous when they were performed in contrast with the immediate impulse of nature to acquire private pleasure, by instead suppressing this urge temporarily so as not to offend or harm others" (para 13).

However, the theory of skillful politicians seems to be incompatible with the philosopher's central contention that actions are virtuous when propelled by self-seeking emotions. On the other hand, all humans were thought to be natural selfish beings and no action would be considered virtuous if it originated from that natural desire. More so, human beings need to express some form of self-denial to behave virtuously. This can be considered as quasi-morality which means that to "control naturally selfish men- but because this involved the redirection of natural passion, not active self-denial, at root this was vice" (para 13).

Rebuttal of Mandeville's theory of moral ethics

Looking at Mandeville's philosophical claim, a rebuttal is necessary. Normally, the societal expectations are that vices should be as minimal as possible implying plenty of virtue behaviors. Vandenberg and De Hart (2017) pose a viable question on the philosophers thought of the relationship between public benefits and private vice that "was he merely holding up a mirror to a corrupt society, satirizing those who claimed commercial opulence was straightforwardly compatible with virtue? Did he believe that flourishing individual(s) and commercial entities ought to do away with their riches and luxury for ascetic self-denial? (para 11). Proponents of virtues would consider an unapologetic allegation made by Mandeville that some men tend to hide their vicious behaviours behind socially acceptable behaviours in order to appear virtuous as uncalled for. Clerics and religious ideologists do not agree with the philosopher's claims of

hypocrisy which imply that the people who preach virtue do not practice virtuous behaviors. The implication that views that are based on common sense are not reliable as they appear to be is just satirical, that is, what resembles a virtue may be camouflaged as selfishness.

Many scholars then refuted the depiction of human beings as unruly and selfish by Mandeville, some sort of denial that virtues are real. Further, critiques questioned his assertion that skillful politicians invented moral ethics to domesticate the natural passions of humans. Placing more emphasis on peculiar natural passions like self-interests, self-seeking, self-approval, and self-liking indicates a skewed observation since the society at large is not considered. The paradoxical arguments satirize societies that advocate virtues which are thought to be the root of benevolence. For example, the statement that “Pride and Vanity have built more Hospitals than all the Virtues together” (*The Fable*, pg. 294) does not make sense in a society that is compelled to act based on the sufferings of the masses. The religious fraternity principles and Mandeville’s ideologies on charitable actions easily clash. This is because the religious group teaches that pride ought to be considered as a vice which is contrary to the philosopher’s intuition. An argument that pride is key to human actions done to be perceived as selfless thus gain from the society does not make sense to Mandeville’s contemporaries. It is worth noting that the notion that virtues encompass decisions that lead to denial of self-interests for the sake of others contradicts the ‘private vice-public virtue’ paradox which advocates the natural passions such as self-liking and self-approval. Therefore, the skillful politician theory and private vice-public virtue paradox pull in different directions as far as moral ethics by Mandeville is concerned. One of his contemporaries, Joseph Butler, questioned the possibility of applying Mandeville’s version of psychological egoism. In addition to that, the theme of pride had to be re-conceptualized implying that Mandeville realized his arguments were just loaded with terms. Another critique of this ideology, Francis Hutcheson, thought that moralists need not get approval from others to engage in virtuous activities; rather, it was out of one’s interests. According to his moral sense theory, virtues are in complete accordance with an individual’s nature without necessarily getting the affection of another person or others (Vandenberg and De Hart (2017).

Conclusion

Controversial as it may appear, Mandeville arguments somehow convincing looking at a theoretical perspective, that is, natural feelings or passions of humankind need to be satisfied for

his actions to be considered virtuous. Looking at the concept of pride as a source of public benefits such as the fashion industry and economic growth showcases that his arguments may be well on point. However, this is easily opposed by contemporaries and religious ideologists who preach against such qualities as pride and thievery. More so, theoretical concepts fronted by Mandeville are satirical to the society that believes in virtues as a source of good actions.

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