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A STORY OF THREE FABLES: MANDEVILLE, MONTESQUIEU, AND SPINOZA ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECULAR MORALITY

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about a set of philosophical issues related to the development of secular morality, that is, a conception of morality as independent of faith and religion. Prior to the development of secular morality, beginning in the seventeenth century, the dominant view was that morality is God's plan for how human beings should conduct themselves and live in community. Call this theocentric moral philosophy. Theocentric moral philosophy holds that moral standards have a supernatural origin, whereas secularism must hold that morality has a natural origin, perhaps even originating in human ends and planning. A central challenge for secularism was explaining how natural or human moral standards derive legitimacy and authority. According to theocentric moral philosophy, moral standards derive legitimacy and authority from the fact that they issue from a moral God, who created us. The worry is that without the backing of divine planning, morality would simply be rules and standards that humans arbitrarily make up, having no more legitimacy or authority than the rules of monopoly.

In early modern moral philosophy, these issues played out dramatically in the genre of moral genealogy, which often took the form of fables. This paper examines how three fables addressed these issues: Mandeville's fable of the bees, Montesquieu's fable of the Troglodytes, and Spinoza's "fable" about the origin of moral concepts from artifacts. This examination will

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show that secular or secular-leaning early modern moral philosophy pursued two general strategies for explaining the natural origins of morality and, consequently, its legitimacy and authority. The first, represented by Mandeville and Montaigne, supposes that moral standards arise from political and social dynamics within human communities, whereas the second, represented by Spinoza and Montesquieu, supposes that moral standards are grounded in facts about human nature that constrain and determine the nature of human communities and human ends. The former strategy was appealing to moral philosophers whose focus was reforming religious based ethics, but the strategy had a harder time accounting for the legitimacy and authority of moral standards.

1. THE FABLE OF THE GRUMBLY HIVE

Before examining Mandeville's fable of the bees, we should set the stage by considering his theological thought, which sets the trajectory for his secular approach to questions of morality's origins. Mandeville's main theological work, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness*, shows that he was attracted to secularism largely because of the problem of evil. There Mandeville argues that Christianity can offer no rational solution to the problem. The proposed solutions and arguments "drawn from human reason, have hitherto been insufficient to answer the objections that have been made to them."[1] He argues that the only rationally defensible solution is Manichaeism: evil can only exist because the power of a good God is countered by an evil power.[2] Thus, Mandeville denies that reason supports the existence of a providential God. Nevertheless, Mandeville continues to assert the existence of a good, providential God, based purely on faith without support from reason, a view that resembles Bayle's faith-based solution to the problem of evil. Mandeville concludes that the problem of evil is "a fitter subject for our resignation to the reveal'd will of God, than it is for quarrels and contentions with one another."[3] As with Bayle, Mandeville's purely faith-based solution to the problem of evil leads to secularism in a subtle way. For Mandeville, accepting religious beliefs based purely on faith has

[1] Bernard MANDEVILLE, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromman Verlag, 1969), 101.

[2] MANDEVILLE, 112.

[3] MANDEVILLE, 102.

the effect of leaving religious beliefs out of the picture when engaging in rational inquiry and philosophy.

This secular approach informs Mandeville's genealogy of morals by ruling out the traditional Christian view that morality originates in God. In the *Enquiry*, he explicitly considers the religious view that "the notions of good and evil were the pure effect of religion."[4] He responds to the objection that morality existed before Christianity, which means that, if morality derives from religion, it must derive from the first religions, "heathen religion or other idolatrous superstition."[5] Mandeville's response approaches religion not as a Christian believer but as a disinterested scientist, theorizing based on observation of all cultures and faiths without showing preference for his own.

> It is evident from history, that in all considerable societies, how stupid or ridiculous soever people's received notions have been, as to the deities they worshipped, human nature has ever exerted itself in all its branches, and there is no earthly wisdom or moral virtue, but at one time or other men have excelled in it in all monarchies and commonwealths, that for riches and power have been any ways remarkable.[6]

If morality did not come from God, then where did it come from? The *Fable of the Bees* offers an alternative answer. The fable recounts a happy hive of busy bees, who lived in an ideal society that sounds remarkably like the constitutional monarchy established by England's Glorious Revolution.

> No Bees had better Government,
> More Fickleness, or Less Content.
> They were not Slaves to Tyranny,
> Nor ruled by wild Democracy;
> But Kings, that could not wrong, because
> Their Power was circumscrib'd by Law.[7]

But the success of this society is based entirely on the industry of selfish bees, each looking out for itself with no concern for the good of the hive. In fact, the source of the bee's industry and economy is vice: the desire for lux-

[4] Bernard MANDEVILLE, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*, in *British Moralists: 1650–1800*, vol. 1, *Hobbes–Gay*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 233.

[5] MANDEVILLE, 234.

[6] MANDEVILLE, 234.

[7] Bernard MANDEVILLE, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, vol. 1, ed. Frederick B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 27.

ury, fueled by pride. Despite their flourishing hive, the bees "grumble" about their moral failings, which moves Jove to banish vice from the hive, replacing it with virtue, a concept for which the hive hitherto had no use. The newly virtuous bees pursue temperance, abandoning their pursuit of luxury and comfort. The hive collapses. The economy fails, and all are worse off, ruined by virtue. The *Fable* was subtitled, "private vices, public benefits."

While the fable raises many provocative issues, I will focus on the poem's explanation of the origin of morality, which is highlighted by its subversive use of the fable genre. Following Aesop, the fable genre narrates simple stories, the sort of stories that one would tell a child, to draw moral lessons. The moral lessons, often featuring animals, come from observation of the natural world. By focusing on bees, Mandeville clearly positions his fable within this genre, yet he also defies the genre by denying that nature is a source of moral wisdom. Mandeville's fable denies that morality can be found in nature at all. His fable insists that morality is contrary to nature, fighting against the bee's natural tendency to self-interest.

In fact, Mandeville's fable implies that morality is artificial, created by human art, a view that he developed in the accompanying essay, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue.* There he explains the philosophy underpinning the fable. According to Mandeville, from the beginning of organized societies, a group of crafty people—he calls them "lawgivers," "wise men" (philosophers), or "skillful politicians"—sought a way to make people easier to govern, thereby strengthening the powers of the governors and architects of society.[8] These lawmakers are the grumbly bees of the fable, now unmasked as having more sinister motives. Lacking sufficient reason to convince people to trust governance by the lawmakers, they "were forced to contrive an imaginary one": virtue.[9] They created the idea that humans are superior to all other animals because they can act from selfless, benevolence. According to this idea, people directed by self-interest are "vile, groveling wretches," "the dross of mankind," "having only the shape of men," "differing from beasts in only their outward figure," whereas the virtuous are "lofty high-spirited creatures," "free from sordid selfishness," "the true representatives of their sublime species." [10] Given these options, people naturally want to be perceived as virtuous, which leaves them to behave virtuously to win

[8] MANDEVILLE, *Origin of Virtue*, 229–31.
[9] MANDEVILLE, 230.
[10] MANDEVILLE, 231.

the esteem of others. This may appear selfless but is merely selfishness in disguise.

On this view, morality is not just artificial but a kind of trick, a lie that people accept because it is flattering to them. Seen in this light, Mandeville's fable resembles another, published later by Hans Christian Andersen as the *Emperor's New Clothes*. In the story, a naked emperor parades about like a fool because he was hoodwinked by dishonest tailors who sold him imaginary "clothes" that they claimed were invisible to stupid people. The emperor and nearly everyone in the kingdom plays along, pretending to admire the clothes out of the desire to be perceived as smart. The tailors of the story are essentially Mandeville's crafty lawmakers, and the make-believe garments are the virtues, which everyone pretends exists because they do not want to be perceived as vicious. Morality, on this story, has nothing to do with God's plans, but everything to do with the machinations of human power.

Mandeville's genealogy of morals implicitly drew on Montaigne's influential view of custom as a social force that habituates people to accept beliefs and practices as natural and inevitable.

> But the principal effect of the power of custom is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances. In truth, because we drink them with our milk from birth, and because the face of the world presents itself in this aspect to our first view, it seems that we are born on condition of following this course. And the common notions that we find in credit around us and infused into our souls by our father's seed, these seem to be the universal and natural ones. Whence it comes to pass that what is off the hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason, God knows how unreasonably, most of the time.[11]

Mandeville implicitly drew on this characterization of custom to explain our perceptions of virtue. Although virtue is an artificial human invention, the power of custom leads us to accept it as natural and inevitable, the one and only right way of living. Custom blinds the bees to virtue's true origins.

Montaigne's notion of custom provides Mandeville with some explanation of the legitimacy and authority of moral standards. We accept morality as the one true guide to living because of the power of custom. However, this only explains the *apparent* legitimacy and authority of moral standards,

[11] Michel de MONTAIGNE, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 83.

not their *actual* legitimacy and authority. On the contrary, this view leads to moral relativism, as Montaigne demonstrated. *Of Cannibals* reflects on the reported cannibalism of a Brazilian tribe, one of many incredible stories devoured by European readers during the age of discovery. After consulting with a traveler who spent over a decade living among the Brazilians, Montaigne concludes, "I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country."[12] According to Montaigne, Europeans perceive their own ways as natural and right, but this is how everyone perceives their own customs. The Brazilians regard Europeans as equally barbarous and themselves as equally civilized. Montaigne suggests that the perceptions of the Brazilians and the Europeans are equally valid.

It is important to be clear about the meaning of moral relativism. Moral relativism is not the view that moral beliefs vary by culture and time, which is not a controversial moral claim but rather an indisputable fact. Moral relativism is the view that the *truth* of moral beliefs varies. Moral relativism is controversial because it removes what many regard as the essential character of morality, that its claims and standards are universal, applying to all people at all times, like Christian divine commands or the laws of the Stoic cosmic city. Universality is part of what makes morality more authoritative than mere manners and conventions, such as the prohibition against picking your nose in public, or the custom of shaking hands rather than bowing when greeting a stranger. Universality is also what allows morality to provide an independent basis for criticizing or reforming one's culture, customs, and laws. Moral relativism denies that morality possesses the independent authority that makes it different from customs and conventions. Consequently, to many moral universalists, relativism is tantamount to moral skepticism, the denial that morality exists or that we can have genuine moral knowledge. Moral skepticism, in turn, leads to highly controversial conclusions. It implies that we cannot really say that moral atrocities like genocide or child abuse are wrong. We can only say that these things are wrong for us, given our customs, but we must concede that they may be morally acceptable in a different culture with different customs. According to relativism, the holocaust may have been morally permissible for the Nazis, a bitter pill to swallow.

[12] Michel de MONTAIGNE, "Of Cannibals," in *The Essays of Montaigne*, vol. 2, trans. Charles Cotton, revised by William Carew Hazlett (New York: Edwin C. Hill, 1910), 66.

Like Montaigne, Mandeville's genealogy of morals also suggests moral relativism. According to Mandeville, morality is a political invention, an instrument devised by lawmakers to exert power over citizens.[13] Thus, morality is no more natural or necessary than any custom; it is created by humans for human ends. If this is the case, then morality has no claim to be a universal standard for human action. Mandeville compares moral judgments to judgments of beauty, "which varies according to the different tastes of nations and ages"; morality is in the eye of the beholder.[14] Indeed, Mandeville's criticism of virtue as deleterious to society—certainly to the hive of virtuous bees—implies that there are other standards for judging right and wrong, perhaps even better standards.

Of course, Mandeville's criticism of virtue does not necessarily imply relativism.

He has an obvious escape route. He could argue that there remains a single true standard of virtue, which is exemplified by the self-interested behavior of the hive before the grumbly bees and lawmakers got their way. By taking this approach, Mandeville could take the moral high ground, accusing the lawmakers of corrupting morality and coopting the language of morality for their own purposes. But Mandeville doesn't pursue this escape route, which suggests that he only countenances the virtue invented by politicians.

2. THE FABLE OF THE TROGLODYTES

Mandeville brings into focus a chief difficulty with banishing a providential God from moral theorizing. If reason does not accept the existence of a planning God who sets moral standards for humans, then morality would appear to be a human invention much like custom and convention. This suggests that morality is relative in the same way as culture or custom, and that there are no universal moral standards. To early modern thinkers, Mandeville demonstrated the moral danger of religious free thought and the possibility of secular morality. He also posed a challenge to secular thinkers who were

[13] "It is visible then that it was not any heathen religion or other idolatrous superstition, that first put man upon crossing his appetites and subduing his dearest inclinations, but the skillful management of wary politicians; and the nearer we search into human nature, the more we shall be convinced, that the moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride." See MANDEVILLE, *Origin of Virtue*, 234.

[14] Bernard MANDEVILLE, *Fable*, 328, 338; for a discussion, see Andrea BRANCHI, *Pride, Manners, and Morals: Bernard Mandeville's Anatomy of Honour* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 104.

less interested in criticizing or rejecting traditional morality than in providing a new secular foundation for it. An instructive response to this challenge can be found in another fable from the same time, to which we now turn.

In 1721, eight years after Mandeville first published the fable of the grumbly hive, another Enlightenment thinker built a reputation by publishing a fable inquiring into the origin of morality, drawing exactly opposite conclusions to Mandeville. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* is a novel told through letters exchanged by Usbek and Rica, fictional Persian nobles visiting Europe. Much of the novel's appeal derives from cultural misunderstandings, which lead the visitors to make humorous observations on European society. Through the eyes of the Persians, European ways appear strange and incomprehensible, while the Persians' observations, despite their misapprehensions, often struck a chord. Much like the work of Montaigne and Mandeville, *Persian Letters* aims to reveal the power of custom to bias our perceptions. Europeans regard their own customs as universal, rational, and natural, but they are nothing of the sort, which becomes obvious by considering how they appear to people with different customs.

Despite this similarity, Montesquieu departed from Montaigne and Mandeville about moral relativism. Montesquieu's recognition of the power of custom naturally raises the question of whether morality is universal or rather should be counted among Europe's provincial local customs. While Montesquieu was not primarily a moral theorist, he could not resist taking up the question in a fable related by the Persians in the novel. "Once upon a time there dwelt in Arabia a small tribe called Troglodytes, descendants of the ancient Troglodytes."[15] By presenting the fable as having Persian origins, Montesquieu closes off consideration of the Christian explanation of morality's origins. Thus, like *The Fable of the Bees*, the fable of the Troglodytes examines the origins of morality without appealing to Christian revelation or religious beliefs.

The story unfolds across several letters, which relate key chapters in the development of the Troglodyte people from a failed tribal clan to a flourishing city. The first chapter presents them in their original natural state. The second chapter recounts how they came to develop morality and notions of virtue, while the final chapter relates their instituting a king. Given Montesquieu's importance as a political theorist, scholars usually devote their attention to the final chapter, which deals with the development of government

[15] MONTESQUIEU, *Persian Letters*, Letter 11, in *A New Modern Philosophy: The Inclusive Anthology of Primary Sources*, ed. Marshall and Sreedhar (New York: Routledge, 2019), 440.

and its relationship to morality. For our purposes, however, the important bit is Montesquieu's account of the origin of morality in the first two chapters.

In their natural state, the Troglodytes "lack all notion of justice and equity," each acting from selfish appetites and desires.[16] They overthrow their foreign King and then overthrow the magistrates who replace him. "Freed from this new yoke, the people were swayed only by their savage instincts. Every man determined to do what was right in his own eyes." But this self-interested behavior is contrary to their living in society, which provides greater benefits than living in isolation or in enmity with one's neighbors. The Troglodytes do not help their neighbors in need, and in return their neighbors do not help them. They break agreements without concern for justice, so that none can be trusted to make agreements and there is no cooperation. None of them will settle disputes, since this takes time away from one's own business, which means that conflicts escalate out of control. Troglodyte men steal one another's wives in the street. Each "attending to his own interests, the general welfare was forgotten." The conflict and lack of cooperation brings Troglodyte society to the verge of collapse. A foreign doctor cures the Troglodytes of a plague, but they refuse to pay him, and so when the plague returns, he will not come to their aid. "You are unworthy to live," he tells them, "for you are inhuman monsters, unacquainted with the first principles of justice. I will not offend the gods who punish you by opposing their just wrath."

The Troglodytes save their society from ruin, the second chapter explains, by developing virtue, which allows them to form tighter and more cooperative communities. The two Troglodyte families that survived the plague learn their lesson. "Together they labored for their mutual benefit." "Their utmost care was given to the virtuous training of their children.… They led them to see that the interest of the individual was bound up in that of a community." The people become pious, worshipping the Gods with feasts and festivals, not to seek personal gain, but to express their gratitude and to beseech the Gods to help others. "The whole race looked upon themselves as one singly family."[17]

The story aimed partly to challenge notions of European moral superiority. According to lore, the Troglodytes are supposed to be primitive, cave dwellers, but Montesquieu supposes that this impression is a European misapprehension. The Persians, who live closer to Troglodytes, know the full story, according to which the Troglodytes are morally advanced, even more

[16] All quotations in this paragraph are from Letter 11 in MONTESQUIEU, *Persian Letters*, 441.

[17] All quotations in this paragraph are from Letter 12 in MONTESQUIEU, *Persian Letters*, 442–43.

than European cultures. The story implies that morality is not the exclusive province of European civilization, nor does it derive from European religious beliefs. Indeed, it doesn't arise from religious beliefs at all but rather develops naturally from conditions common to all human societies, the need to work cooperatively for shared aims. Consequently, according to the Persians—with whom Montesquieu appears to agree—morality stands independently of religion, so that even atheists have reason to be moral. "Even if there were no God," Usbek writes, "we should always love justice, that is, try to resemble that being of whom we hold so perfect an idea and who, if he existed would necessarily be just. Although we would be free of the bonds of religion, we ought not to be free of the bonds of justice."[18]

While the story offers a secular account of morality's origins, it is not friendly to Mandeville's jaded view of morality. The fable of the Troglodytes reaches exactly the opposite conclusions to the fable of the bees. Whereas the society of the bees depends on the selfish pursuit of vice, the Troglodyte society depends upon the pursuit of virtue. The hive was ruined by virtue, but the Troglodytes were saved by it. The two fables also disagree on the critical question of whether virtue is natural. Montesquieu, like Mandeville, regards virtue as artificial in one sense because it is created by humans in response to human needs and desires, rather than being set down for us by God. But, unlike Mandeville, Montesquieu thinks that virtue is natural in a sense because it follows from human nature. It is human nature that we are cooperative beings, and that virtuous action is a condition for our cooperation, as the Troglodytes learned the hard way.

Furthermore, for Montesquieu, the virtuous impulse, the tendency to care for one another, is not invented by politicians but rather exists naturally within people. The Troglodytes don't have to be duped into virtue by the promise of recognition and honor. Thus, virtue is a form of self-governance, rather than the forced external governance of the hive. In the final chapter, the Troglodytes institute formal governance by a King with great reluctance because they fear that external governance would stamp out the most effective form of governance, the self-governance of virtue. At the conclusion of the story, the new king issues a warning about replacing the governance of

[18] Letter 81 in MONTESQUIEU, *Persian Letters*, ed. Andrew Kahn, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114. It should be noted here that Usbek's view is not entirely consistent with the moral of the Troglodytes, for the latter suggests that virtue is grounded in human nature, whereas Usbek holds that "Justice is eternal and independent of human conventions" (Letter 81, p. 114 of the Kahn edition).

virtue with the governance of law. "A troglodyte without any command does what is right from natural inclination."[19]

3. SPINOZA'S FABLE

It may seem strange to turn to Spinoza after Mandeville and Montesquieu, considering that Spinoza's story predates the others by approximately forty years. However, given the development of secularism, Spinoza's work is the most advanced of the three, for it is the only one that seriously denies the existence of a providential plan, a view that would not achieve mainstream acceptance until the widespread acceptance of Darwinian theories of evolution in the nineteenth-century. Thus, Spinoza shows how it is possible to provide a natural basis for moral standards while explicitly denying a divine plan for nature.

The preface to Part 4 of Spinoza's *Ethics* tells a story about the origin of our main moral concepts: good and evil, perfection and imperfection. Unlike the fable of the bees or the Troglodytes, Spinoza does not explicitly present his story as a fable. But he does present it as a genealogy, which is like a fable in that it offers simple stories that are not supposed to be actual historical accounts. No effort is made to document the story with historical record or to reconcile it with known historical facts. The historical details don't matter, Spinoza suggests, because the truth of the story lies in its underlying message, just like a fable.

According to Spinoza's story, human beings invented certain concepts of goodness and perfection from artifacts. When we create artifacts—Spinoza uses the example of a house—we act with purpose, intention, and planning. We want the house to provide shelter, among other things, and we build it according to a plan, in the case of the house, a literal blueprint. Spinoza refers to the plan as an exemplar or model. This is a thinly veiled reference to Christian creation theology, influenced by Plato's creation account from the *Timaeus*. According to this view, God creates things like a craftsman in accordance with his ideas, which serve as exemplars or models. Spinoza claims that the exemplar (often supposed to be a divine archetype) becomes the basis for judging the house as perfect or imperfect. "As soon as the work has been carried through to the purpose which its creator set himself to give it,

[19] From letter 14 in MONTESQUIEU, *Persian Letters*, 444.

he will see it as perfect."[20] Similarly, we can judge whether it is a good or bad house by whether it realizes its intended aim, and we can judge other things as good or bad according to whether they help with these aims.

After people became habituated to this way of thinking, the story goes, they then began to apply these notions of perfection and goodness to things in nature that were not created through intention or planning. In doing so, they supposed that natural things were like artifacts created according to a plan or model. This is justified by Christian creation theology, which holds that all things are created according to God's ideas or exemplars, but Spinoza regards this view as pure anthropomorphism. We begin with the knowledge of our own creations and then suppose that nature works the same way, which imagines that God is a craftsman and natural things his artifacts. We then imagine that there is a plan for natural things, exemplars, which we can discern in nature. We also imagine that these exemplars—including especially the exemplar of a human being—show how these things are supposed to be. According to Spinoza, nature was not created through planning, so these exemplars are as imaginary as the emperor's clothes. What we imagine to be the exemplars of things are just ideas that we make up, either based on our own desires—the model house is a craftsman bungalow!—or through comparing things to one another to create ideas for categories of similar things.

The most obvious takeaway from Spinoza's fable is that the exemplars of things by which people often make moral judgments are not the result of divine planning. The fable further implies negative claims against morality based on a providential plan and positive claims about the future of morality in a non-providential world. On the negative side, Spinoza's fable implies that traditional moral judgments based on exemplars are wrong and confused because the exemplars are not divine ideas revealing God's plan for creation, as moralists often suppose, but rather figments of human imagination. Consequently, the fable rejects the notion that the natures of things provide moral guidance because they are the result of divine planning. For instance, Spinoza would reject the claim that murder is wrong because, being contrary to our nature, it is also contrary to God's plan for humans.

[20] SPINOZA, *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*, ed. Kisner, trans. Silverthorne and Kisner (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), 157. Spinoza's *Ethics* is occasionally cited using the standard abbreviations. The first numeral refers to the part of the *Ethics*. Other abbreviations include: p = proposition; d = demonstration; DOE = Definition of the Emotions; s = scholium; ex = explanation. For instance, 2p49s refers to the scholium to proposition 49 of Part 2.

The more difficult task is identifying the positive claims that follow from Spinoza's fable. According to Spinoza's fable, what is the fate of morality, if we abandon the notion of a providential plan in nature? If we cannot say that murder is wrong because, being contrary to our nature, it is contrary to God's plan, then what can we say about murder? To begin with, Spinoza is clear that he does not intend to take Mandeville's route of abandoning or overcoming moral concepts and judgments, as though they are merely religious superstitions and confusions. At the conclusion of his fable, Spinoza delivers the following announcement.

> We have to retain these words [goodness and perfection]. Because we desire to form an idea of a human being as an exemplar of human nature to which we may look, it will be useful for us to retain these same words in the sense I mentioned. In what follows I will mean by good anything that we certainly know to be a means for us to approach ever closer to the exemplar of human nature that we set for ourselves; and by bad that which we know hinders us from relating to that same exemplar. Then, we shall say that human beings are more or less perfect or imperfect insofar as they more or less approach this same exemplar. (4pref)[21]

According to this passage, Spinoza wants to continue basing moral judgments on exemplars, but his exemplars are derived from a new, non-providential understanding of nature. Exemplars here are not divine ideas but human creations that "we set before ourselves." Furthermore, in theocentric morality, exemplars are morally significant because as models for creation they reveal how things are supposed to be, God's plan. In contrast, Spinoza thinks that exemplars are morally significant because they articulate our goals, ends, and purposes. Thus, morality is based not on a divine plan but a human one.

The passage also sheds light on the human plan that is the basis for moral judgments. So far, Spinoza has agreed with Mandeville and Montesquieu that moral concepts are human creations related to human plans, but he departs from them on the nature of the plans. Mandeville and Montesquieu both thought that morality derives from social and political goals, either the lawmakers' goal of dominating others (Mandeville) or the human goal of living in more cooperative communities (Montesquieu). But Spinoza argues that all moral judgments should be based on a model of human nature. This

[21] SPINOZA, *Ethics*, 159.

implies that morality derives from the human goal of becoming a certain kind of person.

Spinoza's focus on this goal makes a break with theocentric morality. In the theocentric system, there are exemplars for all things, which are all morally significant because they reveal God's plan for nature. For example, the theocentric view grounds some moral claims on the nature of animals, say, that it is permissible to eat them but not to have sex with them because of their nature, which indicates God's plan for how we interact with animals. But in Spinoza's system, all morality is based on one nature, human nature.

4. THE BASIS FOR MORALITY: NATURE OR CULTURE?

So far, we have seen two secular strategies for explaining the source and basis of morality. In broad strokes, one strategy (Mandeville and Montaigne) seeks to ground the authority of morality in culture and the other (Montesquieu) in nature. Mandeville explains that moral standards originate in the state from political forces, the efforts of law makers to impose their will on the populace. According to this view, moral standards are like customs, widely accepted cultural standards that originate from the forces that shape culture, including political power. This suggests that the origin and basis of morality is the political power by which lawmakers impose their standards, which is partly what leads people to accept to their notions of virtue. Of course, the basis for morality is also partly human nature in some sense because the lawmakers create the standards from a common human desire to dominate others, and the human desire for flattery is what leads people to accept the lawmakers' conception of virtue. But these tendencies in human nature only leads to the creation of virtue in the context of a state, where lawmakers devise ways of governing citizens.

Montesquieu pursues the second secular strategy, based instead on human nature. Montesquieu holds that moral standards originate prior to the state and prior to people coming together and forming a shared society and culture. For Montesquieu, the standards of virtue are the conditions for forming cohesive societies, which are set by human nature. It is human nature that we require and are fit for cooperative societies, and human nature sets the standards for how we live together. For instance, it is because of human nature that we want to be treated with basic forms of respect and dignity, which, consequently, is a condition for our cooperating with one another and, thus, a virtue.

Where does Spinoza fit? To a certain extent, he agrees with Mandeville. Mandeville's notion that virtue originates in culture and politics suggests that nature is not the source of morality, in other words, that nature is morally neutral, indifferent to human conceptions of virtue and vice. To some extent, Spinoza agrees. For Spinoza, God has no ends, which he takes to imply that God has no values; nothing is good or bad for God. Since God is identical to Nature—nature with a capital N, the totality of the natural world—it follows that Nature has no ends or values either. In this respect, Nature is value neutral. This view of Nature entails that nothing in nature is good or evil because of its relationship to a divine plan for the whole of nature.

Spinoza relies on the notion that Nature is value-neutral in his political philosophy on natural rights. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he claims that God is not subject to any standard of right or wrong. Spinoza takes this to imply that Nature does not bestow rights to any individual natural thing.

> It's certain that nature, considered absolutely, has the supreme right to do everything it can, i.e., that the right of nature extends as far as its power does. For the power of nature is the power of God itself, and he has the supreme right over all things. But the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the power of all individuals together. From this it follows that each individual has a supreme right to do everything it can, *or* that the right of each things extends as far as its determinate power does.[22]

Spinoza basically equates natural rights with natural powers. According to this view, every power that is exercised, everything that happens does so by right. This implies that it is impossible to violate natural rights. In this respect, nature does not distinguish right from wrong. Everything is natural; everything is right. Because of this proto-Mandevillian tendency in Spinoza's thinking, he is unfriendly to Montesquieu's theory of natural rights. For Spinoza, no constitution or political arrangement can be criticized for violating natural rights because natural rights cannot be violated. Spinoza's thinking is more sympathetic to Bentham's famous quip that natural rights are "nonsense on stilts."

Despite this Mandevillian streak, Spinoza does not fully embrace Mandeville's way of thinking. Spinoza does not extend his reasoning about natural rights to other sorts of value. While Spinoza regards Nature with a capital N

[22] *Theological-Political Treatise*, chap. 16 in Benedictus de SPINOZA, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 282.

as value neutral, he allows that value exists from the perspective of finite beings. Being dependent on external things, finite things can be harmed by external things or benefit from them, which makes these things good or bad. "We call good or bad that which helps or hinders the preservation of our being" (4p8d). This value is grounded in human nature in the sense that the goodness or badness of things depends on the kind of beings that we are, the distinctive ways that we benefit from or are harmed by other things in our environment.

But Spinoza's notion of natural goodness and badness is not a distinctly moral notion. His theory of good and bad encompasses non-moral things, like the goodness of eating your vegetables and flossing your teeth. We are here concerned with morality and, thus, moral value and moral standards, like virtue. Does Spinoza allow that nature provides grounds for this kind of value? Like Montesquieu, Spinoza thinks that moral standards are grounded in human nature, but his explanation for how is different. Whereas Montesquieu regards moral standards as conditions for living in common society, Spinoza supposes that moral standards are set by the exemplar of human nature and, thus, by our goal to become a certain kind of person. This entails that moral standards are grounded in human nature because we construct the exemplar from our knowledge of human nature. While the exemplar is an idea that we create and set before ourselves, it is not just something that we make up higgledy piggledy from our imagination. This would make Spinoza's exemplar no different from the Christian exemplars that he criticizes as based on ignorance. Rather, the *Ethics* provides the rational basis for constructing the exemplar by providing an account of human nature, including an account of human psychology and the emotions. This account implies that human beings benefit from cooperating with one another and from acting virtuously toward one another (4p37; 4app9). Thus, Spinoza derives moral standards from the natural conditions of human flourishing.[23] Consequently, in stark contrast to Mandeville, Spinoza endorses the Hellenistic description of morality and virtue as living in accordance with nature, specifically with one's human nature. For instance, he claims that virtue amounts to "acting by the laws of one's own nature" (4p24d; cf. 4D8).

[23] This explanation for how morality is grounded in human nature fits nicely with eudaimonism, the dominant ethical tradition from the ancient Greeks to the eighteenth century.

CONCLUSION

These clashing fables dramatize a central question raised by the development of secularism. If morality does not originate in God's will or plan, then it must derive somehow from the natural world, but how? The moral genealogies of Mandeville, Montesquieu, and Spinoza agree that morality is created by humans, but they offer different explanations for how. For Mandeville, morality is devised by one group of people as a means of political domination. On this view, morality is not necessary for humans to live in society; in fact, they tend to get along better without it. Rather, morality originates from social and political forces that come into existence only after societies have been established. This potentially leads to moral relativism because moral standards only apply in societies that have come to accept them because of these social and political forces. Mandeville's explanation of the human origins of morality maps out one path for the development of secular morality, the path of the moral skeptic, who sees morality as a kind of deception that must be overcome. This is the path famously taken in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche.[24] For many secular thinkers, this path offers an opportunity to criticize and reform traditional morality, which they see as reflecting the interests and power of individuals.

Montesquieu's fable charts an alternative path for secular morality. For Montesquieu, morality arises spontaneously, prior to the state because it is a condition for the formation of cooperative communities. He regards morality as grounded in human nature in the sense that humans are hardwired to accept moral standards as conditions for cooperation. This view allows for the existence of moral diversity without leading to moral relativism. According to Montesquieu, some people, because of their temperament, climate, or history, may cooperate better by upholding or emphasizing certain moral standards rather than others. For instance, Montesquieu claims that people who live in fertile countries are more contented and, consequently, place less value on their freedom than others, which likely influences their moral standards.[25] To adapt Montesquieu's theory to a more recent example, the American history of slavery and racial discrimination against people of African descent may lead Americans to develop moral standards that place a

[24] See Brian LEITER, "Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2021), sec. 1.3, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political.

[25] See Montesquieu's discussion in *Spirit of the Laws*, chap. 18, sec. a2-4.

higher premium on fairness and greater attention to racial disparities because doing so helps them to address historical barriers to cooperative societies.

Despite these regional moral variations, humans share a common nature, which means that there will be a shared set of moral standards that help all humans to cooperate, for instance, prohibiting murder and arbitrary violence. Montesquieu is clear that there are universally binding moral standards. For instance, while he allows that people in hotter climates are more likely to tolerate slavery, he is clear that slavery is always wrong, regardless of the climate or the temperament of the people.[26] Thus, Montesquieu shows one way that secular morality, without relying on a divine plan, can escape moral relativism: grounding morality not in customs or political forces but rather in the sociable and cooperative aspects of human nature. Interestingly, Spinoza, who is sometimes regarded as an iconoclastic moralist, closer to Mandeville or Nietzsche, is closer to Montesquieu. Spinoza holds that human nature benefits from common society and from virtue, which allows him to ground moral standards in human nature. Spinoza is forward thinking because he recognizes that grounding morality in nature in this way does not require a providential divine plan in nature. Rather, it only requires that human beings are social beings, whose self-interest depends on living in cooperative communities.

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[26] *Spirit of the Laws*, chap. 15, sec. 1.

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A STORY OF THREE FABLES: MANDEVILLE, MONTESQUIEU, AND SPINOZA ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECULAR MORALITY

Summary

With the development of secular moral philosophy in the seventeenth century, moral philosophers began to explain morality as originating not in God's plan but rather in nature, often in human ends and planning. A central challenge for this view was explaining how natural or human moral standards derive legitimacy and authority. In early modern moral philosophy, these issues played out dramatically in the genre of moral genealogy, which often took the form of fables. This paper examines how three fables addressed these issues: Mandeville's fable of the bees, Montesquieu's fable of the Troglodytes, and Spinoza's "fable" about the origin of moral concepts from artifacts. This examination will show that secular or secular-leaning early modern moral philosophy pursued two general strategies for explaining the natural origins of morality and, consequently, its legitimacy and authority.

Keywords: early modern moral philosophy; secular moral philosophy; moral genealogy; Spinoza; Montaigne; Mandeville; Montesquieu

HISTORIA TRZECH PRZYPOWIASTEK: MANDEVILLE, MONTESQUIEU I SPINOZA O ROZWOJU ŚWIECKIEJ MORALNOŚCI

Streszczenie

Wraz z rozwojem świeckiej filozofii moralnej w XVII wieku, filozofowie moralności zaczęli wyjaśniać moralność jako wywodzącą się nie z Bożego planu, ale raczej z natury, często z ludzkich celów i planowania. Głównym wyzwaniem dla tego poglądu było wyjaśnienie, jak naturalne czy ludzkie standardy moralne zyskują uprawomocnienie i autorytet. We wczesnonowożytnej filozofii moralnej kwestie te ujawniły się w sposób dramatyczny w gatunku genealogii moralnej, która często przybierała formę bajek. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje trzy bajki poświęcone tym kwestiom: bajkę Mandeville'a o pszczołach, bajkę Monteskiusza o troglodytach i Spinozy „bajkę"

o pochodzeniu pojęć moralnych z artefaktów. Badanie tych bajek pokazuje, że świecka czy świecko zorientowana wczesnonowożytna filozofia moralna stosowała dwie ogólne strategie wyjaśniania naturalnego pochodzenia moralności, a co za tym idzie, jej legitymizacji i autorytetu.

Słowa kluczowe: wczesnonowożytna filozofia moralna; świecka filozofia moralna; genealogia moralna; Spinoza; Montaigne; Mandeville; Montesquieu