

# Who Was Bernard Mandeville and Was He Truly An Epicurean?

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2021 at 10:37 AM

Only time right now to mark this for further research: Who Was Bernard Mandeville referenced here?

Clip from this article: <https://www.academia.edu/19860151/Rouss...=download-paper> I note that it puts the "Epicurean" in quotes.

*philosophes* (to use Jonathan Israel’s characteristic terminology), a number of these seem to be bound up with what we might associate with popular understandings of Epicureanism. But, from his time down to our own, Rousseau has repeatedly been identified as being a kind of Epicurean. An early critic, Jean Castillon, for example, wrote in 1756 of the *Second Discourse* that

It is almost a year since he [Rousseau] revived the Epicureans’ delusions concerning our origins; that he reduced our earliest ancestors to the ranks of the stupidest beasts; that he accused us of being the most wicked and ferocious of all animals.<sup>5</sup>

In the same year, Adam Smith published his anonymous “Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*,” which, if it did not identify Rousseau specifically as an Epicurean, argued that the reader of the *Second Discourse* “will observe, that the second volume of the Fable of the Bees has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau,” thus aligning him with the most notorious “Epicurean” author of the eighteenth century, Bernard Mandeville.<sup>6</sup>

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Post by “Don” of August 26, 2021 at 10:47 AM

[Mandeville, Bernard | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[Books by Mandeville, Bernard \(sorted by popularity\)](#)

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I get the impression that he was "Epicurean" in only the most basic or stereotypical sense.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2021 at 10:51 AM**

This reminds me that "**priestcraft**" is a great word! 😊

Quote

Published in 1720, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church and National Happiness* was his final party political tract in which he endorses the advantages of Whig governance as well as advancing a skeptical view of the religious establishment and priestcraft.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2021 at 10:58 AM**

I read over the summary there and indeed it's hard to tell, but if we substituted "pleasure" for "egoism" in that article then there might be some merit to it, and since this is a summary and we don't know to what extent "egoism" is a label applied to him, rather than his own label, it would take some reading into the original material to see what's really going on. It would also be important to know whether in fact it cites Epicurus for any of his views.

But there's enough here in the "Fable of the Bees" references that this might well be worth reading. I'll tag @EricR here to as he is much more familiar with some of the writers in that camp than I am. Maybe he's heard of Mandeville.

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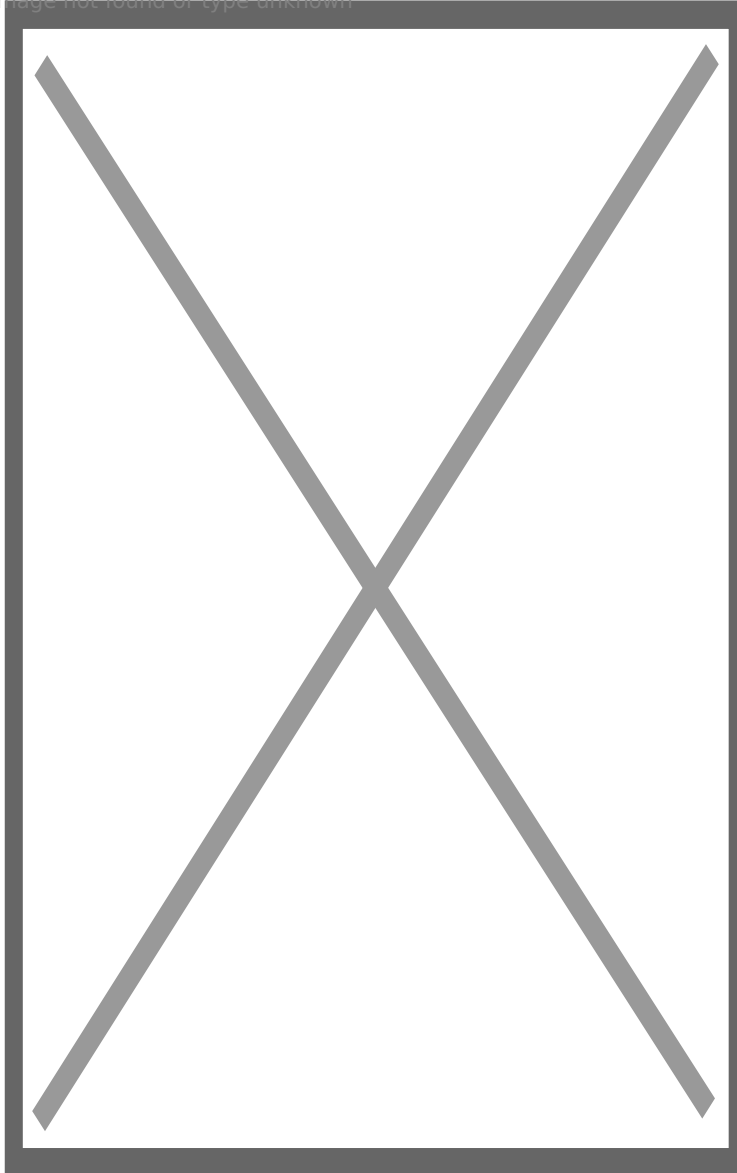
### **Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2021 at 11:02 AM**



The title page of the 1714 edition of Mandeville's Fable of the Bees

Fable of the Bees resources:

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[The Fable of the Bees - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fable_of_the_Bees)

[en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

[https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/mandeville1732\\_1.pdf](https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/mandeville1732_1.pdf)

<https://projectintegrity.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/bernard-mandeville-the-fable-of-the-bees-1712.pdf>

Analysis: <https://fee.org/articles/the-f...ory-of-society/>

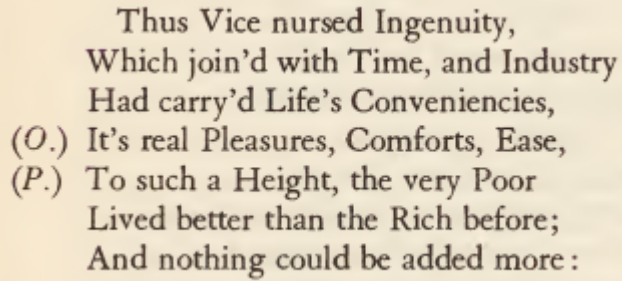
Flippable pdf version: <https://archive.org/details/Mandev...age/n1/mode/2up>

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2166-who-was-bernard-mandeville-and-was-he-truly-an-epicurean/>

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2021 at 11:08 AM**

This looks very promising. First is the part of the poem that references Footnote (O), then the



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

PAGE 69. LINE 10. That the highest Good consisted in Pleasure, was the Doctrine of *Epicurus*, who yet lead a life Exemplary for Continnence, Sobriety and other Vertues, which made People of the succeeding Ages quarrel about the signification of Pleasure. Those who argued from the Temperance of the Philosopher, said, that the Delight *Epicurus* meant, was being Virtuous; so *Erasmus* in his Colloquies tells us, that there are no greater *Epicures* than pious Christians. Others that reflected on the dissolute Manners of the greatest part of his Followers, would have it, that by Pleasures he could have understood nothing but sensual Ones, and the Gratification of our Passions. I shall not decide their Quarrel, but am of Opinion, that whether Men be good or bad, what they take delight in is their Pleasure, and not to look out for any further Etymology from the learned Languages, I believe an *Englishman* may justily call every thing a Pleasure that pleases him, and according to this Definition, we ought to dispute no more about Men's Pleasures than their Tastes: *Trahit sua quemque Voluptas*.<sup>24</sup>

The worldly minded, voluptuous and ambitious Man, notwithstanding he is void of Merit, covets Precedence every where, and desires to be dignify'd above his Betters: He aims at spacious Palaces and delicious Gardens; his chief Delight is in excelling others in stately Horses, magnificent Coaches, a numerous Attendance, and dear-bought Furniture. To gratify his Lust, he wishes for genteel, young, beautiful Women of different Charms and Complexions that shall adore his Greatness, and be really in love with his Person: His Cellars he would have stored with the Flower of every Country that produces excellent Wines: His Table he desires may be serv'd with many Courses, and each of them

24. 'Its sweetest pleasure leads each creature on.' Virgil, *Eclogues*, ii, 65. - Ed.

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**Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2021 at 11:10 AM**

upon his most glaring Vices: Nay, if his Authority can purchase it, he covets to be thought Wise, Brave, Generous, Good-natur'd, and endu'd with all the Virtues he thinks worth having. He would have us believe that the Pomp and Luxury he is serv'd with are as many tiresome Plagues to him; and all the Grandeur he appears in is an ungrateful Burden, which, to his Sorrow, is inseparable from the high Sphere he moves in, that his noble Mind so much exalted above vulgar Capacities, aims at higher ends, and can not relish such worthless Enjoyments; that the highest of his Ambition is to promote the Publick Welfare, and his greatest Pleasure to see his Country flourish and every Body in it made happy. These are call'd real Pleasures by the Vicious, and Earthly minded, and whoever is able, either by his Skill or Fortune after this refin'd manner at once to enjoy the World, and the good Opinion of it, is counted extremely happy by all the most fashionable part of the People.

But on the other side most of the ancient Philosophers and grave Moralists, especially the Stoicks, would not allow any thing to be a real Good that was liable to be taken from them by others. They wisely consider'd the Instability of Fortune and the Favour of Princes, the Vanity of Honour and Popular Applause; the Precariousness of Riches and all Earthly Possessions, and therefore placed true Happiness in the calm Serenity of a contented Mind free from Guilt and Ambition; a Mind, that, having subdued every sensual Appetite, despises the Smiles as well as Frowns of Fortune, and taking no delight but in Contemplation, desires nothing but what every Body is able to give to himself: A Mind, that arm'd with Fortitude and Resolution has learn'd to sustain the greatest Losses without Concern, to endure Pain without Affliction, and to bear Injuries without Resentment. Many have own'd themselves arriv'd to this height of Self-denial, and then, if we may believe them, they were rais'd

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2021 at 11:11 AM**

OK definitely ["Remark O" beginning on page 170 appears to be worth reading](#)

Maybe better link for desktop -- two up format --  
<https://archive.org/details/Mandev...e/n161/mode/2up>

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**Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2021 at 11:15 AM**

Remark O ends with a very nice attack on "Virtue"! 😊

making all Mankind either Fools or Impostors, which to avoid, there is nothing left us, but to say what Mr. *Bayle* has endeavour'd to prove at large in his *Reflections on Comets*; That Man is so unaccountable a Creature as to act most commonly against his Principle; and this is so far from being injurious, that it is a Compliment to Human Nature, for we must say either this or worse.

This Contradiction in the Frame of Man is the Reason that the Theory of Virtue is so well understood, and the Practice of it so rarely to be met with. If you ask me where to look for those beautiful shining Qualities of Prime Ministers, and the great Favourites of Princes that are so finely painted in Dedications, Addresses, Epitaphs, Funeral Sermons and Inscriptions, I answer *There*, and no where else. Where would you look for the Excellency of a Statue, but in that part which you see of it? 'Tis the Polish'd outside only that has the Skill and Labour of the Sculptor to boast of; what's out of sight is untouch'd. Would you break the Head, or cut open the Breast to look for the Brains or the Heart, you'd only shew your Ignorance and destroy the Workmanship. This has often made me compare the Virtues of great Men to your large *China Jars*; they make a fine Shew, and are Ornamental even to a Chimney; one would by the Bulk they appear in, and the Value that is set upon 'em, think they might be very useful, but look into a thousand of them, and you'll find nothing in them but Dust and Cobwebs.

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### Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2021 at 11:18 AM

I hope others will have time to look at some of this material and comment further. Right now, after getting past that "egoism" accusation of the IEP article, I'd say that there's a good chance that Mandeville had a very well developed appreciation of Epicurus that surpasses most of what I've seen in other writers of the last several hundred years. But again that's a very preliminary assessment and while he appears to be a materialist, his views on epistemology aren't clear to

me yet. But if indeed he was a medical doctor then perhaps there's a lot of promise here.

I wish [Charles](#) were still around to comment on this. Maybe he'll see this and drop by! 😊

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2021 at 12:02 PM**

I should also mention that that little clip of the poem seems promising to my very simple poetic tastes too, so therefore I need to be sure that the resident poet Laureate (probably Don would agree) [Joshua](#) will need to check this poem out too!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2021 at 3:03 PM**

I just finished reading Remark O. Overall it is a very memorable slash and burn of Stoics, Priests, Government officials and others who claim virtue in public but do the opposite in private (and sometimes in public too).

It does seem to me that he has a good understanding of Epicurus, but it's hard to say whether he is going to extend it philosophically or just be content to cite him in support of his contention, which is something like that everyone in facts acts to pursue what they find pleasing so we should be honest about it.

No doubt it's easy to see why he is labeled an "egoist" but that just obscures the deeper issues in my view. I would say that Ayn Rand is faily labeled an "egoist" but I am also convinced that scratch the surface of her philosophy and she is throughout Platonist and even Stoic in her worship of reason. Labeling someone an egoist might be a decent indicator of Epicurean views (because the stoic majority views that negatively and labels most all Epicureans as egoists) but unless you drill down to the specifics you probably can't be sure what is going on in the original writings.

Here I would say there is a good chance that Mandeville combines his view of pursuit of pleasure with considerably more Epicurean philosophy. His ethics at least here do seem based on pleasure, but I don't see much if any recognition of the need for friends of the same viewpoint or much if the practical advice about evaluating the total balance of pleasure and pain.

Maybe since he is a doctor (I gather?) He is more of a materialist, but if so that's not in this section of this poem.

And I haven't seen any references to epistemology here though that's not unexpected given this subject.

So more reading would be necessary but I would rate based what I've read so far as someone who seems to be willing to go further than most in support of some of Epicurus' most controversial ethical positions.

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### Post by “Eikadistes” of August 27, 2021 at 10:45 AM

I came across Mandeville in my research and initially added him to my list. There are a few loose citations that tie him to the Epicurean philosophical tradition (and not just modern *epicurean* stereotypes). He seems to have been familiar with the specifics of the philosophy and made several observations about Christian neo-Epicureanism.

#### Quote

The controversial Epicurean moralist, **Bernard Mandeville**, makes a distinction between Christian Epicureans like **Erasmus**, **Gassendi** and **Temple**, who claim that piety and virtue are the only true sources of *voluptas*, and libertines such as Hobbes's follower **Charles de Saint-Évremond**, who associate it with more straightforwardly sensual pleasure.” (Bullard, *Edmund Burke and the Art of Rhetoric* 91)

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### Post by “Cassius” of August 27, 2021 at 11:18 AM

Yes Nate it's mainly a question of how you define the target of a list. Saying an occasional good word about Epicurus here and there is probably not enough to consider someone an Epicurean, but again it's all in the context of how you're setting up your chart. There are many people who say a good word about him who I wouldn't dream of calling Epicurean.

To me, I don't generally start considering them Epicurean until they've at least ruled out supernatural gods, ruled out life after death, they specifically talk about pleasure as the goal and distinguish that from virtue, and say at least something in the direction of general materialism. I don't know that with Mandeville we have good documentation except for the pleasure part.