

## Erasmus Institute of Philosophy and Economics

### 300 years Mandeville's "Fable of the Bees" Science, Politics, and Economy *The Unintended Consequences of a Diabolic Paradox*

2014 marks the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits* and the Centennial of Erasmus University. Since 1988, the Foundation Bernard Mandeville (including Erasmus University and the Rotterdam business community) yearly honours a person with major social merits with the so-called prestigious Mandeville Lecture.

To celebrate both events and in honour of one of Rotterdam's most famous citizens, Erasmus University will host an international conference on the work of Mandeville: its historical and intellectual context, and its contemporary relevance. The conference will take place Friday 6 June 2014 at the M-building of the Erasmus University.

The preliminary programme is to be found [here](#), registration goes via this page.

We are proud to present three distinguished speakers to address these different contexts of Mandeville's work:

Harold Cook, Brown University  
Neil De Marchi, Duke University  
Margaret Schabas, University of British Columbia

Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) was born to a family of city physicians in Rotterdam in 1670, in an age when science, politics and commerce were rapidly changing in their methods and substance. These revolutions forced thinkers to reflect anew on the nature of economy, state and society. Mandeville was undoubtedly one of the most radical of them, proposing controversial new ideas about human motivation, the relationship between individual behavior and the common good, and the role of the state in society. Politically, the Mandevilles belonged to the States Party, that favoured economic, political and religious liberty, in opposition to the Orangists and the allied conservative Calvinists. In the aftermath of the so-called Costerman riots, the Mandeville family was banned from Rotterdam and Bernard Mandeville ended up in London where he started publishing pasquils and pamphlets, and practiced as a physician.

The poem *Grumbling Hive, or Knaves Turn'd Honest* of 1705 was one of his satirical works. It had little impact until it was republished with extensive comments under the title *Fable of the Bees*. Published shortly after Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Man, Manners, and Morals*, the book could not have been more at odds with Shaftesbury's message that mankind's virtues automatically align with the common good. Mandeville promised to unveil man's true nature by observing the 'trifling fibres and little pipes of the human frame'. He claimed, provocatively, that it was man's wickedness from which social benefits were to be expected. Luxury, though a private vice, contributed to a nation's prosperity; frugality led to public ruin. Mandeville published several other, increasingly philosophical

works, the most important being *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour, and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* (1732).

After the *Fable* was condemned in 1724 by the Grand Jury of Middlesex for its 'diabolic attempts against religion', Mandeville's notoriety increased sharply. His shocking paradox that mankind's vices contributed to the common good, has haunted moral philosophers, social scientists and economists ever since. According to Friedrich Hayek, Mandeville 'asked the right question' in his attempts to understand modern commercial society, but, as Hayek's political antagonist the Cambridge economist Joan Robinson noted, this question, 'has never been properly answered'. This renders Mandeville's thought of great relevance for contemporary social science.

The conference aims to bring together scholars from the history of science and medicine, social and political science, philosophy and economics to assess Mandeville's work and his lasting influence.