

## **Opponent's report on the bachelor thesis**

Branislav Salkay: *Fénelon, Mandeville and Cheyne: Luxury Debate in Moral Philosophy of the Early Enlightenment*

The topic of this thesis is a unique one in the Czech context. For it is the very first time that a thesis is dealing with the here almost unknown French philosopher Fénelon as well as with the medical writings of the British physician Cheyne. Only for this reason it needs to be applauded. Both above mentioned authors are teaming together with Bernard Mandeville in the context of a very fierce debate of its time, namely on the issue of luxury and its corrupting effects both on society and human health. This is a topic that is largely discussed in the international context, but in our Czech context it is practically unknown. Thus, the thesis fulfils a desideratum and introduces two unknown however important figures of the Enlightenment era to the attention.

The structure and aim of the thesis are simple but effective. Fénelon and Cheyne are representing the critical stance in the luxury debate: Fénelon demonstrates its corrupting effects on morality and society in general, Cheyne on the human body in particular. It is suggested that Cheyne was familiar with Fénelon's position and ideas and thus probably influenced by him. Meanwhile Mandeville represents such a position that defends luxury against the critique and demonstrates its positive effect on society in the form of being an incentive for industry, effort, competition, and specialisation in crafts and arts that is leading to prosperity. It is suggested that Mandeville was writing his apology of luxury intentionally and directly against Fénelon's stance.

Thus, the thesis is divided into three parts dedicated to each of the aforementioned writers and a general part trying to compare their positions. All statements are drawn directly from the writings of the respective authors with a little help from selected secondary commentaries. The train of thought and argumentation runs by picking up key text elements concerning luxury from each writer and commenting, comparing, and putting them into a context and direct confrontation. The method is of comparative and descriptive close reading with a great emphasis on detail and being correct both textually and historically. A very interesting fact is that both Fénelon and Mandeville present their thoughts in a fictional and allegorical form: Fénelon in an educational novel based on an imitation of Greek legends and sources; Mandeville in a satirical poem in the form of an animal fable. However, the thesis does not pick this formal aspect and misses a good

opportunity to draw some conclusions from it not only in regard of the luxury debate, but in regard of their respective overall intentions.

Since the thesis focusses solely on the direct textual evidence, it misses out on broader philosophical context and premises. No word is spent on the – maybe all too evident? – fact that Fénelon inspired Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his idea of The Golden Age with the “noble and uncorrupted savage”, which in turn is taken over from ancient Greek sources. The ideal state of society in Fénelone for example is organised exactly in the same manner as Plato’s ideal polis from his *Republic*. Fénelon’s construction of the ideal Boetican way of life was also later imitated and mocked by Voltaire in the respective chapter of his *Candide*, which was also written as a direct answer to Fénelon and Rousseau, and especially against Leibniz. One can only ask if there is such a thing as “the state of natural abundance” (p. 7), which later becomes prominent in John Locke’s account of the natural state and the effort spent by humans in attaining private property.

Another topic taken directly from Plato’s *Republic* is the abandonment of arts. However, the main issue is Fénelon’s attack on architecture (p. 8), which is an attack on Vitruvius and his *Ten Books on Architecture*. This used to be the ultimate source for the Italian *Renaissance* and contains a normative anthropology, which becomes the target of Fénelon’s criticism. By neglecting the Vitruvian competitive and normative worldview that made Western Europe so great and prosperous in the first place, Fénelone sacrifices the whole idea of progress, improvement, strive for *truth, goodness, and beauty* – the holy trinity of European spiritual endeavour and history. What he leaves us behind is a bleak and lazy vision of an inhibited and lethargic mankind bereft of all aspiration, enthusiasm, and effort.

But it comes worse when Fénelon demonstrates his vision of correction of the corrupt state of affairs with Stalin-like methods (p. 26 sqq.). Indeed, what Fénelon is doing was later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century made real by Stalin’s repressive politics. Good intentions DO indeed lead to hell. Fénelone hoped that a remedy for his current France under the Sun King Louis XIV can be found: but what he suggested was an act tyranny.

The passage dedicated to food (p. 23) misses out on the all too important fact that gluttony used to be one of the seven mortal sins and for the Catholic priest Fénelon there was no mercy in this topic which later will return in the section dedicated to Cheyne. I never really understood how does frugality and simplicity as “to live on little” lead to or is connected with “to despise death” (p. 25). Originally “to despise death” is the meaning of the virtue “courage”. But is there any direct connection to frugality and modesty?

In regard of the thread of a counter-revolution against the reforms (p. 27 sqq.) it seems, that there is Fénelon's concern that people might get bored. But revolutions never start from boredom but from oppressive insufferability. If Fénelon lived long enough he would see things way differently in what happened in his country in 1789. Also there is a missing link in how to keep people occupied and busy: you also have to entertain them! The old Roman *Caesars* knew very well that *not only bread but also the games* (in Latin: *panis et circus*) are the key to keep the people both in check and "happy".

The section dedicated to Cheyne aims to demonstrate how Cheyne applies Fénelon's moral and political ideas on the physical health and individual body. However, it also leaves out important philosophical contexts. While it is correctly suggested that Cheyne draws from and build on Newtonian mechanical principles (p. 33), the conception of the "bodily machine" operating with "animal functions" has its philosophical premise both in Descartes and Hobbes. It is more than plausible that Cheyne was familiar with Hobbes' *De corpore* or its version repeated in the first part of the *Leviathan*. It is even more important as Hobbes on the opening pages of his *Leviathan* draws from the image of this mechanical body the analogy for the way a state is build and should be functioning. But the bodily machine as "*machina membrorum*" operating with "animal spirits" is a Cartesian *terminus technicus*, which should not stay unmentioned. Cheyne's practical regimens found its further reception also later in Hume and are even today still relevant and recommendable.

The bar significantly rises with the section dedicated to Mandeville (p. 41 sqq.). One has to admire his insight and intellectual audacity with which he tackles and dismantles all too rash and simple statements on luxury. If his *Fable of the Bees* was directly provoked by Fénelon's *Telemachos*, then both works need to be studied together. If Fénelon criticises the European cornerstones of striving for truth, goodness, and beauty, then Mandeville is the counterargument to this effort to undermine the very soul of European humanity: albeit in his account Mandeville demonstrates – and this is making him the *avant-garde* to Nietzsche's "genealogical method" – the "not so good, beautiful, and truthful" roots and "motivations" for such striving.

After all the textual evidence from the works of all three authors is laid on the table than the actual comparison becomes easy and self-evident. The last section (p. 54 sqq.) basically repeats what we have read already and what we already know. The thesis suffers from excessive repetitions. Many information and even sentences occur repeatedly without adding to the train of the argument or helping it to enhance or become clearer.

However, given the nature of the topic, its originality and novelty in the Czech context, the sheer amount of textual material it had to take into account and cover, *I do recommend* Branislav Salkay's thesis to be considered for defence *with the grade between very good (B), or even excellent (A)* depending on the manner and outcome of the actual defending.

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