

## BOOKS

[*In Defense of Hypocrisy: Picking Sides in the War on Virtue*, Jeremy Lott, *Nelson Current*, 193 pages]

### Private Vices, Public Benefits

By Daniel McCarthy

IN 1714, the Dutch-born, London-based pamphleteer and economic thinker Bernard de Mandeville stirred a scandal with his *Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, a work arguing long before Adam Smith that self-interest, not benevolence, was the motor of social progress. Indeed, the earlier writer went further, unashamed to call this self-interest by the names that generations of classical and Christian moralists had given it: vice, passion, evil. “What we call Evil in this World,” he wrote, “...is the grand Principle that makes us sociable Creatures, the solid Basis, the Life and Support of all Trades and Employments without Exception: ... the Moment Evil ceases, the Society must be spoiled if not totally dissolved.”

Some 200 years after Mandeville's death, novelist Ayn Rand built an empire, or at least a large and lucrative cult, by championing what she called “the Virtue of Selfishness.” Wealth as well as fame was to be had from the transvaluation of values. Now comes a fresh effort to turn established morality on its head, an apologia for hypocrisy from the prolific young journalist Jeremy Lott. As any look at Americans' television habits or waistlines will show, this country has long since made its peace with sins like gluttony, lust, avarice, and pride. But hypocrisy, as Lott shows, remains a hanging offense in our mass culture, in politics, religion, and entertainment alike.

Lott begins with a case study: the hypocrisy of Bill Bennett, dubbed the

“Bookie of Virtue” by *The Washington Monthly* early in 2003 when the magazine exposed his high-stakes gambling habit. Over a decade, Bennett wagered away more money than most of us will make in our lifetimes—more than \$8 million by *The Washington Monthly's* estimate. But however unwise, even unvirtuous Bennett's gambling may have been, was he really, as his critics charged, a hypocrite? Not at all, according to Lott. Bennett himself had never condemned gambling. His church—Bennett, like Lott, is Roman Catholic—does not generally consider betting on games of chance sinful. Even Bennett's detractors didn't necessarily think there was anything wrong with his gambling *per se*. If there was any hypocrisy here, argues Lott, it was on the part of Bennett's critics, who would not normally publicize a man's recreational vices—if that's the right word—but made an exception for a political enemy.

So far, so droll: hypocrisy is not always what it appears to be, and the people who howl the loudest about it might themselves be guilty. But Lott next questions the very premise shared by accused and accuser alike in the Bennett affair—what's so bad about hypocrisy, anyway? Sounding like a modern Mandeville, Lott argues hypocrisy “helps to prop up moral norms and preserve useful fictions. And without those norms and those illusions, well, we'd have anarchy.” Indeed, “it also provides a way for good men to pay lip service to heinous governments and warped social customs while working to thwart and ultimately undermine them. You see, hypocrisy is not *just* a necessary evil. It's also an engine of moral progress.”

*In Defense of Hypocrisy* is a breezy, chatty book. The moral gravity of his subject doesn't weigh down Lott's prose. And if anything he errs on the side of brevity. In less than 200 pages, he touches upon the hypocrisies—real or perceived, virtuous or not—of politicians from Newt Gingrich to Howard Dean, celebrities from Britney Spears to Michael Moore, and institutions from public schools to the Roman Catholic

cheat on his wife until the last possible moment, is characteristic. But in the end, they must overcome their indecision, often with the help of the thinkers these people grappling with love and faith look to for advice. “My Night at Maud's” narrator wagers his life on Pascal.

Many critics compare Stillman to that most European director (in his dramas, anyway), Woody Allen. Stillman's neurotics might be the children of Allen's. But Stillman is still very American, and a much more optimistic New York chronicler than Allen. Stillman's films did get increasingly dark. But his work, happily, shows young people successfully navigating a space between tradition and what's come to replace it. The filmmaker isn't naïve enough to believe we can hold on to everything we're losing. Some social mores are lost forever. But neither must we give up. We can embrace life in the modern world—his conservatism is too sophisticated to ignore it—while not embracing everything in it.

Both Eric Rohmer and Woody Allen were incredibly prolific directors. It appears that Whit Stillman never will be. And, unlike them, he's abandoned the milieu to which he gave a voice and that made his name. His only completed project since “The Last Days of Disco” was an interesting “novelization” of the film that seemed to indicate Stillman hadn't yet finished his exploration of the “type” he made famous.

Perhaps his next movie will be a more overtly political film, in keeping with the times. *Little Green Men*, written by the son of *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, is a Washington satire on conspiracy theories that focuses more on politics than people. Based on the recent success of another Buckley adaptation, “Thank You for Smoking,” Stillman might be making a wise move, monetarily. But those of us who revere his wise trilogy on love and art may be poorer for it. ■

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Church. At every turn, he raises more questions than he answers—which might be a Socratic strategy in an older author but in Lott’s case leaves the impression he simply hasn’t thought things through carefully enough to come up with firm positions. Though consistently thought-provoking, the book falls somewhat short of its promise: *Maybe Hypocrisy is OK Sometimes* would make a more accurate title. Lott’s defense of hypocrisy is tentative indeed.

But there’s no hypocrisy, for good or ill, about the book itself: Lott doesn’t pretend to have written a scholarly treatise here. And he’s not shy about calling on established authorities for help. To familiarize readers with the academic study of hypocrisy, Lott talks to Taylor University philosophy professor James Spiegel, who speculates that hypocrisy is almost universally condemned “because it’s a double vice. It involves not just the indiscretion that one’s covering up but also the indiscretion of the deception. Also, we despise the act that hypocrites justify themselves and often

profit by their deception, so there’s a deep injustice here.” Following St. Thomas Aquinas, Spiegel carefully distinguishes between “akratic” individuals who simply lack the moral strength to live up to their values—Darryl Strawberry is one example he gives—and true hypocrites who willfully transgress.

For insight into the Catholic Church’s priestly pedophilia scandal, Lott turns to Philip Jenkins, professor of religious studies at Penn State and author of a

Rauch’s own words, his Hidden Law “absolutely depends on hypocrisy. It not only depends on genteel hypocrisy, which is the preacher pretending not to be screwing the congregant, it depends on public hypocrisy, which is the people actually averting their eyes.” “The people’s hypocrisy in the case isn’t ideal,” Lott writes, “but it’s probably less bad than the alternative of busting up a marriage and condemning the children to every other weekend with daddy.”

**THERE’S NO HYPOCRISY, FOR GOOD OR ILL, ABOUT THE BOOK ITSELF.**

book on clerical abuse. Lott’s own take on the affair, tweaking a phrase of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s, is that it reflects “the soft tyranny of high expectations.” While Lott finds that sexual misconduct by employees of public schools may dwarf the church’s scandals, “the cases of abuse that are uncovered in public schools are not roped together as part of a larger crisis because people have come to expect and demand less from our schools. The Catholic Church, by contrast, has never really tried to disguise its moralism...” Here and elsewhere, Lott observes that one sure way to avoid charges of hypocrisy is simply to lower standards. That, he contends, is worse than hypocrisy itself.

Lott finds a powerful ally for this line of argument in one of history’s most vociferous foes of hypocrisy: Jesus of Nazareth. Even as Christ reviled the Pharisees for what they did and failed to do, he nonetheless taught that what they preached was still to be heeded. “It’s hard for people in this day and age to understand how Jesus could tell the crowd (a) that the teachers of the law were a bunch of brazen hypocrites, but that (b) the people still had to listen to them,” writes Lott, “But, according to the book of Matthew, that’s exactly what he did.”

Yet that’s no defense of hypocrisy. And so Lott looks to Brookings Institution scholar Jonathan Rauch, who argues for utility of social convention—what he calls the “Hidden Law”—over punctilious “Bureaucratic Legalism.” In

This is the strongest argument, by far, the book makes for hypocrisy. But is it strong enough? One wishes Lott had invested more thought in the scenario. He doesn’t consider the possibility that Rauch may simply be wrong: quite conceivably a woman being cheated upon and her children would all be better off knowing the truth. And might not others in the congregation, seeing what the preacher is able to get away with, follow his example? Yet if Rauch and Lott are correct, the implications might be still more problematic: would it follow that our institutions of religion, monogamy, and politics depend upon lies for their very existence? It’s a conclusion that certain radical schools of thought, from ancient Cynics and early Stoics to latter-day nihilists, have embraced—though rather than accept hypocrisy, they rejected the social order.

Even before the Cynics, the place of convention—and by extension hypocrisy—in the social order was a point of contention between philosophers and sophists, some of whom held views not unlike Rauch’s. Lott’s book is not the place to turn for a discussion of this; indeed, he gets important facts wrong in his fleeting treatment of ancient philosophical history. (The trial of Socrates, contra Lott, was not a “show trial”—he was only narrowly convicted.) Nevertheless, *In Defense of Hypocrisy* is stimulating reading, a fun, if cursory, take on a subject that has engaged philosophers and prophets for thousands of years. ■

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[*A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846*, Boyd Hilton, Oxford University Press, 757 pages]

## Navigating the Age of Revolution

By William Anthony Hay

REVOLUTION AND WAR have defined the experience of most European countries from the mid-18th century, but Britain stands apart in having avoided revolution and fought its wars abroad. Britain's evolutionary narrative contrasts sharply with the story of other countries traumatized by revolution, civil war, or conquest and occupation. Europe's *ancien regime* faced a profound general crisis as institutions failed to meet demands they faced, and the French Revolution in 1789 marked the most prominent instance of a wider pattern. China followed a parallel trajectory with revolts that pushed it into a spiral of decline and vulnerability over the coming century. Even the fledgling United States faced challenges to its cohesion from the 1780s through 1830 that adumbrated the catastrophe of the 1860s. So what made Britain different?

Boyd Hilton offers a sophisticated answer in the latest volume of the New Oxford History of England series focused on Britain's perilous journey through the age of revolution. As a distinguished specialist in the history of finance and economics who has also written on the relationship between religion and public culture, Hilton is well placed to explore the period in context. His title draws on the famous description of Byron by his lover Lady Caroline Lamb—wife to the future Prime Minister Lord Melbourne—as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” Britain's elite at this time lived atop a fault line that threatened to produce the kind of earthquake seen in France, and the Whig cler-

gyman and wit Sydney Smith captured the spirit of the age when he remarked in 1840 that “the old-fashioned, orthodox, hand-shaking, bowel-disturbing passion of fear” underlay the political reforms of the era.

Instability went beyond fear of the mob. Technology and developments in industrial organization brought unprecedented growth, but cycles of boom and bust heightened risk and unease. Economic depression threw angry workers onto the streets without unemployment provision to prevent utter destitution. Change benefited some while leaving others dispossessed, and economic policy created a zero-sum game with political consequences. New interest groups in the provinces demanded a voice with greater urgency and challenged established interests with metropolitan ties. War with France from 1793, with the threat it brought of invasion and subversion, imposed heavy strains that peace after 1815 did not immediately raise. It shifted patterns of demand and investment while leaving a financial hangover of debt.

Hilton makes a strong case that the absence of a shared civic culture marked the defining characteristic of the age. At the time when public opinion first became a national phenomenon, neither the

tion of strength that collapsed in the crisis of the American Revolution, which undermined Britain's position in Europe and overseas—risking a defeat far worse than losing the 13 American colonies—and had serious consequences at home. Opposition Whigs led by Charles James Fox sided with the Americans, accusing George III and his ministers of trying to revive Stuart absolutism and subvert English liberties. Friends of the crown attributed the conflict to an alliance of infidels, religious dissenters, republicans, and Whigs seeking to overthrow kingly government. One Tory clergyman, William Jones, invoked the Puritan legacy by labeling the conflict “a Presbyterian war.” The anti-Catholic Gordon Riots in 1780, which caused more damage to London than the French Revolution later did to Paris, marked a symbolic loss of control. Repealing laws against Catholics in 1788 had aroused Protestant fears of foreign subversion and royal absolutism, and a crowd that had gathered to accompany a petition to parliament degenerated into a mob that sacked embassies and churches, opened the Fleet Prison, and terrorized London for five days. By 1783, George III had been forced to accept a coalition government led by Fox and Lord North.

Hilton describes the emergence of a

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public nor elites shared a common idiom for expressing it. Political, religious, and intellectual disputes cut deeply enough to create almost unbridgeable divides with opposing sides viewing each other as agents of anarchy or despotism. Rivalry between Whigs and Tories revived party politics, and religious dissenters clashed with defenders of the Church of England's authority. Some Englishmen sympathized with revolutionary movements abroad, but loyalists viewed them as an assault on Christian civilization.

Britain had emerged from the Seven Years War in 1763 with an enviable posi-

“new conservatism” as a backlash against these developments, but it might better be understood as the revival of older trends submerged by the Whig supremacy. England's landed interests and Anglican clergy had been politically marginalized until George III ended their exclusion in the 1760s. Tory squires and parsons, whose sentiments prefigured the militant loyalism stirred by the French Revolution, joined politicians like Charles Jenkinson to drive out the Fox-North coalition and install William Pitt the Younger as prime minister in 1784. Pitt's skill pushed the Foxite Whigs to the political wilder-