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ON LA ROCHEFOUCAULD: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

J. E. PARSONS, Jr

I

George Saintsbury writes in his article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on La Rochefoucauld: “. . . each maxim is the text for a whole sermon of application and corollary which any one of thought and experience can write.”¹ It is in response to this generous spirit of invitation that I approach the task of providing an adequate introduction to the study of La Rochefoucauld. Yet my first care is not to be overly sanguine in minimizing the difficulties that beset my subject. In particular, it is not entirely clear to which kind of literature Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* belong. For example, according to Montesquieu: “The *Maxims* of La Rochefoucauld are proverbs for persons of intellect.”² Whether by this he means to dismiss them as mere epigrams, or elevate them to the rank of precepts for the wise, is not sufficiently explicit, for Montesquieu nowhere else refers directly to the *Maxims*. Provisionally, however, we may assume that they are more than proverbs or epigrams and something less than precepts. As the outgrowth of an enquiring mind they reflect the endeavor to instruct; as the internal dialogue of a statesman with himself, they reveal a highly cultivated man. At the very least, they avoid the facile iteration of preceptive moralism, and (to speak in Rochefoucauld’s behalf) they elude the familiarity of the prosaic. On balance the *Maxims* are perhaps best described as aphorisms.

Now, the distinction between aphoristic prudence and rules of practical reason (precepts) is clearly demarcated by Kant, among others.³ A difference in motive as well separates Rochefoucauld’s endeavor from Kant’s. For the former proposed to assist kindred spirits on the grounds of *tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*, whereas the latter sought to inculcate an ethic of the will giving itself its own laws. The earnest of this is that La Rochefoucauld is harder on faults or deficiencies than on vices. Indeed, he hardly concerns himself with sins at all, except as they correspond to their secular counterparts, that is, to excesses of *amour-propre*.

To carry the parallel with Kant still further, we observe that the distinction between maxims and precepts corresponds to a disjunction

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, seventh edition, vol. 16, s.v. “François de La Rochefoucauld.”

² Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. l’Intégrale, (Paris, 1964), “Mes Pensées,” § 898 (p. 978), author’s transl.

³ La Rochefoucauld was probably acquainted with Plutarch’s distinction in the *Moralia* between apophthegms and precepts: apophthegms resemble anecdotes, or epigrams (indirect precepts), while precepts themselves directly appeal to the judgment and aim to influence the will as hortatory injunctions.

between subjectivity and objectivity, or to the will as revealing each individual's intentions distinct from objective rules or principles.⁴ Kant juxtaposes "maxims which each person bases on his inclinations" to "precepts which hold for a species or rational beings in so far as they agree in certain inclinations."⁵ Evidently, mankind in all its diversity does not qualify as Kantian "man", not constituting such purely "rational beings". Besides, Kant's prime maxim turned precept, that each must legislate for himself as if he were legislating for all mankind, bodes forth a kind of misanthropy⁶ that La Rochefoucauld, even in his most reproachful moments, utterly fails to match.

From the above considerations, there seems to be no mediation between the departure point of aristocratic *moeurs* in La Rochefoucauld (timocracy) and Kant's meliorist principles in ethics. For La Rochefoucauld morality breathes the spirit of life and life's uncertainties; for Kant it is to be prescribed from within as part of a methodical programme.⁷ Hence the maxims of La Rochefoucauld are at variance with those of Kant, whose first principles assign duties never known before to moralists ancient or modern. In short, for Kant "we can understand moral conduct only if we discover rules or principles which are logically independent of experience and which are capable of contradiction."⁸ We may ask, can maxims remain maxims which are utter strangers to the experience of the good? It would seem not unless it follows logically that maxims, to be authentic, must also be capable of contradiction.

As so far stated, such a likelihood is more than dubious. Accordingly, Kant's derivation of a misanthropic ethic from maxims is tendentious, to say the least. Still less is his ultimate successor, Nietzsche, plausible in attempting what Karl Löwith called a philosophical "system of aphorisms".⁹ Whether La Rochefoucauld conceived of such a possibility will be investigated in the sequel. It suffices here to note that his suspicions

⁴ See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (Library of the Liberal Arts: New York, 1956) p. 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69. Similarly, Kant suggests that maxims pertain to the ethical mode of "the permitted and the forbidden", whereas precepts pertain to the ethical mode of "duty and that which is contrary to duty." (*Loc. cit.*)

⁶ See Allan Bloom, "An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*", in ed. J. Cropsey, *Ancients and Moderns* (Basic Books: New York, 1964), p. 255.

⁷ See Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 167: "... when the maxim did come into vogue of carefully examining every step which reason had to take and not to let it proceed except on the path of a well-considered method, the study of the structure of the world took an entirely different direction and therewith attained an incomparably happier result." Stephen Körner notes that for Kant: "To choose maxims is to choose a policy," (*Kant*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1955, p. 134.)

⁸ Hans Reiss. Introduction to *Kant's Political Writings*, transl. H. B. Nisbet, (Cambridge, 1970) p. 18. Kant cites a maxim of La Rochefoucauld in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, II, iii.

⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, (New York, 1960) Introduction, p. 2.

of imposture on the part of agents claiming moral rectitude for their deeds are, in most instances, all too justified. "Whatever the care one takes to disguise one's passions by simulation of piety and honor, they always become apparent through such obscurities."¹⁰

II

Maintaining, as we should, that the art of writing aphorisms requires empathy between the aphorist and his public, we but reflect the universal inclination of literate men to ever better understanding of those among whom they must live. In this, the aphorist somewhat resembles the poet, imitating the whole rather than elaborating a part; for him, parenthetically, the half can be greater than the whole (which is beyond our ken). At all events, the aphorist's art is like a vehicle that can veer, on the one hand, toward the loosely textured rhetoric of politics, or, on the other, toward the fine-spun discourse of political theory.

Before turning our attention directly to La Rochefoucauld, it remains to examine the similar turn of mind in other great moralists who sought truth in aphoristic form. Pascal's *Pensées* would serve as the best known prototype of that kind were it not for their disclosing, on inspection, the unfulfilled design of a fideist apologetic.¹¹ In a more political vein we could example Harrington's "Political Aphorisms", Halifax's "Maxims of State" and even Swift's "Thoughts on Various Subjects". Of comparable interest and of broader scope we could distinguish Goethe's *Maximien und Reflexionen* which (thanks to their arrangement by topic) bear every mark of being as thoroughly meditated as those just mentioned.

The predominating unit of thought with these moralists was the chapter, as in their discursive works, and subdivision by paragraph, sentence, or even phrase only in appearance suffices to present their thought adequately. Hence La Rochefoucauld must not be expected to furnish us with a finished, synoptic system of thought, although he cannot be understood except in his entirety. M. F. Zeller, for example, after classifying all his maxims by subject matter, concludes that Rochefoucauld intended nothing especial by their haphazard order of presentation, and certainly no thematic development.¹² On this point, a contemporary of the Duke, La Chapelle-Bessé, writes: "I remain in agreement that one will not find

¹⁰ La Rochefoucauld, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. La Pléiade (Gallimard, 1964), p. 404. All further references to Rochefoucauld's maxims will be to this edition; these citations appear in the author's translation, unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ See Pascal, *Pensées*, (Bordas: Paris, 1966) p. 17.

¹² See M. F. Zeller, *New Aspects of Style in the Maxims of La Rochefoucauld* (Washington, D.C., 1954), p. 142 ff. Cf. W. G. Moore, *La Rochefoucauld: His Mind and Art*, (Oxford, 1969) pp. 8, 13, 42.

there all the order or all the art one could wish for, and that a scholar who would have had more leisure, would have been enabled to supply it with better sequence . . .”¹³ On this and similar evidence we can safely assume that La Rochefoucauld intended no complete moral teaching, but instead afforded such a series of insights into man’s nature as the selective study of human passions could furnish.

To avoid confusing the reader by treating ethical in isolation from political maxims, I will set forth my initial intent to follow in this matter the moderation of the ancients, notably Aristotle. For Aristotle the correct understanding of the good, prudence, temperance and justice must first be at least approximated prior to any worthwhile attempt to improve the quality of political life. Aristotle prefaces the study of politics with the study of ethics, not only as a matter of appropriate procedure, but in so far as some moral virtues – say, magnanimity – demand the widest possible range for their practice. In addition, there is the fact that politics is a necessary pre-condition of philosophy, both being rendered choice-worthy with a view to their end of human happiness (viz. eudaimonism). Happiness, in turn, for Aristotle reaches its heights through the experience of maximal self-sufficiency, in contrast to awareness of social interdependence. What constitutes this self-sufficiency par excellence is the life of contemplation (i.e., the “theoretic life”). For however attractive in itself, the ethical life proves less autonomous by dint of its social and political dependence on others’ approval. One cannot practice liberality, for example, in reclusive solitude. Besides, virtue requires the right kind of education and moral habituation, which can only be produced as an incidence of healthy political life. The good life is indissolubly attached to modes and orders of a political nature – themselves reflecting the intentions of a first legislator or legislators. “. . . it is difficult to obtain a right education without being brought up under right laws.”¹⁴

Examining moral and political life from another perspective than Aristotle’s, we perceive that the distinction between State and Society is resolvable only in terms of official morality counterbalanced by freedom to act in all cases except where the law expressly forbids. Under this arrangement Society’s moral role in education becomes the prime issue, whose amelioration is as equally vitiated by mindless anarchists as by waspish ultras. In consequence, the social balance struck between the intimidators and the libertarian voluntarists, or between “folkways” and “stateways”, remains exceedingly tenuous. Jurists would tend to see a

¹³ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b32 ff. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics*, Lesson XIV, sec. 2150: “He [Aristotle] says first that it is difficult for anyone to be guided from his early days to virtue according to good customs unless he is reared under good laws, by which a kind of necessity impels a man to good.”

solution as represented (in principle) by the impartiality of a Kantian *Rechtsstaat*. “God”, according to Kant, “wants men to be made happy by men, and if only all men united to promote their happiness we could make a paradise of Novaya Zemlya.”¹⁵

Perhaps so, but Kant is known for understanding happiness in a most curious way, since he accepts the Rousseauan position that men may *become* happy only by being forced to be “free”. However, the promise of human perfectibility can lead to the utmost misery, as well as to the utmost happiness, as is sadly indicated by the dystopias of our era. To see this in all clarity, we need not postulate a *trahison des cieux*. We have only to perceive the law of inflated expectations and their reactive aftermath.

Kant’s “internal constitution of the state erected on pure principles of right” can be fruitfully compared to that of Humboldt’s:

“While the State constitution, by force of law, or custom, or its own power, sets the citizens in a specific relationship to each other, there is another which is wholly distinct from this [juridical relationship] – chosen by their own free will, infinitely various, and in its nature ever-changing. And it is strictly speaking the latter – the free cooperation of the members of the nation – which secures all those benefits for which men longed when they formed themselves into a society.”¹⁶

What Humboldt’s statism leaves out at the expense of public conscience is restored in the guise of a libertarian private morality. His ethos of freedom is placed in a category prior to and distinct from the rules of political right. John Stuart Mill derived a similar preference for private over public life – as is found in La Rochefoucauld as well. But La Rochefoucauld reconciles this preference with absolute monarchy in the only way he can. For both he and Humboldt perceive the state as limited by prior rights and by its own character as a regime which demands less of its subjects than would a commercial republic (like Venice) — one without an elite of birth, but with a competitive civil service. La Rochefoucauld’s practical politics indicate his role as foremost *politique*

¹⁵ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (New York, 1963), pp. 54-5. Kant once criticized a maxim of La Rochefoucauld as follows: “If we, however, incline to the opinion that human nature can better be known in the civilized state . . . we must listen to a long melancholy litany of indictments against humanity [and to] . . . the remark (*Maxims*, ed. 1678, No. 583) that ‘in the misfortune of our friends, there is something which is not altogether displeasing to us.’” (*Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York, 1960, pp. 28-9.)

¹⁶ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (Cambridge, 1969) p. 131. Cf. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (New York, 1967) p. 161 (=III, iii, sec. 261): “Individuals have duties to the state in proportion as they have rights against it.”

of his nation and his magnanimous concern to preserve the appearance of individual liberty (even when the operative reality was subjection).¹⁷

Further, to the present day ethics are still considered propaedeutic to politics. Common sense discerns the link between the two in practice to be “morale” or the civilian counterpart of military *esprit de corps*.¹⁸ In Rochefoucauld’s times French absolutism attempted to replace a land-based aristocracy with an aristocracy-in-arms, a vertical organization of staff officers and naval commanders. But it suffices to say that its drawback lay in dearth of men in the ranks and bad finances. To resume briefly: La Rochefoucauld’s high-minded indifference to the “verdict of history”, his scorn of clerical influence and his profound patriotism all indicate an amplitude of spirit seldom encountered among even his best contemporaries.

III

In view of considerations similar to the foregoing – and with hopes of not overly vexing the reader by our digressions – we now approach some of La Rochefoucauld’s chief moral maxims. While these maxims are possibly indicators of frustrated ambition, motives other than chagrin, regret and disillusionment must have contributed to their initial conception. A certain noble cast of mind equally betokens higher motives on our author’s part (and perhaps reasserts them). For who – and especially La Rochefoucauld – would spare no pains to reveal his innermost thoughts were his aim but to relieve the feelings of those similarly inclined to frustration and disillusionment? Besides, La Rochefoucauld’s efforts to remain both aloof from partisanship and self-effacing in his moral concerns do not so much testify to preoccupation with today’s “value-free” social science, as with his own well-concealed pride.

The distance produced by Rochefoucauld’s remarkable self-effacement, his pride as consummate anatomist of morals (*moeurs*), suffices for us because it helps clarify our knowledge of human deficiencies, so as to render us more circumspect than we would be otherwise. For the statesman-like moralist, such as he was, the oretic constitution of man necessitates now and again the use of disingenuousness to deliver men from

¹⁷ See La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.* p. 505: “To render society convenient, it is necessary that each maintain his liberty; one must see oneself, or not see oneself at all, without obligations . . . One must contribute, to the degree that one can, to the diversion of those with whom one wishes to live; but it is not always necessary to be burdened with the care of such a contribution. Deference is necessary in society, but it ought to have limits: it becomes a servitude when it is overdone; there are necessary reasons why it should at least *appear* free.” (Emphasis added.)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 455: “The middle class manner can sometimes be lost in the army, but never at court.”

undesirable illusions; and these most emphatically include self-diremption and misconceived systems of nature, as in Rochefoucauld's pejorative reference to Seneca. Yet even dissimulation has its limits.¹⁹

According to La Rochefoucauld, nature in the Machiavellian guise of "Fortuna" is arbitrary sovereign over much human life: "Our wisdom", he writes, "is not less at the mercy of fortune than our property."²⁰ This sense of human limitations is expressed in an equally skeptical opinion of our author's, as follows: "Moderation in good fortune is nothing but the apprehension of shame which accompanies the heat of anger, or the fear of losing all that one has."²¹ In either case, it seems that Rochefoucauld neither commits himself to the course of basing his perception on extremes of nature, nor regards the mean of nature as normative. His tendency, if such can be ascribed to him, is to explain moderation as concern for averting the consequences of others' imprudence, not as constituting paradigms to be imitated in action. This is in full accord with his (ascertainable) Christian "pessimism".

Moreover, the further we venture to interpret Rochefoucauldian moral thought, the further we are led to remark its distinction between politics and ethics, public and private life. This conclusion seems most fully justified due to what we would today call our author's "psychology". Indeed, the human affections, faculties and accompanying virtues which typify ethical as distinct from political conduct can be grounded in principles representing the positive supports inherent – according to Rochefoucauld – in the life of reason. Hence we will try to summarize certain aspects of his "psychology" so that a sample of the good qualities belonging to human nature may be seen clearly by way of contrast with their corresponding deficiencies.

On the merit side we can discern and enumerate six prominent qualities: kindness, reasonableness, curiosity, prudence, magnanimity (akin to Cartesian "generosity"), and wisdom. On the demerit side, we discover and must confront corresponding deficiencies – though not necessarily sins: selfishness (*amour-propre*),²² arrogance, thoughtlessness, vanity,

¹⁹ See Pascal, *Pensées*, "Misère de l'homme", Nos. 119-20, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J. Chevalier, (Paris, 1954) p. 1121: "What are our natural principles, if not principles to which we have become accustomed? . . . Custom is a second nature, which destroys the first. But what is nature? Why is custom not natural? I am greatly afraid that this nature may itself be nothing but a first custom, as custom is a second nature." (Author's transl.)

²⁰ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 487. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 445: "People have made a virtue of moderation to limit the ambition of great men, and to reconcile the mediocre to their paucity of means and merit." Rochefoucauld also writes of moderation as "being nothing in reality but an idleness, a tedium and a lack of courage, such that one can justly say that moderation is baseness of soul, whose elevation is ambition." (*Ibid.*, p. 352.)

²² Compare J.-J. Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. La Pléiade, (Paris, 1964), Vol. I, lxxvii, where it is maintained that La Rochefoucauld alone prior to Rousseau

avarice and folly. We will be occupied at length in giving almost every merit its due, it sufficing to remind ourselves that the preliminary character of this study rules out a more exhaustive treatment.

Excepting magnanimity and prudence, the balance of the positive dispositions (the "merit" side) belongs to ethics and the sphere of private life. We should likewise note the conspicuous absence of that greatest of all political virtues, justice.²³ Accordingly, La Rochefoucauld, where he does not reduce political to moral virtue, permits the former certain freedoms which are less apparent in the latter's confinement to private, even personal rectitude. In neither does his insight falter as between merited praise and unmerited reward of actions purporting to be in the best interests of each and every one. Just as the moralist should not endeavor to politicize what are essentially private dispositions, so should the *politique* endeavor not to moralize what are at bottom political necessities.

To focus our attention on any conjoint "psychology" of heart and mind is to note the different kinds of knowledge requisite for greater or lesser degrees of self-sufficiency. Our author is particularly solicitous in behalf of man's independence and autonomy, and this can be ascribed to his conviction that "Fortuna" is not the whole of nature, which proceeds by an economy of order and purpose rather than by blind chance.

What seems to be indicated here is that the problem of the relation between necessity and freedom is reproduced in that governing the relation between theory and practice. Because men are not entirely free, it follows that they *are* free within the ambit of their unhindered faculties. This particularly applies to their unhindered mental faculties, in so far these do not restrain one another, but are co-ordinated. Rochefoucauld discerns the difficulty of the relation between theory and practice, without trying to reduce theory to practice (as in Marx), or minimize the intervening distance.

To La Rochefoucauld policy and contemplation have in common a measure which is commensurable in itself only in so far as community and friendship make it so. Taken together, they deliver each individual thinker from the self-imposed isolation of solitude – and even more significantly – from alienation in the bosom of the social order. Above all, the society of men needs an integrated knowledge of theory and

expressed clearly the thought that jealousy can outlast love because it is the fruit of selfishness, or the doctrine of egoism. Rousseau avoids egoism through his conception of self-regard (*l'amour de soi*), from which he derives empathetic compassion (*la pitié*). See *Letters from the Mountain*, First Letter and *Julie, or the new Eloise*, Bk. III, Letter xlviii.

²³ La Rochefoucauld reduced justice to "a lively apprehension that someone is robbing us of what belongs to us" from which derives "this respect for all the interests of our neighbor . . ." See, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

practice.²⁴ Otherwise, faction and partisanship will divide human society into bellicose antagonisms, none of which will seem worthy of support. La Rochefoucauld, who had experienced at first hand the evils of civil war and intestine strife, professed to be no longer much "concerned which of the two parties gains the advantage."²⁵ Man's dual nature will not bear easy transformations of malice into benevolence, or obdurate into complaisant.

Thus, man's dual nature is not best served by endeavoring to derive the higher from the lower, as it were; instead, it is better served by perceiving mankind's indissoluble unity, yet with sufficient diversity to belie Kantian "man". How else could one proceed to dignify man's common humanity were one to neglect the polarities of rich and poor, wise and ignorant, agents and subjects, warriors and civilians, men and women, the guilty and the innocent, saints and secularists, free and slave, and so on? While the higher is more vulnerable than the lower, the least one can say is that a balance struck between them indicates a reciprocal relationship. At the very minimum it takes two to seesaw.

An approach to understanding such a balance is implicit in La Rochefoucauld. If he does not invariably aim as high as the Christian state of grace, or always take his bearings by "the peace that passeth all understanding", neither does he lower his sights below what common decency and decorum prescribe. As a *politique* he invariably observes the rules which make community and society viable. It has been ably propounded, for example, that "as judge and lawmaker . . . [La Rochefoucauld] is very much a Doubting Thomas who grants no one the benefit of the doubt."²⁶ At the same time, our author is not half the skeptic about politics that we are often given to believe, and his evident amplitude of mind accords ill with the cynicism commonly ascribed to him.

In due course we will come to the cruces of Rochefoucauldian politics. Suffice it for the moment to say that La Rochefoucauld desired both to extend and modify the spirit of genuine aristocracy; his was not the jealousy of rank or pettiness of intrigue characteristic of the court of an absolute monarch. For the meantime, it behooves us to detail a foremost quality we would have otherwise omitted had we dealt exclusively with Rochefoucauld's secular virtues.

There should be no surprise that among the moral qualities for which our author reserves praise is the theological virtue of charity. La Rochefoucauld emphasizes in this connection the ascent from virtues of unassisted reason to preternatural ones on the principle of superinduction. Hence with what can be characterized as an unusually acute aptitude for such a subject, he defines charity as follows: "The passions possess an

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 411, 417, 476, 505-6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 588.

²⁶ Louis Kronenberger, *The Maxims of La Rochefoucauld*, (New York, 1959) Introduction, p. 23.

injustice and a specific interest which makes them always offend and wound even when they speak reasonably and equitable. Charity alone has the privilege of addressing almost everything that pleases it, while never offending anyone."²⁷ Charity lessens jealousy and envy, it seems. Another means of expressing the same moral truth is to say that for La Rochefoucauld charity is best understood as "one virtue and the form and director of all the others."²⁸ In such terms, it nowhere falls short of the theologians' *caritas* or *agapé*.

What the aforesaid indicates as Rochefoucauld's general orientation is that his perspective on human affairs is both fortified and limited by his adhesion to a transcendent faith. This is borne out by his statement on man's post-lapsarian culpability: "To punish man for original sin God has let him divinize his selfishness that he may be tormented by it in all actions of his life."²⁹ Our author does not seem to subscribe to that thought of proto-modernity which recasts charity as impersonal benevolence and impartial tolerance.³⁰ He should evidently be thought of as approaching more Pascal in this respect than Montaigne and the *politiques* in general. The Rochefoucauldian world is not the world of man abandoned and left to his own resources alone. Whatever else he may be, La Rochefoucauld's deity is not an anthropomorphism.

Now, La Rochefoucauld evinces a love of truth and contempt for improbity which serves as correlative to his appreciation of charity. In addition, this interest in our author discloses a distinctly aesthetic turn of mind. For example, he traces a connection between the true and the beautiful in our sense and pursuit of perfection. Such perfection, understood rightly, is much akin to the performance of charity in that it is ordered to an awareness of the divine order. As perfection is primarily of a moral kind, the moral is inseparable from the beautiful. "Truth is the groundwork and cause of perfection and beauty. Nothing," adds our author, "whatever its nature, can be beautiful or perfect that is not everything it ought to be and has not all that it ought to have."³¹

IV

To return to the question of La Rochefoucauld's politics, we find that

²⁷ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

²⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Eyre and Spottiswoode: London, 1966) Vol. 46, p. 118. Cf. *ibid.*, 1a2ae, 64, 4: "A root comes before what grows from it . . . charity is the root of all virtues . . ."

²⁹ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 381. See *ibid.*, p. 367: "Only God knows whether a plain, sincere and upright action is a result of honesty rather than improbity."

³⁰ See Howard B. White, *Peace Among the Willows: The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon*. (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1968) p. 21.

³¹ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

he turned from the conspiratorial intrigues of his youth to more self-assured, moderate interventions of later years. Essentially a patriot, he hoped for his country's good and impugned the temporal power of the clergy, especially of its upper echelons. He aspired to encourage a true aristocracy that would become the fulcrum of power between court and people.

But this solution depended in great measure on the aristocrats' participation in local affairs, far from the Byzantine politics of Versailles. Moreover, such a landed aristocracy functions best when it follows a deliberate policy of the aristocratic concealment of aristocracy:

"One can also be in society with those to whom one is superior by birth or personal merit, but those who have this advantage ought not to abuse it: they must make it seldom felt and use it only for instructing others; they must induce others to perceive their own need for guidance, and then guide them by reason."³²

For the welfare of society as a whole, each individual must be taught to relinquish his inclination to live at the expense of others.³³ Each must learn to rely on himself and manifest some regard for the sensibilities of others. Such limited deference to others must follow the recognition that civil society can only be made viable through each's willingness to sacrifice for the common good: *salus populi suprema lex*. La Rochefoucauld's spirit of aristocracy is not to be confused with the venal administration of oligarchs overshadowed by an absolute prince out of touch with the majority of his subjects.

We have already mentioned La Rochefoucauld's preference for private over public life. This means that he elected to explain public affairs by private motives, rather than the reverse. However, his caution in this regard led him to observe limits in such an undertaking. At any rate, we are indebted to him on account of the following illustration. "My intention is not to speak of friendship while speaking of society: although they have some relationship, they are nevertheless very different: the first has more grandeur and dignity, and much more excellence than the other, which consists in resembling it."³⁴

In so far as La Rochefoucauld indicates a preference, his evident par-

³² *Ibid.*, p. 505.

³³ See John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration* in *Works*, third edition, (London, 1727) Vol. 2, p. 249: "... the Pravity of Mankind being such, that they had rather injuriously prey upon the fruits of other Men's Labours, than take pains to provide for themselves, the necessity of preserving Men in the Possession of what honest Industry has already acquired, and also of preserving their Liberty and Strength, whereby they may acquire what they further want, obliges Men to enter into Society with one another..." Cf. La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 504: "Chacun veut trouver... ses avantages aux dépens des autres."

³⁴ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 504.

tiality to private virtues exceeds his concern for public ones. In this sense he is a liberal, a lover of privacy. As a liberal and, by anticipation, a Whig after the manner of Sir William Temple, La Rochefoucauld opted for rural retirement, or semi-retirement, rejecting the life of a courtier. And we ought not forget that the audience to whom he addressed his aphorisms was of those to whom rank and preferment were not all-consuming passions. For La Rochefoucauld's greatest estate was always in the minds of men of letters.

Before passing on to further indications of our author's "privatism", we would do well to note the emphasis he places on jealousy as a motive close to selfishness (*amour-propre*).³⁵ Like Machiavelli, La Rochefoucauld demotes love of glory to ambition, a more private, more secure preoccupation since the alternating extremes of human baseness and exaltation result from aiming too high. In the long run, accordingly, such a reduction is the safest policy for civil society. Indeed, this matches Rochefoucauld's analysis of injustice (another near parallel to Machiavelli), especially in its assumption that the people prefer to stave off injustice rather than actively seek justice. "For Machiavelli the ruling class is always a prince or princes; the people are not a self-subsisting class apart from the ruling class. They passively receive the imprint of the ruling class, and their function is to hold what they receive."³⁶

La Rochefoucauld's account of injustice thus partakes of a certain Machiavellian reasoning, although it avoids the cautious commendation of extremes advanced by Machiavelli. As for its corollary, that "the love of justice among good judges who are moderate is only the love of their own eminence",³⁷ Rochefoucauld sees as clearly as any great political theorist of his time that the salvation of the state lies in its firmest adherence to personal security and the protection of private property, albeit these in themselves are not sufficient. Or to express this in less political terms and in ones characteristic of Rochefoucauldian "psychology": "Pity is an awareness of our own injuries in [those of] another; it is a clever foresight of the misfortunes to which we can succumb that makes us aid others, to oblige them to return the same to us on comparable occasions . . ."³⁸ Immediately, we perceive the grounds of a substantially negative golden rule: "Do unto others only those benefactions which will oblige them in like manner to reciprocate to you". Or as Rousseau, emphasizing the role of compassion, was to modify it in the *Second Discourse*: "men would never have been anything but monsters if nature had not given them pity in support of reason".

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

³⁶ Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "Burke and Machiavelli on Principles of Politics" in *Edmund Burke, The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, (Detroit, 1967) p. 66. See Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, I, ii.

³⁷ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

The private basis for certain of man's political dispositions is nowhere better exemplified than in the Rochefoucauldian estimate of magnanimity. If La Rochefoucauld can be said to anticipate in part the school of political opinion known as Whig liberalism, he is equally well-acquainted with ethical thinking anterior to it. There is much to remark about the manner in which he compressed into a single aphorism his by no means negligible insight into a most equivocal moral disposition. To be specific, it would perhaps be more correct for us to say that he understood the disposition in question – magnanimity – as an unqualified good in private life, but as of highly equivocal utility in public life.

However this may be, La Rochefoucauld defines magnanimity as a disposition that fits a man for public and private life alike. "Magnanimity is a noble effort of pride by which it renders man master of himself in order to render him master of all things."³⁹ This assessment of magnanimity falls short of Aristotle's definition, which emphasizes honor as the aim of the magnanimous man in contrast to Rochefoucauld's definition stressing ambition. His Christian – even Augustinian – orientation could perhaps be taken to credit pagan virtues as no more than "splendid vices." Accordingly, La Rochefoucauld explains that liberality is an ephemeral pursuit. "Liberality does not exist, and [if it did] it would be only the vanity of giving, which we prefer to that which we actually bestow."⁴⁰ Liberality, then, is not only less than magnanimity (which we might expect), because it is needed to reassure the donor of his own worth, but because, surprisingly enough, it provokes ingratitude. This, in turn, supplies us with greater evidence than we have before had of La Rochefoucauld's Christian "pessimism." "Arrogance and self-interest everywhere produce ingratitude; the determination to reward goodness and avenge evil appears to them [the majority of men] a bondage to which they have difficulty submitting themselves."⁴¹ We should not forget that the author of *Réflexions ou Sentences et maximes morales* moved in what W. G. Moore calls his "Augustinian circle" of acquaintances.

Proceeding to a more universal affect than the one underlying magnanimity, we come to the basis of man's orrectic constitution, love. The Rochefoucauldian analysis of love soon proves to be the direct opposite of his analysis of egoism or *amour-propre*.⁴² At the same time, such recognition equally avoids the error of confusing love and charity, in so far as love to Rochefoucauld is selfless in the same sense as friendship can be. It is not sublime through being a theological virtue.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 496. Compare René Descartes, *Oeuvres complètes*, (11 vols., ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery, Paris 1967) XI, 453-4.

⁴⁰ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁴² See above, note 22 for a comparison between *amour-propre* and *l'amour de soi*.

To be brief, the capacity for love corresponds to honestly impassioned yearnings of the soul. Indeed, in the Rochefoucauldian world there are as many lovers as there are appropriate objects of love (laying aside the problem of love's insalubrious realizations). La Rochefoucauld recognized love as existing in the form of what today we would call "true" love. "Love is to the soul of the lover as the soul is to the body it animates."⁴³ Nothing else can qualify as such, not only because there exists a God of love than whom nothing is worthier of the soul's impassioned yearning. It is also because La Rochefoucauld unequivocally stigmatizes fear and the hatred fear breeds as such a low, degrading passion. "There is no disguise which can long conceal love where it exists, nor simulate it where it does not."⁴⁴

A sense of growth in love, paralleling the same in growth of knowledge, brings with it a wisdom that can be defined as knowledge perfected by love. No one could mistake love thus understood as the chief element by which *eros* seeks to overcome the particularity of human life in its ascent toward the divine, or toward that which is akin to the divine. However, La Rochefoucauld stops short of this pursuit for the reason that none but God could judge the probity of such endeavors.⁴⁵ Man as a finite being with a finite mind cannot penetrate what it means to experience love that surmounts his own nature. Like Aristophanes in the *Banquet* (189c4-d5), La Rochefoucauld is reluctant to enlighten man as to his own nature, if such an awareness bids fair to issue in absurd presumptions. In other words, clarity about the whole leads to the dissolution of the mystery and obscurity on which human existence depends. For even were man to achieve clarity about the human condition, the resulting awareness – however complete it itself – would not be a sufficient means for transcending that condition.

VI

To recapitulate: we have already seen that La Rochefoucauld develops "privatism", or liberal love of privacy, in contrast to the political virtues. We also perceive his reasons for placing the deficiencies of human nature squarely in the context of Christian (even Augustinian) "pessimism". Further, his cautious stress upon restraints to prevent oppression patently relies on an aristocratic concealment of aristocracy. This is the element of Rochefoucauldian thought that has suffered most at the hands of posterity. For it does not sufficiently satisfy man's free use of himself as a moral agent envisaged by proto-modernity. And man must act as free agent in such affairs, or forfeit the hope to act freely even within a narrow

⁴³ La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

⁴⁵ See above, note 29.

compass. "The desire of bettering one's condition," avers Joseph Cropsey, "is the endless impulse to add to the means of preservation, and it depends essentially on free use of powers. The desire to forestall violence," he adds, "may be satisfied by the effective restraint of all others, and it depends essentially upon a privation of the free of powers."⁴⁶

It is in the light of these principles that La Rochefoucauld envisages the natural order to be one in which the human affects balance and check one another, but in a productive way. For "though motives may differ, the effects are the same". Or to articulate this phenomenon otherwise: "However uncertain and ill-harmonized life may seem, there is yet a certain hidden chain of circumstances and an eternal ruling order created by Providence, which assigns everything its proper place and which decrees its proper destiny."⁴⁷ Such an order is the effect of defects and deficiencies, as well as of sound dispositions. We must not forget that some of his contemporaries were given to referring ironically to the Duc de La Rochefoucauld as "Sir Truthful" ("La Franchise").

The aforesaid considerations bring us to the one remaining theme in La Rochefoucauld as regards that "which assigns everything its proper place". This dispensation is political or economic rather than theological; it bears on the means for making civil society durable. It anticipates a transformation of the *ancien régime* either into a bourgeois, commercial republic, whose aristocracy has grown liberal and inclusive, or into the Rousseauan state of the "social contract". Both models were possible or were thought possible ones by philosophers of the eighteenth century, although Rousseau himself seems to have regarded the latter as only a temporary stay of execution from the aggravating ills of modernity. Be this as it may, La Rochefoucauld did not share the meliorism of proto-modernity because he was acutely aware of human imperfection and because his analysis of *amour-propre* is the secular counterpart of original sin. For the same reason he did not share the disillusion of later modernity with Hegel's version of philosophy as "a sanctuary apart" served by "an isolated order of priests, who must not mix with the world, and whose work is to protect the possessions of Truth."⁴⁸

Our author escapes categorization as a cynic or a frivolous man through his unmistakable moral earnestness. According to Louis Kronenberger, La Rochefoucauld induces in us a certain sense of shame coupled with an abjuration of cynicism: "... for if there is any chance of our becoming better than we are, it is through our perceiving that

⁴⁶ Joseph Cropsey, *Polity and Economy: An Interpretation of the Principles of Adam Smith* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1957), pp. 71-2.

⁴⁷ Louis Kronenberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 128, 151.

⁴⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (3 vols., London, 1968) III, 151. Compare Michael Oakshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge, 1966) p. 5.

we are worse than we think.”⁴⁹ For Rochefoucauld there are still perhaps grounds for decent politics (despite men’s defects), and he does in fact compare political harmony to that produced by the various instruments and voices in music: one can find in society an identical proportion and rightness as in well-performed chamber music.⁵⁰

Such political observations reflect something tangible. A certain *mésure* in public and private matters affords reason for hope. To be sure, La Rochefoucauld’s statesmanship in this respect was not exerted over a broad range of questions. But his influence, for example, with Adam Smith is not negligible, even though we must grant that it operated at one remove from the more immediate influence of Spinoza and Montesquieu.⁵¹ On the other hand, the Rousseauan state of the “social contract”, the alternative here, has a definite analogy in La Rochefoucauld’s account of hypocrisy. As Rousseau chose to cite him in his *Reply to the King of Poland*: “But *hypocrisy is the homage that vice renders to virtue*: yes, [in] such a one of Caesar’s assassins as he who prostrated himself at his feet in order to slaughter him with greater sureness. This thought is able to illuminate; it can be authorized by the celebrated name of its author [La Rochefoucauld]: it is not more worthy of him.”⁵² Be this as it may, hypocrisy is better than open crime, as Rousseau would not have denied.

Returning to the subject of the commercial republic, we note that Adam Smith had originally included La Rochefoucauld among authors of “licentious systems” of moral philosophy, only to withdraw his name on reconsideration. The other moralist with whom he had paired La Rochefoucauld in this category was Bernard Mandeville, whose *Fable of the Bees* so scandalized both clergy and laity in England. Smith incorporated this alteration in the 1790 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which, incidentally, quotes La Rochefoucauld at one point on the power of love. (See Part I, sec. 3, ch. ii.) In addition, John Rae, Smith’s assiduous biographer, reports that the consensus of scholarly opinion regarded this textual change as an emendation, since “there is certainly difference enough between Rochefoucauld and Mandeville to support such a view.”⁵³ And W. G. Moore was surely

⁴⁹ Louis Kronenberger, *The Republic of Letters* (New York, 1955), p. 9.

⁵⁰ See La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, p. 506.

⁵¹ See Montesquieu, *On the Spirit of the Laws*, III, 7: “It is with this kind of government [monarchy] as with the system of the universe, in which there is a power that constantly repels all bodies from the center, and a power of gravitation that attracts them to it. Honor sets all the parts of the body politic in motion, and by its very action connects them; and it is the case that each individual advances the common good, while believing that he promotes his private interest.” (Author’s transl.) Cf. Benedict Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, VI, iii.

⁵² Quoted in La Rochefoucauld, *op. cit.*, at p. 828 (author’s transl.).

⁵³ John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, (New York, 1965) p. 428.

not in error when he asserted the following. "It may well be that suggestions about the nature of man and of society, which La Rochefoucauld handed on to Adam Smith and Bentham . . . whatever their intrinsic importance, help us to understand how the modern world was made out of the hierarchic society of the seventeenth century."⁵⁴

We close by reflecting that La Rochefoucauld would deserve careful study, even if his sole contribution had been only to prefigure a political theory based on self-interest. As it is, we are equally well served by other findings of that capacious and critical mind.

⁵⁴ W. G. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 67.