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There is one vice into which people of good education, and, in the main, of good principles, sometimes fall, from mistaken notions of skill, dexterity and self-defence; I mean lying: The prudence and necessity of often concealing the truth, insensibly seduces people to violate it. It is the only art of mean capacities, and the only refuge of mean spirits. Whereas, concealing the truth, upon proper occasions, is as prudent and as innocent, as telling a lie, upon any occasion is infamous and foolish. I will state you a case in your own department. Suppose you are employed at a foreign court, and that the minister of that court is absurd or impertinent enough to ask you what your instructions are; will you tell him a lie, which, as soon as found out, and found out it certainly will be, must destroy your credit, blast your character, and render you useless there? Will you tell him the truth then, and betray your trust? But you will answer, with firmness, That you are surprised at such a question; that you are persuaded he does not expect an answer to it; but that, at all events, he certainly will not have one. Such an answer will give him confidence in you; he will conceive an opinion of your veracity, of which opinion you may afterwards make very honest and fair advantages. But if, in negotiations, you are looked upon as a liar and a trickster, no confidence will be placed in you, nothing will be communicated to you, and you will be in the situation of a man who has been burnt in the cheek; and who, from that mark, cannot afterwards get an honest livelihood if he would, but must continue a thief. Lord Bacon, very justly, makes a distinction between simulation and dissimulation; and allows the latter rather than the former; but still observes, that they were the weaker sort of politicians who have recourse to either. A man who has strength of mind, and strength of parts, wants neither of them. This sort of lying is the spurious offspring of vanity, begotten upon folly; these people deal in the marvellous; they have seen some things that never existed; they have seen other things which they really never saw, though they did exist, only because they were thought worth seeing. Has any thing remarkable been said or done in any place, or in any company? They have done feats themselves, unattempted, or at least unperformed, by others. They are always the heroes of their own fables; and think that they gain consideration, or at least present attention, by it. Whereas, in truth, all they get is ridicule and contempt, not without a good degree of distrust; for one must naturally conclude, that he who will tell any lie from idle vanity will not scruple telling a greater for interest. Had I really seen any thing so very extraordinary as to be almost incredible, I would keep it to myself, rather than, by telling it, give any one body room to doubt for one minute of my veracity. It is most certain, that the reputation of chastity is not so necessary for a woman, as that of veracity is for a man; and with reason; for it is possible for a woman to be virtuous, though not strictly chaste, but it is not possible for a man to be virtuous without strict veracity. The slips of the poor women are sometimes mere bodily frailties; but a lie in a man is a vice of the mind, and of the heart. Defamation and calumny never attack, where there is no weak place; they magnify, but they do not create. It is the production either of malice, cowardice, or vanity; and generally misses of its aim in every one of these views; for lies are always detected sooner or later. If I lie, or equivocate, for it is the same thing, in order to excuse myself for something that I have said or done, and to avoid the danger or shame that I apprehend from it, I discover at once my fear, as well as my falsehood; and only increase, instead of avoiding, the danger and the shame; I show myself to be the lowest and the meanest of mankind, and am sure to be always treated as such. Fear, instead of avoiding, invites danger; for concealed cowards will insult known ones. If one has had the misfortune to be in the wrong, there is something noble in frankly owning it; it is the only way of atoning for it, and the only way of being forgiven. Equivocating, evading, shuffling, in order to removed a present danger or inconveniency, is something so mean, and betrays so much fear, that whoever practises them always deserves to be, and often will be, kicked. There is another sort of lies, inoffensive enough in themselves, but wonderfully ridiculous; I mean those lies which a mistaken vanity suggests, that defeat the very end for which they are calculated, and terminate in the humiliation and confusion of their author, who is sure to be detected. These are chiefly narrative and historical lies, all intended to do infinite

honour to their author. He is always the hero of his own romances; he has been in dangers from which nobody but himself ever escaped; he has seen, with his own eyes, whatever other people have heard or read of; he has had more bonnes fortunes than ever he knew women and has ridden more miles post in one day than ever courier went in two. He is soon discovered, and soon becomes the object of universal contempt and ridicule. Remember, then, as long as you live, that nothing but strict truth can carry you through the world, with either your confidence or your honour unwounded. It is not only your duty, but your interest:

Chapter 2 : Moral Reflections, Sentences and Maxims - Wikisource, the free online library

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He distinguished himself as the most brilliant nobleman about the court, and by his share in the good graces of the celebrated Duchess of Longueville, was involved in the civil wars of the Fronde. He signalized his courage at the battle of St. Antoine, in Paris, and received a shot which for some time deprived him of his sight. By the former of these ladies, he is spoken of as holding the first rank in "courage, merit, tenderness, and good sense. Huet describes him as possessing a nervous temperament, which would not allow him to accept a seat in the French Academy, owing to his want of courage to make a public speech. The Duke de Rochefoucauld died with philosophic tranquillity, at Paris, in , in his sixty-eighth year. The "Maxims" receive a portion of their peculiar point from the very courtly scene of contemplation, and from the delicacy and finesse with which the veil is penetrated that is spread over the surface of refined society. It is well known that Swift was a decided admirer of Rochefoucauld, and his celebrated poem on his own death commences with an avowal of the fact. The family of La Rochefoucauld is one of the most ancient and illustrious in France. Its founder, according to Andrew Du Chesne, was one Foucauld, or Fulk, a cadet, as is supposed, of the house of Lusignan, or Lezignem, and connected with the ancient Dukes of Guienne, who appears, about the period A. He is described in contemporary charters as Vir nobilissimus Fulcaldus, and his renown seems to have been sufficiently extensive to confer his name on La Roche, which has ever since borne, and bestowed on his descendants, the distinctive appellation of La Roche Foucauld. Guy, the eighth Seigneur de la Roche Foucauld, is mentioned by Froissart as having performed, in the year , a celebrated tilt in the lists at Bordeaux, whither he came, attended by of his kinsmen and connections. Francis, the sixteenth seigneur, had the honor of being sponsor to, and bestowing his name on, King Francis I. The widow of his son and successor, in the year , entertained, at the family seat of Vertueil, the Emperor Charles V. The Emperor is reported by a contemporary historian to have said on his departure, that he had never entered a house which possessed such an air of virtue, courtesy, and nobility as that. Francis, the fifth count, was created the Duke de la Rochefoucauld in , and was father to Francis, the second duke, the celebrated author of the Maxims, who was born on the 15th December, The principal events of his life are matter of history rather than biography, as he was a leading actor in the numerous and complicated state intrigues which took place in France after the death of Louis XIII. It is extremely difficult at this period, and would hardly be worth while, to attempt to trace the course of these cabals and the wars to which they gave rise. Beyond the gratification of an absurd ambition, it is almost impossible to discover any object that the contending parties had in view; and the motives of individuals are still more difficult to penetrate, from the conflicting accounts given by the various actors themselves, of the transactions in which they were engaged. The impression left on the mind by a perusal of the histories of the times, is a painful sensation of the corruption of the government, the sad want of public, or even private, principle on the part of the higher classes, and the frivolity and folly generally prevalent in the society of the period. To these princes La Rochefoucauld appears to have remained faithful during all the subsequent mutations of the party. He took part in most of the military proceedings that resulted from the troubles of the times; and though he does not appear much in the character of a general, is universally allowed to have displayed the greatest bravery on all occasions. At the battle of St. Antoine, near Paris, he received a severe wound in the head, which for a time deprived him of sight, and was the occasion of terminating his military career. Before he had recovered, the Fronde had fallen before the gold of Mazarin and the arms of Turenne. La Rochefoucauld appears to have been a man of most amiable character and of high personal probity; for, amid the various party feelings of the writers of that period, scarcely any thing can be discovered in the accounts they have left which would throw discredit on him. He possessed brilliant powers of mind, but without any regular education; and an easiness of temper, combined, as it generally is, with fickleness and indecision, which is supposed to have led him to engage so constantly in the various intrigues of the time. He has left us an entertaining sketch of himself, which is subjoined, together with another character of him by

Cardinal de Retz, his great enemy, and also a character of De Retz, by La Rochefoucauld. In the leisure which succeeded to the stir of his early life. La Rochefoucauld composed the "Memoirs of his own Times," and the work on which his fame is founded, "Maxims and Moral Reflections. He appears to have taken considerable pains with their composition, submitting them frequently for the approval of his numerous circle of friends, and altering some of them, according to Segrais, nearly thirty times. Hallam observes, has been more highly extolled or more severely censured. Johnson has pronounced it almost the only book written by a man of fashion, of which professed authors had reason to be jealous. Rousseau calls it, Conf. This little collection was read with avidity; it taught people to think and to comprise their thoughts in a lively, precise, and delicate turn of expression. This was a merit which, before him, no one in Europe had attained, since the revival of letters. La Rochefoucauld is, at all events, the model of this mode of writing, in which success indeed is rare, but when attained, it has many charms for the reader. For first, it trieth the writer whether he be superficial or solid; for aphorisms, except they be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of example are cut off; discourse of connection and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off: Secondly, methods are more fit to win consent or belief, but less fit to point to action; for they carry a kind of demonstration in orb or circle, one part illuminating another, and therefore satisfy; but particulars being dispersed, do best agree with dispersed directions. And lastly, aphorisms representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire further; whereas methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest. It is, besides, no mean advantage to be spared the exertion of wading through and deciding upon the successive stages, each perhaps admitting of discussion, of a tedious and involved argument, and to be presented at once with ready-made conclusions. Where so much proof is required, men are apt to think much doubt exists; and a simple enunciation of a truth is, on this account perhaps, the more imposing from our not being admitted, as it were, behind the scenes, and allowed to inspect the machinery which has produced the result. There is, besides, a yearning after infallibility to a greater or less degree latent in every human heart, that derives a momentary gratification from the oracular nature of these declarations of truth, which seem to be exempt from the faults and shortcomings of human reason, and to spring, with all the precision of instinct, full grown to light, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter. For the sake of rendering the turn of expression more smart and epigrammatic, truth is sometimes distorted, sometimes laid down in such general and unqualified terms as sober reason would not warrant. La Rochefoucauld is by no means free from this fault, which perhaps is inseparable from the species of composition we are considering, and may be regarded as the price we pay for its other advantages. But while the style of the "Maxims" has been almost universally admired, the peculiar views of morals they present have been the subject of much cavil. Now all this confusion might be avoided by stating to ourselves wherein the idea of self-love consists, as distinguished from all particular movements towards particular external objects, the appetites of sense, resentment, compassion, curiosity, ambition, and the rest. With regard to the question whether La Rochefoucauld meant to represent self-love, in its more extended sense, as the motive of all human actions, it seems not altogether fair to charge him with the inculcation of any particular theory or system, in the same manner as if the maxims were formal deductions from a regularly reasoned treatise, instead of being, as they are, unconnected observations on mankind and their actions. It opens gates suicidally on the morals of the actor, because a long course of imposition on others invariably ends in self-deceit; "We are so much accustomed to disguise ourselves to others," as our Author remarks, "that at length we disguise ourselves to ourselves. But this assumption is still more pernicious to the interests of virtue itself To use a common illustration nothing depreciates a sound coinage more than the existence of well-executed counterfeits. Nothing tends so much to disgust men with goodness, as the hollowness and artificiality of what is palmed on them for goodness. Repeatedly disappointed in their search for the reality, they are led to doubt its existence, and it is this feeling which is embodied in the bitter exclamation of the despairing Roman: It will readily be admitted also that any inquiry into the reality of virtue must go deeply into the theory of human motives. An action may be externally virtuous; but, when the motive comes to be examined, may prove to be deserving of censure rather than commendation. And it is evident that, to constitute a virtuous action a virtuous motive is absolutely necessary. In these instances the result may be beneficial; but, so far as the actor is concerned, this

is evidently an accidental effect to which it would be preposterous to give the name of virtue. Truly he may be said to have "anatomized" man and shown what breeds about his heart. The spectacle he offers us is, it may be admitted, decidedly gloomy, and by no means gratifying to human pride; but on the other hand, La Rochefoucauld is very far from denying, as has been represented, the reality of virtue. The reason appears to be, that a general statement of a principle, as it concerns no one in particular, comes home to no one more than another; but a close and searching scrutiny, like that of the maxims, into the motives of particular actions, must raise an uncomfortable sensation in every breast, which is thus, made to feel its own failings. Men have a direct interest in maintaining appearances; if they have not the virtue, they at least may "assume it," and they are naturally irritated at the dissipation of those delusions which facilitated the assumption. There may certainly appear some want of charity in any attempt to throw discredit on the motives of an action; but in practice it will be found that every well-constituted mind, in proportion as it becomes more sensible of the numerous and inherent failings of human nature, is more and more willing to make allowance for weaknesses it knows to be so difficult to remedy, for temptations which it feels are so hard to struggle with; and no longer thirsting for. It is his own heart that they should teach him most to reflect upon. He will thus avoid any breaches of charity, and be led to the true utility of the maxims, namely, the aid they give to the extirpation of the dangerous habit of self-deceit, the habit of all others the most fatal to virtue. They can hardly fail to open the eyes of men to the various and singular modes in which self-delusion operates, the readiness with which glosses over error, the acuteness with which it discovers excuses applicable only to itself, nay, the perverse subtlety with which it would palm off its very errors as instances of virtue. No man who is thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the maxims, can pretend to that degree of mental obliquity which looks for illustrations of their working solely in the conduct of others. Should it still be considered that La Rochefoucauld presents us with too low a view of human nature to serve the purposes of morality, it should be remembered, in his defence as an author, that the times in which he lived, and the political and moral state of the society of his day, are known to have closely corresponded with the general picture he has offered us, and in this respect may be said to afford him a complete justification. Neither is it fair as before remarked, to charge La Rochefoucauld with any deliberate system of vilifying human nature, or with any theory destructive to morality. Like Montaigne, he might plead, that he was not so much an instructor as an observer: First Published in I am of a middling size, active and well proportioned. My complexion is dark, but sufficiently uniform; forehead high and tolerably large; eyes black, small and deep set, and eyebrows black and thick, but well arched. I should have some difficulty in describing my nose, for it is neither flat, aquiline, large, nor pointed; at least, I think not: My mouth is large; the lips sufficiently red in general, and neither well nor badly shaped. My teeth are white and tolerably even. I have been sometimes told that I have rather too much chin. I have just been examining myself in the glass to ascertain the fact; and I have not been able to make up my mind about it. As to the shape of my face, it is either square or oval; but which, it would be very difficult for me to say. My hair is black, curling naturally, and, moreover, thick enough and long enough to give me some pretensions to a fine head. In my countenance there is something sorrowful and proud, which gives many people an idea that I am contemptuous, although I am far from being so. My gestures are easy, indeed rather too much so; producing a great degree of action in discourse. He has taken part several conclaves, and his conduct has always increased my reputation. His natural bent is to indolence; nevertheless, he labors with activity in pressing business, and reposes with indifference when it is concluded. He has great presence of mind and knows so well how to turn it to his own advantage all the occasions presented him by fortune, that it would seem as if he had foreseen and desired them. He loves to narrate, and seeks to dazzle all his listeners indifferent by his extraordinary adventures; and his imagination often supplies him with more than his memory. He is incapable of envy or of avarice whether from virtue or from carelessness. He has neither taste nor refinement; he is amused in every thing, and pleased by nothing. He avoids, with considerable address, allowing people to penetrate the slight acquaintance he has with every thing. It never reposes out of itself, and only settles on strange objects, as bees do on flowers, to extract what is useful to it. There is nothing so impetuous as its desires, nothing so secret as its plans, nothing so clever as its conduct. We cannot sound the depths, nor penetrate the darkness of its abysses. There it is concealed from the keenest eyes, it goes through a thousand turns and changes. There it

is often invisible to itself; it conceives, nourishes, and brings up, without being conscious of it, a vast number of loves and hates. Some of these it forms so monstrous, that when brought to light it is unable to recognize them, or cannot resolve to own them. From this darkness, which conceals it, spring the ridiculous ideas it has of itself; hence come its errors, its ignorances, its grossness, and its follies with respect to itself. Hence it comes that it fancies its sentiments dead when they are only asleep, it thinks that it has no desire to arise from its repose, and believes that it has lost the appetite which it has satiated. But this thick darkness which conceals it from itself does not prevent its seeing perfectly every external object in this, resembling our eyes, which see every thing and are only blind to themselves; in fact, in its greatest interests and in its most important affairs, where the violence of its desires call for all its attention, it sees, it perceives, it understands, it imagines, it suspects, it penetrates, it divines every thing; so much so, that one is tempted to believe that each of our passions has a magic peculiar to itself. Nothing is so close and so firm as its attachments, which it vainly endeavors to break off at the appearance of the extreme evils which menace it. Sometimes however, it accomplishes in a short time, and without effort, what it had not been able to effect in the course of several years with all the efforts in its power; whence we may conclude, not unjustly, that its desires are excited by itself, rather than by the beauty and the merit of their objects; that its own taste is the price which gives them value, and the cosmetic which sets them off; that it is only itself which it pursues, and that it follows its own taste when it follows things after its taste. It is a compound of contraries, it is imperious and obedient, sincere and dissembling, compassionate and cruel, timid and daring; it has various inclinations according to the various temperaments which affect it, and devote it, sometimes to glory, sometimes to riches, and sometimes to pleasure; it changes them according to the changes of our age, our fortune, and our experience. It is indifferent to it, whether it has many inclinations, or only one, because it shares itself among many, or collects itself into one as may be necessary or agreeable to it.

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Excerpt. Chesterfield says he had been accustomed to read and translate the great masterpieces to improve and form his style. His indebtedness to Milton in his Areopagitica in the above passage is obvious.

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