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# A reflection on Moral Maxims

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# **A Reflection on *Moral Maxims***

**Katherine Byrd**

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## A Reflection on *Moral Maxims*

In *Reflections; or Sentences and Moral Maxims*, François Duc de La Rochefoucauld argues that virtues often exist as vices in disguise. He supports this idea in his maxims, arguing that “the motives that underlie conventionally virtuous behavior are often character traits conventionally thought vicious,” that “much concern with virtue in others is a dressed-up expression of self-love,” and that “vice has a complex role in happiness” (Dunkle, lecture). In this paper, I will argue there is some credence to La Rochefoucauld’s first two assertions, but they appear extreme and do not apply to all cases. Instead, I propose that a duality exists in vice and virtue and that both play an intricate role in friendship and happiness.

### Argument 1

- (1) “Passions often produce their contraries” (La Rochefoucauld §11).
- (2) The repulsion to lying is often a concealed desire to make our words appear accurate and meaningful, which attaches a virtuous light to our character and conversation (§163).
- (3) “Idleness and fear keep us in the path of duty, but our virtue often gets the praise” (§169).
- (4) No one should receive praise for acting in a virtuous manner unless they recognize the vicious disposition within them (§237).
- (5) Therefore, the motives that typically characterize moral behavior are often those which constitute vicious behavior.

What constitutes vices, virtues, and passions? La Rochefoucauld describes what may be involved with these but never gives a clear definition of them. More importantly, what is the relationship between vice and virtue and can they interact?

Aristotle, book 6 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, claims that for an action to be virtuous, it must be aimed at being true and have the right intention. One problem with basing the goodness of actions on intentions is that their content cannot explicitly be proven. Therefore, an argument asserting that the content is good (hence, virtuous) can only be assessing the behavior and not underlying intentions. The only way we would be able to dispel this idea is through empirical evidence. What then is La Rochefoucauld

suggesting when he claims that virtues are often concealed vices, and how are they associated? One answer is that behavior that appears virtuous may stem from intentions that are ultimately vicious.

Not only can vicious intentions be the cause of virtuous actions, but the interaction of the two can also influence our behavior. He explores this idea by claiming that “vices enter into the composition of virtues as poison into that of medicines. Prudence collects and blends the two and renders them useful against the ills of life” (§182). By this he means that appropriate human behavior is a product of the complex interaction between vices and virtues and that acting through prudence is accomplished through understanding this interaction and behaving according to social norms. It appears that La Rochefoucauld is suggesting that vices have value, in this case, not only in distinguishing right from wrong but, as we will also explore, in what makes us happy and in friendship.

Aristotle would disagree, arguing that prudence exercises our rationality, requiring the correct desires and the right actions for attaining those desires. He also claims that prudence is an absolute phenomenon, meaning one possesses it entirely or not at all. La Rochefoucauld would agree that prudence exercises our rationality in action, as it renders the integration of vices and virtues “useful against the ills of life,” but he would disagree that prudence requires true desires and the right actions for attaining those desires. Instead, La Rochefoucauld would argue the opposite, that no desires have purely good intentions (i.e. they are all motivated by self-interest) and are determined to be socially acceptable before the onset of action. Again, the thoughts and intentions are different from the way they appear in behavior. If prudence is a blend of vice and virtue, then this inherently goes against Aristotle's claim that prudence is absolute, and, if La Rochefoucauld's characterization of virtue is correct, then Aristotle's view of prudence and thereby virtuous behavior is unsound.

Admittedly though, some intentions must be honorable and selfless, like the intentions of parents for their children. However, one could argue that this behavior is due to the evolutionary advantage of passing on the parents' genes and that all the joy and seemingly unconditional love is primarily a product of oxytocin and other pleasure neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin that flood the brain when interacting with one's child (thereby loving behavior also supports evolutionary advantage). Though, this does not mean we love and adore our children any less; our reasoning for having children is not (consciously at least) solely to pass on our genes. Therefore, I agree with La Rochefoucauld that virtuous behavior stems from selfish intentions and, consequently, I suggest that actions and intentions possess a dual nature.

Take friendship for instance. Aristotle claimed that it was a virtue (as a state of a character) being “most necessary with a view to living” (Aristotle, book 8). Everyone needs friends, whether wealthy, destitute, young, or old. It is both instrumentally valuable (as a means to become virtuous) and intrinsically valuable (e.g. the person of commendable character is one with friends). However, when La Rochefoucauld's characterization of virtues is applied, it sculpts a very different view of what friendship can be. For example, friendship can be harmful in the sense that loving and doing things for a friend(s) takes away from other obligations we have, such as to family, school, or work. Groups of friends can also bring out lousy character traits in us depending on the group of people we surround ourselves with, for example, if the friend(s) use alcohol or drugs. Also, our friends are bound to dislike certain aspects of our character; therefore, we may ultimately mute components of our personality or cease engaging in an activity to appear more desirable to our friends or promote homogeneity within our group.

Additionally, to maintain a friendship, it may be beneficial not to act virtuously all the time. If we can indeed be ourselves among our friends, then we should be able to display a degree of our negative character traits while maintaining the special love within a perfect friendship. Thus, we see that vice plays an essential role in something as seemingly pure and virtuous as friendship.

I would also like to point out another case that illustrates the duality of friendship. La Rochefoucauld claimed that “if we judge love by the majority of its results, it rather resembles hatred than friendship” (§72), meaning that there exist a plethora of other feelings that relationships engender in addition to love. These can include (but are not limited to) jealousy (either of our friends or any deviation of their attention away from us), dependency (emotionally), and the inevitable disinterestedness (in which heartbreak begets hate). Love is complicated, and we feel attachment or a special bond to our friends. When the other person betrays us or severs this bond, it is not only emotionally, but physically painful. It is only natural to feel strong emotions against those who harmed us in this way. Perfect friendship is not immune to this pain, which is often intensified because the attachment is so robust.

Therefore, friendship involves interacting degrees vice and virtue.

Argument 2

- (1) Our virtues attract persecution and hatred, more so than our vices (La Rochefoucauld §29).
- (2) Pride is more important than humility when others commit faults. We offer our critiques less so to correct others, but to persuade ourselves that we do not possess faults (§37).
- (3) Friendship is merely a relationship with a “collection of reciprocal interests and an exchange of favors” where self-love always expects to benefit from trade (§83).
- (4) We are joyous when our friends are happy not because of our virtue or the friendship we share, but instead due to our “self-love,” which makes us feel like we too will soon reap good fortune, or that we will somehow benefit from our friend's good fortune (§14).
- (5) Therefore, much concern with virtue in others is just a dressed-up expression of self-love.

A degree of self-love is vital in any friendship; without one person contributing their importance, the relationship is unequal. Hence this relationship would not characterize a perfect friendship if a friendship exists at all. Nevertheless, does La Rochefoucauld go too far in saying that concern for our friends' actions and character traits is largely a product of self-love?

Aristotle would disagree with the first point in La Rochefoucauld's argument and respond that one with admirable character traits is an ideal friend, which would attract people to such a person rather than repulse them. Moreover, if virtues attract such hatred, then how could a virtuous person have so many friends?

La Rochefoucauld would counter with the idea that “passions produce their adversaries,” meaning that intrinsic hate for someone would produce the appearance of love behaviorally (§11). Also, there are likely distinct benefits to befriending a virtuous person, in particular, if they possess many friends, this will benefit the seeker of friendship with connections, hence maximizing their self-love. This phenomenon is especially apparent if the seeker of friendship poses as having upstanding character traits that they do not possess in reality. Nehamas discusses this idea of the relationship between virtue and the forging of friendship further in the first chapter of his work, *On Friendship*, by modifying Aristotle's argument. He suggests that instead of virtue that molds a friendship, it is the perception of virtue in the other person that molds a friendship (Nehamas: 27-8).

Aristotle would disagree with La Rochefoucauld's third and fourth points by arguing that they characterize a pleasure or utility friendship and not a perfect friendship; they stem from the selfish value of friendship, where the relationship exists only for one or both parties to benefit, which maximizes their self-love respectively. However, in a perfect friendship, we are joyous when our friends are happy because we love them, which involves desiring and acting to bring about goods for our friends, and not for the sole purpose of maximizing our self-love. The noble basis of love within a friendship, which states that " $x$  loves  $y$  because of  $y$ 's character traits  $C_1 \dots C_n$  where  $C_1 \dots C_n$  include virtues and wisdom" should, therefore, be distinguished (Dunkle, lecture).

Though La Rochefoucauld argues that friendship is inherently selfish, he may concede Aristotle's point, but with an exception: because we can only love things or people that are agreeable to us, and we experience pleasure when we prefer our friends to ourselves, our friendships can constitute perfect friendships only when we prefer our friends to ourselves (thus, putting the value of our friendship over our self-love) friendships can constitute perfect friendships (La Rochefoucauld §81). Furthermore, he would add that "however rare true love is, true friendship is rarer" because the majority of our relationships are based on self-love (§473).

Moral philosophy suggests that morality is the "most important set of values in life, and to have a moral character requires us to regard everyone as equally deserving of moral consideration" (Dunkle, lecture on Nehamas). However, friendship requires that we treat our friends with higher regard than others with whom we are less intimate, which violates this notion of morality; therefore, friendship cannot be a moral virtue. One would imagine that morality is involved with possessing a noble character, but if friendship is selfish and also constitutes a good character, then the two oppose each other; so, perhaps La Rochefoucauld's assertion that character traits traditionally thought to be upright stem from vice is not as extreme as it sounds. However, Aristotle does not claim that all virtues are moral; in this case, friendship would fall under the category of nonmoral virtues. Intimate (essentially, perfect) friendships exist between those who are not virtuous, but alike in their degree of virtue. Furthermore, synthesizing both Aristotle's and La Rochefoucauld's ideas on friendship, Nehamas suggests that "friendship need not be a beneficial relationship or moral good" (Nehamas: 95). He relies on the example of a Flaubert novel where the two friends were not virtuous but reveled in the banalities of their existence together (Nehamas: 97).

Hence, though pleasure or utility friendships apply to La Rochefoucauld's argument, perfect friendship is unique because it is not as heavily based on self-love and should be distinguished from other types. Moreover, perfect friendship is perhaps more

based on the simple comfort of merely existing in each others' presence without lavish expectation.

In conclusion, I have argued that vice and virtue can have a dual nature and play an intricate role in friendship and happiness, and hence, La Rochefoucauld's argument that vices are often virtues in disguise is often true but does not apply in all cases.

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