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Michael Moriarty, *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011. vi + 409 pp. Preface, bibliography, and index. \$125.00. U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780199580371.

Review by Marisa Linton, Kingston University.

Amongst the *Maximes* of the seventeenth-century moralist, the duc de La Rochefoucauld, was the following pessimistic statement: “Nos vertus ne sont, le plus souvent, que des vices déguisés” (p. 317). It was a viewpoint that informed La Rochefoucauld’s reading of human nature, so much so that he used this phrase as the epigraph to the final version of his text, that of 1678. Moriarty takes the idea of virtue as disguised vice for his title and a statement of the problem he will address. Virtue was a central concept in classical and early modern thought. It underpinned fundamental ideas about ethics, human nature, society and politics. Yet the problem of how to establish the authenticity of virtue as a guide for conduct was one which successive commentators have struggled to answer. How can we differentiate between virtue and vice disguised as virtue when, based on external appearances, the one can so closely resemble the other?

A fundamental difficulty here is the relationship between virtue and emotion (the passions). Are people really capable of a selfless concern for their fellows, or is self-love (*amour-propre*) a much more powerful motive behind human actions? Moriarty’s book is an extended exploration of these problems through the texts of a series of key thinkers. It begins with the ancients, then moves on to Augustine and the Christian rejection of pagan virtue. It goes on to address the search for authentic virtue in the writings of Aquinas, then on to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, followed by Montaigne, Charron and Descartes. Later chapters investigate the problem of virtue as interpreted by the Jansenist school of thought. The book concludes with four chapters devoted to La Rochefoucauld himself.

Moriarty begins with virtue in classical antiquity, focusing on attempts by Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca and Plutarch to distinguish between genuine and false virtue. Aristotle’s formulations provide the starting point to which subsequent writers would react. Moriarty shows that for Aristotle there was no incompatibility in the relationship between virtue and self-love as “he sees virtue as the form taken by a good love of self” (p. 39). In Aristotle’s eyes, the man of virtue is guided by his reason rather than his passions: his self-love is understood as a higher quality than seeking after wealth or honours. This self-love as a rational quality inclines the man of virtue “to want what is noble and most truly good, and he wants it for himself, with the best part of himself” (p. 39). For Aristotle “virtue cannot be an emotion: it must be a good disposition in regard to the emotions,” the difference being that “the virtues involve choice, the emotions not” (p. 355).

Chapter three turns to Augustine and his attack on pagan virtue. For Augustine, there was no true virtue without Christianity. Any attempt to be virtuous independently of God is nothing more than pride, which in itself is a form of self-love. Augustine claimed that the relationship between virtue and the emotions was a negative one. People thought they were being guided by reason in choosing virtue, but in reality they were slaves to their passions.

Chapters eight, ten, and eleven focus on the Jansenist response to the problem of virtue, first from the perspective of Jansenius himself, then in the writings of Nicole and Arnauld. Nicole went further than Augustine's argument that pagans could not have virtue, raising doubts about how far even Christians who were sincere in wanting to lead a moral life could avoid the temptation to pursue their own self-interest (p. 252). Nicole recognised that we can never know the depths of the human heart. We are condemned to uncertainty, about others and about ourselves: "Nous ne connoissons, ni le fond des coeurs des autres, ni le nôtre propre. Leurs véritables intentions nous sont cachées. Ne jugeons donc jamais de leurs intentions, ni du fond de leur vertu, ou de leur vices" (p. 246). Not everything about Nicole's attitude to virtue was negative, however. As Dale Van Kley pointed out, Nicole was one of the first to make the pragmatic observation that self-love and self-interest, *faute de mieux*, could have a positive, utilitarian effect in society.[1]

La Rochefoucauld's perspective is in many ways at the heart of this book. Like Augustine and the Jansenists, he denied the possibility of a virtue that was truly authentic. Men were deluding themselves to think that their motives were driven by intellectual judgements. According to La Rochefoucauld, we are led, not by our intellects but by our emotions. Ironically, we are not even aware of this: "*Amour-propre*, interest, vanity, fear sloth" are the real impulses behind most of what we like to think of as virtuous actions (p. 337). Even friendship, which for the ancients was one of the purest forms of virtue, La Rochefoucauld characterised as a subtle form of self-interest: "L'amitié la plus désintéressé n'est qu'un trafic, où notre amour-propre se propose toujours quelque chose à gagner" (p. 359). His conclusion from this (which Moriarty says we may prefer to characterise either as "depressing" or "bracing" according to taste) is that: "Moral agency is largely an illusion" (p. 357).

Moriarty characterises La Rochefoucauld as a pious, rather than a devout man. He wrote his *Maximes* primarily for the social world of the *honnête homme*, that is for the worldly man at court or in Parisian high society who conformed to certain codes of polite behaviour, without expecting too much of the morality of others—or indeed of his own. Moriarty brings out the extent to which La Rochefoucauld was operating between different concepts of virtue. One was an absolute virtue—the possibility of which he rejected. But elsewhere in the *Maximes* there is space made for a more modest workaday form of virtue, happy in its effects, even if we should not look too closely into the motives of the person who practices it.

A fundamental concern of this thought-provoking book is the way in which people insist on the authenticity of their own virtue not only in order to impose upon others, but also—and perhaps more crucially—in order to deceive themselves. All the writers with whom Moriarty engages consider this problem to one degree or another. The extreme point of scepticism about the existence of secular virtue was epitomised by the Jansenist writer, Jacques Esprit, whose book, *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*, is the subject of chapter thirteen. Moriarty demonstrates that in many ways the ideas of Esprit and La Rochefoucauld are more closely linked than is often supposed. Moriarty points to the personal connections between Esprit and La Rochefoucauld on the one hand, and Nicole and other more doctrinaire Jansenists on the other (pp. 277-278).

Some commentators have tended to overlook the importance of Esprit's contribution, preferring the succinct and witty formulations of the *Maximes*; but for Moriarty Esprit's text is a systematic and subtle work of considerable value in its own right. Esprit emphasised the point about virtue as self-delusion in the course of discussing the failures of the pagan philosophers to justify the existence of a virtue independent of God. Esprit's aim was "to strip his readers of their illusions about themselves, to convince them of the falsity of the virtues with which they credit themselves, and to persuade them to turn to God to obtain the virtues in their authentic form" (p. 285).

According to Esprit, the pagan philosophers believed their own assurances that they were motivated by authentic virtue, but in reality it was their own ambition that drove them and guided their actions,

above all their desire for praise. Other mundane and worldly motives included “advantage, glory, fear, habit” continued Esprit, quoting Montaigne (pp. 284–285). The pagan philosophers’ lack of understanding of their own inner selves stemmed from their “erroneous conception of human nature” (p. 283). One way in which we can discern the difference between authentic and inauthentic virtue, we are told, is consistency of practice. As an illustration of this point, Esprit gave the example of Cato who, a few hours before his suicide, brutally struck a slave. Such a violent act was inconsistent with Cato’s reputation for patience and fortitude, an identity which masked his suppressed anger (pp. 292–293). Thus, even the renowned Cato was more subject to passion and pride than to true virtue.

For Esprit there is no escape from the constricting web of our own innate selfishness: “*Amour-propre* directs all our virtues and virtuous actions to its own ends” (p. 284). On the other hand, Esprit was readier than the more hard-line Jansenists like Nicole, who wrote in the neo-Augustinian tradition, to acknowledge the possibility of human virtue, albeit in a limited and relativist sense (pp. 315–316). Moriarty’s reading of Esprit is one that leaves space for a “nuanced” reading of humanity’s potential for some good actions (p. 316).

Moriarty has been exploring related themes of doubt, suspicion and human frailty in early modern French thought for many years.[2] No one, therefore, is better placed than himself to write the definitive account of this subject. At sixteen chapters, Moriarty has space to explore his subjects in considerable detail and to do justice to the variety and complexity of their responses to the perennial problems of human virtue and human pride. Moriarty’s analysis of the texts is never less than illuminating, even-handed and scrupulously attuned to authorial intentions and meaning. He pays attention to gender-based distinctions in virtuous conduct, whilst acknowledging that the writers he analyses were much more concerned with male virtue than its female counterpart. The scholarship is meticulous and thorough, to the extent of quotations being given both in the original and in translation. The authenticity of virtue is a subject which has attracted growing attention from both philosophers and historians of late. The problematic nature of virtue has recently been the subject of a fine study by Jennifer Herdt (acknowledged by Moriarty in his preface), which discusses some of the same writers, whilst also including writers from the Enlightenment period.[3]

Moriarty’s book addresses the problem of authentic virtue from within the disciplines of philosophy and theology. His concern, as he makes clear from the outset, is not with the political dimensions of virtue. He does not venture into the eighteenth-century transmutations of classical republican virtue and natural virtue into a founding ideology of revolutionary politics, and indeed there is no reason why we should ask him to do so.[4] The links—and dissonances—are interesting nonetheless. The revolutionaries were as obsessed with the difficulty of distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic virtue as any Jansenist scholar, though the conclusions and consequences were altogether different. As I read Moriarty’s work I found myself thinking of how Robespierre, when he was fighting for his life in the Convention on the eve of Thermidor, chose that moment to reaffirm his passionate belief in the existence of authentic virtue as a natural emotion, the love of one’s fellows: “Mais elle existe, je vous en atteste ... vous le sentez en ce moment qui brûle dans vos âmes; je le sens dans la mienne.”[5]

By the time we come to the end this book, rather than agreeing with Robespierre, we may find ourselves giving in, exhausted, to the inexorable logic and endorsing the reaction of one of La Rochefoucauld’s readers, Madame de Schomberg, who emerged from the *Maximes* with the depressing conclusion that “il n’y a ni vice ni vertu à rien” (p. 339). But Moriarty would not have us despair. If there is a lesson to be learned it is that we need to be more aware of the true motives of others and more aware of our own. Yet with that self-awareness comes a degree of recognition and acceptance that, in the end, can be more helpful for our understanding of ourselves than any unattainable goal of authentic virtue. After putting our complacent self-delusions through the wringer of his unblinking analysis, Moriarty’s conclusion is touchingly simple: that any satisfying ethic needs to be founded not on virtue, but on love (p. 384).

NOTES

[1] Dale Van Kley, "Pierre Nicole, Jansenism, and the Morality of Enlightened Self-Interest," in Alan Charles Kors and Paul J. Korshin, eds., *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France and Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 69-85.

[2] Michael Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and idem, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[3] Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[4] Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

[5] "Contre les factions nouvelles et les députés corrompus", 8 Thermidor l'an II, 26th July 1794," in Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, eds. Marc Bouloiseau et al, 11 vols. (Paris: Société des études Robespierriistes, 1910-2007), x: p. 554.

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