

# Nietzsche and La Rochefoucauld:

## The Art of Concise and Polemical Writing

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#### Abstract

The influence of French writers of aphorism on Nietzsche is present explicitly and implicitly in his works, especially starting with *Human, All Too Human*. It was during his university years in the mid to late 1860s when Nietzsche started reading the French aphorists including LaRochefoucauld, La Bruyere, Vauvenargues, and Chamfort; according to Donnellan he discovered them when he was reading Schopenhauer. A few years later Nietzsche, his friend Paul Ree, and others immersed themselves in reading aphorisms at Meysenbug's house in Sorrento during Nietzsche's stay there from October 1876 to May 1877 (confirm dates). In this short paper, I will explore specifically LaRochefoucauld and his influence on Nietzsche's writing in the following areas: the nature of aphoristic genre, poetic techniques such as pun, polemics, and sarcasm, and insightfulness or psychological observation, to use Nietzsche's phrase. From *Human, All Too Human* (1877) until *Twilight of Idols* (1888) Nietzsche wrote and published more than 2000 aphorisms, as he perfected the art of pithy expression, many of which are full of insights and deserve special attention and careful exegesis. This paper will present ideas on reading these aphorisms, as informed by La Rochefoucauld's techniques and literary style.

*As the stamp of great minds is to suggest much in few words, so, contrariwise, little minds have the gift of talking a great deal and saying nothing.*  
La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* 142

Nietzsche spent six months in Sorrento, Italy, from October 1876 to May 1877 at the house of Malwida von Meysenbug where a group of free spirits—this is what they considered themselves to be—spent time reading, discussing, and writing. In addition to the hostess,

Meysenbug, and Nietzsche, Nietzsche's friend Paul Ree, and Albert Brenner also attended. Their readings included many French writers, including La Rochefoucauld, and Nietzsche starts writing his first book of aphorisms, *Human, All Too Human*, in this time period, a book written for free spirits. The significant place of La Rochefoucauld in Nietzsche's style is not only due to his significance in French letters, but also because he was one of the first modern aphorists Nietzsche closely read and studied. Nietzsche recognizes LaRochefoucauld's place in history in the first aphorisms of Chapter 2 of *Human, All Too Human*, as he refers to him and other French writers as "masters of psychical examination" (HAH, Aphorism 36, 32) and does not refrain from mentioning his friend, Paul Ree, among the company of masters, though not by his name. In what follows below, I will investigate LaRochefoucauld's influence on Nietzsche's aphoristic style—a bigger project would have included other aphorists such as La Bruyere, Vauvenargues, Chamfort, Lichtenberg, and Schopenhauer—and explore their relationship in the following aspects of this art of concise writing: psychological observation (or "psychical examination"); literary devices used such as puns, anaphora, alliteration, and accumulation, and polemic.

## **I. Psychological Observations**

Aphoristic literature offers many insights about the human condition. Relying on this experience and insightfulness, the aphorist experiments with language and pushes its limits beyond what is effable. The list of human conditions is endless; in my research and teaching I usually focus on insights on human emotion among the aphorists. For this paper, I have chosen self-love and pity.

La Rochefoucauld's book opens with his reflections on self-love, *amour-propre*, a phrase that is difficult to translate into English. Although it does have the connotation of love of one's

own self, it also connotes being proper in the same of having esteem or pride. In the first edition of his book published in 1665, La Rochefoucauld writes a lengthy aphorism on self-love, more than two pages, as he reveals its hidden layers; the English edition that is often used is based on the edition from 1678. In this edition La Rochefoucauld exposes this underlying “self-centeredness” or narcissism in all things that are human, which usually lies hidden (Aphorisms 2, 3, 4, 41, 81 et al) and ties with such things as self-interest. Even in acts of altruism and sacrifice, La Rochefoucauld detects self-love; the altruist, for instance, pretends not to have any interest. But for La Rochefoucauld this is only a pretense. “Self-love is subtler than the subtlest man of the world.” (Aphorism 4). Even pretension of modesty and humility, common among the pious, is a sign of self-love and self-interest. “Self-interest speaks all manner of tongues and plays all manner of parts, even that of disinterestedness.” (Aphorism 39).

The idea that we are almost always interested and altruism is only a posture of the weak to exercise power in an indirect way is a common theme in Nietzsche. In the last few aphorisms of *Daybreak* Book III, Nietzsche exposes the workings of altruism and the assumptions of “unegoistic action.” For one thing, there is no such thing as “unegoistic” for Nietzsche. Altruism is either a misunderstanding of ‘love’ or care, or an absence of love: “*Cause of ‘altruism’*.—Men have on the whole spoken of love with such emphasis and so idolized it *because they have had little of it* and have never been allowed to eat their fill of this food:...” (D, Aphorism 147). Even love itself is not bereft of the lover’s interest, which manifests itself in different forms. While being ready to die for the beloved, the lover often ensnares the beloved within the scheme of control. Nietzsche observes this aspect of love in Aphorism 14 of *The Gay Science*. “...indeed, that this love has furnished the concept of love as the opposite of egoism while it actually may be

the most ingenuous expression of egoism.” I cannot discuss it at length here, but Aphorism 21 of GS is Nietzsche’s exposition of altruism and its problems.

Another issue I would like to discuss is pity. There are not many maxims La Rochefoucauld wrote on pity. One that I found is Maxim 264 where he writes: “Pity is often feeling our own sufferings in those of others, a shrewd precaution against misfortunes that may befall us...” He does, however, speak of pity in his self-portrait, which piqued Nietzsche’s interest. There La Rochefoucauld asserts that pity should have no place in a noble soul, because it weakens the heart (*Maxims* 28). Here are the other points he makes there: a) he is not touched by pity; b) he would show compassion<sup>1</sup> and comfort people in affliction; c) pity can counteract misery and the stupidity it brings with it; d) one can show pity, but should not have it oneself (I think he means not harbor it for longer than needed). Nietzsche’s reflection on pity starts, in or around HAH Aphorism 50-- there is only one aphorism on the subject just before this one, namely Aphorism 46--with a response to this passage from La Rochefoucauld and pity and the related feelings<sup>2</sup> become central to Zarathustra’s teaching. Nietzsche accepts La Rochefoucauld’s conclusions on pity, but digs deeper and departs from his remarks on the stupidity of people (this may be an aristocratic bias on La Rochefoucauld’s part). Nietzsche adds that those who invoke pity want to inflict suffering on others. What they possess is “the power to hurt;” in this way they feel superior. “In this feeling of superiority of which the manifestation of pity makes him conscious, the unfortunate man gains a sort of pleasure...The thirst for pity is thus a thirst for

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<sup>1</sup> French, like English has two related words, pity and compassion, with their roots in Latin.

<sup>2</sup> The term Nietzsche uses for pity and related feelings is *Mitleid*. This word has been translated as ‘pity’, ‘compassion’ or ‘sympathy,’ which can be misleading to the English reader who does not know German. *Mitleiden*, in the verb form, means to suffer with; ultimately, Nietzsche is examining and questioning the way we relate to our own and others’ sufferings.

self-enjoyment, and that at the expense of one's fellow men..." (Nietzsche 39) These passages are not only Nietzsche's first insightful observations on pity, but also the beginnings of his philosophy of power. Let's read a little further from the same aphorism to see how he departs from La Rochefoucauld: "...it displays man in the whole ruthlessness of his own dear self: but not precisely in his 'stupidity', as La Rochefoucauld thinks..." Human beings are ruthless as much as they are social and will make their ruthlessness felt at the first opportunity they have; it is their power scheme. To call this stupidity is naïve and misses other layers in human relations. And finally Nietzsche asks in the spirit of a good psychological observer: "But will there be many honest men prepared to admit that causing pain gives pleasure?"

## II. Literary Devices

Like poets and other masters of the word, aphorists use a variety of literary techniques. I can only discuss a few of them here in the works of LaRochefoucauld and Nietzsche. In order to show how these literary techniques work and how LaRochefoucauld use them in similar, or sometimes different, ways, sometimes I have to include the original texts. Clearly, we need to keep in mind that French and German belong to different linguistic groups under the overarching Indo-European language family and have their own limitations and powers of expression. The following are the literary techniques I included in this paper: contrast, analogy, expression of the extraordinary, expression of the adjacent, movement among adjacent states, and the hyperbolic expression.

*Contrast.* Contrast of extremes or what will not be usually thought as opposites is presented in a variety of ways. Opposites are sometimes channeled into a single concept as in M 185: "Evil has its heroes as well as good." Here the evil and the good are directed into the idea

of ‘hero.’ This channeling of opposites may not always be clear as in “Hypocrisy is a tribute vice pays virtue.” (Maxims 218); this is not to suggest that clarity is a goal for the aphorist. Nonetheless, we are to make some sense of what is written. Here is the original: “L’hypocrisie est un hommage que le vice rend a la vertu.” (*Maxims* 56) A literal translation of this maxim would run like this: “Hypocrisy is an homage that vice renders virtue.” Through hypocrisy LaRocheffoucauld shows the paradoxical relationship between the opposites of vice and virtue. Sometimes the contrast is indirect: “Everybody complains of his memory, but nobody of his judgment.” (Maxim 89). Although memory and judgment are not opposites, the opposition lies in our relationship to them; in this maxim there is also an opposition between ‘everybody’ and ‘nobody.’

Nietzsche’s use of contrast is not dissimilar to that of LaRocheffoucauld. Let’s start with a direct contrast: “*Love and hatred.* – Love and hatred are not blind but dazzled by the fire they themselves bear with them.” (HAH 566). Two opposing qualities of love and hatred are brought together under the same theme of fire. Another maxim brings forth two oppositions in relation to truth: “*Enemies of truth.* – Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.” (HAH 483) We have two inter-lacing oppositions here, conviction vs. truth and truth vs. lie.

*Analogy.* Common to many philosophical texts, analogy is used in many aphorisms of LaRocheffoucauld and Nietzsche, but authors use analogies in their unique ways. Here is one from La Rocheffoucauld: “Simple grace is to the body what common sense is to the mind.” (Maxim 67). One sense I make of this maxim is that you either have it or not; neither grace nor common sense is something that one develops but rather something that one has. I see why ‘common sense’ is associated with the mind, but I do not see why grace is with the body. I brought this

maxim here, but it is one of those maxims I need to reflect on further. Nonetheless, it is a good example for analogy.

*Expression of the extraordinary.* Saying the unusual and the extraordinary is not a characteristic of the aphorist only, but the aphorist does it in a compact way. The impact on the reader can vary from shock to surprise or a pessimistic mood. This is exactly what the aphorist would like to induce in the reader. Here is one from La Rochefoucauld: “At times we are as different from ourselves as we are from others.” (Maxim 135) What is ordinary is that we see ourselves as one being and always the same; this is how everyday life functions, especially in our age. To say that we see our own selves differently would be labeled as a mental disorder, but it is true; it is *extraordinary* and true.

*Expression of the adjacent.* La Rochefoucauld demonstrates not only the contrasting states of character but also those that are adjacent, those that somehow overlap with one another. One example for this is in Maxim 281 where he shows the adjacent relationship between pride and envy: “Pride, which makes us so envious, also helps to keep envy within bounds.” (74). Pride works in both directions in relation to envy because of their proximity; on the one hand, it is our pride that makes us envious of other things, goods or goals; our pride says you can attain them. On the other hand, it is also our pride that sets a limit to what we can achieve. Our pride does not want loss and defeat; therefore, it will set a limit to what we seek propelled by potential envy. But pride already preempts any attempt on the part of envy before it even pops up its head. It is not as clear-cut as I present as to which feelings are adjacent to each other and which ones are not. For one thing, their proximity can be determined in many different ways. For Nietzsche, for instance, the feelings of revenge—specifically, mediated revenge--, reactivity, and *ressentiment* are associated feelings (GM I).

*Movement (or direction) between adjacent states and traits of character.* Here it is not so much the causality of character that is at stake as the mobile relationship between character traits. In other words, what character trait may lead to what? This is expressed in Maxim 490: “Love often leads on to ambition, but seldom does one return from ambition to love.” The direction the character moves is from love to ambition.

*Exaggeration or the hyperbole.* Certain points are inflated for effect and for rhetorical persuasion. This can be seen in many aphorisms where such phrases as ‘all’, ‘everyone,’ ‘nothing,’ ‘no one,’ ‘seldom,’ or ‘always’ are used or where comparatives or superlatives appear. Many of what is expressed does not apply to everyone, but nonetheless their insightfulness cannot be easily denied. In a series of maxims from 143 to 150 on praising—this technique is often called accumulation—La Rochefoucauld exposes this human trait; here is one of them: “We seldom praise except to get praise back.” (Maxim 146). What is your immediate reaction to this one? How true? Or, how false? In any case, it can be true for some in certain situations, but not for everyone and in every case. The hyperbole is needed to get the reader’s attention, to provoke the reader and thereby to produce a strong response. It is not an invitation to take sides, but rather to thinking about one’s own self and human affairs in general.

### **III. Polemical**

*Rebelliousness.* A tendency to oppose common opinions and canonical ideas runs through La Rochefoucauld’s text as he exposes why and how they are problematic. We see this, for instance, in his reflections on a variety of feelings that many consider acceptable such as pity (A 264) and jealousy (A 503) and his critique of the supremacy of the mind over the heart, an insightful, but not a systematic, critique of modern rationalism in its apex. Nietzsche’s persistent

critique of Christianity and European value-system of the modern age is a proof of his rebellious spirit. Clearly, there is a vast gap between the two spirits, which can be explained based on who they are and their historic context. La Rochefcaould is close to the beginning of the modern age; he is not a thinker with a hammer who fashions himself to be a legislator or a value-creator. He was an aristocrat, a soldier caught up in the internal strife of his country, who had things to say about human nature and society. Nietzsche, on the other hand, is positioned, with a unique philosophy, at the end of the modern age to announce its end, as the proclamation “God is dead” signifies, and to prophesize the rise of a new age. This is one reason why La Rochefoucauld’s polemic is not addressed against any specific figures of history, but Nietzsche’s is. You can hardly find any name in the writings of the former, whereas there is almost no one of historic significance whom Nietzsche does not attack in his books.

*Skepticism.* Skepticism, a school of philosophy that emerged in ancient Greece, was of no use for the excessively religious medieval age, but was revived during the Renaissance. One already finds skeptic trends in literature before LaRochefoucauld, as in Montaigne, for instance. What we find in these writers is not skepticism as is manifest in philosophy in a specifically methodological form, but rather a skeptic attitude towards all things that are accepted by people simply because they are part of a tradition. An inquisitive approach to all things human can be detected in La Rochefoucauld’s text. For instance, Maxim 113 is skeptical of the institution of marriage; many other maxims take a skeptic attitude towards love. Nietzsche takes skepticism to a higher level; let’s keep in mind that La Rochefoucauld, despite his free-spiritedness, was constrained, for better or worse, by his code of nobility. Nothing of this sort applies to Nietzsche; at young age he threw away his major constraining force, which was his Lutheranism. Despite La Rochefoucauld’s relentless critical reflections on the human condition and the

shallowness and pettiness of human character, one will not find one criticism of religion or monarchy. One may rightly attribute this to his times, the pre-Enlightenment age. On the other hand, there is almost nothing Nietzsche left untouched, in his critique, from art and religion to philosophy and science. The problems that La Rochefoucauld displays in his maxims have their connection—I would not say cause—in these areas of human experience. To put it concretely, if pity is problematic and prevalent, it is because Christianity promoted it as a value. La Rochefoucauld does not show this connection, but Nietzsche does. Examples can be multiplied, but I think my point should be clear.

### **Epilogue**

La Rochefoucauld and other writers of his time period started a new experimental genre in modern literature in which one can work on one's own self by way of self-reflection and pithy expression. On the one hand, the process of writing on the level of high style is not an easy task—Joubert presumably wrote aphorisms every day, perfecting what he wrote; on the other hand, aphoristic literature provides pathways for readers and writers at different levels for their own psychological observations and self-overcomings. It is through an aphoristic experimentation starting with HAH that Nietzsche overcame his own pessimism and romanticism and created his unique works in literature and philosophy. The aphoristic works of La Rochefoucauld, Nietzsche and others remain to be examples for anyone who embark on the path of psychological observations.

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