What I call the system of La Rochefoucauld is a certain conception of the psychology of man which tends to destroy the categories of the traditional Aristotelian ethic. Bénichou speaks of "the demolition of the hero". One recalls the portrait of the young magnanimous man, the man of great soul drawn by Aristotle. "Magnanimity", says Aristotle, "is the belief that one is worthy of great things." It is inseparable from the notion of glory: heroic exploits bring with them glory or reputation which in the last resort is their most precious reward because it confers a form of immortality. Three points arise in this connection. Firstly, the doctrine presupposes the reality of the notion of aristocracy. A man may well be virtuous without being a hero. Certain virtues, says St. Thomas, are within the reach of all men, whilst other virtues such as magnanimity, magnificence and virginity, are reserved to a restricted élite. Secondly, the magnanimous man or hero is someone who knows that he is capable of great things. This presupposes the possibility of knowing oneself with clarity and accuracy by referring directly to the content of the consciousness. Thirdly, the classical doctrine concerning the virtues and the vices rests on the pre-supposition that the individual is free to choose between the pursuit of the ones or of the others: no obscure force inside himself determines his conduct unless it be that, already distant and having exercised itself once and for all, which makes him or not, as the case may be, a member of the élite. With this slight reservation man is free to know himself as virtue, to assume his virtue, and to act in consequence. Such is the

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 9th of March 1966.
system which La Rochefoucauld is presented as demolishing. How and to what extent does he demolish it?

First, he casts doubt on the validity of the consciousness which we have of the motives of our behaviour by saying that the virtues are mere appearances which hide one fundamental reality—self-love—which is at the point of departure of all our actions. In love we think that we love the other but in reality we love only ourselves; if we give evidence of what is commonly known as courage, it may only be because we are frightened of appearing a coward; if we are moderate in victory it is in order to avoid giving a hold to the jealousy of others; if we show pity it is only in order to ensure for ourselves the pity of others at some time in the future or it may be out of vanity, idleness or fear. Whatever be the motive the self alone benefits. As for gratitude, it is merely a secret desire to receive greater gifts, and so on. All the so-called virtues are masks which self-love takes on in order the better to hide itself and to arrive at its ends. La Rochefoucauld, then, denies any enlightening virtue to consciousness. Man is the plaything of self-love which blinds him to the true motives of his conduct.

Secondly, man is not free. He is subject to the laws of a rigorous determinism and to the vagaries of chance. That is to say that he is conditioned by his temperament, the source of his passions, and by the situation created by circumstances which are constantly changing. The idea that man is conditioned by his temperament is an old one but in the previous decades it had been given a new lease of life thanks to the work of the Spanish doctor Juan Huarte, entitled The Examination of Minds, of which numerous editions were published throughout the seventeenth century. Starting from the premise that the temperament is the principle of all actions of the reasonable soul, Huarte sets out to find what qualities make man fit for different professions and trades, but, as

1 Maxim 262: "There is no passion in which the love of self reigns so powerfully as in love...."
Maxim 374: "If one imagines that one loves one's mistress for the love of her one is greatly deceived."

2 Maxim 213: "The love of glory, the fear of shame, the design of making one's fortune, the desire to make one's life pleasant and agreeable and to humble others are often the causes of the courage so celebrated amongst men."
far as we are concerned, what is important are the consequences which follow from this doctrine: if all our actions are the resultant of a conflict of desires themselves arising from a sort of chemistry involving the temperature of the blood and the qualities of the humours, it is obvious that the notion of the moral responsibility of man is, to say the least, weakened. It is true that Huarté states that, this being the case, all virtuous action must be attributed to the intervention of a special grace, but for the irreligious his system appears valid without the introduction of considerations of this kind. This follows from the text in which Huarté writes: "If a man is capable of accomplishing a virtuous action when the flesh is opposed to it, I say that that is only possible when man receives the external help of a special grace. For the qualities by which the temperament operates have a force superior to any purely human resolution to act virtuously", and Huarté goes on: "I said, when the flesh is opposed to it, because men may well appear virtuous by the weakness of their desires. Such is the case of chastity in a man who is cold." La Rochefoucauld fully accepts this theory. "The strength and the weakness of the mind are ill-named; they are indeed only the good or bad disposition of the organs of the body", he writes in maxim 44.1 So it is then that the behaviour of the individual exists already potentially in the temperament and is exteriorized in a situation arising by chance.2 Such is La Rochefoucauld's vision of man, such is the system which has not ceased, since the seventeenth century, to intrigue and to scandalize.

1 Also Maxim 122: "If we resist our passions, it is rather through their weakness than through our strength"; Maxim 220: "Vanity, shame and above all temperament are often the cause of the valour of men and the virtue of women"; and Maxim 237: "No one deserves to be praised for his goodness if he have not the strength to be wicked. All other goodness is, more often than not, merely laziness or weakness of the will." This Maxim comes very close to the observation of Huarté himself who writes: "Many are morally good only because they have neither the intelligence or the skill to be wicked" (L'Examen des Esprits, Amsterdam, 1672, p. 349).

2 Maxim 344: "Most men have, like plants, hidden properties which chance causes to be revealed"; and Maxim 345: "Circumstances cause us to be known to others and even more to ourselves."
It is obvious that in the course of the centuries the work of La Rochefoucauld has been the object of numerous enquiries. First one, then another aspect of his thought has been emphasized. The Jansenists, after having begun by applauding, quickly realized that, although La Rochefoucauld's description of man was very similar to their own, La Rochefoucauld had no intention of leading man to God. The misunderstanding was rapidly dissipated. In the eighteenth century, the tendency was affirmed to turn the maxims into a practical manual. The edition of 1714 of Amelot de la Houssaye is significant from this point of view. "As he was very well versed", one reads in the *advertissement du libraire*, "in everything which concerned history and politics, he added to the maxims things drawn from these two sciences. He embellished them with passages and facts which might serve them as proofs or at least place them in a clearer light, and he showed that, after all, La Rochefoucauld advanced nothing which the most talented writers in all the centuries had not themselves advanced and which was not confirmed by frequent examples taken from ordinary civil life", so that the edition presents itself, says the editor, as "the work of two excellent men who, born with the most happy dispositions, treated the same matter after having studied it differently. One will see what they learnt about it, the one in the movements of the Town and the Court, the other in the repose of solitude and study, so that we have here a précis of all the benefit which can be acquired in the frequenting of the highest society and the reading of the best books." The same formula is adopted by the Abbé de la Roche in his edition of 1737, but as one advances further in the century one finds the maxims attacked as being dangerous. "Young men, and even others", says the Abbé de Castres, "for lack of thought, have let themselves be seduced and have even used this important witness in order to support


2 Les pensées, maximes et réflexions morales de M. le Duc... onzième édition, augmentée de remarques critiques, morales et historiques, sur chacune des réflexions. By M. l'abbé de La Roche. Paris, 1737.
false, absurd, and sometimes dangerous ideas”

With its emphasis on the importance of personal experience, the Romantic period saw a proliferation of attempts to explain the maxims by reference to the personality and the life of the author. Sainte-Beuve emphasizes what, according to him, the philosophy of La Rochefoucauld owes to the events which he had lived through before 1652: the conspiracies against Richelieu first, against Mazarin later, and finally the Civil Wars. Victor Cousin accuses him of having, in his maxims, painted his own portrait, and throughout the century people took sides for or against La Rochefoucauld according to whether or not, following Rousseau, they considered that man is fundamentally good. A little later the discovery of the form of the maxim was made and it was often presented as a principle which determined the content. It was Taine who inaugurated this tendency in an important article in the *Revue de l'Instruction Publique* in 1855. “Do not let us forget”, says Taine, “that in a maxim or sentence, form determines the content; in this type of style one inclines towards the paradox in order to reach art. Maxims on the human heart are not geometrical theorems and literary truths have the right to be half falsehoods.” The same point of view is taken up thirty years later by Edouard Droz. “No form is more perfidious to the writer than the maxim. An author seeks to make a work of small dimensions filled with meaning and strong of expression. He accumulates in it the most energetic terms, he condenses the thought and, for lack of space to put in the necessary attenuations, he does without them. In this way a particular truth becomes generalised, the accident turns itself into a law, one class of man becomes all humanity, one sentiment is taken for the whole soul.”

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1 Abbé S*** de Castres, *Les Trois Siècles de la littérature française ou Tableau de l'esprit de nos Ecrivains* (La Haye, 1781), t. iv, p. 114.
3 Victor Cousin, *La Jeunesse de Madame de Longueville*.
Others, notably Dreyfus-Brisac and the American critic Grubbs sought for the literary sources of the maxims both in the authors of antiquity and in the work of the moderns.¹

Finally, in the last twenty years, a very large number of scholars have been attracted to the case of La Rochefoucauld. Editions of the maxims have followed each other rapidly since the last war, prefaced by men like Lacretelle, Hoog, Barthes, Starobinski, etc., and we have had important articles, amongst others, by W. G. Moore and Louis Hippeau.² If one were to attempt to characterize the most recent criticism in a few sentences, to indicate its principle lines of force, its particular orientation, one would say that it tends to emphasize the multiple, the diverse and the absence of systematization in the thought of La Rochefoucauld. It is significant that one of the articles of Starobinski is entitled "The complexity of La Rochefoucauld". For him, La Rochefoucauld is not the man whom La Bruyère described as a man of a single thought. Through an ingenious analysis, Starobinski arrives at the conclusion that there is present in La Rochefoucauld a double thought. In one category of maxims, simplicity, instead of coinciding with the exclusive motivation of self-love, situates itself on the plane of appearance, and it is behind this appearance that the complexity is to be found. For example, mercy for La Rochefoucauld is to be decomposed into vanity, idleness and fear. It is the appearance, mercy, which is simple, and the reality which is complex. Nothing is simple once one passes the stage of appearance and Starobinski quotes the maxim "Perfect valour and complete cowardice are two extremities which one finds rarely. The space which is between them is vast and contains all the other forms of courage. There is no less difference between them than between faces and humours." In other words La Rochefoucauld is much more sensitive to the differences which exist between men than he

is to their resemblances. For him it is much easier to know man in general than to know man in particular. The same tendency is present in the work of W. G. Moore. There are no simple sentiments for La Rochefoucauld, he states. All sentiment is decomposable and he quotes the original form of the maxim 106 which is as follows: “It would be impossible to count all the types of vanity; in order to be able to do so we would have to know the detail of things and that is almost infinite. That is why so few people are knowledgeable and that our knowledge is superficial and imperfect. One describes things instead of defining them.” Although both Starobinski and Moore emphasize the acute consciousness which La Rochefoucauld had of the diversity of men and the contradictions of the individual, their interpretations from that point diverge. For Starobinski “the world of La Rochefoucauld is given up to the diversity which knows no law. There is further no place for reasonable knowledge or for reasonable action, extreme nominalism only authorises a resigned scepticism. So it is that La Rochefoucauld ruins all possibility of action not only by saying that we are determined by interior forces beyond our control but also by refusing to attribute to the human world any constancy which could have permitted us, up to a point, to retake possession of our surroundings and of ourselves.” Moore, on the other hand considers that the great novelty of the maxims is the importance which La Rochefoucauld attaches to the will. Reasonable action is rendered impossible by the mobility and the diversity which La Rochefoucauld sees everywhere but that does not prevent us from acting, on the contrary, and Moore quotes the original form of maxim 30 where La Rochefoucauld hesitates between two striking variants “Nothing is impossible in itself, there are ways which lead to all ends, and if we had enough will we would always have enough means”, and “One can always do what one wishes provided that one wishes it hard enough”. Men are judged by La Rochefoucauld by the force of their character.

By stressing the diversity in La Rochefoucauld's thought and by emphasizing the contradictions which he sees around him, and consequently, the contradictions which he expresses, is one not in danger of overlooking one of his greatest, and perhaps most significant originalities: the search for a form of unity? Jacques de Lacretelle states that La Rochefoucauld took nothing from philosophy and that the proof lies in the fact that he contradicts himself often, like someone who lets himself be guided by day to day observation.1 But may not one well think that the significance of La Rochefoucauld's thought lies less in the degree of truth, in the philosophic sense, which his maxims contain, than in the method and the intention which subtend them? To ask, as Lacretelle does: "is La Rochefoucauld always true?" is to condemn oneself to an endless and inconclusive debate.

One maxim in particular, taken in conjunction with certain others, would appear to open a door to La Rochefoucauld's intimate convictions. It is the maxim 65: "There is no praise which is not given to prudence and yet it is incapable of allowing us to foresee the slightest event." It is obvious that La Rochefoucauld is not using the word prudence here in its full traditional sense. One recalls the definition of Aristotle: "Habitus agendi vera cum ratione, circa ea quae homini bona vel mala sunt"; of Saint Augustine: "Rerum apetendarum et fugiendarum scientia"; of Saint Thomas: "Recta ratio agibilium." Something is lacking in the use made of the word by La Rochefoucauld. The bishop of Bellay, Jean-Pierre Camus, gives us an excellent analysis of the word prudence and lists the various qualities which we require in order to become prudent: memory of the past in order to help us act in the future; an upright understanding which is the instrument of sober judgement; docility to lessons and examples; a certain suppleness of mind by which we adapt ourselves to circumstances of time, place and persons; foresight by which we may predict events in advance; reason directed by the understanding; circumspection and caution.2 Prediction then is only one of the elements entering into the classical

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definition of prudence; for La Rochefoucauld, on the other hand, it is synonymous with prudence.

Further, La Rochefoucauld frequently denies the value of experience. "One can say that vices await us in the course of our lives like successive hosts with whom we have to stay, and I doubt if experience would cause us to avoid them, if it were permitted to us to tread the same path twice."1 Time and again, he emphasizes the role of chance. "Our wisdom is no less at the mercy of chance than our wealth,"2 "Chance causes our virtues and our vices to appear as the light causes to appear objects,"3 "Chance and temperament govern the world."4 And it is precisely this predominance of chance which conditions La Rochefoucauld's conception of the nature of action. Here, he is very close to Machiavelli, whose lines each one recalls: "I know that many have thought and still think that things of this world are governed by divine Providence or by chance, in such a way that human prudence is powerless against events; it would be useless then to labour and to seek to forestall them or direct them. The revolutions of which we have been and still are witnesses are such as to give credence to this opinion from which I sometimes have difficulty in preserving myself, when I consider how far these events go beyond all our conjectures. And yet, since we have free will, we must, I think, recognize that chance governs half of our actions and that we direct the rest."5 Now how does Machiavelli represent chance? As a river which threatens at every moment to overflow and which must be contained. Machiavelli's prudence calls therefore for the qualities of the fighter. And La Rochefoucauld does not think otherwise. Prudence is not a question of calculation but of struggle. And that is why the hero remains possible, remains present in the maxims, the hero whose energy, whose virtue gives the lie to determinism and breaks the mechanisms of chance. It is a moral rather than an intellectual force. "Great souls," he says

1 Maxim 191. Also Maxim 57, in its original form: "Although the prudence of ministers takes credit for the greatness of their actions, these are very often the effect of chance or of some small design."

2 Maxim 323. 3 Maxim 380. 4 Maxim 435.

5 Machiavelli, The Prince, chap. XXV.
in one of the suppressed maxims, “are not those who have less passions and more virtue than common souls, but those who have greater designs.”¹ And again, “Moderation is the languor and the idleness of the soul, as ambition is its activity and its ardour”.²

La Rochefoucauld denies then to experience the capacity of foresight. In spite of this he was, as we know, a great reader of history. The inventory drawn up after his death reveals that nearly a half of the contents of his library was formed by works of history. We know also the tenor of the addition which he made to the document concerning the education of children composed by his friend Madame de Sablé, who had stated her belief that it was futile to instruct children in history and that the value of examples taken from history was negligible. La Rochefoucauld, on the contrary, asserted the necessity of giving historical examples where Madame de Sablé had professed a direct, rational teaching of ethics.³ But in so doing La Rochefoucauld is not necessarily in contradiction with himself. All that he denies to experience, be it acquired directly in the world, or indirectly through the medium of history, is the power to serve as a basis for prudence conceived as a means of foreseeing the course of events with the scientific accuracy which he requires. And we come here upon one of the major preoccupations of the century: how and to what extent can some sort of scientific rigour be introduced into human affairs? Or, to be more precise: some sort of mathematical rigour. “What order can one give to Ethics, amongst the disorder of so many human actions which are its object”, asks Camus in 1610, and he continues: “But if we turn our eye toward our Mathematics, we see nothing but order, polish, elegance, clarity and perspicacity.”⁴ The foundations of all the other disciplines, Philosophy, Jurisprudence, Medicine, are weak when compared with the solidity of Mathematics, but, says Camus, the more closely their demonstrations comply with

mathematical rules the more probable they become. How is one to proceed in order to come as near as possible to the construction of an ethic, and, by extension, of a politic, of which one can say that they are a form of science? The century is unanimous: by analysing the passions of man. "This science", says Alamos de Barrientos in the important discourse which precedes his commentary on Tacitus, "allows us to know human passions in order to arrive at our ends; to dissimulate if necessary, to discover the designs of others in their actions and counsels; to act wisely in the administration of life, in whatever rank, and to acquire the rules and counsels necessary to the conquest of kingdoms, to their preservation and prosperity."

It is true that Alamos adds: "Although I am aware that, taking the term in its logical purity, one cannot, strictly speaking, call this prudence of State a science, because its conclusions are not always evident nor applicable at all times, any more than the outcome that one expects. Although founded in reason and valid in the generality of cases, they are not therefore sufficient to allow us to foresee infallibly the action of an individual who can always find in his free will the force necessary to overcome his natural inclinations." In spite of this scrupulous reservation, it is obvious that the author's intention is to bring a matter which is to some extent rebellious to a scientific structure as near as possible to the norms of a science. The same tendency, in a more self-confident form, is present in the work of Hobbes, whose scorn for a prudence born of experience is unbounded and to which he opposes as ideal sapience, presented as infallible. It would not be absurd to attribute to La Rochefoucauld similar preoccupations.

First, the very idea of seeking to explain human conduct by reference to a single unifying principle—self-love—is in itself not without analogy to the idea of the scientist who reduces the physical world and its complexity to measurable space and movement as did Descartes, or to the electron in more modern times. And to pursue to its ultimate conclusions the application of a hypothesis of this nature is also scientific in spirit.2 Behind the

1 Alamos de Barrientos, Tácito español, Madrid, 1614, Discurso para inteligencia de los Aforismos, uso y provecho dellos (not paginated).
diversity and contradictions, one must see everywhere the one unifying principle, as La Bruyère so well perceived. In fact, the notation of the diverse becomes a veritable necessity. It has often been repeated that when, with successive editions, La Rochefoucauld tempered his generalizations with the addition of words like "often", instead of "always", "most men", in place of "all men", and so on, he did so under the humanizing influence of Madame de la Fayette. No proof of this exists. On the contrary, it would seem perfectly compatible with the spirit in which he elaborated his system that he should seek scrupulously to define the limits of its validity. And at the same time, by emphasizing the diverse and the contradictory on the level of appearances, he is also laying stress on the extent to which his principle is valid.

Furthermore, in common with other writers of his generation, La Rochefoucauld is not devoid of utilitarian intentions. Taine and Droz saw the maxim only as a literary form, and suggested that this alone determined the content. One may think that they failed to understand the very nature of the maxim. The maxim is a form which is intended to receive, to use a word which Alamos uses concerning his aphorisms on Tacitus, the *quintessence* of a thought, a meditation, an experience, in such a way that it becomes a principle, a basis for prudence, for a prudence which does not depend on experience alone. The maxim comes from a reflection on the real and is intended to authorize a return to the real at a level of greater awareness. It is obvious, therefore, that the *Maxims* of La Rochefoucauld are inseparable from his life in general and his *Mémoirs* in particular. Comparing Guicciardini and Machiavelli, Federico Chabod writes: Guicciardini is "hardly concerned with the reconstruction of the event, which too often constitutes a mere diversion for his inquiring mind", whereas in the case of Machiavelli "such research at once strikes a deep chord of feeling, so that it becomes the centre of a life that is neither apathetic nor amorphous, and returns to his thought with new significance, whence his creativeness springs", and Chabod draws attention to the "profound difference between the psychological analysis of Guicciardini and that of Montaigne and of the great French writers of the seventeenth century, e.g.
La Rochefoucauld states, "With them, he says, "the capacity to probe human motives is itself human in origin... in Guicciardini the same capacity is often purely intellectual in its inspiration. The Mémoirs do not become Maxims." The Mémoirs do not become Maxims": that is the essential. In the case of La Rochefoucauld the Mémoirs do indeed become Maxims. There is a transfer of experience from one level to another, a process of decanting in which the particular gives place to the general which then becomes the possession of all men, and provides them with an instrument of action for the future. Not, it is true, of the type of action which is envisaged in the maxims of Gracián. The maxims of Gracián are of a very different nature from those of La Rochefoucauld: they form a body of precepts which are intended, if applied, to enable one to have a conduct in the world which will produce success. They do not rest on an all-embracing theoretical basis as do the maxims of La Rochefoucauld; they have not the same generalizing pretentions. But to oppose the work of these two authors, and to say that Gracián makes a call for action, whilst La Rochefoucauld represents an immobilization of life reflecting on itself, would seem to neglect the simple fact that the maxim must, by its very nature, stand or fall according to its degree of usefulness. And that is why the question which has been so often asked: is La Rochefoucauld's system true, is a false question. It is obvious to modern psychology that man is not reducible to the single motivation of self love: it is not true in the strict sense of the word, but what we have to ask ourselves is the following question: can we, be accepting the hypothesis, make reasonably accurate predictions concerning the conduct of our fellow beings, and, if the answer is in the affirmative, then the hypothesis is useful and consequently, from a certain point of view, true.