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THE CHESTERFIELD MYTH AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ETHICS

THE LITERARY REPUTATION of the fourth Earl of Chesterfield is, as is Samuel Johnson's, inextricably linked and confused with his reputation as a human being. With Johnson, there are always those who suspect that the confusion of Boswell's Johnson with Johnson, the writer and critic, is all to the advantage of that famous man. It is not so with Chesterfield, whose standing as a writer has been aspersed not only by the moral strictures passed upon his writing but also by his reputation as a father, and as a politician. As a result, it may be a valid endeavour to attempt to dispel, in part, the *idée fixe* which has imposed itself upon the man and the father. Indeed, it may be said, without exaggeration, that the bulk of the critical material extant pertaining to Chesterfield is engaged in proving, or disproving, that he was a prurient and sometimes evil old man. Yet an examination of the letters will show that Chesterfield's ethical and religious position is hardly unusual for an eighteenth-century gentleman of his breeding and education.

The early letters to the son and the entire collection of letters to the godson reveal Chesterfield constantly at work in the fields of religion and ethics. It is true that less time is spent upon religion, particularly in the letters to his son, but as Chesterfield said himself, both of the boys were for the most part in the hands of tutors who were also clergymen, and he looked to the tutors to direct their religious education. It might well be suggested that Chesterfield rarely showed reluctance in intruding on academic subjects in which the tutors were quite as well able to do the job, and it would be folly to suggest that Chesterfield was not rather lukewarm about religion. In general, however, any scepticism about Christianity is confined to his letters to adults, and the rare remark which might suggest his somewhat deistic position appears in letters to his son Philip only after his son had reached maturity. The letters to the godson (all of them written while he was still a child) do, in fact, contain constant reminders of man's duty to God:

Though I generally write to you upon those subjects which you are now chiefly

employed in, such as history, geography, and French, yet I must from time to time remind you of two much more important duties which I hope you will never forget, nor neglect. I mean your duty to God, and your duty to Man. God has been so good as to write in all our hearts, the duty that he expects from us; which is adoration and thanksgiving, and doing all the good we can to our fellow creatures.¹

There is certainly none of the worldly-wise snickering that his critics sometimes suggest is a constant accompaniment of his idea of success in the world. "You owe all the advantages you enjoy to God, who can and who probably will, take them away, whenever you are ungrateful to him, for he has justice as well as mercy".¹ He never suggests to the children anything but complete acceptance of the existence and the power of God. There seemed to be nothing to discuss, not only because of the kind of tutors which the children had, but because it was a matter quite out of his hands—and quite out of theirs.

I have long since done mentioning your great religious and moral duties, because I could not make your understanding so bad a compliment, as to suppose that you wanted or could receive any new instructions upon those two important points. Mr. Harte [one of Philip's tutors], I am sure, has not neglected them; besides they are so obvious to common sense and reason, that commentators may (as they often do) perplex, but cannot make them clearer (IV, 1251).

There was no need for more than *pro forma* statements about religion; the matter had been taken care of by a power higher than that of a father: "Religious duties or obligations, are to love God and keep His commandments, which He has in truth written in the heart of every rational creature" (VI, 2609).

Chesterfield avoids the problem that Locke precipitated on the century when he banished innate ideas. Chesterfield, however, has a good deal of Locke in him, and his appeal to common sense and reason reminds one of the great philosopher. Locke, of course, limits himself to a promulgation of divine law through the light of nature or the voice of revelation, but the tone of one of his statements is close to that of Chesterfield:

That God has given a rule whereby men should govern themselves, I think there is nobody so brutish as to deny. He has a right to do it; we are his creatures; he has goodness and wisdom to direct our actions to that which is

best, and he has power to enforce it by rewards and punishments of infinite weight and duration in another life; for nobody can take us out of his hands.²

Chesterfield insists, in a similar manner, that the subject need not perplex the child; the duty is perfectly obvious, and for good measure is engraved in the heart of man. Certainly there is never in the letters the slightest suggestion of disbelief, and if the subject of religion is not treated as fully as some of his critics would like, its importance to life is never depreciated. His own grandfather, George Savile, First Marquess of Halifax, can bring his common-sense suspicion of religious enthusiasm to bear on the problem with little self-consciousness: "Religion doth not consist in believing the Legend of the *Nursery*, where Children with their *Milk* are fed Tales of Witches, Hobgoblins, Prophecies, and Miracles". Nothing quite as obvious as this ever reached the eyes of Chesterfield's children in his letters, but there is no doubt that he shared Halifax's restraint. He was at one with the "common-sense" school of his age which shunned enthusiasm on the one hand and a too-intent examination of the truths of religion on the other. As Halifax said, "Religion is a chearful thing, so far from being always at *Cuffs* with *Good Humour*, that it is inseparably united to it. . . . A wise *Epicure* would be *Religious* for the sake of Pleasure; Good Sense is the Foundation of both; and he is a *Bungler* who aimeth at true *Luxury*, but where they are join'd". Chesterfield's mind was very much of the same kind as that of his grandfather and "hath the Privilege of being free from Passions".³ Religion was, as it was for Halifax, a private thing and one that was not to be loosely bandied about in public:

Religion is by no means a proper subject for conversation in a mixed company. It should only be treated among a very few people of learning, for mutual instruction. It is too awful and respectable a subject to become a familiar one. Therefore, never mingle yourself in it, any farther than to express a universal toleration and indulgence to all errors in it, if conscientiously entertained; for every man has as good a right to think as he does, as you have to think as you do, nay in truth he cannot help it (VI, 2721).

One could indulge in sophistry about the foregoing passage in order to claim for Chesterfield a higher seriousness about religion than he would claim for himself. The truth is that, in part, his motive for raising the subject was to instruct his godson in the proper and improper subjects for social conversation. This motive, however, does not detract from the fundamental good sense of

the advice and the obvious generosity with which he expects the boy to view the spiritual divagations of humanity.⁴ This same tolerance appears in a letter to the son (while on tour) about Roman Catholicism, which Chesterfield fears may precipitate feelings of superiority and derision in the young Anglican: "Every man seeks for truth; but God only knows who has found it. It is, therefore, as unjust to persecute, as it is to ridicule, people for those several opinions, which they cannot help entertaining upon the convictions of their reason (III, 1007). It is true, as Dobrée suggests in his introduction to the *Letters*, that religion is a light burden for Chesterfield, but more to the point is the obvious fact that he, like so many of his generation, believed that he was not equipped by his Maker to know very much about religion. "I wish mankind would condescend to be respectfully ignorant of many things, which it is impossible they can ever know whilst in this world. But no, we must know everything; and our pride will not let us own our ignorance" (To the Bishop of Waterford, VI, 2429). If he is sometimes dogmatic, he is only so because he refuses to go farther than he believes human reason is capable of extending itself. "If I believe my own existence, I believe His; it cannot be proved *a priori*, as some have idly attempted to do, and cannot be doubted of *a posteriori*. Cato says, very justly, *And that He is, all nature cries aloud*" (To Waterford, V, 2157). His inability to grasp the mysteries of religion and his distaste for such attempts sometimes take amusing forms: he cannot, for instance, appreciate Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Besides, not having the honour to be acquainted with any of the parties in his poem, except the man and the woman, the characters and speeches of a dozen or two of angels, and of as many devils, are as much above my reach as my entertainment" (V, 1952-53). Visiting Bolingbroke in France in 1741, he could only look with amusement upon the old politician's interest in philosophy: "He is plunged in metaphysics, and willingly neither speaks, nor speaks of anything else. He says, indeed, it is only to expose them he goes so deep into them. . . . I begged some share of his time for history . . . but the truth is the other studies engross him. I am sorry for it" (To George Lyttleton, II, 474). He is, in fact, not only modest about his own ability to know much about God, but also, as are so many of his contemporaries, reluctant to search too deeply into a problem which has caused so much discord in the English nation.

Hawkins brought me the other day your kind present of Dr. Seed's *Sermons*. I have read some of them, and like them very well; but I have neither read nor intend to read those which are meant to prove the existence of God, because it

seems to me too great a disparagement of that reason which He has given us, to require any other proofs of His existence than those which the whole and every part of the creation afford us (To Waterford, V, 2157).

There is a Leibnitzian streak in Chesterfield, and he accepts the "rightness" argument which informs his friend Pope's *An Essay on Man*. Not only does he accept the "rightness" of this world, but he also allies himself with the group which was able to see that creation in rather cautious but optimistic lights.

In the general course of things, there seems to be, upon the whole a pretty equal distribution of physical good and evil, some extraordinary cases excepted; and even moral good and evil seem mixed to a certain degree; for one never sees anybody so perfectly good, or so perfectly bad, as they might be. Why this is so, it is vain for us upon this subject to inquire, for it is not given us yet to know. I behold it with a respectful admiration, and cry out *O altitudo!* (V, 2366).

The reluctance and discretion with which he speaks of religion is quite clearly related to this attitude of acceptance (and, of course, to his idea of decorum) of God's world as we see it. There is never a scintilla of doubt in the letters to the children, and his insistence upon withholding judgment about other men's beliefs could only have had a salutary effect. In refusing to proselytize, he did the children no harm, and he exemplified the best qualities of the Deistic position: its diffidence, caution, and quiet confidence in the fundamental goodness of God's creation.

It must not be thought, however, that Chesterfield's reluctance about religion precluded him from teaching ethics. He was too much a latter-day Roman for that to happen. If religion was best accepted without much thought, the ethics of everyday life were to be constantly in the mind of the child; God expected that man would fulfil his duty not only to Him, but also to his fellow men. On this aspect of conduct, Chesterfield can hardly be faulted by his critics: "To the Roman father education was not a matter of instruction from books or of cultivating aesthetic appreciation in his children, but rather a means of inculcating an indelible reverence for a few definite moral qualities, and of imparting such practical skills as were essential to good farming and brave fighting".⁵ The simple ethic of the Roman Republic cannot completely illustrate the Roman influence upon Chesterfield, but he, as did those Latin fathers, believed in the early and constant instruction in social morality. Later Cato, Cicero, Quintilian affirmed the necessity of

early and careful moral training. Quintilian believed that children, however young, could distinguish between right and wrong, and his orator was to be, first and foremost, a good man. Cicero's orator is to be equally responsible:

But of the two virtues, honesty and wisdom, the former is the most powerful in winning the confidence of mankind, for honesty without wisdom has influence sufficient of itself; but wisdom without honesty is of no effect in inspiring confidence; because, when we have no opinion of a man's probity, the greater his craft and cunning, the more hated and suspected he becomes; honesty, therefore, joined to understanding, will have unbounded power in acquiring confidence; honesty without understanding can do a great deal; but understanding without honesty can do nothing.⁶

Roger Coxon in his book, *Chesterfield and His Critics* (1925), chooses to trace Chesterfield's attitude towards public morality completely to the second book of the *Offices*, and it is true that the Earl often follows Cicero word for word. It is not, however, necessary to bring Chesterfield so close to a single author, since he exemplifies in the main the common and prevailing attitude to which the eighteenth-century gentleman subscribed. Hume might kick against the pricks of reasonable morality in the mid-century, but Chesterfield and his fellows had formed their characters in an older school:

Man was impelled by self-interest to seek pleasure and to avoid pain according to Locke; or, according to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, he was a benevolent and social creature, moved by taste for the beauty of moral actions or by sympathy, and prone to promote the happiness of his fellow man. Even more frequently self-interest and benevolence were combined in some system, for enlightened self-interest was proved time and again to be identical with the welfare of the social group.⁷

Chesterfield saw two duties: to God and to man. Duty to man was, in part, an extension of duty to God, but it also included rewards in this world: "I am sure you know that it is your most important moral duty, to do to others what you would have them do to you, and would you have them civil to you and endeavour to please you? To be sure you would; consequently it is your duty as well as your interest to be civil to, and to endeavour to please them" (VI, 2601). Shaftesbury might come to his somewhat similar idea of social morality through a labyrinth of suggestions; there is no such maundering in Chesterfield: "Pray let no quibbles of lawyers, no refinements of casuists, break into

the plain notion of right and wrong, which every man's right reason, and plain common sense, suggest to him. To do as you would be done by, is the plain, sure, and undisputed rule of morality and justice" (IV, 1231). Social duty cannot elude a man who thinks, a man who knows his relation to society and its relation to him.

The fact was that for Chesterfield and many of his contemporaries morality made much less difficulty than religion. "Morality was presumed to be as absolutely true as a proposition in geometry".⁷ Cicero's four divisions of virtuous acts were perfectly obvious to the early eighteenth-century gentleman: they consist "in either sagacity and the perception of truth; or in the preservation of human society, by giving to each man his due, and by observing the faith of contracts; or in the greatness and firmness of an elevated and unsubdued mind; or in observing order and regularity in all our words, and in all our actions, in which consists moderation and temperance".⁸ Shaftesbury weighed morality against religion and found an answer which might have come from one of Chesterfield's letters: "If we are told a man is religious, we still ask, 'What are his morals?' But if we hear at first that he has honest moral principles, and is a man of natural justice and good temper, we seldom think of the other question, 'Whether he be religious and devout?'"⁹

It does not appear to have been noticed just how close Chesterfield sometimes is to Shaftesbury. It is true that he always is careful to inform the boys of the rewards which virtue brings not only in kind but also in terms of success and reputation. Yet the high standard of excellence which he sets for other accomplishments also applies to ethics, and truth and honour must be practised for their own sake as well as for reasons of worldly ambition. "Love your fellow-creatures in general, and contribute all you can to their good" (VI, 2639). Shaftesbury's standard of virtue may seem entirely too severe to be met by the more pragmatic advice of Chesterfield, and there is no doubt that the letters to the children have a touch of Mandeville in them. Yet Chesterfield always denigrates the great men of the past who acted primarily through self-interest: "They think that their subjects are made singly for their use, whereas in truth they are appointed singly for the good of their subjects" (VI, 2639). And what applied to politics applied to all conduct: self-interest never was the prime mover of a moral act, but a concomitant of it. The harmony of a man's soul which Shaftesbury reached in his peculiar manner was the harmony which Chesterfield expected to come naturally to the boys as an outcome of their training. Shaftesbury's standard is a severe one to meet:

Whatsoever therefore is done which happens to be advantageous to the species through an affection merely towards self-good, does not imply any goodness in the creature than as the affection itself is good. Let him, in any particular, act ever so well, if at the bottom it be that selfish affection alone which moves him, he is in himself still vicious. Nor can any creature be considered otherwise when the passion towards self-good, though ever so moderate, is his real motive in the doing that to which a natural affection for his kind ought by right to have inclined him.¹⁰

Yet Chesterfield hoped to develop in the child so fine and intuitive a response to situations that there would be no questions of motives behind an action. He was, in fact, attempting to train that "natural temper" which was similar to Shaftesbury's seat of proper action. Cicero had anticipated the idea in his "Paradox I: That Virtue is the Only Good" in which he says that "Whatever is done uprightly, honestly, and virtuously, is truly said to be done well; and whatever is upright, honest and agreeable with virtue, that alone, as I think, is a good thing".¹¹ In the *Offices*, this severity is pursued: "An action which is intrinsically right is only morally good in so far as it is voluntary".¹² This is the rule by which Chesterfield judges action, and he can be very close to Shaftesbury on occasion: "Honour is as much itself when acting by itself and unseen, as when seen and applauded by all the world",¹³ says Shaftesbury, and Chesterfield applauds the idea:

While you were a child, I endeavoured to form your heart habitually to virtue and honour, before your understanding was capable of showing you their beauty and utility. Those principles which you then got, like your grammar rules, only by rote, are now, I am persuaded, fixed and confirmed by reason. . . . Lord Shaftesbury says, very prettily, that he would be virtuous for his own sake, though nobody were to know it; . . ." (IV, 1427).

The "heart" seems a strange organ for the sinister Chesterfield to play upon, but he does so again in an essay in *The World*:

A TRUE MAN OF HONOR will not content himself with the literal discharge of the duties of a man and a citizen; he raises and dignifies them into magnanimity . . . his whole conduct is directed by the noble sentiments of his own unvitiated heart; surer and more scrupulous guides than the laws of the land, which, being calculated for the generality of mankind, must necessarily be more a restraint upon vices in general, than in invitation and reward of particular virtues.¹⁴

If honourable conduct and magnanimity make for worldly happiness and success, they also make for personal happiness; and no action is to be weighed merely in terms of the great world: "If a man has acquired great power and riches by falsehood, injustice, and oppression, he cannot enjoy them, because his conscience will torment him and constantly reproach him with the means by which he got them" (II, 442). He tells his son that "the strictest and most scrupulous honour and virtue can alone make you esteemed and valued by mankind" (II, 459); and it is for this reason that, in his estimate of historical figures, he distinguished between the great tyrants and the great servants of humanity. Indeed, failure is often extolled if it is a failure of honour and virtue; expedience, personal or political, was not for Chesterfield an excuse for an immoral act, since he believed and said that it was only by virtue that any society could flourish and be considerable.

His critics to the contrary, Chesterfield did not differentiate between private and public morality. There was no Machiavellian split between these two parts of life; success without virtue would not allow a man a good night's sleep. It was not a new attitude for the aristocrat. Ruth Kelso, in *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century*, found the same emphasis upon what she calls "Aristotelian virtue": "The essence of the gentleman was goodness; without goodness he could not perform his office in the state, which was first of all to govern well, and secondly by his example of personal perfection to make all men good". Nor should we criticize Chesterfield too severely because he was ambitious for his children. As Miss Kelso says, "the aristocratic ideal assumes inherent inequalities between men and works for the perfection of a few at the expense of the many. For such an ideal the Aristotelian code is an admirable guide exalting as it does the individual, expanding his powers, and developing a proud consciousness of superiority."¹⁵

It is important, however, to remember that Chesterfield based his claim for superiority less upon birth than upon ability, a sense of responsibility, and an almost intuitive grasp of ethics. His man of service is, perhaps, more of a political animal than he would have been in the sixteenth century and honour for him is a different sort of thing, but his attitudes are no less products of a long tradition which can be traced back to the first Augustan age. His advice is a combination of many, sometimes contrary, ideas. He is not quite at one with Hume's suggestion that the reason is subordinate to the passions since he puts a good deal of emphasis upon the ability of the finely-trained man to reason his way through any situation; yet he believes in the Ruling

Passion. And, at the same time, he suggests to the children that the fully-trained man will have an intuitive sense of right action. The problem is complicated further by his Mandevilleian apprehension of mankind. Indeed, he saw the world as a combination of all the faults which Locke and Mandeville and Hume suggested: people were severely limited in their ability to know, self-interested, and easy prey to their passions. The young man was trained to take such weaknesses into consideration in his journey to success. The boys were, ideally, outside the fallen world; they were to act on a different level, cognizant of the fact that it was a flawed world which they must convince and which they must serve. Their training was to make them superior to the world: they were to be ambitious, but not to the point of reckless self-interest; they were to appreciate the limits of reason, but depend upon it to the utmost; they were to recognize the fact that other men were constantly influenced by their passions (and they were to take advantage of this weakness to further their own, ethically-proper ends), but they were not to succumb to such dangerous influences in their own breasts. And they were to act virtuously with the same kind of intuitive sense which Shaftesbury had suggested was the sign of the man in harmony with himself and which Cicero (with a different emphasis) saw as the natural response of the orator.

Whatever he thought of the world "out there" in which the young man must succeed, his approach to ethics, both personal and private, was similar to his approach to academic subjects: an uncompromising insistence upon perfection. Great place without honour had been shunned by Chesterfield in his own career and he expected the same response from the young men whom he attempted to educate. He was, in short, for all his cynicism, something of an idealist, and if the children had achieved great place, his reputation might be very different. They were, as everyone knows, undistinguished. His illegitimate son died while young, but not before failing to distinguish himself, and his successor to the title opted for the life of a country gentleman. And that, perhaps, has made all the difference.

NOTES

1. *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, 1932), to his godson, 2 August, 1762, VI, p. 2406. All references are to this edition.
2. John Locke, *Essay on the Human Understanding*, in *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*, intro. J. A. St. John, London: 1843, II, xxviii, 8, p. 280.
3. George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, *The Lady's New-Year's Gift: Or, Advice*

to a Daughter, in *The Complete Works of George Savile, First Marquess of Halifax*, ed. Walter Raleigh, Oxford: 1912, pp. 3, 5, 6.

4. His own position is summed up by Dobrée, *Letters*, I, p. 213: "Chesterfield was a Deist, believing in some sort of supreme Being; he believed in a future life; he deplored the position of the clergy, but he would steer clear of dogma, and all kinds of 'enthusiasm'; above all, he loathed the idea of a priest."
5. E. B. Castle, *Ancient Education and Today*, London, 1962, p. 113.
6. Cicero, *Cicero's Three Books of Offices, or Moral Duties*, trans. Cyrus R. Edmonds, London, 1850, II, ix, p. 89.
7. Francis Gallaway, *Reason, Rule, and Revolt in English Classicism*, New York, 1940, p. 13.
8. Cicero, *Offices*, I, v, p. 11.
9. Antony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit", in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, Etc.*, ed. John M. Robertson, London, 1900, p. 238.
10. Shaftesbury, "Virtue and Merit", in *Characteristics*, p. 249.
11. Cicero, *Offices*, p. 265.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
13. Shaftesbury, "Freedom of Wit and Humour", in *Characteristics*, p. 83.
14. Chesterfield, *The World*, No. 49, in *Miscellaneous Works of the late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. M. Maty, London, 1777, I, p. 144.
15. Ruth Kelso, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century*, in *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, XIV, (No. 1-2, February-May, 1929), pp. 70, 74.