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Vauvenargues, by John Morley**

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ESSAY 1: VAUVENARGUES ***

CRITICAL MISCELLANIES

BY

JOHN MORLEY

VOL. II.

Essay 1: Vauvenargues

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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER	PAGE
The influence of Pascal	1
Vauvenargues holds the balance between him and the votaries of Perfectibility	4
Birth, education, and hard life of Vauvenargues	4
Life in Paris, and friendship with Voltaire	10
His religious sentiment	12
His delicacy, reserve, and psychagogic quality	15
Certain inability to appreciate marked originality	17
Criticisms on Molière, Racine, and Corneille	19
Comparison with English aphoristic writers and moralists	20
Character the key to his theory of greatness	25
His exaltation of spontaneous feeling, a protest against Rochefoucauld and Pascal	26

His plea for a normal sense of human relation, the same	28
His doctrine of the Will connected with his doctrine of Character	29
Antipathy to ascetic restrictions	33
Two ways of examining character: that followed by Vauvenargues	34
Examples of his style	36
The beauty of his nature to be read in his face	40

[Transcriber's Note: Footnotes have been moved to end of book.]

VAUVENARGUES.

One of the most important phases of French thought in the great century of its illumination is only thoroughly intelligible, on condition that in studying it we keep constantly in mind the eloquence, force, and genius of Pascal. He was the greatest and most influential representative of that way of viewing human nature and its circumstances, which it was one of the characteristic glories of the eighteenth century to have rebelled against and rejected. More than a hundred years after the publication of the *Pensées*, Condorcet thought it worth while to prepare a new edition of them, with annotations, protesting, not without a certain unwonted deference of tone, against Pascal's doctrine of the base and desperate estate of man. Voltaire also had them reprinted with notes of his own, written in the same spirit of vivacious deprecation, which we may be sure would have been even more vivacious, if Voltaire had not remembered that he was speaking of the mightiest of all the enemies of the Jesuits. Apart from formal and specific dissents like these, all the writers who had drunk most deeply of the spirit of the eighteenth century, lived in a constant ferment of revolt against the clear-witted and vigorous thinker of the century before, who had clothed mere theological mysteries with the force and importance of strongly entrenched propositions in a consistent philosophy.

The resplendent fervour of Bossuet's declamations upon the nothingness of kings, the pitifulness of mortal aims, the crushing ever-ready grip of the hand of God upon the purpose and faculty of man, rather filled the mind with exaltation than really depressed or humiliated it. From Bossuet to Pascal is to pass from the solemn splendour of the church to the chill of the crypt. Besides, Bossuet's attitude was professional, in the first place, and it was purely theological, in the second; so the main stream of thought flowed away and aside from him. To Pascal it was felt necessary that there should be reply and vindication, whether in the shape of deliberate and published formulas, or in the reasoned convictions of the individual intelligence working privately. A syllabus of the radical articles of the French creed of the eighteenth century would consist largely of the contradictions of the main propositions of Pascal. The old theological idea of the fall was hard to endure, but the idea of the fall was clenched by such general laws of human nature as this,—that 'men are so necessarily mad, that it would be to be mad by a new form of madness not to be mad;'—that man is nothing but masquerading, lying, and hypocrisy, both in what concerns himself and in respect of others, wishing not to have the truth told to himself, and shrinking from telling it to anybody else;^[1] that the will, the imagination, the disorders of the body, the thousand concealed infirmities of the intelligence, conspire to reduce our discovery of justice and truth to a process of haphazard, in which we more often miss the mark than hit.^[2] Pleasure, ambition, industry, are only means of distracting men from the otherwise unavoidable contemplation of their own misery. How speak of the dignity of the race and its history, when we know that a grain of sand in Cromwell's bladder altered the destinies of a kingdom, and that if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter the whole surface of the earth would be different? Imagine, in a word, 'a number of men in chains, and all condemned to death; some of them each day butchered in the sight of the others, while those who remain watch their own condition in that of their fellows, and eyeing one another in anguish and hopelessness, wait their turn; such is the situation of man.'^[3]

It was hardly possible to push the tragical side of the verities of life beyond this, and there was soon an instinctive reaction towards realities. The sensations with their conditions of pleasure no less than of pain; the intelligence with its energetic aptitudes for the discovery of protective and fruitful knowledge; the affections with their large capacities for giving and receiving delight; the spontaneous inner impulse towards action and endurance in the face of outward circumstances—all these things reassured men, and restored in theory to them with ample interest what in practice they had never lost—a rational faith and exultation in their own faculties, both of finding out truth and of feeling a very substantial degree of happiness. On this side too, as on the other, speculation went to its extreme limit. The hapless and despairing wretches of Pascal were transformed by the votaries of perfectibility into bright beings not any lower than the angels. Between the two extremes there was one fine moralist who knew how to hold a just balance, perceiving that language is the expression of relations and proportions, that when we speak of virtue and genius we mean qualities that compared with those of mediocre souls deserve these high names, that greatness and happiness are comparative terms, and that there is nothing to be said of the estate of man except relatively. This moralist was Vauvenargues.

Vauvenargues was born of a good Provençal stock at Aix, in the year 1715. He had scarcely any

of that kind of education which is usually performed in school-classes, and he was never able to read either Latin or Greek. Such slight knowledge as he ever got of the famous writers among the ancients was in translations. Of English literature, though its influence and that of our institutions were then becoming paramount in France, and though he had a particular esteem for the English character, he knew only the writings of Locke and Pope, and the *Paradise Lost*.^[4] Vauvenargues must be added to the list of thinkers and writers whose personal history shows, what men of letters sometimes appear to be in a conspiracy to make us forget, that for sober, healthy, and robust judgment on human nature and life, active and sympathetic contact with men in the transaction of the many affairs of their daily life is a better preparation than any amount of wholly meditative seclusion. He is also one of the many who show that a weakly constitution of body is not incompatible with fine and energetic qualities of mind, even if it be not actually friendly to them. Nor was feeble health any disqualification for the profession of arms. As Arms and the Church were the only alternatives for persons of noble birth, Vauvenargues, choosing the former, became a subaltern in the King's Own Regiment at the age of twenty (1735). Here in time he saw active service; for in 1740 the death of Charles VI. threw all Europe into confusion, and the French Government, falling in with the prodigious designs of the Marshal Belle-Isle and his brother, took sides against Maria Theresa, and supported the claims of the unhappy Elector of Bavaria who afterwards became the Emperor Charles VII. The disasters which fell upon France in consequence are well known. The forces despatched to Bavaria and Bohemia, after the brief triumph of the capture of Prague, were gradually overwhelmed without a single great battle, and it was considered a signal piece of good fortune when in the winter of 1742-43 Belle-Isle succeeded, with a loss of half his force, in leading by a long circuit, in the view of the enemy, and amid the horrors of famine and intense frost, some thirteen thousand men away from Prague. The King's Regiment took part in the Bohemian campaign, and in this frightful march which closed it; Vauvenargues with the rest.

To physical sufferings during two winters was added the distress of losing a comrade to whom he was deeply attached; he perished in the spring of '42 under the hardships of the war. The *Éloge* in which Vauvenargues commemorates the virtues and the pitiful fate of his friend, is too deeply marked with the florid and declamatory style of youth to be pleasing to a more ripened taste.^[5] He complained that nobody who had read it observed that it was touching, not remembering that even the most tender feeling fails to touch us, when it has found stilted and turgid expression. Delicacy and warmth of affection were prominent characteristics in Vauvenargues. Perhaps if his life had been passed in less severe circumstances, this fine susceptibility might have become fanciful and morbid. As it was, he loved his friends with a certain patient sweetness and equanimity, in which there was never the faintest tinge of fretfulness, caprice, exacting vanity, or any of those other vices which betray in men that excessive consciousness of their own personality, which lies at the root of most of the obstacles in the way of an even and humane life. His nature had such depth and quality that the perpetual untowardness of circumstances left no evil print upon him; hardship made him not sour, but patient and wise, and there is no surer sign of noble temper.

The sufferings and bereavements of war were not his only trials. Vauvenargues was beset throughout the whole of his short life with the sordid and humiliating embarrassments of narrow means. His letters to Saint-Vincens, the most intimate of his friends, disclose the straits to which he was driven. The nature of these straits is an old story all over the world, and Vauvenargues did the same things that young men in want of money have generally done. It cannot be said, I fear, that he passed along those miry ways without some defilement. He bethinks him on one occasion that a rich neighbour has daughters. 'Why should I not undertake to marry one of them within two years, with a reasonable dowry, if he would lend me the money I want and provided I should not have repaid it by the time fixed?'^[6] We must make allowance for the youth of the writer, and for a different view of marriage and its significance from our own. Even then there remains something to regret. Poverty, wrote Vauvenargues, in a maxim smacking unwontedly of commonplace, cannot debase strong souls, any more than riches can elevate low souls.^[7] That depends. If poverty means pinching and fretting need of money, it may not debase the soul in any vital sense, but it is extremely likely to wear away a very priceless kind of delicacy in a man's estimate of human relations and their import.

Vauvenargues has told us what he found the life of the camp. Luxurious and indolent living, neglected duties, discontented sighing after the delights of Paris, the exaltation of rank and mediocrity, an insolent contempt for merit; these were the characteristics of the men in high military place. The lower officers meantime were overwhelmed by an expenditure that the luxury of their superiors introduced and encouraged; and they were speedily driven to retire by the disorder of their affairs, or by the impossibility of promotion, because men of spirit could not long endure the sight of flagrant injustice, and because those who labour for fame cannot tie themselves to a condition where there is nothing to be gathered but shame and humiliation.^[8]

To these considerations of an extravagant expenditure and the absence of every chance of promotion, there was added in the case of Vauvenargues the still more powerful drawback of irretrievably broken health. The winter-march from Prague to Egra had sown fatal seed. His legs had been frost-bitten, and before they could be cured he was stricken by small-pox, which left him disfigured and almost blind. So after a service of nine years, he quitted military life (1744). He vainly solicited employment as a diplomatist. The career was not yet open to the talents, and in the memorial which Vauvenargues drew up he dwelt less on his conduct than on his birth, being careful to show that he had an authentic ancestor who was Governor of Hyères in the early

part of the fourteenth century.^[9] But the only road to employment lay through the Court. The claims even of birth counted for nothing, unless they were backed by favour among the ignoble creatures who haunted Versailles. For success it was essential to be not only high-born, but a parasite as well. 'Permit me to assure you, sir,' Vauvenargues wrote courageously to Amelot, then the minister, 'that it is this moral impossibility for a gentleman, with only zeal to commend him, of ever reaching the King his master, which causes the discouragement that is observed among the nobility of the provinces, and which extinguishes all ambition.'^[10] Amelot, to oblige Voltaire, eager as usual in good offices for his friend, answered the letters which Vauvenargues wrote, and promised to lay his name before the King as soon as a favourable opportunity should present itself.^[11]

Vauvenargues was probably enough of a man of the world to take fair words of this sort at their value, and he had enough of qualities that do not belong to the man of the world to enable him to confront the disappointment with cheerful fortitude 'Misfortune itself,' he had once written, 'has its charms in great extremities; for this opposition of fortune raises a courageous mind, and makes it collect all the forces that before were unemployed: it is in indolence and littleness that virtue suffers, when a timid prudence prevents it from rising in flight and forces it to creep along in bonds.'^[12] He was true to the counsel which he had thus given years before, and with the consciousness that death was rapidly approaching, and that all hope of advancement in the ordinary way was at an end, even if there were any chance of his life, he persevered in his project of going to Paris, there to earn the fame which he instinctively felt that he had it in him to achieve. Neither scantiness of means nor the vehement protests of friends and relations—always the worst foes to superior character on critical occasions—could detain him in the obscurity of Provence. In 1745 he took up his quarters in Paris in a humble house near the School of Medicine. Literature had not yet acquired that importance in France which it was so soon to obtain. The Encyclopædia was still unconceived, and the momentous work which that famous design was to accomplish, of organising the philosophers and men of letters into an army with banners, was still unexecuted. Voltaire, indeed, had risen, if not to the full height of his reputation, yet high enough both to command the admiration of people of quality, and to be the recognised chief of the new school of literature and thought. Voltaire had been struck by a letter in which Vauvenargues, then unknown to him, had sent a criticism comparing Corneille disadvantageously with Racine. Coming from a young officer, the member of a profession which Voltaire frankly described as 'very noble, in truth, but slightly barbarous,' this criticism was peculiarly striking. A great many years afterwards Voltaire was surprised in the same way, to find that an officer could write such a book as the *Félicité Publique* of the Marquis de Chastellux. To Vauvenargues he replied with many compliments, and pointed out with a good deal of pains the injustice which the young critic had done to the great author of *Cinna*. 'It is the part of a man like you,' he said admirably, 'to have preferences, but no exclusions.'^[13] The correspondence thus begun was kept up with ever-growing warmth and mutual respect. 'If you had been born a few years earlier,' Voltaire wrote to him, 'my works would be worth all the more for it; but at any rate, even at the close of my career, you confirm me in the path that you pursue.'^[14]

The personal impression was as fascinating as that which had been conveyed by Vauvenargues' letters. Voltaire took every opportunity of visiting his unfortunate friend, then each day drawing nearer to the grave. Men of humbler stature were equally attracted. 'It was at this time,' says the light-hearted Marmontel, 'that I first saw at home the man who had a charm for me beyond all the rest of the world, the good, the virtuous, the wise Vauvenargues. Cruelly used by nature in his body, he was in soul one of her rarest masterpieces. I seemed to see in him Fénelon weak and suffering. I could make a good book of his conversations, if I had had a chance of collecting them. You see some traces of it in the selection that he has left of his thoughts and meditations. But all eloquent and full of feeling as he is in his writings, he was even more so still in his conversation.'^[15] Marmontel felt sincere grief when Vauvenargues died, and in the *Epistle to Voltaire* expressed his sorrow in some fair lines. They contain the happy phrase applied to Vauvenargues, '*ce cœur stoïque et tendre*.'^[16]

In religious sentiment Vauvenargues was out of the groove of his time. That is to say, he was not unsusceptible of religion. Accepting no dogma, so far as we can judge, and complying with no observances, very faint and doubtful as to even the fundamentals—God, immortality, and the like—he never partook of the furious and bitter antipathy of the best men of that century against the church, its creeds, and its book. At one time, as will be seen from a passage which will be quoted by and by, his leanings were towards that vague and indefinable doctrine which identifies God with all the forces and their manifestations in the universe. Afterwards even this adumbration of a theistic explanation of the world seems to have passed from him, and he lived, as many other not bad men have lived, with that fair working substitute for a religious doctrine which is provided in the tranquil search, or the acceptance in a devotional spirit, of all larger mortal experiences and higher human impressions. There is a *Meditation on the Faith*, including a *Prayer*, among his writings; and there can be little doubt, in spite of Condorcet's incredible account of the circumstances of its composition, that it is the expression of what was at the time a sincere feeling.^[17] It is, however, rather the straining and ecstatic rhapsody of one who ardently seeks faith, than the calm and devout assurance of him who already possesses it. Vauvenargues was religious by temperament, but he could not entirely resist the intellectual influences of the period. The one fact delivered him from dogma and superstition, and the other from scoffing and harsh unspirituality. He saw that apart from the question of the truth or falsehood of its historic basis, there was a balance to be struck between the consolations and the

afflictions of the faith.^[18] Practically he was content to leave this balance unstruck, and to pass by on the other side. Scarcely any of his maxims concern religion. One of these few is worth quoting, where he says: 'The strength or weakness of our belief depends more on our courage than our light; not all those who mock at auguries have more intellect than those who believe in them.'^[19]

The end came in the spring of 1747, when Vauvenargues was no more than thirty-two. Perhaps, in spite of his physical miseries, these two years in Paris were the least unhappy time in his life. He was in the great centre where the fame which he longed for was earned and liberally awarded. A year of intercourse with so full and alert and brilliant a mind as Voltaire's, must have been more to one so appreciative of mental greatness as Vauvenargues, than many years of intercourse with subalterns in the Regiment of the King. With death, now known to be very near at hand, he had made his account before. 'To execute great things,' he had written in a maxim which gained the lively praise of Voltaire, 'a man must live as though he had never to die.'^[20] This mood was common among the Greeks and Romans; but the religion which Europe accepted in the time of its deepest corruption and depravation, retained the mark of its dismal origin nowhere so strongly as in the distorted prominence which it gave in the minds of its votaries to the dissolution of the body. It was one of the first conditions of the Revival of Reason that the dreary *memento mori* and its hateful emblems should be deliberately effaced. 'The thought of death,' said Vauvenargues, 'leads us astray, because it makes us forget to live.' He did not understand living in the sense which the dissolute attach to it. The libertinism of his regiment called no severe rebuke from him, but his meditative temper drew him away from it even in his youth. It is not impossible that if his days had not been cut short, he might have impressed Parisian society with ideas and a sentiment, that would have left to it all its cheerfulness, and yet prevented that laxity which so fatally weakened it. Turgot, the only other conspicuous man who could have withstood the license of the time, had probably too much of that austerity which is in the fibre of so many great characters, to make any moral counsels that he might have given widely effective.

Vauvenargues was sufficiently free from all taint of the pedagogue or the preacher to have dispelled the sophisms of licence, less by argument than by the gracious attraction of virtue in his own character. The stock moralist, like the commonplace orator of the pulpit, fails to touch the hearts of men or to affect their lives, for lack of delicacy, of sympathy, and of freshness; he attempts to compensate for this by excess of emphasis, and that more often disgusts us than persuades. Vauvenargues, on the other hand, is remarkable for delicacy and half-reserved tenderness. Everything that he has said is coloured and warmed with feeling for the infirmities of men. He writes not merely as an analytical outsider. Hence, unlike most moralists, he is no satirist. He had borne the burdens. 'The looker-on,' runs one of his maxims, 'softly lying in a carpeted chamber, inveighs against the soldier, who passes winter nights on the river's edge, and keeps watch in silence over the safety of the land.'^[21] Vauvenargues had been something very different from the safe and sheltered critic of other men's battles, and this is the secret of the hold which his words have upon us. They are real, with the reality that can only come from two sources; from high poetic imagination, which Vauvenargues did not possess, or else from experience of life acting on and strengthening a generous nature. 'The cause of most books of morality being so insipid,' he says, 'is that their authors are not sincere; is that, being feeble echoes of one another, they could not venture to publish their own real maxims and private sentiments.'^[22] One of the secrets of his own freedom from this ordinary insipidity of moralists was his freedom also from their pretentiousness and insincerity.

Besides these positive merits, he had, as we have said, the negative distinction of never being emphatic. His sayings are nearly always moderate and persuasive, alike in sentiment and in phrase. Sometimes they are almost tentative in the diffidence of their turn. Compared with him La Rochefoucauld's manner is hard, and that of La Bruyère sententious. In the moralist who aspires to move and win men by their best side instead of their worst, the absence of this hardness and the presence of a certain lambency and play even in the exposition of truths of perfect assurance, are essential conditions of psychagogic quality. In religion such law does not hold, and the contagion of fanaticism is usually most rapidly spread by a rigorous and cheerless example.

We may notice in passing that Vauvenargues has the defects of his qualities, and that with his aversion to emphasis was bound up a certain inability to appreciate even grandeur and originality, if they were too strongly and boldly marked. 'It is easy to criticise an author,' he has said, 'but hard to estimate him.'^[23] This was never more unfortunately proved than in the remarks of Vauvenargues himself upon the great Molière. There is almost a difficulty in forgiving a writer who can say that 'La Bruyère, animated with nearly the same genius, painted the crookedness of men with as much truth and as much force as Molière; but I believe that there is more eloquence and more elevation to be found in La Bruyère's images.'^[24] Without at all undervaluing La Bruyère, one of the acutest and finest of writers, we may say that this is a truly disastrous piece of criticism. Quite as unhappy is the preference given to Racine over Molière, not merely for the conclusion arrived at, but for the reasons on which it is founded. Molière's subjects, we read, are low, his language negligent and incorrect, his characters bizarre and eccentric. Racine, on the other hand, takes sublime themes, presents us with noble types, and writes with simplicity and elegance. It is not enough to concede to Racine the glory of art, while giving to Molière or Corneille the glory of genius. 'When people speak of the art of Racine—the art which puts things in their place; which characterises men, their passions, manners, genius;

which banishes obscurities, superfluties, false brilliancies; which paints nature with fire, sublimity, and grace—what can we think of such art as this, except that it is the genius of extraordinary men, and the origin of those rules that writers without genius embrace with so much zeal and so little success?'^[25] And it is certainly true that the art of Racine implied genius. The defect of the criticism lies, as usual, in a failure to see that there is glory enough in both; in the art of highly-finished composition and presentation, and in the art of bold and striking creation. Yet Vauvenargues was able to discern the secret of the popularity of Molière, and the foundation of the common opinion that no other dramatist had carried his own kind of art so far as Molière had carried his; 'the reason is, I fancy, that he is more natural than any of the others, and this is an important lesson for everybody who wishes to write.'^[26] He did not see how nearly everything went in this concession, that Molière was, above all, natural. With equal truth of perception he condemned the affectation of grandeur lent by the French tragedians to classical personages who were in truth simple and natural, as the principal defect of the national drama, and the common rock on which their poets made shipwreck.^[27] Let us, however, rejoice for the sake of the critical reputation of Vauvenargues that he was unable to read Shakespeare. One for whom Molière is too eccentric, grotesque, inelegant, was not likely to do much justice to the mightiest but most irregular of all dramatists.

A man's prepossessions in dramatic poetry, supposing him to be cultivated enough to have any prepossessions, furnish the most certain clue that we can get to the spirit in which he inwardly regards character and conduct. The uniform and reasoned preference which Vauvenargues had for Racine over Molière and Corneille, was only the transfer to art of that balanced, moderate, normal, and emphatically harmonious temper, which he brought to the survey of human nature. Excess was a condition of thought, feeling, and speech, that in every form was disagreeable to him; alike in the gloom of Pascal's reveries, and in the inflation of speech of some of the heroes of Corneille. He failed to relish even Montaigne as he ought to have done, because Montaigne's method was too prolix, his scepticism too universal, his egoism too manifest, and because he did not produce complete and artistic wholes.^[28]

Reasonableness is the strongest mark in Vauvenargues' thinking; balance, evenness, purity of vision, penetration finely toned with indulgence. He is never betrayed into criticism of men from the point of view of immutable first principles. Perhaps this was what the elder Mirabeau meant when he wrote to Vauvenargues, who was his cousin: 'You have the English genius to perfection,' and what Vauvenargues meant when he wrote of himself to Mirabeau: 'Nobody in the world has a mind less French than I.'^[29] These international comparisons are among the least fruitful of literary amusements, even when they happen not to be extremely misleading; as when, for example, Voltaire called Locke the English Pascal, a description which can only be true on condition that the qualifying adjective is meant to strip either Locke or Pascal of most of his characteristic traits. And if we compare Vauvenargues with any of our English aphoristic writers, there is not resemblance enough to make the contrast instructive. The obvious truth is that in this department our literature is particularly weak, while French literature is particularly strong in it. With the exception of Bacon, we have no writer of apophthegms of the first order; and the difference between Bacon as a moralist and Pascal or Vauvenargues, is the difference between Polonius's famous discourse to Laertes and the soliloquy of Hamlet.

Bacon's precepts refer rather to external conduct and worldly fortune than to the inner composition of character, or to the 'wide, gray, lampless' depths of human destiny. We find the same national characteristic, though on an infinitely lower level, in Franklin's oracular saws. Among the French sages a psychological element is predominant, as well as an occasional transcendent loftiness of feeling, not to be found in Bacon's wisest maxims, and from his point of view in their composition we could not expect to find them there. We seek in vain amid the positivity of Bacon, or the quaint and timorous paradox of Browne, or the acute sobriety of Shaftesbury, for any of that poetic pensiveness which is strong in Vauvenargues, and reaches tragic heights in Pascal.^[30] Addison may have the delicacy of Vauvenargues, but it is a delicacy that wants the stir and warmth of feeling. It seems as if with English writers poetic sentiment naturally sought expression in poetic forms, while the Frenchmen of nearly corresponding temperament were restrained within the limits of prose by reason of the vigorously prescribed stateliness and stiffness of their verse at that time. A man in this country with the quality of Vauvenargues, with his delicacy, tenderness, elevation, would have composed lyrics. We have undoubtedly lost much by the laxity and irregularity of our verse, but as undoubtedly we owe to its freedom some of the most perfect and delightful of the minor figures that adorn the noble gallery of English poets.

It would be an error to explain the superiority of the great French moralists by supposing in them a fancy and imagination too defective for poetic art. It was the circumstances of the national literature during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which made Vauvenargues for instance a composer of aphorisms, rather than a moral poet like Pope. Let us remember some of his own most discriminating words. 'Who has more imagination,' he asks, 'than Bossuet, Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal, all of them great philosophers? Who more judgment and wisdom than Racine, Boileau, La Fontaine, Molière, all of them poets full of genius? *It is not true, then, that the ruling qualities exclude the others; on the contrary, they suppose them.* I should be much surprised if a great poet were without vivid lights on philosophy, at any rate moral philosophy, and it will very seldom happen for a true philosopher to be totally devoid of imagination.'^[31] With imagination in the highest sense Vauvenargues was not largely endowed, but he had as much as is essential to reveal to one that the hard and sober-judging faculty is not the single, nor even the

main element, in a wise and full intelligence. 'All my philosophy,' he wrote to Mirabeau, when only four or five and twenty years old, an age when the intellect is usually most exigent of supremacy, 'all my philosophy has its source in my heart.'^[32]

In the same spirit he had well said that there is more cleverness in the world than greatness of soul, more people with talent than with lofty character.^[33] Hence some of the most peculiarly characteristic and impressive of his aphorisms; that famous one, for instance, '*Great thoughts come from the heart*,' and the rest which hang upon the same idea. 'Virtuous instinct has no need of reason, but supplies it.' 'Reason misleads us more often than nature.' 'Reason does not know the interests of the heart.' 'Perhaps we owe to the passions the greatest advantages of the intellect.' Such sayings are only true on condition that instinct and nature and passion have been already moulded under the influence of reason; just as this other saying, which won the warm admiration of Voltaire, '*Magnanimity owes no account of its motives to prudence*,' is only true on condition that by magnanimity we understand a mood not out of accord with the loftiest kind of prudence.^[34] But in the eighteenth century reason and prudence were words current in their lower and narrower sense, and thus one coming like Vauvenargues to see this lowness and narrowness, sought to invest ideas and terms that in fact only involved modifications of these, with a significance of direct antagonism. Magnanimity was contrasted inimically with prudence, and instinct and nature were made to thrust from their throne reason and reflection. Carried to its limit, this tendency developed the speculative and social excesses of the great sentimental school. In Vauvenargues it was only the moderate, just, and most reasonable protest of a fine observer, against the supremacy among ideals of a narrow, deliberative, and calculating spirit.

His exaltation of virtuous instinct over reason is in a curious way parallel to Burke's memorable exaltation over reason of prejudice. 'Prejudice,' said Burke, 'previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit, and not a series of unconnected acts; through just prejudice his duty becomes a part of his nature.'^[35] What Burke designated as prejudice, Vauvenargues less philosophically styled virtuous instinct; each meant precisely the same thing, though the difference of phrase implied a different view of its origin and growth: and the side opposite to each of them was the same—namely, a sophisticated and over-refining intelligence, narrowed to the consideration of particular circumstances as they presented themselves.

Translated into the modern equivalent, the heart, nature, instinct of Vauvenargues all mean *character*. He insisted upon spontaneous impulse as a condition of all greatest thought and action. Men think and work on the highest level when they move without conscious and deliberate strain after virtue: when, in other words, their habitual motives, aims, methods, their character, in short, naturally draw them into the region of what is virtuous. '*It is by our ideas that we ennoble our passions or we debase them; they rise high or sink low according to the man's soul*.'^[36] All this has ceased to be new to our generation, but a hundred and thirty years ago, and indeed much nearer to us than that, the key to all nobleness was thought to be found only by cool balancing and prudential calculation. A book like *Clarissa Harlowe* shows us this prudential and calculating temper underneath a varnish of sentimentalism and fine feelings, an incongruous and extremely displeasing combination, particularly characteristic of certain sets and circles in that century. One of the distinctions of Vauvenargues is that exaltation of sentiment did not with him cloak a substantial adherence to a low prudence, nor to that fragment of reason which has so constantly usurped the name and place of the whole. He eschewed the too common compromise which the sentimentalist makes with reflection and calculation, and it was this which saved him from being a sentimentalist.

That doctrine of the predominance of the heart over the head, which has brought forth so many pernicious and destructive fantasies in the history of social thought, represented in his case no more than a reaction against the great detractors of humanity. Rochefoucauld had surveyed mankind exclusively from the point of their vain and egoistic propensities, and his aphorisms are profoundly true of all persons in whom these propensities are habitually supreme, and of all the world in so far as these propensities happen to influence them. Pascal, on the one hand, leaving the affections and inclinations of a man very much on one side, had directed all his efforts to showing the pitiful feebleness and incurable helplessness of man in the sphere of the understanding. Vauvenargues is thus confronted by two sinister pictures of humanity—the one of its moral meanness and littleness, the other of its intellectual poverty and impotency. He turned away from both of them, and found in magnanimous and unsophisticated feeling, of which he was conscious in himself and observant in others, a compensation alike for the selfishness of some men and the intellectual limitations of all men. This compensation was ample enough to restore the human self-respect that Pascal and Rochefoucauld had done their best to weaken.

The truth in that disparagement was indisputable so far as it went. It was not a kind of truth, however, on which it is good for the world much to dwell, and it is the thinkers like Vauvenargues who build up and inspire high resolve. 'Scarcely any maxim,' runs one of his own, 'is true in all respects.'^[37] We must take them in pairs to find out the mean truth; and to understand the ways of men, so far as words about men can help us, we must read with appreciation not only Vauvenargues, who said that great thoughts come from the heart, but La Rochefoucauld, who called the intelligence the dupe of the heart, and Pascal, who saw only desperate creatures, miserably perishing before one another's eyes in the grim dungeon of the universe. Yet it is the observer in the spirit of Vauvenargues, of whom we must always say that he has chosen the

better part. Vauvenargues' own estimate was sound. 'The Duke of La Rochefoucauld seized to perfection the weak side of human nature; maybe he knew its strength too; and only contested the merit of so many splendid actions in order to unmask false wisdom. Whatever his design, the effect seems to me mischievous; his book, filled with delicate invective against hypocrisy, even to this day turns men away from virtue, by persuading them that it is never genuine.'^[38] Or, as he put it elsewhere, without express personal reference: 'You must arouse in men the feeling of their prudence and strength, if you would raise their character; those who only apply themselves to bring out the absurdities and weaknesses of mankind, enlighten the judgment of the public far less than they deprave its inclination.'^[39] This principle was implied in Goethe's excellent saying, that if you would improve a man, it is best to begin by persuading him that he is already that which you would have him to be.

To talk in this way was to bring men out from the pits which cynicism on the one side, and asceticism on the other, had dug so deep for them, back to the warm precincts of the cheerful day. The cynic and the ascetic had each looked at life through a microscope, exaggerating blemishes, distorting proportions, filling the eye with ugly and disgusting illusions.^[40] Humanity, as was said, was in disgrace with the thinkers. The maxims of Vauvenargues were a plea for a return to a healthy and normal sense of relations. 'These philosophers,' he cried, 'are men, yet they do not speak in human language; they change all the ideas of things, and misuse all their terms.'^[41] These are some of the most direct of his retorts upon Pascal and La Rochefoucauld:

'I have always felt it to be absurd for philosophers to fabricate a Virtue that is incompatible with the nature of humanity, and then after having pretended this, to declare coldly that there is no virtue. If they are speaking of the phantom of their imagination, they may of course abandon or destroy it as they please, for they invented it; but true virtue—which they cannot be brought to call by this name, because it is not in conformity with their definitions; which is the work of nature and not their own; and which consists mainly in goodness and vigour of soul—that does not depend on their fancies, and will last for ever with characters that cannot possibly be effaced.'

'The body has its graces, the intellect its talents; is the heart then to have nothing but vices? And must man, who is capable of reason, be incapable of virtue?'

'We are susceptible of friendship, justice, humanity, compassion, and reason. O my friends, what then is virtue?'

'Disgust is no mark of health, nor is appetite a disorder; quite the reverse. Thus we think of the body, but we judge the soul on other principles. We suppose that a strong soul is one that is exempt from passions, and as youth is more active and ardent than later age, we look on it as a time of fever, and place the strength of man in his decay.'^[42]

The theological speculator insists that virtue lies in a constant and fierce struggle between the will and the passions, between man and human nature.

Vauvenargues founded his whole theory of life on the doctrine that the will is not something independent of passions, inclinations, and ideas, but on the contrary is a mere index moved and fixed by them, as the hand of a clock follows the operation of the mechanical forces within. Character is an integral unit. 'Whether it is reason or passion that moves us, it is we who determine ourselves; it would be madness to distinguish one's thoughts and sentiments from one's self... No will in men, which does not owe its direction to their temperament, their reasoning, and their actual feelings.'^[43] Virtue, then, is not necessarily a condition of strife between the will and the rest of our faculties and passions; no such strife is possible, for the will obeys the preponderant passion or idea, or group of passions and ideas; and the contest lies between one passion or group and another. Hence, in right character there is no struggle at all, for the virtuous inclinations naturally and easily direct our will and actions; virtue is then independent of struggle; and the circumstance of our finding pleasure in this or that practice, is no reason why both the practice and the pleasure should not be unimpeachably virtuous.

It is easy to see the connection between this theory of the dependence of the will, and the prominence which Vauvenargues is ever giving to the passions. These are the key to the movements of the will. To direct and shape the latter, you must educate the former. It was for his perception of this truth, we may notice in passing, that Comte awarded to Vauvenargues a place in the Positivist Calendar; 'for his direct effort, in spite of the universal desuetude into which it had fallen, to reorganise the culture of the heart according to a better knowledge of human nature, of which this noble thinker discerned the centre to be affective.'^[44]

This theory of the will, however, was not allowed to rest here; the activity of man was connected with the universal order. 'What prevents the mind from perceiving the motive of its actions, is only their infinite quickness. Our thoughts perish at the moment in which their effects make themselves known; when the action commences, the principle has vanished; the will appears, the feeling is gone; we cannot find it ourselves, and so doubt if we ever had it. But it would be an enormous defect to have a will without a principle; our actions would be all haphazard; the world would be nothing but caprice; all order would be overturned. It is not enough, then, to admit it to be true that it is reflection or sentiment that leads us: we must add further that it would be

monstrous for this to be otherwise.^[45] ...

'The will recalls or suspends our ideas; our ideas shape or vary the laws of the will; the laws of the will are thus dependent on the laws of creation; but the laws of creation are not foreign to ourselves, they constitute our being, and form our essence, and are entirely our own, and we can say boldly that we act by ourselves, when we only act by them.'^[46] ...

'Let us recognise here, then, our profound subjection.... Let us rend the melancholy veil which hides from our eyes the eternal chain of the world and the glory of the Creator.... External objects form ideas in the mind, these ideas form sentiments, these sentiments volitions, these volitions actions in ourselves and outside of ourselves. So noble a dependence in all the parts of this vast universe must conduct our reflections to the unity of its principle; this subordination makes the true greatness of the beings subordinated. The excellence of man is in his dependence; his subjectation displays two marvellous images—the infinite power of God, and the dignity of our own soul.... Man independent would be an object of contempt; the feeling of his own imperfection would be his eternal torture. But the same feeling, when we admit his dependence, is the foundation of his sweetest hope; it reveals to him the nothingness of finite good, and leads him back to his principle, which insists on joining itself to him, and which alone can satisfy his desires in the possession of himself.'^[47]

Vauvenargues showed his genuine healthiness not more by a plenary rejection of the doctrine of the incurable vileness and frenzy of man, than by his freedom from the boisterous and stupid transcendental optimism which has too many votaries in our time. He would not have men told that they are miserable earth-gnomes, the slaves of a black destiny, but he still placed them a good deal lower than the angels. For instance: 'We are too inattentive or too much occupied with ourselves, to get to the bottom of one another's characters; *whoever has watched masks at a ball dancing together in a friendly manner, and joining hands without knowing who the others are, and then parting the moment afterwards never to meet again nor ever to regret, or be regretted, can form some idea of the world.*'^[48] But then, as he said elsewhere: 'We can be perfectly aware of our imperfection, without being humiliated by the sight. *One of the noblest qualities of our nature is that we are able so easily to dispense with greater perfection.*'^[49] In all this we mark the large and rational humaneness of the new time, a tolerant and kindly and elevating estimate of men.

The faith in the natural and simple operation of virtue, without the aid of all sorts of valetudinarian restrictions, comes out on every occasion. The Trappist theory of the conditions of virtue found no quarter with him. Mirabeau for instance complained of the atmosphere of the Court, as fatal to the practice of virtue. Vauvenargues replied that the people there were doubtless no better than they should be, and that vice was dominant. 'So much the worse for those who have vices. But when you are fortunate enough to possess virtue, it is, to my thinking, a very noble ambition to lift up this same virtue in the bosom of corruption, to make it succeed, to place it above all, to indulge and control the passions without reproach, to overthrow the obstacles to them, and to surrender yourself to the inclinations of an upright and magnanimous heart, instead of combating or concealing them in retreat, without either satisfying or vanquishing them. I know nothing so weak and so vain as to flee before vices, or to hate them without measure; for people only hate them by way of reprisal because they are afraid of them, or else out of vengeance because these vices have played them some sorry turn; but a little loftiness of soul, some knowledge of the heart, a gentle and tranquil humour, will protect you against the risk of being either surprised, or keenly wounded by them.'^[50]

There is a tolerably obvious distinction between two principal ways of examining character. One is a musing, subjective method of delineation, in which the various shades and windings seem to reveal themselves with a certain spontaneity, and we follow many recesses and depths in the heart of another, such as only music stirs into consciousness in ourselves. Besides this rarer poetic method, there is what may be styled the diplomatist's method; it classifies characters objectively, according to the kinds of outer conduct in which they manifest themselves, and according to the best ways of approaching and dealing with them. The second of these describes the spirit in which Vauvenargues observed men. He is French, and not German, and belongs to the eighteenth century, and not to the seventeenth or the nineteenth. His *Characters*, very little known in this country, are as excellent as any work in this kind that we are acquainted with, or probably as excellent as such work can be. They are real and natural, yet while abstaining as rigorously as Vauvenargues everywhere does from grotesque and extravagant traits, they avoid equally the vice of presenting the mere bald and sterile flats of character, which he that runs may read. As we have said, he had the quality possessed by so few of those who write about men; he watched men, and drew from the life. In a word, he studied concrete examples and interrogated his own experience—the only sure guarantee that one writing on his themes has anything which it is worth our while to listen to. Among other consequences of this reality of their source is the agreeable fact that these pictures are free from that clever bitterness and easy sarcasm, by which crude and jejune observers, thinking more of their own wit than of what they observe, sometimes gain a little reputation. Even the coxcombs, self-duping knaves, simpletons, braggarts, and other evil or pitiful types whom he selects, are drawn with unstrained and simple conformity to reality. The pictures have no moral label pinned on to them. Yet Vauvenargues took life seriously enough, and it was just because he took it seriously, that he had no inclination to air his wit or practise a verbal humour upon the stuff out of which happiness and misery are made.

One or two fragments will suffice. Take the Man of the World, for instance:

'A man of the world is not he who knows other men best, who has most foresight or dexterity in affairs, who is most instructed by experience and study; he is neither a good manager, nor a man of science, nor a politician, nor a skilful officer, nor a painstaking magistrate. He is a man who is ignorant of nothing but who knows nothing; who, doing his own business ill, fancies himself very capable of doing that of other people; a man who has much useless wit, who has the art of saying flattering things which do not flatter, and judicious things which give no information; who can persuade nobody, though he speaks well; endowed with that sort of eloquence which can bring out trifles, and which annihilates great subjects; as penetrating in what is ridiculous and external in men, as he is blind to the depths of their minds. One who, afraid of being wearisome by reason, is wearisome by his extravagances; is jocose without gaiety, and lively without passion.'^[51]

Or the two following, the Inconstant Man, and Lycas or the Firm Man:

'Such a man seems really to possess more than one character. A powerful imagination makes his soul take the shape of all the objects that affect it; he suddenly astonishes the world by acts of generosity and courage which were never expected of him; the image of virtue inflames, elevates, softens, masters his heart; he receives the impression from the loftiest, and he surpasses them. But when his imagination has grown cold, his courage droops, his generosity sinks; the vices opposed to these virtues take possession of his soul, and after having reigned awhile supreme, they make way for other objects.... We cannot say that they have a great nature, or strong, or weak, or light; it is a swift and imperious imagination which reigns with sovereign power over all their being, which subjugates their genius, and which prescribes for them in turn those fine actions and those faults, those heights and those littlenesses, those flights of enthusiasm and those fits of disgust, which we are wrong in charging either with hypocrisy or madness.'^[52]

'Lycas unites with a self-reliant, bold, and impetuous nature, a spirit of reflection and profundity which moderates the counsels of his passions, which leads him by impenetrable motives, and makes him advance to his ends by many paths. He is one of those long-sighted men, who consider the succession of events from afar off, who always finish a design begun; who are capable, I do not say of dissembling either a misfortune or an offence, but of rising above either, instead of letting it depress them; deep natures, independent by their firmness in daring all and suffering all; who, whether they resist their inclinations out of foresight, or whether, out of pride and a secret consciousness of their resources, they defy what is called prudence, always, in good as in evil, cheat the acutest conjectures.'^[53]

Let us note that Vauvenargues is almost entirely free from that favourite trick of the aphoristic person, which consists in forming a series of sentences, the predicates being various qualifications of extravagance, vanity, and folly, and the subject being Women. He resists this besetting temptation of the modern speaker of apophthegms to identify woman and fool. On the one or two occasions in which he begins the maxim with the fatal words, *Les femmes*, he is as little profound as other people who persist in thinking of man and woman as two different species. 'Women,' for example, 'have ordinarily more vanity than temperament, and more temperament than virtue'—which is fairly true of all human beings, and in so far as it is true, describes men just as exactly—and no more so—as it describes women. In truth, Vauvenargues felt too seriously about conduct and character to go far in this direction. Now and again he is content with a mere smartness, as when he says: 'There are some thoroughly excellent people who cannot get rid of their *ennui* except at the expense of society.' But such a mood is not common. He is usually grave, and not seldom profoundly weighty, delicate without being weak, and subtle without obscurity; as for example:

'People teach children to fear and obey; the avarice, pride, or timidity of the fathers, instructs the children in economy, arrogance, or submission. We stir them up to be yet more and more copyists, which they are only too disposed to be, as it is; nobody thinks of making them original, hardy, independent.'

'If instead of dulling the vivacity of children, people did their best to raise the impulsiveness and movement of their characters, what might we not expect from a fine natural temper?'

Again: 'The moderation of the weak is mediocrity.'

'What is arrogance in the weak is elevation in the strong; as the strength of a sick man is frenzy, and that of a whole man is vigour.'

'To speak imprudently and to speak boldly are nearly always the same thing. But we may speak without prudence, and still speak what is right; and it is a mistake to fancy that a man has a shallow intelligence, because the boldness of his character or the liveliness of his temper may have drawn from him, in spite of himself, some dangerous truth.'

'It is a great sign of mediocrity always to praise moderately.'

Vauvenargues has a saying to the effect that men very often, without thinking of it, form an idea of their face and expression from the ruling sentiment of which they are conscious in themselves at the time. He hints that this is perhaps the reason why a coxcomb always believes himself to be handsome.^[54] And in a letter to Mirabeau, he describes pleasantly how sometimes in moments of

distraction he pictures himself with an air of loftiness, of majesty, of penetration, according to the idea that is occupying his mind, and how if by chance he sees his face in the mirror, he is nearly as much amazed as if he saw a Cyclops or a Tartar.^[55] Yet his nature, if we may trust the portrait, revealed itself in his face; it is one of the most delightful to look upon, even in the cold inarticulateness of an engraving, that the gallery of fair souls contains for us. We may read the beauty of his character in the soft strength of the brow, the meditative lines of mouth and chin, above all, the striking clearness, the self-collection, the feminine solicitude, that mingle freely and without eagerness or expectancy in his gaze, as though he were hearkening to some ever-flowing inward stream of divine melody. We think of that gracious touch in Bacon's picture of the father of Solomon's House, that 'he had an aspect as though he pitied men.' If we reproach France in the eighteenth century with its coarseness, artificiality, shallowness, because it produced such men as the rather brutish Duclos, we ought to remember that this was also the century of Vauvenargues, one of the most tender, lofty, cheerful, and delicately sober of all moralists.

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- [1] *Pensées*, i. v. 8.
- [2] *Ib.* i. vi. 16.
- [3] *Ib.* i. vii. 6.
- [4] M. Gilbert's edition of the *Works and Correspondence of Vauvenargues* (2 vols. Paris: Furne, 1857), ii. 133.
- [5] *Éloge de P.H. de Seytres. Œuv.* i. 141-150.
- [6] *Œuv.* ii. 233. See too p. 267.
- [7] No. 579, i. 455.
- [8] *Réflexions sur Divers Sujets*, i. 104.
- [9] *Œuv.* ii. 249.
- [10] *Ib.* ii. 265.
- [11] *Ib.* ii. 266.
- [12] *Conseils à un Jeune Homme*, i. 124.
- [13] *Œuv.* ii. 252.
- [14] *Ib.* ii. 272.
- [15] *Mémoires de Marmontel*, vol. i. 189.
- [16] The reader of Marmontel's *Mémoires* will remember the extraordinary and grotesque circumstances under which a younger brother of Mirabeau, (of *l'ami des hommes*, that is) appealed to the memory of Vauvenargues. See vol. i. 256-260.
- [17] *Œuv.* i. 225-232.
- [18] *Letter to Saint-Vincens*, ii. 146.
- [19] No. 318.
- [20] Napoleon said on some occasion, '*Il faut vouloir vivre et savoir mourir.*' M. Littré prefaces the third volume of that heroic monument of learning and industry, his *Dictionary of the French Language*, by the words: 'He who wishes to employ his life seriously ought always to act as if he had long to live, and to govern himself as if he would have soon to die.'
- [21] No. 223.
- [22] No. 300.
- [23] No. 264.
- [24] *Réflexions Critiques sur quelques Poètes*, i. 237.
- [25] *Œuv.* i. 248.
- [26] *Réflexions Critiques sur quelques Poètes*, i. 238.
- [27] *Œuv.* i. 243.
- [28] *Œuv.* i. 275.
- [29] *Correspondance. Œuv.* ii. 131, 207.
- [30] Long-winded and tortuous and difficult to seize as Shaftesbury is as a whole, in detached sentences he shows marked aphoristic quality; *e.g.* 'The most ingenious way of becoming foolish is by a system;' 'The liker anything is to wisdom, if it be not plainly the thing itself, the more directly it becomes its opposite.'
- [31] No. 278 (i. 411).
- [32] *Œuv.* ii. 115.
- [33] *Ib.* i. 87.

- [34] Doch
Zuweilen ist des Sinns in einer Sache
Auch mehr, als wir vermuthen; und es wäre
So unerhört doch nicht, dass uns der Heiland
Auf Wegen zu sich zöge, die der Kluge
Von selbst nicht leicht betreten würde.

Nathan der Weise, iii. 10.

- [35] *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Works (ed. 1842), i. 414.
[36] *Œuv.* ii. 170.
[37] No. 111.
[38] *Œuv.* ii. 74.
[39] No. 285.
[40] 'A man may as well pretend to cure himself of love by viewing his mistress through the artificial medium of a microscope or prospect, and beholding there the coarseness of her skin and monstrous disproportion of her features, as hope to excite or moderate any passion by the artificial arguments of a Seneca or an Epictetus.'—Hume's *Essays* (xviii. *The Sceptic*).
[41] *Œuv.* i. 163.
[42] Nos. 296-298, 148.
[43] *Sur le Libre Arbitre. Œuv.* i. 199.
[44] *Politique Positive*, iii. 589.
[45] *Ib.* i. 194.
[46] *Politique Positive*, 205.
[47] *Ib.* 206, 207.
[48] No. 330.
[49] Nos. 462, 463.
[50] *Correspondance. Œuv.* ii. 163.
[51] *Œuv.* i. 310.
[52] *Œuv.* i. 325.
[53] *Œuv.* i. 326.
[54] No. 236.
[55] *Œuv.* ii. 188.

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ESSAY 1: VAUVENARGUES ***

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