When Ideas Matter: The Moral Philosophy of Fontenelle

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Introduction

There has been a recent trend in the historiography of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectual culture to analyze that culture from a sociological perspective. This perspective, a necessary corrective to a pure history of ideas, takes knowledge as a socially constructed phenomenon and thus subject to sociological analysis. The point of the sociology of knowledge, however, is not to re-hash and bolster old externalist arguments but to do away with the whole debate over whether ideas or social conditions are more important in intellectual history and the history of science. A focus on sociology does not mean that ideas do not matter. This becomes apparent when analyzing the ethics of early modern intellectuals.

For example, Anne Goldgar’s recent work, Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750 (1995), gives much attention to the sociology of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Republic of Letters—but at the cost of relegating the role of ideas to the sidelines. According to Goldgar, if one wants to understand early modern intellectuals as a community, including their ethics and sense of morality, one should focus on forms of sociability rather than the ideas and philosophies they put forth in their writings. An aristocratic ethic dominated early modern scholarship, she argues, and even took precedence over knowledge claims: “[i]n striving to make its inner workings acceptable to the outside community the Republic of Letters chose, like the aristocracy, to empty its internal relationships of content, choosing instead to concentrate on form.... [A]rguments were often judged on the politeness with which they were presented, rather than on their intrinsic merit.”¹ Men of

letters, although often of humble origin, cultivated nobility by emulating aristocratic modes of decorum and noble interests in status and reputation. One way they promoted these ideas was through a literary genre adopted from classical antiquity, the *éloge* (eulogy), which presented exemplary modes of behavior by praising the lives of the “heroes” of the Republic of Letters. Interestingly, the years on which Goldgar focuses her analysis almost precisely encompass the period of Bernard le Bouyer de Fontenelle’s mature intellectual production. Yet Fontenelle (1657-1757), widely hailed during his lifetime as having perfected the art of the *éloge*, plays no role in her argument.

From 1699 to 1740 Fontenelle, as *secrétaire perpétuel* of the Académie Royale des Sciences, composed some sixty-nine *éloges* in honor of recently deceased members of the academy and of other notable savants. Even a brief glance at Fontenelle’s eulogies reveals an intimate link between philosophy and morality. A more careful examination of them in the context of his life and works shows that this link was logically commensurate with his genuinely held notions of human nature, happiness, reason, and the good. In fact the relationship in the eulogies between notions of nobility and the virtues proper to the savant or philosopher is highly intellectualized. Fontenelle was not as concerned with status and reputation or with self-fashioning as one might think.² We can only assimilate his ethics to those of the court aristocracy if we ignore what he actually wrote.

Through his eulogies and other writings, Fontenelle’s thoughts on philosophy and morality have had a lasting impact on western culture. He presented an image of what would come to characterize the proper, objective, modern scientist and thinker.³ In order to understand the *éloge* as an institution in the Republic of Letters (and by extension the early modern intellectual ethic) it is therefore important to examine Fontenelle’s moral philosophy more carefully. It is a philosophy expressed in his eulogies but understood clearly only in the context of his life and works.

**On the Éloges**

As noted above, one way to contextualize the institution of the *éloge* is to place it within a Republic of Letters concerned with adopting the manners of the nobility: the *éloges* become a way of instructing savants to be *poli* and *honnête*. Yet they make no sense at all unless seen as part of the neoclassical tradition,


³ See, for example, Fontenelle’s *éloge* for de Lemery: “C’est une louange qui appartient assez généralement à cette espèce particulière et peu nombreuse de gens que le commerce des sciences éloigne de celui des hommes.” *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. G.-B. Depping (Paris, 1818; repr. Geneva, 1968), II, 193 (cited as “OC”).
which does not always mesh nicely with the above interpretation. By the time of Fontenelle, neoclassicism was a predominant fashion in art, architecture, drama, and literature. Although fashionable since the Italian Renaissance had “arrived” in France in the fifteenth century, the promotion of neoclassical modes became a veritable state program during the reign of Louis XIV. By the later seventeenth century the monarchy had mobilized the arts as never before for the display of the gloire of the Sun King. The monarchy actively promoted classical models as expressive of the order and harmony it wanted to symbolize. The éloges were part of this neoclassical enterprise. It is therefore no accident that the elegiac tradition found its way into the Académie Royale des Sciences—one of the many academies Minister Colbert established to reflect the glory of the absolute monarchy and of Louis XIV.4

In Science and Immortality Charles Paul explores the institution of the éloges in the Académie Royale des Sciences, examining their beginning with Fontenelle and their evolution through his three successors as secrétaire perpétuel: J.J. Dortous de Mairan, J.P. Grandjean de Fouchy, and the Marquis de Condorcet. Paul also points out the connections between philosophy or science and morality made in the éloges.

As Paul demonstrates, the panegyric tradition of classical antiquity was primarily a rhetorical and oratorical practice with mimetic, ethical intent, aimed at representing the moral behavior of dead heroes so that it could be emulated by the living. Therefore, even though eulogies told of the lives of heroes, they were not biographical in the critical sense as we might understand it today. Furthermore, the eulogist was limited to a stock of topoi, or class of topical arguments, which could illustrate the ethical intent of his rhetoric. For instance, he might employ a type of mock humility in the formal exordium of the eulogy in order to convince his audience it should listen for the virtues of “X.”5 In other words panegyric turned away or “troped” from “realistic” discourse (in the sense of following formal rules of logic) and found refuge in certain tropes, or moods, or figures of speech. The purpose of the panegyric was to be useful to the present, not to be a true representation of the past; its auditors understood this and accepted it, while still enjoying the “truth” of the rhetoric itself.

Like many of his contemporary men of letters, Fontenelle would have learned the classical tradition of panegyric and accepted topoi as part of his study of rhetoric at his Jesuit collège.6 As a result, Paul implies, Fontenelle’s notions of

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4 See Peter Burke, The Fabrication of Louis XIV (New Haven, 1992).
how and what virtues to praise derived directly from the classical rhetoricians Plutarch, Cicero, Quintillian, and the rest. As much as Fontenelle was steeped in the classical tradition, however, he was acutely aware of the differences between his time and antiquity. In accordance with what he thought was appropriate for his own day, he had no qualms about diverging from the classical panegyrical tradition and striking a better balance between a biographical and ethical purpose for the éloge. His eulogies often went into great detail on the life and works of each savant. Nevertheless, he always kept sight of the ultimate goal: to idealize the morality of the savants he eulogized.

Arguing that we should not overvalue his “modernity,” Paul links Fontenelle’s moral philosophy to those virtues appropriate to the classical panegyrical tradition, especially those expressed in Plutarch’s popular Lives of Illustrious Men. In other words the virtues that Plutarch praises in the heroes of antiquity are the same ones that Fontenelle praises in the “Plutarchian heroes” of eighteenth-century intellectual culture. Just like Plutarch’s Coriolanus, Marcus Cato, and Setorius, Fontenelle’s savants embodied stoic fortitude; and like Pericles, Solon, and Lycurgus, they possessed an overwhelming sense of duty. They expressed “temperance and equanimity” and “courage and resolution.” Furthermore, they were endowed with the pastoral, Arcadian virtues of “simplicity, humility, honesty, want of ambition, poverty, austerity, and frugality.”

There is nothing particularly aristocratic (in the sense of a desire for glory) about these virtues—sometimes they are quite the opposite. Fontenelle’s éloges most clearly celebrate an uncultured, Edenic goodness, associated with his own mythic notions of the shepherd’s life, a life uncorrupted by civilization and commerce with humanity.

For instance, the affable and modest Vincenzio Viviani “had an innocence and simplicity of manners that one finds ordinarily in those who have less commerce with men than with books.” Guillaume de Amontons had a “simplicity, a frankness, and a candor that a minimum of commerce with men can conserve.” Philosophy somehow engendered an Arcadian freedom from the corruption of modern, secular life. In so doing it enabled men to overcome the violent passions that governed the lives of most, and achieve a true tranquillity of soul. Indeed, the manners of Pierre-Sylvain de Régis were “such as the study of philosophy can form, when it does not find too much resistance from the nature of the man.”

\[\text{Paul, Science and Immortality, 89-93.}\]
\[\text{See } \text{OC, III, 51-69, “Discours sur la nature de l’éloge.”}\]
\[\text{OC, I, 62: “Il avait cette innocence et cette simplicité de moeurs que l’on conserve ordinairement, quand on a moins de commerce avec les hommes qu’avec les livres.”}\]
\[\text{OC, I, 81: “une simplicité, une franchise et une candeur, que le peu de commerce avec les hommes pouvait conserver.”}\]
\[\text{OC, I, 95: “Les moeurs de Regis étaient telles que l’étude de la philosophie les peut former, quand elle ne trouve pas trop de résistance du côté de la nature.”}\]
etrated into his heart, and had established there that delicious tranquillity which is the greatest but the least sought of all goods.”12 Likewise, Guillaume Homberg had achieved “that tranquillity of soul,” so that he was “free of the tumult of the passions.” In fact “A sound and peaceful philosophy had disposed him to accept without trouble the different events of his life, and it rendered him incapable of those agitations to which we are so subjected.”13

Even those with whom Fontenelle did not agree were worthy of tranquility if they devoted their lives to philosophy. Isaac Newton, whose physics Fontenelle strongly opposed, possessed the virtues of modesty and humility, “augmented by the wise simplicity of his life.”14 The tranquil geometer Pierre de Varignon had a character which “was as simple as his superiority of mind was able to ask.” Indeed, Fontenelle was very clear that it was philosophy itself which induced receptive men to the good: “I have already given this same praise to so many persons in this academy that one might believe this merit pertains more to our science than to our savants.”15 Those who practiced philosophy were by that very act elect, and of the elect those who attained a life of perfect contemplative virtue achieved sainthood. Of Jean-Baptiste du Hamel, his predecessor as secrétaire perpétuel, Fontenelle found himself (rhetorically) at a loss for words. He could not express the virtues of the man “because this would be the panegyric of a saint.” Nevertheless, he quickly recovered his composure and remarked, “One saw easily that his humility was not mere acting, but a sentiment founded on science itself.”16

Fontenelle expressed what he idealized as the innate virtues of savants with a literary grace hardly revealed in the excerpts I have translated here. What is more, a unified vision of the intellectual virtues runs throughout his éloges, as I have tried to demonstrate. Paul links Fontenelle’s virtues to the Plutarchian ideals necessitated by the topoi of the panegyrical tradition, but I think we should take this analysis somewhat further. Fontenelle’s notion of the intellectual virtues as articulated in the éloges is not merely bound up in Plutarchian tropes, and the pastoral aspect of the virtues requires more attention. We should be careful not to over-contextualize Fontenelle’s ideas, thus freezing them within

12 OC, I, 132: “la vraie philosophie avait pénétré jusqu’à son coeur, et y avait établi cette délicieuse tranquillité, qui est le plus grand et le moins recherché de tous les biens.”
13 OC, I, 201: “Une philosophie saine et paisible le disposait à recevoir sans trouble les différents événemens de la vie, et le rendait incapable de ces agitations dont on a, quand on veut, tant de sujets. A cette tranquillité d’âme tiennent nécessairement la probité et la droiture: on est hors du tumulte des passions.”
14 OC, I, 402: “augmentée encore par la sage simplicité de sa vie.”
15 OC, I, 337: “Son caractère était aussi simple que sa supériorité d’esprit pouvait le demander. J’ai déjà donné cette même louange à tant de personnes de cette académie, qu’on peut croire que le mérite en appartient plutôt à nos sciences qu’à nos savans.”
16 OC, I, 88-89: “il faudrait maintenant le représenter comme homme, et peindre ses moeurs: mais ce serait le panégyrique d’un saint.... On voyait aisément que son humilité était, non pas un discours, mais un sentiment fondé sur sa science même.”
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their own history and preventing them from saying anything. For Fontenelle
the true savant exists in the realm of truth, having overcome, not denied, the
woes of earthly existence by perfecting his own human nature. There is a per-
sonal psychology at work here, in combination with a clear understanding of
the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical tradition and a serious engagement with
a Stoicism greatly revived in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France.17

On Human Nature

Fontenelle was not a systematic philosopher; he worked out no unified
philosophy of ethics, epistemology, or metaphysics. He was a littérateur, and
what he wrote was mostly literature. This does not mean he did not have a
philosophy, or that he was incapable of engaging in the philosophical issues of
his day. It was no doubt precisely his ability to discuss philosophy in a clear,
engaging, literary style that earned him the position of secrétaire perpétuel in
the Académie Royale des Sciences. Who better to write the history of the acad-
emy than one of the foremost writers of the day?

Fontenelle developed his notions of human nature at a fairly young age
(beginning in his mid twenties), and they remained surprisingly constant through-
out his life. In short, his philosophy of human nature is pessimistic, but it is a
mitigated pessimism. One historian cleverly names this philosophy “naturalis-
tic fatalism,” but let us not be led by philosophic jargon to infer that Fontenelle
came to his conclusions in pure, contemplative isolation from life. In works
such as Nouveaux dialogues des morts, “Discours sur la patience,” “Du
Bonheur,” and in his discussions of poetry, I think we can see him wrestling
with and working through personal questions: Why am I a failure? Why am I
unhappy? What is the meaning of my life? His philosophy is embedded in a
particular seventeenth-century Christian, literate context and is heavily engaged
with neo-Stoicism, but in the end he is asking and answering real, personal
questions about his life. We can speculate that his philosophy, or the disaf-
dected angst only partially submerged beneath it, had something to do with his
formative years, when he was Bernard le raté—Bernard the failure.

Fontenelle’s father, François, was a lawyer at the Parlement of Rouen, and
so it seemed practically preordained that young Bernard would follow him into
the vocation. Fontenelle studied law and rhetoric at the Jesuit college in Rouen,

17 The revival of Stoicism in France owes much to Guillaume du Vair’s La Philosophie
morale des Stoiques (1641). See Levi, French Moralists; also Charles Taylor, Sources of the
Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 159; Gerhard Oestreich,
Neo-Stoicism and the Early Modern State (Cambridge, 1983); Robert Evans, Jonson, Lipsius,
and the Politics of Renaissance Stoicism (Wakefield, 1992); Margaret Osler (ed.), Atoms,
Pneuma, and Tranquillity: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought (Cambridge,
and by 1674, at seventeen years of age, he was accepted into the bar. He pleaded his first case that year—and lost. Of the possible mitigating circumstances we have no idea. According to some interpretations, Fontenelle had never wanted to be a lawyer anyway and did not get along with his father (who was reputed to be little intelligent and of “boorish humor”). According to other stories, the court was either struck by Fontenelle’s eloquence or, on the contrary, his speech faltered (which seems more likely). At any rate Fontenelle renounced the bar after just this one case. Not surprisingly, he soon found himself out of his father’s house, and on the road to Paris—apparently to try his luck as a man of letters. He did not have the means to remain in Paris on a permanent basis until the late 1680s, but from 1675 on he spent as much time there as possible.

Fortunately for Fontenelle, his mother’s brothers were the famous Corneilles: Pierre, dramatist and author of such works as *Le Cid*, and Thomas, editor of the literary journal, *Mercure galant*. In Paris Fontenelle rubbed elbows with the literary elite, the libertines, and the *érudits*, and he was an especial favorite of the *précieuses*, the hostesses of the salons. More importantly, Fontenelle had the *Mercure galant* as a literary outlet. Normally authors had to pay to have their works published in the *Mercure*. Fontenelle, of course, did not. Throughout the 1670s and 80s his poetry and literary pieces appeared regularly in the journal. This is not to say he had achieved success on his own merits. In 1676 he submitted a piece for the poetry prize at the Académie Française—and lost, once again. (Consequently, the Academy became a particular obsession with him: he tried and failed four times to be admitted, before finally being accepted in 1691. Of course, by this time his uncle Thomas was the Chancellor of the Academy.) Perhaps worse, his first attempt at a tragedy, *l’Aspar* (1680), flopped miserably, and Racine himself heaped criticism upon it. Humiliated, Fontenelle burned the manuscript, and the last of his optimism, and retreated to Rouen.

It was therefore an irony not lost on Fontenelle that he finally achieved real literary recognition for a work written in self-imposed exile back in Rouen, a work which revealed a deep, satirical pessimism about the human condition, the *Nouveaux dialogues des morts* (1683). Modeled on the original second-century *Dialogues of the Dead*, Fontenelle took the role of a new Lucian. Through the mouths of the famous dead, Fontenelle satirized that which most maddened and tormented him—all truth with malice in it, all the subtle demonisms of life and thought. When he proclaimed that humans were selfish and stupid and governed by their passions, he was speaking of himself, too. It was his ambitions, his passions, and his stupidity, which had led him to abandon the practice of law and set him on a course for seeming failure as a man of letters. Therefore, men were

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fools if they thought reason could dominate the passions. 20 Perhaps this was what he had learned from his one case as a lawyer: the courts were where one was supposed to overcome the passions with reasoned arguments, and yet his own human nature, his fear and lack of self-confidence, had caused him to stammer and falter—and fail. Humans, he saw, are essentially passionate animals, and it was upon this fundamental premise of human nature (the exact opposite of Aristotle’s) that Fontenelle built his ethics, using Aristotle’s own logic.

In the guise of Anacreon, the Dionysian lyric poet, he therefore mocked Aristotle’s dictum “Man is man by reason alone.” Rebuffing Aristotle’s patronizing banter concerning his interest in wine and song, Anacreon replies, “It is more difficult to drink and sing as I have sung and I have drunk than to philosophize as you have philosophized. For to sing and drink as I, it would be necessary to have cleared your soul of violent passions, no longer to aspire to that which does not depend on us, to be disposed to take each day as it comes.” 21

Fontenelle saw that it was passion, especially aspiration, that led to unhappiness, at least his own. If one could follow the advice of the Stoics and maintain a stoic apathy toward the different events of life, then one could achieve happiness. But nothing could be more difficult; even the metaphysical philosophizing of Aristotle pales in comparison. This is because man is man by passion, with perhaps a smattering of reason in passion’s service. In fact even as he admired the Stoic admonition to disavow the desires, Fontenelle was not sure such a disavowal could be possible or for the good:

It is the passions which make and unmake all. If reason dominated the earth, nothing would happen. They say that pilots fear passive seas, where they are not able to sail, most of all and that they want wind, even at the risk of a tempest. The passions are for men as the winds which are necessary to put everything in motion, even if they often cause storms. 22


21 OC, II, 179: “Vous prétendez railler; mais je vous soutiens qu’il est plus difficile de boire et de chanter comme j’ai chanté et comme j’ai bu, que de philosopher comme vous avez philosophé. Pour chanter et pour boire comme moi, il faudrait avoir dégagé son âme des passions violentes, n’aspirer plus à ce qui ne dépend pas de nous, s’être disposé à prendre toujours le temps comme il viendrait.”

22 OC, II, 215: “Ce sont les passions qui font et qui défont tout. Si la raison dominait sur la terre, il ne s’y passerait rien. On dit que les pilotes craignent au dernier point ces mers pacifiques où l’on ne peut naviguer, et qu’ils veulent du vent, au hasard d’avoir des tempêtes. Les passions sont chez les hommes des vents qui sont nécessaires pour mettre tout en mouvement, quoiqu’ils causent souvent des orages.”
In fact Fontenelle begins to sound almost Nietzschean in his claim that the apotheosis of reason might kill life:

[Nature] has put men on the world to live, and to live means not knowing what we do most of the time. When we discover the small importance of what we do and what concerns us, we steal from nature her secret: then we become too wise and no longer want to act, and this nature does not find good.\(^23\)

In other words humans must have the capacity to live irrationally. We must believe that what we do has meaning or that things are as they seem even if our reason tells us otherwise—else we risk a crisis of being that would freeze us in our tracks.

By defining man as a creature of passion (thus rejecting the Cartesian view of man as a thinking thing and the Aristotelian view of man as a rational creature), Fontenelle absolved himself of his failures. He was bound to fail because he was bound to desire and to aspire. Indeed, in his view passion becomes the motor of history, the cause of human actions, both evil and good: “All great deeds which men were compelled to do were done without reason. The order which nature seeks is always enforced...”\(^24\) To deny one’s essential nature, then, is to act unnaturally—in Stoic terminology, not to be in accordance with nature, and therefore not to be virtuous. In Stoicism, with which Fontenelle was certainly in dialogue here, happiness (or at least Stoic indifference, or apathy) results only from being in accord with nature. Not coincidentally, happiness is the second key element underlying Fontenelle’s ethics. Like Aristotle, Fontenelle understands happiness as the greatest human good, and virtuous or good behavior as necessarily in accordance with happiness.

In redefining human nature, however, Fontenelle had dug himself into a hole. If to act in accordance with nature meant surrendering ourselves to the passions, then we are forever to desire things “not up to us”—and thus to be cursed to unhappiness. It is for this reason, I think, that the Dialogues never arrive at a truly positive closure. Fontenelle would eventually find his way out of this dilemma by reworking Aristotle’s ethics in light of his own view of human nature. This would, as it had for Aristotle, make philosophy that activity which

\(^23\) OC, II, 224: “Elle a mis les hommes au monde pour y vivre; et vivre, c’est ne savoir ce que l’on fait la plupart du temps. Quand nous découvrons le peu d’importance de ce qui nous occupe et de ce qui nous touche, nous arrachons à la nature son secret: on devient trop sage, et on ne veut plus agir; voilà ce que la nature ne trouve pas bon.”

induces virtue and happiness. But in 1683 Fontenelle had not yet built this intellectual bridge, and his pessimism dominated. What hope is there for man, he thought, doomed to unhappiness and kept in ignorance by the very nature of his being? In the guise of Montaigne, Fontenelle laughs at Socrates himself for believing men might have ever improved their nature: “Men of all centuries have the same penchants, over which reason has no power at all. Thus, everywhere where there are men, there are follies, and they are the same follies.”

Fontenelle was perhaps never so harsh on human nature in the Dialogues than when he spoke through Molière. When Paracelsus asks him to what use he has put his study of human folly, Molière quips, “I assemble in a certain place the greatest number of people that I am able, and there I make them see that they are all sots.” Amazed, Paracelsus asks how Molière can possibly persuade them of such a thing, to which Molière replies,

Nothing is easier. One proves their folly to them without employing any great feats of eloquence, nor any well-considered reasoning. What they do is so ridiculous that it is necessary only to do as much before them, and you will soon see them burst out laughing.

Thus, by their very nature humans are prone to folly and foolish behavior. In all his satire, however, Fontenelle reveals his great debt to Molière. If anywhere, this is where he explains the point of the Dialogues—a point that is in its essence *comedie à la Molière*: “In order to laugh at the world, it is necessary to be in some fashion outside of it, and comedy draws you from it: it gives you all of it as a spectacle, as if you had no part in it at all.” The Dialogues are cathartic; that is their charm, and probably why they sold so well. In explaining what humans are and laughing at their idiocy, Fontenelle had perhaps to some degree put himself beyond humanity, and thus he could feel he had escaped his own troubles for a while. Even if the Dialogues ultimately offered no answers, the laughter was good medicine.

Being a series of satirical vignettes and not a sustained argument, the Dialogues say many things on different subjects and are likely not meant to be read

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25 *OC*, II, 190-91: “Les hommes de tous les siècles ont les mêmes penchants, sur lesquels la raison n’a aucun pouvoir. Ainsi, partout où il y a des hommes, il y a des sottises, et les mêmes sottises.”

26 *OC*, II, 246: “J’assemblais dans un certain lieu le plus grand nombre de gens que je pouvais, et là je leur faisais voir qu’ils étaient tous des sots.... Rien n’est plus facile. On leur prouve leurs sottises, sans employer de grands tours d’éloquence, ni des raisonnemens bien médités. Ce qu’ils font est si ridicule, qu’il ne faut qu’en faire autant devant eux, et vous les voyez aussitôt crever de rire.”

27 *OC*, II, 247: “Pour rire des choses du monde, il faut en quelque façon en être dehors, et la comédie vous en tire: elle vous donne tout en spectacle, comme si vous n’y aviez point de part.”
in such a unified manner as I have done. Doing so means risking an interpretation that perhaps could be questioned with evidence internal to the text, since I am necessarily picking and choosing what best fits my argument. In any case the tone of the Dialogues seems to me too harsh, too shrill at times, merely to be a disconnected literary effort in the libertine, skeptical tradition of Molière, or Cyrano de Bergerac, or even Montaigne. Also, I mentioned above that Fontenelle recognized the irony of the Dialogues’ success—that is the literary success of a work in which he explores and rails against the reasons for his own failure as a man of letters. Probably with an ironic grin (the one we see in Rigaud’s portrait of him, for instance), Fontenelle himself anonymously published a critique of the Dialogues the year after they appeared—entitled the Jugement de Pluton. It was a final joke on humanity as a whole, this time from the lips of the god of the underworld himself.

On Philosophy, Happiness, and Virtue

Although Fontenelle’s philosophy of human nature began to solidify in the cathartic outpouring of 1683, no ethic had yet emerged. Nor could it. In the Dialogues the moral order of the cosmos is thrown on its head. Good is bad, and bad is good: to be in accordance with nature (i.e., to be a good human) is to be a passionate animal, but that precludes happiness. According to the Aristotelian tradition, happiness is a disposition of the soul in accordance with goodness. Thus, if one is not happy, one is therefore not virtuous—or not disposed toward the good. This confused situation mirrored Fontenelle’s inner disaffection. It is in his attempt to find happiness that an ethic of intellectual nobility explicitly opposed to the honor-ethic of the court nobility emerges.

After the Dialogues des Morts Fontenelle’s luck slowly began to change. He seemed to learn that, despite his love of poetry and drama, his real literary gift was for satire, comedy, and philosophy. He was at his best when seriously considering philosophy in a satirical, comedic tone. Not long after the Dialogues, he published the work that would bring him fame into the twentieth century: Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes (1686). Certainly influenced by Cyrano de Bergerac’s satirical l’Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune (1657) and l’Histoire comique des états et empires du soleil (1662), Fontenelle earnestly considered the possibility of life on other planets—but always with an eye to satirical commentary on science and philosophy itself. Cast in the form of a dialogue with a young marquise, Fontenelle commented wryly in the preface,

28 Leonard Marsak, Bernard de Fontenelle, 8-12, offers a somewhat more positive interpretation of the Dialogues.

Don’t you believe that if Wisdom wished to present herself successfully to men, she would do well to take a form such like that of the Marquise? Indeed, if Wisdom could make her conversation equally agreeable, I assure you that all the world would run after her.

Despite his newfound success, Fontenelle’s view of human nature had not changed: humans are governed by their passions, and men would much rather chase after beautiful women than truth itself (Fontenelle had a reputation as a womanizer, so here again he is laughing at himself). Philosophy, where it exists at all, must therefore be a result of our passions and our ignorance: “All philosophy ... is based on two things only: curiosity and poor eyesight; if you had better eyesight you could see [the universe] perfectly..., and if you were less curious you wouldn’t care about knowing, which amounts to the same thing.”

In general the Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds demonstrates the persistence of Fontenelle’s notions of human nature and the fact that they were not merely an isolated and internal development of the Dialogues.

We see that the Dialogues end rather sourly, with Fontenelle finding catharsis in laughter, but at the cost of having defined happiness (true happiness, pleasure is another matter) out of the nature of man. That is, happiness became a state beyond mortal grasp. To be in accordance with nature, as Stoicism requires, means acknowledging that we are passionate creatures, but by that acknowledgment we realize we cannot (as the Stoics suggest) “despise what is not up to us”—in fact we cannot help but desire it. Thus, to be as we are means being cursed to unhappiness. This Fontenelle found insupportable. An initially unpublished essay entitled “Du Bonheur” can be read, therefore, as Fontenelle’s attempt to climb out of the hole he had dug for himself. How could he retain his view of human nature—a view he saw so self-evident everywhere he looked, especially when he looked inward—and yet salvage some hope of happiness in life?

On Happiness (“Du Bonheur”) is not an entirely clear piece. Fontenelle does not seem to be sure at times what he wants to do with it (whether it should be a theoretical analysis or a practical guide) or how he wants to define happiness (as a state of being, or a way of experiencing pleasure), but it comes together nicely at the end as a thought-provoking sermon. Perhaps this is why he


did not publish the essay immediately, even though it was written fairly early, most likely sometime in the late 1680s or around 1690-91.32

This work marks a further break from and at the same time a confirmation of some Stoic principles. Concerning Stoicism, Fontenelle repeated what he had argued in more depth in a 1687 essay “Discours sur la Patience”—namely that he rejected what he saw as the Stoic and Cartesian belief in a duality of mind and body. Humans are passionate animals, and one cannot imagine that their reason or their minds are separate from their bodies. Fontenelle therefore also rejected the Stoic notion that humans could disavow desire or ignore the evils that plagued them, by claiming these evils had no power to affect a human’s true being (his mind): “When a Stoic, pressed by the sadness of a violent malady, cries out: I will not avow however that you are an evil; the effort that he would make to disavow it, is this not actually the strongest and sincerest avowal that can be made?”33 Yet Fontenelle continued to believe, as the Stoics, that humans could to a degree control their judgments on the world, and this enabled them to establish some control over their passions.

“At Bonheur” defines happiness as a state of being, “a situation such that one desires it to last with changing.”34 Thus it is not the same thing as pleasure, which is merely an agreeable sensation that quickly passes. Nor is it simply caused by pleasures, since some people may experience many pleasures and never find happiness, while others live plain lives and are happy. True happiness is a state of psychological “immobility”; the only concern of he or she who achieves this state is to conserve it.

The Stoics, explains Fontenelle, would say one can achieve this state by eliminating desires, by not wanting things to be other than they are. This is folly, Fontenelle argues, for it requires us to maintain “the ridiculous and useless vanity that we are invulnerable.”35 That is, it requires us to maintain the vanity that

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32 There are no clear indications I have seen of when Fontenelle wrote the essay. It was only published in 1724 in a collection of diverse works all written more than twenty years before. I suggest he wrote it in the 80s, or at most the early 90s, based on its congruence with several other works from the late 80s. The issues the essay raises, and especially the language it uses link it to a 1687 essay, “Discours sur la Patience” (for which Fontenelle won the Académie Française’s prize for eloquence) as well as to his 1687 essay on the nature of the Eglogue (a poem in which shepherds converse). The appearance of “Du Bonheur” in 1724 along with other early essays seems a rather self-indulgent afterthought—perhaps the act of a famous and elderly writer (he was in his late sixties) publishing his memoirs for the benefit of his public.

33 OC, II, 370: “Quand ce Stoïcien, pressé par la douleur d’une maladie violente, s’écriait, en s’adressant à elle: Je n’avouerai pourtant pas que tu sois un mal; cet effort qu’il faisait pour ne le pas avouer, ce désaveu même apparent, n’était-ce pas un aveu et le plus fort et le plus sincère qui pût jamais être?”

34 OC, II, 378: “On entend ici par le mot de bonheur un état, une situation telle qu’on en désirât la durée sans changement.”

35 OC, II, 379: “la ridicule et inutile vanité de nous croire invulnérables.”
we are essentially thinking things who only happen to have bodies under our complete control. If happiness exists at all, and it is not the result of an elimination of nor a total abandonment to the passions, then necessarily it must find itself in a moderation of the passions. Here Fontenelle begins to approach the elitist, even aristocratic, notions (in an Aristotelian sense) we find in his éloges: most people are of such a character and disposition that they will never be happy, but there are some few “calm and moderate” people “who accept more willingly agreeable ideas and impressions: these people can work usefully to make themselves happy.” They are ultimately the good, virtuous, and philosophic people, and thus by extension a sort of intellectual nobility, although perhaps more in the priestly than the knightly sense.

In order to moderate the passions and approach happiness one must first cleanse the soul “and chase away all evil fantasies.” That is, through contemplation it is possible to distinguish between what we imagine to be misfortune or what we imagine deserves our desires and passions, which, however, are not real at all, and what truly deserves our attention. Fontenelle’s prose sounds somewhat muddled at this point. Essentially, however, he is arguing that people often imagine things to be worse than they are, or they fail to recognize the good they have, always desiring what are perceived as greater and better goods: “they do not deign to stop and taste those [goods] that they have; often they abandon them in order to run after those they do not have.” In other words all that which we could desire to make us happy, the “small goods,” are cheap and readily available; but many, opting for immoderation, allow desire for perceived greater goods to govern them. The implicit assumption here is that the object of all desire is the good, and it is the proper perception of what is truly good that brings happiness, not merely the fleeting pleasures of the false-goods.

Here Fontenelle makes an explicit break with courtly life and its aristocratic morality, denying it is a true good, a proper object of desire. If we examine the perceived greater goods, he argues, the objects of our violent desires, we often find they melt away under the illumination:

Why this status that I pursue? Is it necessary? It is if it is necessary to be elevated above other men. But why is this necessary? It is to receive respect and homage from others. But what do I get from this respect and homage? Men will flatter me very obviously. But how will they flatter me, when I owe the flattery only to my status, and not to myself?

36 OC, II, 380: “Il en reste quelques-unes, doux et modérés, et qui admettent plus volontiers les idées ou les impressions agréables: ceux-là peuvent travailler utilement à se rendre heureux.”
37 OC, II, 380: “chassé tous les maux imaginaires.”
38 OC, II, 384: “on ne daigne pas s’arrêter à goûter ceux que l’on possède; souvent on les abandonne pour courir après ceux que l’on n’a pas.”
... Often our idea of happiness is much too complex. How many things, for example, would be necessary in order to make a courtier happy? The credit of the ministers, the favor of the King, considerable establishments [i.e., estates] for him and his children, luck at games, faithful mistresses who flatter his vanity; finally everything which could represent to him an imagination unrestrained and insatiable?39

It is a matter of calculation, says Fontenelle: how much do we value those pleasures only gained through immoderate desires, and how do we weigh them against the pain we must endure in order to obtain them, and against their instability in time? How are they worth it when the simple pleasures, “tranquillity of life, association, hunting, reading, etc. ... will always be pleasurable, and cost nothing? Immoderate men might find these simple pleasures insipid, ... but what they call insipid, I call tranquillity ... what idea do they have of the human condition when they complain of being only tranquil? It is the most delicious state that I can imagine.”40

An ethic is emerging here, based on a particular conception of human nature and man’s proper orientation toward the good; and it is set precisely against the honor-ethic of the court. The good is not the achievement of being through recognition in court society—according to whatever criteria that society establishes as necessary for recognition, be it politesse and honnêteté or something else—but is individualistic: it is whatever allows one to be well and whole within one’s self. The object of our desires and passions should be that which brings us the inner tranquillity of being ourselves as sovereign individuals. The influence here of Montaigne is clear. Fontenelle advocates a retreat into the self, as did Montaigne. He chooses the mode of being and advocates the kind of reflection Montaigne inaugurated—indeed, a separate but similar line of thought about the modern self than the one Descartes articulated.41 Even Fontenelle’s realization

39 OC, II, 385, 386: “Pourquoi cette dignité que je poursuis m’est-elle si nécessaire? C’est qu’il faut être élevé au-dessus des autres. Et pourquoi le faut-il? C’est pour recevoir leurs respects et les hommages. Et que me feront ces hommages et ces respects? Ils me flatteront trés-sensiblement. Et comment me flatteront-ils, puisque je ne les devrai qu’à ma dignité, et non pas à moi-même?... Souvent le bonheur dont on se fait l’idée, est trop composé et trop compliqué. Combien de choses, par example, seraient nécessaires pour celui d’un courtisan? du crédit auprès ministres, la faveur du Roi, des établissemens considérables pour lui et pour ses enfants, de la fortune au jeu, des maitresses fidèles et qui flatassent sa vanité; enfin tout ce que peut lui représenter une imagination effrénée et insatiable” (italics added).

40 OC, II, 385-86: “Il en faut revenir aux plaisirs simples, tels que la tranquillité de la vie, la société, la chasse, la lecture, etc. ... Les gens accoutumés aux mouvemens violens de passions, trouveront sans doute fort insipide tout le bonheur que peuvent produire les plaisirs simples. Ce qu’ils appellent insipidité, je l’appelle tranquillité ... Mais quelle idée a-t-on de la condition humaine, quand on se plaint de n’être que tranquille? et l’état le plus délicieux que l’on puisse imaginer.”

41 See Nannerl Keohane, Philosophy and the State in France, 83-116, and Taylor, The Sources of the Self, 177-84.
that it is moderation that is the key to finding the good and achieving inner tranquillity echoes Montaigne, for example in his essay “On moderation.”

Fontenelle was quite aware he was articulating an ethical position in “Du Bonheur”—the notion of happiness has rested on ethical foundations at least since Aristotle. As the essay draws to a close, Fontenelle writes grandly, “The greatest secret to happiness is to be well with one’s self. Naturally all the troublesome accidents which come from outside ourselves throw us back into ourselves. It is good to have an agreeable retreat, but the self is only able to be so if it is prepared by the hand of virtue.” Virtue in this ethic, however, is naturally founded on notions of a sovereign self. We must not be ashamed of our self when we retreat there for reflection and contemplation—it is not an issue of sociability. Virtue is conducive neither to riches nor elevation, Fontenelle writes, but brings “an infallible compensation: interior satisfaction.” One therefore “finds in one’s own reason and integrity the greatest depths of happiness for which others hope in the caprice of chance.”

The ironic strand of Fontenelle’s position is that even as he argued for withdrawal into the self and rejection of courtly life, he achieved worldly success and high regard in the French absolutist state. In fact Fontenelle’s life and philosophy read as an allegory of the ancient Christian dilemma of how to live in the world and yet not be touched or corrupted by it. Perhaps this is the influence of his Jesuit educators. Like the mendicant orders, the Jesuits walked the line between the sacred and the secular: they were in the secular world to spread the gospel and the truth, but (ideally) they eschewed material possessions and worldly ambitions like the regular clergy. Thus considered incorruptible, they earned the esteem of rulers, who gave them administrative positions in government. Likewise, Fontenelle’s rejection of courtly life earned him the favor of the French state. Was he too considered incorruptible?

I think it is becoming clear that Fontenelle’s attempt to achieve happiness within a particular notion of human nature involved the articulation of an individualistic ethic with its own type of morality and virtues. And what are these

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42 Montaigne, “On Moderation,” The Complete Essays, tr. M.A. Screech (New York, 1991), 222-23: “I have seen one of our great noblemen harm the reputation of his religion by showing himself religious beyond any example of men of his rank ... I like natures which are temperate and moderate. Even when an immoderate zeal for the good does not offend me, it still stuns me.”

43 OC, II, 387: “Le plus grand secret pour le bonheur, c’est d’être bien avec soi. Naturellement tous les accidens fâcheux qui viennent du dehors, nous rejettent vers nous-mêmes, et il est bon d’y avoir une retraite agréable; mais elle ne peut l’être si elle n’a été préparée par les mains de la vertu.”

44 OC, II, 387: “Mais une récompense infaillible pour elle, c’est la satisfaction intérieure ... On trouve dans sa propre raison et dans sa droiture un plus grand fonds de bonheur que les autres n’en attendent des caprices du hasard.”
virtues? They are moderation, simplicity, humility, and a focus on the sovereign self and its own tranquillity—in other words, exactly those virtues Fontenelle praises savants for exhibiting in his éloges.

It is philosophy itself that induces these virtues, leading through contemplation to a proper recognition of the good. Fontenelle’s notion of the good may consist in a modern, individualistic orientation inward, toward the self, but the role he gives philosophy draws on an ancient tradition perhaps inaugurated by Plato and articulated most clearly in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. In fact “Du Bonheur” follows many of the arguments of the *Nichomachean Ethics* with striking similarity. The significant difference is in the definition of human nature.

A brief digression on Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* reveals the parallels and divergences of Aristotle’s and Fontenelle’s moral philosophies, and demonstrates why philosophy plays a central role in inducing virtue for Fontenelle. In the *Ethics* Aristotle defines the *telos* of human life as happiness itself: “what is the highest of all practical goods? Well, so far as the name goes there is pretty general agreement. ‘It is happiness’” (I.iv). Like Fontenelle, Aristotle argues that happiness is not the same thing as pleasure. It is “an activity [or disposition] of the soul in accordance with virtue,” by which he means the “best and most perfect kind” of virtue. Note that “virtue” is a translation of the Greek *arete* (excellence), which denotes the abstract noun for *agathos*, or “good.”

So happiness consists in acting or being in accordance with goodness. Both Aristotle and Fontenelle reject the Platonic notion that there is a universal Good. Aristotle argues merely that there is a “Good for man” (meaning all men) which is the ultimate object of human life. Fontenelle might say there is a “good for me” and a “good for you,” although this is not clear. Aristotle links this human good to his notion of human nature: man is a rational animal (but remember, he means something entirely different from a Cartesian “thinking thing”). Therefore, to be in accordance with virtue, or goodness, is to be perfectly rational. Fontenelle of course rejects this notion of human nature, but his logic is the same as Aristotle’s. For Fontenelle man is a passionate animal, and so to be in accordance with virtue, or goodness, is to be perfectly passionate, that is, not to give in to wild, violent, uncontrollable passions but to be properly passionate toward, or desirous of, what is truly good, and therefore conducive to tranquillity and happiness.

Thus, for Aristotle, the average good man is he (and for Aristotle the sexism is explicit) who bases his actions on reason. Here he means reason in the practical, calculative sense of choosing well in the everyday activities of life. The man of perfect goodness and therefore of the highest moral character, however, is
more than this. In book VI, the “Intellectual Virtues,” Aristotle argues that there are two distinct parts to the rational half of our souls: the “calculative” discussed above, and a higher “scientific” part (VI.i.). The calculative part deliberates on that which is variable, but the scientific part contemplates the invariable, that is, the Truth with a capital T. Thus, the “best and most perfect” kind of virtue, according to which the soul must be disposed to achieve the highest happiness, is scientific contemplation, or philosophy (X.vii.). Because philosophy is the apprehension of “the highest things that can be known,” its aim is nothing other than contemplation for its own sake. Hence it “entails pleasures that are marvelous in purity and permanence,” much like Fontenelle’s “simple pleasures” (X.vii.). We must remember here that Aristotle conceives of this higher form of reason not as a procedure for use in seeking knowledge of Truth but as the perception of Truth itself. You cannot be reasonable in the Aristotelian sense and still be wrong about how things really are. Thus, contemplation of Truth has no goal other than the pleasure of pure contemplation. The best and most virtuous man is the happiest man because he is perfectly wise. Moreover, he is a “self-sufficient” man because he needs no others to confirm his virtuosity: “the wise man can practice contemplation by himself, and the more wise he is, the more he can do it” (X.vii.).

For Fontenelle philosophy as a contemplative activity plays the same role, but he works it out in accordance with his own diametrically opposed view of human nature, and a different notion of knowledge. In an unpublished fragment on human reason he rejects the notion of universals, arguing that they are merely linguistic constructs. He kept a basically representationalist, empiricist view of human reason: knowledge of the particulars of the world was possible.46 Thus, for Fontenelle it is through the contemplative search for the particular truths (and thus the particular goods) of the world that the philosopher finds the virtue to direct his natural human desires toward those objects proper for assuring his happiness. We are always impassioned by desire, but philosophy induces us to desire those simple, permanent goods that bring tranquillity—and the virtues of the sovereign self. As he says in his éloge to Homberg, “Whoever has the leisure to think discovers nothing better than to be virtuous.”47

Conclusion and a Few Words on Shepherds

Ergo, for Fontenelle the most virtuous of men in his age, those heroes most worthy of eulogies, were savants and philosophers. Far from promoting any

47 OC, I, 201: “quiconque a le loisir de penser, ne voit rien de mieux à faire que d’être vertueux.”
sort of mimicry of the court nobility, Fontenelle all but invites the courtly to adopt the noble ethic of the learned if they want to discover true happiness, tranquillity, and the good life. If we take the éloge as instruction on moral behavior and Fontenelle’s éloges as the greatest examples of them in his period, then we cannot ignore the ideas that underlie the virtues they propound. Any analysis of the éloges that includes no examination of Fontenelle’s ideas on human nature, happiness, and reason, therefore, will be deficient. In the end ideas do matter. Indeed, the intellectual origins of Fontenelle’s ethics reveal more about the concerns of early modern savants than an analysis of sociability and civility. True, there is often a gap between moral ideals and actual behavior, but an examination of sociability that does not take ideas into account assumes that there is no conscious ethical dimension to civil behavior.

In the debate over the role of the passions in human life Fontenelle stands at the bridge between the seventeenth-century notion that the passions must be constrained to ensure happiness and harmony, and the eighteenth-century rehabilitation of the passions as the motor of human society. Despite his idea that the passions must be properly directed by reason to ensure happiness, Fontenelle presaged the likes of Hume and Holbach by giving the passions primacy in the human psyche. It is in the difficulty of resolving the tension between passion and reason that Fontenelle rejected both the courtly and the classical ethics, and turned, as many of his contemporaries would, to the pastoral ideal as the model of human existence. In his musings on pastoral poetry, for example, we can see Fontenelle beginning to work out his ethics before they came together more clearly in “Du Bonheur.” Already the crucial ideas—tranquillity, simplicity, and the rejection of courtly life—are there. If read in light of his 1687 essay “Discours sur la nature de l’éloge,” one sees that human happiness as defined in “Du Bonheur” consists of Fontenelle’s notions of the simple, tranquil purity of the shepherd’s life. The virtues of the philosopher are not those of the court nobility, but of the simple shepherd.

Fontenelle’s pastoralism was not a random turn in the development of his moral philosophy but a logical component of his steadfast reversal of Aristotelian formulae. For Aristotle the concomitant to “man the rational animal” is “man the political animal.” Humans cannot perfect their nature as rational beings outside of the polis. For Fontenelle, however, man is a passionate animal, and he can therefore only perfect his nature if not corrupted by the polis, that is, by civilization. His ambitions, his immoderate desires and passions had brought Fontenelle unhappiness, but the pastoral life, he wrote, “admits no ambition at all, nor those things which agitate the heart too violently; the idle [shepherd] therefore has cause to be content.” This is because “the condition of the shep-

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herd is the most ancient of all conditions” and filled with “tranquillity and idleness.” For Fontenelle shepherds are the essence of humanity, uncorrupted by the burdens of civilization, politeness, hierarchy, and courtly life: “They live in their own way in great opulence; they have no one above them, that is to say, they are the kings of their own flocks; and I do not doubt that a certain joy which follows such abundance and freedom inclines them to song and poetry.” Indeed, this is why “paintings of the pastoral life always have that inexpressible pleasantness, and [why] they soothe us more than the pompous descriptions of a superb court.” To attain happiness, goodness, and virtue, then, we must throw off the burdens of civilization, and return mentally to a state of simple, Arcadian purity. As we see in Fontenelle’s éloges, it is through contemplation, through philosophy, that he hopes humans can achieve this “most delicious” state of tranquillity.

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49 OC, III, 57: “Elle n’admet point l’ambition, ni tout ce qui agite le coeur trop violemment; la paresse a donc lieu d’être contente.” OC, III, 52: “la condition de berger est la plus ancienne de toutes les conditions.”

50 OC, III, 52: “Ils vivaient à leur manière dans une grande opulence, ils n’avaient personne au-dessus de leur tête, ils étaient pour ainsi dire les rois de leurs troupeaux; et je ne doute pas qu’une certaine joie qui suit l’abondance et la liberté, ne les portât encore au chant et à la poésie.”

51 OC, III, 57: “les peintures de la vie pastorale aient toujours je ne sais quoi de si riant, et qu’elles nous flattent plus que de pompeuses descriptions d’une cour superbe.”