

## True and False Simplicity

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Born in 1651, died in 1715; Preceptor to the sons of the Dauphin in 1689; Archbishop of Cambrai in 1695.

THERE is a simplicity that is a defect, and a simplicity that is a virtue. Simplicity may<sup>1</sup> be a want of discernment. When we speak of a person as simple, we may mean that he is credulous and perhaps vulgar. The simplicity that is a virtue is something sublime; every one loves and admires it; but it is difficult to say exactly what this virtue is.

Simplicity is an uprightness of soul that has no reference to self; it is different from<sup>2</sup> sincerity, and it is a still higher virtue. We see many people who are sincere, without being simple; they only wish to pass for what they are, and they are unwilling to appear what they are not; they are always thinking of themselves, measuring their words, and recalling their thoughts, and reviewing their actions, from the fear that they have done too much or too little. These persons are sincere, but they are not simple; they are not at ease with others, and others are not at ease with them; they are not free, ingenuous, natural; we prefer people who are less correct, less perfect, and who are less artificial. This is the decision of man, and it is the judgment of God, who would not have us so occupied with ourselves, and thus, as it were, always arranging our features in a mirror.

To be wholly occupied with others, never to look within, is the state of blindness of<sup>3</sup> those who are entirely engrossed by what is present and addressed to their senses; this is the very reverse of simplicity. To be absorbed in self in whatever engages us, whether we are laboring for our fellow beings or for God—to be wise in our own eyes, reserved, and full of ourselves, troubled at the least thing that disturbs our self-complacency, is the opposite extreme. This is false wisdom, which, with all its glory, is but little less absurd than that folly which pursues only pleasure. The one is intoxicated with all it sees around it; the other with all that it imagines it has within; but it is delirium in both. To be absorbed in the contemplation of our own minds is really worse than to be engrossed by outward things, because it appears like wisdom and yet is not; we do not think of curing it; we pride ourselves upon it; we approve of it; it gives us an unnatural strength; it is a sort of frenzy; we are not conscious of it; we are dying, and we think ourselves in health.

Simplicity consists in a just medium, in which we are neither too much excited, nor<sup>4</sup> too composed. The soul is not carried away by outward things, so that it can not make all necessary reflections; neither does it make those continual references to self, that a jealous sense of its own excellence multiplies to infinity. That freedom of the soul, which looks straight onward in its path, losing no time to reason upon its steps, to study them, or to contemplate those that it has already taken, is true simplicity.

The first step in the progress of the soul is disengagement from outward things, that<sup>5</sup>

it may enter into itself, and contemplate its true interests: this is a wise self-love. The second is, to join to this the idea of God whom it fears: this is the feeble beginning of true wisdom; but the soul is still fixed upon itself; it is afraid that it does not fear God enough; it is still thinking of itself. These anxieties about ourselves are far removed from that peace and liberty which a true and simple love inspires; but it is not yet time for this; the soul must pass through this trouble; this operation of the spirit of God in our hearts comes to us gradually; we approach step by step to this simplicity. In the third and last state, we begin to think of God more frequently, we think of ourselves less, and insensibly we lose ourselves in Him.

The more gentle and docile the soul is, the more it advances in this simplicity. It does not become blind to its own defects, and unconscious of its imperfections; it is more than ever sensible of them; it feels a horror of the slightest sin; it sees more clearly its own corruption; but this sensibility does not arise from dwelling upon itself, but by the light from the presence of God we see how far removed we are from infinite purity.

Thus simplicity is free in its course, since it makes no preparation; but it can only belong to the soul that is purified by a true penitence. It must be the fruit of a perfect renunciation of self, and an unreserved love of God. But tho they, who become penitents, and tear themselves from the vanities of the world, make self the object of thought, yet they must avoid an excessive and unquiet occupation with themselves, such as would trouble, and embarrass, and retard them in their progress. Dwelling too much upon self produces in weak minds useless scruples and superstition and in stronger minds a presumptuous wisdom. Both are contrary to true simplicity, which is free and direct, and gives itself up, without reserve and with a generous self-forgetfulness, to the Father of spirits. How free, how intrepid are the motions, how glorious the progress that the soul makes, when delivered from all low, and interested, and unquiet cares!

If we desire that our friends be simple and free with us, disencumbered of self in their intimacy with us, will it not please God, who is our truest friend, that we should surrender our souls to Him without fear or reserve, in that holy and sweet communion with Himself which He allows us? It is this simplicity which is the perfection of the true children of God. This is the end that we must have in view, and to which we must be continually advancing.

This deliverance of the soul from all useless, and selfish, and unquiet cares, brings to it a peace and freedom that are unspeakable; this is true simplicity. It is easy to perceive, at the first glance, how glorious it is; but experience alone can make us comprehend the enlargement of heart that it produces. We are then like a child in the arms of its parent; we wish nothing more; we fear nothing; we yield ourselves up to this pure attachment; we are not anxious about what others think of us; all our motions are free, graceful and happy. We do not judge ourselves, and we do not fear to be judged. Let us strive after this lovely simplicity; let us seek the path that leads to it. The further we are from it, the more we must hasten our steps toward it. Very far from being simple, most Christians are not even sincere. They are not only disingenuous, but they are false, and they dissemble with their neighbor, with God,

and with themselves. They practise a thousand little arts that indirectly distort the truth. Alas! every man is a liar: those even who are naturally upright, sincere, and ingenuous, and who are what is called simple and natural, still have this jealous and sensitive reference to self in everything, which secretly nourishes pride, and prevents that true simplicity, which is the renunciation and perfect oblivion of self.