



Self-Love

Voltaire

Nicolas in his “Essais de Morale,” written after two or three thousand volumes of ethics (“Treatise on Charity,” Chap. II), says that “by means of the wheels and gibbets which people establish in common are repressed the tyrannous thoughts and designs of each individual’s self-love.”

I shall not examine whether people have gibbets in common, as they have meadows and woods in common, and a common purse, and if one represses ideas with wheels; but it seems very strange to me that Nicole should take highway robbery and assassination for self-esteem. One should distinguish shades of difference a little better. The man who said that Nero had his mother assassinated through self-love, that Cartouche had much self-love, would not be expressing himself very correctly. Self-love is not wickedness, it is a sentiment that is natural to all men; it is much nearer vanity than crime.

A beggar in the suburbs of Madrid nobly begged charity; a passer-by says to him : “Are you not ashamed to practise this infamous calling when you are able to work?”

“Sir,” answered the beggar, “I ask for money, not advice.” And he turned on his heel with full Castillian dignity.

This gentleman was a proud beggar, his vanity was wounded by a trifle. He asked charity out of love for himself, and could not tolerate the reprimand out of further love for himself.

A missionary travelling in India met a fakir laden with chains, naked as a monkey, lying on his stomach, and having himself whipped for the sins of his compatriots, the Indians, who gave him a few farthings.

“What self-denial!” said one of the lookers-on.

“Self-denial!” answered the fakir. “Learn that I have myself flogged in this world in order to return it in another, when you will be horses and I horseman.”

Those who have said that love of ourselves is the basis of all our opinions and all our actions, have therefore been quite right in India, Spain, and all the habitable world : and as one does not write to prove to men that they have faces, it is not necessary to prove to them that they have self-love. Self-love is the instrument of our conservation; it resembles the instrument of the perpetuity of the Species: it is necessary, it is dear to us, it gives us pleasure, and it has to be hidden.

Voltaire. *The Philosophical Dictionary*. Translated by H.I. Woolf. New York: Knopf, 1924.

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