

TRUE PLEASURE INCONSISTENT WITH VICE

Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773)

to Philip Stanhope (1732–1768), his son

London, 27 March 1747

Pleasure is the rock which most young people split upon. They launch out with crowded sails in quest of it, but without a compass to direct their course, or reason sufficient to steer the vessel; for want of which, pain and shame, instead of pleasure, are the returns of their voyage. Do not think that I mean to snarl at pleasure like a Stoic, or to preach against it like a parson; no, I mean to point it out, and recommend it to you, like an Epicurean. I wish you a great deal, and my only view is to hinder you from mistaking it.

The character which most young men first aim at is that of a man of pleasure; but they generally take it upon trust, and instead of consulting their own taste and inclinations, they blindly adopt whatever those with whom they chiefly converse are pleased to call by the name of pleasure; and a man of pleasure, in the vulgar acceptation of that phrase, means only a beastly drunkard, an abandoned rake, and a profligate swearer and curser. As it may be of use to you, I am not unwilling, though at the same time ashamed, to own that the vices of my youth proceeded much more from my silly resolution of being what I heard called a man of pleasure than from my own inclinations. I always naturally hated drinking; and yet I have often drunk, with disgust at the time, attended by great sickness the next day, only because I then considered drinking as a necessary qualification for a fine gentleman and a man of pleasure.

The same as to gaming. I did not want money, and consequently had no occasion to play for it; but I thought play another necessary ingredient in the composition of a man of pleasure, and accordingly I plunged into it without desire at first, sacrificed a thousand real pleasures to it, and made myself solidly uneasy by it for thirty the best years of my life.

I was even absurd enough for a little while to swear, by way of adorning and completing the shining character which I affected; but this folly I soon laid aside upon finding both the guilt and the indecency of it.

Thus seduced by fashion, and blindly adopting nominal pleasures, I lost real ones; and my fortune impaired and my constitution shattered are, I must confess, the just punishment of my errors.

Take warning then by them; choose your pleasures for yourself, and do not let them be imposed upon you. Follow Nature, and not fashion; weigh the present enjoyment of your pleasures against the necessary consequences of them, and then let your own common-sense determine your choice.

Were I to begin the world again with the experience which I now have of it, I would lead a life of real not of imaginary pleasure. I would enjoy the pleasures of the table and of wine, but stop short of the pains inseparably annexed to an excess in either. I would not, at twenty years, be a preaching missionary of abstemiousness and sobriety, and I should let other people do as they would without formally and sententiously rebuking them for it; but I would be most firmly resolved not to destroy my own faculties and constitution in compliance to those who have no regard to their own. I would play to give me pleasure, but not to give me pain; that is, I would play for trifles, in mixed companies, to amuse myself and conform to custom; but I would take care not to venture for sums which, if I won, I should not be the better for, but if I lost, should be under a difficulty to pay, and when paid would oblige me to retrench in several other articles—not to mention the quarrels which deep play commonly occasions.

I would pass some of my time in reading and the rest in the company of people of sense and learning, and chiefly those above me; and I would frequent the mixed companies of men and women of fashion, which, though often frivolous, yet they unbend and refresh the mind, not uselessly because they certainly polish and soften the manners.