Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

_____ _____

Christopher J. Edelman Date

Essaying Oneself: Montaigne and Philosophy as a Way of Life

By

Christopher Edelman
Doctor of Philosophy

Philosophy

_____
Ann Hartle, Ph.D.
Advisor

_____
Thomas R. Flynn, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Donald Phillip Verene, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:
_____
Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D. Dean of the Graduate School
_____ Date

Essaying Oneself: Montaigne and Philosophy as a Way of Life

By

Christopher Edelman
M.A., Emory University, 2007

Advisor: Ann Hartle, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy
2010

Abstract

Essaying Oneself: Montaigne and Philosophy as a Way of Life
By Christopher Edelman

This dissertation seeks to give an account of Montaigne's understanding of the nature of philosophy. Doing so involves articulating the presuppositions, means, and ends of Montaigne's philosophical practice as well as his understanding of that practice in relation to politics and the good life. Chapter One sets the stage for this account of philosophy by contrasting Montaigne's practices with traditional conceptions of the nature of philosophy and introducing the features of the *Essais* that seem to require some explanation in order for Montaigne's work to be intelligible as a philosophical project. Chapter Two argues that Montaigne is not the Pyrrhonian skeptic that he is often taken to be. While sympathetic to certain Pyrrhonian conclusions, he does not universally suspend judgment. Rather, through self-examination he discovers that he has some beliefs immune to skeptical attack. Chapter Three argues that Montaigne's beliefs include a commitment to the notion of an objective moral order, and that his skepticism allows him to show how this belief is defensible against the arguments of the relativist. Chapter Four interprets Montaigne's habit of essaying himself as a form of contemplative *askēsis* undertaken for the sake of self-knowledge. This *askēsis* shapes one's intellectual character, and therefore constitutes Montaigne's contribution to contemporary discussions concerning the sense in which philosophy can be understood to involve a way of life. In Chapters Five and Six Montaigne's philosophical project is discussed in relation to politics and the pursuit of the good life. Essaying oneself is revealed to be an apolitical activity that neither underwrites nor begins from political principles. While it may be a necessary condition for the happy life for those who share Montaigne's passion for self-understanding, it is not a necessary condition for living the good life, for just as essaying is apolitical, it is also amoral.

Essaying Oneself: Montaigne and Philosophy as a Way of Life

By

Christopher Edelman
M.A., Emory University, 2007

Advisor: Ann Hartle, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy
2010

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. The *Essais* and the Tradition	15
2. Montaigne's Skepticism	38
3. Skepticism and Moral Judgment	73
4. Essaying as Contemplative *Askēsis*	107
5. Philosophy, Politics, and the Self	136
6. Philosophy and the Good Life	168
Bibliography	201

Introduction

> "*It is a strange fact that things should be in such a pass in our century that philosophy, even with people of understanding, should be an empty and fantastic name, a thing of no use and no value, both in common opinion and in fact*."
>
> -"Of the education of children"

If Montaigne thought it strange that philosophy had become useless and vain, this was only because he himself took philosophy to be something more than a merely academic discipline. Indeed, his own conception of how philosophy ought to be practiced had been inspired by the Greeks, against whom the philosophers of his own day compared most unfavorably: "Those men were envied as being above the common fashion, as disdaining public actions, as having set up a particular and inimitable way of life regulated by certain lofty and extraordinary principles; these are despised as being below the common fashion, as incapable of public responsibilities, as dragging along behind the common herd their base life and ways" (1.25.99, VS135).[1] Montaigne did not wish to emulate the Greeks; his philosophical project was his own. Yet nonetheless, he did follow the Greeks in conceiving of philosophy as a way of life. Articulating his conception of philosophy and the sense in which his philosophical *praxis* constituted a way of life is the purpose of the present study.

Today, talk of "philosophy as a way of life" would likely strike many philosophers as antiquarian. Clearly the dominant understanding of philosophy has changed over the last twenty-five hundred years. In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre

[1] Parenthetical citations refer to the book, chapter, and page of *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943), followed by the page number of the original French text as found in Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, "Quadrige," 1992).

Hadot suggests that the evolution in the self-conception of philosophy has a great deal to do with the history of Christianity and the advent of the university.[2] By the Middle Ages, he argues, both the theoretical and ascetical sides of philosophy had been incorporated into Christianity. As a result, spiritual exercises were taken to belong to the domain of Christian spirituality rather than philosophy. Meanwhile, as the university developed and the faculties of philosophy and theology were distinguished, the main task of philosophy became the development of logical and conceptual tools for theological research. Philosophy became increasingly professionalized and specialized, and thus became the theoretical discipline that it is taken to be today. Hadot of course recognizes exceptions to the rule, philosophers for whom philosophy has been more than an academic endeavor, but he maintains that even among those who worked outside the confines of the university, philosophy since the Middle Ages has for the most part been a matter of discourse rather than practice.

Thus when we look back over the history of Western Philosophy, we can distinguish two approaches, broadly speaking. One belongs mostly to the ancients but has been revived at times by individuals like Nietzsche and particular sub-traditions such as pragmatism and existentialism. According to this approach, work in philosophy is intimately tied to one's life as a whole. The other approach conceives philosophy as essentially a theoretical discipline for which, in Richard Shusterman's words, "the idea of philosophy as a deliberative life-practice that brings lives of beauty and happiness to its practitioners is as foreign… as astrology is to astrophysics."[3] According to this

---

[2] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 269-270.

[3] Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

conception of philosophy, the main business of the philosopher is the solving of theoretical problems. It is perhaps the co-presence in the tradition of these two very different conceptions of philosophy that has led to the "lingering sense" of dissatisfaction that Alexander Nehamas describes. He writes: "What philosophers [today] study makes no more claim to affecting their personal lives than the work of physicists, mathematicians, or economists is expected to affect theirs. And yet there is a lingering sense in most people as well as in a few philosophers that somehow this is not how matters should be."[4]

In recent years, then, perhaps in response to this lingering sense that there is some tension in the ways that philosophers conceive of themselves, philosophers working in diverse traditions have begun to look back to the ancients as examples of the way in which philosophy can be something more than the academic discipline that it (for the most part) has become. Thus philosophers such as Shusterman, Nehamas, Pierre Hadot, and Michel Foucault have each investigated the ways in which philosophy has been, for various philosophers both ancient and modern, something like a way of life. In reminding us of some of the ways in which certain philosophers have conceived of and practiced philosophy as a way of life, these contemporary philosophers are not prescribing a particular conception of philosophy. That is, they are not arguing that philosophy as it is practiced today in colleges and universities ought to be changed. For that would be to presuppose a rather crude Platonism, according to which there is a Form of philosophy to which all philosophers are categorically obligated to conform.[5] Rather,

---

[4] Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

[5] See Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and Others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 294-295.

these philosophers can be understood to aim, in the words of Nehamas, "at opening a space for a way of doing philosophy that constitutes an alternative, though not necessarily a competitor, to the manner in which philosophy is generally practiced in our time."[6] The theoretical aim of such a project, then, is to articulate conceptions of what it is to do philosophy that speak to at least some of our notions regarding what philosophy ought to be about, while nonetheless introducing us to or reminding us of philosophical practices that differ from our own. For the ultimate end of such a project is practical: in articulating new or forgotten possibilities they present us with choices to be made about how to proceed in our own philosophical practices.

None of the philosophers mentioned above, then, recommend that we become, for example, Stoics. For - even for those of us who are moved by these reminders of how philosophy was once tied more closely to one's life - one of the troubles with re-appropriating the lived-philosophies of the ancients is that they involved commitments to dogmatic metaphysical worldviews that we may find difficult to accept. Yet it may be that parts of the ancients' philosophical practices can be incorporated in one way or another to our own ways of conceiving of and practicing philosophy.

For example, Hadot argues that to the Stoics, "to do philosophy" meant to engage in a number of spiritual exercises such as meditation on metaphysical doctrines, self-examination, and mental preparation for future situations. Hadot's quintessential example of an ancient practitioner of philosophy as a way of life is Marcus Aurelius. In his *Meditations*, we find the famous Roman emperor attempting to turn his propositional knowledge of Stoic doctrine into the existential knowledge that is required for *living* the philosophical life. His task is to transform the way that he relates to the world by

[6] Nehamas, 2.

practicing objectivity in judgment, cultivating his desire for virtue, and developing his understanding of Nature. While the exercises that Marcus Aurelius employs are built upon the foundations of a theoretical discourse concerning the nature of ultimate reality, subscribing to the Stoics' theoretical commitments, Hadot argues, is not required for engaging in many of the Stoics' exercises. Thus Hadot argues that philosophers today could extract the ancient spiritual exercises from what might be considered their outdated theoretical foundations in order to practice philosophy as the ancients did, as an attempt to transform one's being-toward-the-world.[7]

In many of his later works, Foucault is similarly interested in what could be learned from the way that certain ancient philosophers understood and practiced what he calls the "care of the self." While Hadot focuses on the spiritual exercises of the ancients as a means of communion with the cosmos, Foucault focuses on the ways in which the Greeks and Romans used *askēseis* to constitute and master themselves, and draws attention to the pleasure they took in themselves as a result of their self-care.[8] For Foucault, the value of studying the ways in which ancient philosophers and early Christians undertook to transform themselves lies in the possibility that such a study will change the way that we conceive of "the self" and of the nature of our philosophical and spiritual lives today. The goal of studying ancient modes of care of the self, then, lies in the possibility that doing so will allow us to "think differently."[9] For instance, in a seminar entitled "Technologies of the Self," Foucault argues that for the Greeks, the injunction to care for oneself always accompanied the injunction to know oneself, and

---

[7] Hadot, 211-212.

[8] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 65-66.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9.

that the former had a priority that seems to have been lost in later conceptions of the philosophical life.[10] Thus, by drawing attention to the exercises and conceptual conditions of the ancient occupation with the care of the self, Foucault reminds us of the contested nature of our concepts of philosophy and the self.

While Foucault concentrated his investigation of the "care of the self" on the ancients, Richard Shusterman offers Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Foucault himself as philosophers whose way of doing philosophy makes them "instructive examples for our own attempts at philosophical living."[11] Shusterman views these three philosophers as the latest inheritors of a tradition that extends back from pragmatism through Emerson and Montaigne to the ancients, a tradition in which the goal of knowledge was subordinated to those of utility and happiness.[12] In this tradition, then, theory is always at the service of practice, and the ultimate goal is the richest and most satisfying experience possible. What is distinctive about Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Foucault, Shusterman argues, is that unlike their similarly-minded predecessors such as Epictetus and Montaigne, they share a "model of self-improvement as endless growth through perpetual self-transformation."[13] Such self-transformation is guided by aestheticist values, and therefore aims to make one's life into a work of art that cannot be judged by any universal standards or pre-given rules. Shusterman, then, appeals to certain twentieth-

---

[10] Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 20.

[11] Shusterman, 23.

[12] See Shusterman, 5: "Questioning the thirst for knowledge for its own sake, Hellenistic philosophers like Epicurus or Seneca were more appreciative of philosophy's practical utility. Knowledge was often regarded as having mainly instrumental value for something higher – such as happiness or virtue – that was not reducible to truth and could override the quest for truth when they conflicted…. Montaigne displays the same respectful subordination of knowledge to utility for self-care and good living, and he judged the ancient philosophical schools accordingly." Shusterman, 55, seems to interpret Montaigne to be among those philosophers for whom "philosophy's demand for self-knowledge faces the limits of its goal of self-care."

[13] Shusterman, 61.

century philosophers and schools for the purpose of articulating a pragmatic conception of philosophy as "a deliberative life-practice" or a "tool for the better practice of life, where 'better' [is] conceived in broad aesthetic terms."[14]

Still another conception of philosophy as a way of life is offered by Alexander Nehamas in *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Nehamas constructs his conception of the "art of living" based on his study of the ways in which philosophers such as Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault have appropriated what he takes to be the Socratic practice of "self-fashioning." What these figures have in common, according to Nehamas, is that they "consider the self not to be a given but a constructed unity."[15] For them, to practice philosophy as the art of living is to construct a self or become an individual. Nehamas writes: "To become an individual is to acquire an uncommon and idiosyncratic character, a set of features and a mode of life that set one apart from the rest of the world and make one memorable not only for what one did or said but for who one was."[16] For those who practice philosophy as the art of living, this is accomplished through critically examining the philosophical views of others and subsequently producing one's own distinctive views.[17] The goal of these "aestheticist artists of living," then, is not to achieve happiness or self-mastery, but rather "to be like no one else, before them or after them."[18]

In the studies of "philosophy as a way of life" outlined above, philosophy is explored as an activity aiming at self-transformation, self-mastery, self-creation, or happiness. The present study aims to contribute to this discussion by introducing a yet

[14] Shusterman, 3, 14.
[15] Nehamas, 4.
[16] Nehamas, 5.
[17] Nehamas, 6.
[18] Nehamas, 11.

another conception of philosophy as a way of life: that of Montaigne. While Montaigne treats philosophy as an activity aiming at a type of self-transformation, he understands his project differently from that of the ancients: he is neither trying to existentially appropriate philosophical doctrines nor trying to master himself. His conception of philosophy also differs from those of the modern practitioners of philosophy as a way of life: he does not (*pace* Nehamas) engage in a project that he conceives in terms of self-creation and he does not consider philosophy to be a deliberative life-practice. In fact, I shall argue, Montaigne conceives of philosophy as the pursuit of self-knowledge, a project that he understands as contemplative rather than deliberative. This self-knowledge is achieved through practicing the contemplative *askēsis* that he called the essay. In this study, then, my aim is to elucidate Montaigne's conception of philosophy and to make intelligible the sense in which essaying himself is a contemplative *askēsis* that produces a certain way of life.[19]

In elucidating Montaigne's conception of philosophy, my aims are both historical and conceptual. My historical aim is to contribute both to scholarship that focuses exclusively on understanding Montaigne and his *Essais* and to our understanding of the history of Western Philosophy. Therefore I have made every effort to produce a historically plausible interpretation of Montaigne's work. Yet, true to Montaigne's own understanding of the nature and purpose of working on the history of philosophy, I would not claim to have produced anything more than a "likely story" or a *plausible* interpretation of Montaigne's project. As Hugo Friedrich wrote in the introduction to his

[19] My references to "Montaigne's conception of philosophy" must be qualified. As I shall argue in Chapter Six, Montaigne actually has two conceptions of philosophy, both of which involve a certain way of life. I shall be concentrating my attention on one of those two conceptions, namely the one that I take to underlie the development of the essay as a form of contemplative *askēsis*.

study of Montaigne, "Critics will have an easy time coming up with evidence that opposes many of my interpretations. For what didn't Montaigne say!" (Friedrich, xxix). Certainly we must try to avoid treating Montaigne in same way that he saw Plato being treated in his own day: "See how Plato is moved and tossed about. Every man, glorying in applying him to himself, sets him on the side he wants" (2.12.443, VS587). Yet a text like Montaigne's in which the author does not hesitate to contradict himself, makes for special interpretive difficulties. It seems, then, that the best that we can do as students of Montaigne is to attempt to be as true to his text as possible while remaining self-conscious of the fact that our interpretations are in large part conditioned by what we bring to that text. If we are attempting to give a definitive account of what Montaigne himself thought, this will be a problem. But Montaigne himself would not have approved of project exclusively concerned with giving a definitive account of his thought. In the first place, he would have doubted that commentators could, with their limited resources and historically-conditioned perspectives, "get him" exactly right, just as he doubted that commentators in his own day were accurately representing the thoughts of the historical Aristotle. But also, he would not see the sense in treating historical accuracy rather than philosophical insight as the priority in one's research. He viewed the history of philosophy as a reservoir from which to draw inspiration for his own thinking. He *used* the ancients, for example, to test his own thought, and to provide him with possible ways of viewing the world that he had not seen for himself. He was, then, more concerned with uncovering possibilities than reporting facts, and it is in this spirit that the present study has been written.

Therefore, in the chapters that follow, I am simultaneously working with these two goals in mind: I engage the scholarship on Montaigne's *Essais* in an effort to contribute to the inquiry into the meaning of his work, and I attempt to articulate and defend what I take to have been the conception of philosophy that generates the *essay*. In Chapter One I introduce the *Essais* by measuring them against two paradigmatic formulations of the business of the philosopher, namely, Aristotle's conception of first philosophy in the *Metaphysics* and Descartes' conception of philosophical method in the *Discourse on Method*. In doing so it becomes clear that Montaigne's book lacks certain hallmark features of philosophical texts in the Western tradition and includes other features that seem out of place in a treatise of philosophy. Since Montaigne's *Essais* do not correspond to prevailing conceptions of the nature of philosophy both before and after he writes them, an alternative conception of philosophy must be articulated if we are to understand Montaigne's project as philosophical. This conception of philosophy can be found in the *Essais* themselves, and it is the task of the remaining five chapters to articulate that conception of philosophy according to which the *Essais* can be understood as a thoroughly philosophical work.

One of the features of Montaigne's thought that makes sense of some of the apparently unphilosophical features of his book might be what commentators have referred to as his "skepticism." Thus in Chapter Two I give an account of Montaigne's skepticism and its relation to the skeptical philosophies of antiquity. I argue that though he is sympathetic to certain Pyrrhonian conclusions and he appropriates particular argumentative strategies from the Academics, ultimately his skepticism is unique insofar as it does not culminate in doubt and the universal suspension of judgment. Montaigne's

skepticism is the foundation upon which his conception of philosophy is built. Negatively, it marks out the limits of philosophical inquiry, while positively it shows us how we are to understand what it is we are doing when we attempt to give answers to questions concerning the fundamental nature of reality.

Having given a general outline of Montaigne's skepticism and its historical significance in Chapter Two, in Chapter Three I examine how that skepticism expresses itself in Montaigne's treatment of a particular philosophical problem: the problem of relativism. Given a number of remarks that he makes in the *Essais*, many commentators have argued that Montaigne is a moral relativist, or that he is an objectivist who takes himself to be a relativist. I argue that these interpretations are both textually and logically problematic. Textually speaking, there is ample evidence that Montaigne is a moral objectivist who believes that there are objective moral standards independent of the customs and beliefs of any particular culture or of the human race in general. Logically speaking, I argue that Montaigne's remarks concerning the diversity of customs and morals that appear in the world do not commit him to moral relativism. While the objectivism that Montaigne maintains in the face of cultural and individual diversity may appear to be unfounded and therefore problematic, I argue that in fact Montaigne's position is defensible. For by showing that neither moral objectivism nor moral relativism is theoretically justifiable, Montaigne demonstrates that neither position bears any burden of proof. The question for philosophers is much more personal than they have often taken it to be. It is not: Is there an objective moral order? Rather, the question is: Upon examining myself, do I find myself committed to the existence of an objective moral order? The focus of Montaignian inquiry, then, is the self in its relation to the

world, rather than the world itself. Moreover, what is true of his approach to moral philosophy is true of his approach to philosophy as a whole: the end of Montaignian philosophy is self-knowledge.

In Chapter Four I argue that for Montaigne, self-knowledge is achieved through essaying himself. Montaigne refers to his book as the *essais* of his judgment. What it means to essay one's judgment is complicated by the fact that for Montaigne, "essaying" refers to a number of distinct but related exercises. Yet as I argue, each of these different exercises is an essential part of his pursuit of self-knowledge. Further, I argue that the self-knowledge that he seeks is ultimately something more than a theoretical understanding of himself as both an individual and a participant in the human condition. Ultimately, Montaigne seeks what I call "existential self-knowledge," which is a way of being toward the world. This way of being toward the world presupposes both propositional knowledge of oneself and the cultivation of a particular type of intellectual character. Essaying himself allows him to achieve both of these ends simultaneously. Therefore the essay can be characterized as both theoretical and practical, contemplative and transformative.

In Chapter Five I discuss how Montaigne conceives of the relations among philosophy, politics, and the self. On the one hand, the pleasure that Montaigne takes in himself along with his avowed tolerance of other ways of life has led one critic to argue that Montaigne offers a philosophical justification of tolerance, which would be a significant step towards philosophically grounding liberalism. On the other hand, Montaigne's skepticism, taken along with certain remarks that he makes regarding his tenure as mayor of Bordeaux, has led others to link his attitudes towards politics and the

self with those of Richard Rorty. Thus he has been interpreted as a precursor to Rorty's liberal ironist. I argue that in fact Montaigne's conception of the relations among philosophy, politics, and the self falls somewhere between these two poles. On the one hand, he neither thinks that political institutions require philosophical justification nor that such justification can be given. Rather, we must accept the human condition and the limits that it imposes on our ability to persuade others of the attractiveness of a particular position. Politics is a realm to be ruled by prudence, not philosophy. On the other hand, Montaigne finds himself unable to believe that his political values are arbitrary and that therefore he must take an ironic stance toward his political activities. Rather, his reluctance to devote himself wholeheartedly to politics is the result of his intense desire to maintain the freedom of his judgment. It is this desire to maintain the freedom of his judgment, rather than an ironic compartmentalization of his self, that explains the distinction that he makes between his private and public "selves."

In Chapter Six I conclude my study with a discussion of Montaigne's conception of the relation between philosophy and the good life. Articulating that relation is first complicated by the fact that in the *Essais*, Montaigne operates with two distinct conceptions of philosophy: philosophy-as-morals and philosophy-as-essaying (the latter, of course, being the conception with which I am primarily concerned in this study). This task is further complicated by the fact that Montaigne seems to understand the good life in two ways, one normative (the moral life) and the other not (the happy life). While he understands the nature of the moral life to be an objective matter, the nature of the happy life he takes to be subjective and dependent upon the nature of the individual. Ultimately I argue that though essaying is not a necessary condition for the moral life, it may be a

necessary condition for the happy life if one's character is such as to have a profound desire for self-knowledge. Such, I argue, is the case with Montaigne. In essaying himself, Montaigne both seeks and engages in self-knowledge as he understands it, thereby satisfying one of the fundamental inclinations constitutive of his particular *forme maitresse*.

1

The *Essais* and the Tradition

Montaigne is rarely spoken of as a great philosopher, and this is not without reason.[20] The *Essais* differ in many ways from most of the canonical works of the Western tradition. And while the question of whether the *Essais* is a philosophical work is of course a question about the conception of philosophy according to which one judges it, still by the conceptions of philosophy of the Stoics or of Kant or of the Anglo-American tradition, Montaigne is most certainly not doing philosophy. My aim, however, is to articulate a conception of philosophy according to which we *could* understand him to be doing philosophy. Thus my project here could be understood in transcendental terms: I begin by assuming that Montaigne is in fact philosophizing in the *Essais,* and then I attempt to uncover the conditions for the possibility of interpreting the *Essais* as a philosophical text. But a necessary preliminary, then, to outlining the conception of philosophy in light of which the *Essais* appear philosophical is an account of some of the fundamental features of the *Essais* that are to be explained by this conception of philosophy. By "fundamental features" I am referring both to the presence

[20] Thus Richard Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne: A Critical Exploration* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 177, writes that speaking of Montaigne as a philosopher is "a little dangerous." He suggests it may be Montaigne's unsystematic form and his practical orientation that has prevented him from being recognized as a philosopher (161). Philippe Desan, "Montaigne et le doute judiciaire" in *L'écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne*, ed. Marie-Luce Demonet and Alain Legros (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004), 179, pleads: "Prenons Montaigne au sérieux quand il déclare lui-même n'être nullement philosophe!" Desan holds that Montaigne is not a philosopher insofar as his refuses to systematize his thought (183). See also Colin Burrow, "Frisks, Skips, and Jumps," *London Review of Books* 25, no. 21 (November 6, 2003): 22. Burrow worries that not only may it be misleading to label Montaigne a philosopher, but also that philosophical approaches to Montaigne may, by virtue of their attempts to make too much sense of him, fail to do him justice.

in the book of certain elements and to the absence of others. For just as one finds in the *Essais* elements that seem out of place in a philosophical text, traditionally understood, so the *Essais* seem to lack a number of features that are customarily taken to be hallmarks of philosophical work. In what follows, then, I will set off and illuminate certain fundamental features of the *Essais* by contrasting them with essential features of two paradigmatic conceptions of philosophy: the first formulated by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, and the second by Descartes in the *Discourse on Method*.[21]

First Philosophy and the *Essais*

Aristotle opens the *Metaphysics* with a discussion of the nature of "first philosophy." In doing so he reveals three features of his conception of "first philosophy" that are of particular relevance here. The first is the hierarchical order that Aristotle outlines with respect to experience, art, and science. The second is his conception of the appropriate object of study for the philosopher. Finally, I wish to draw attention to the role that he assigns to wonder in the practice of philosophy.

After declaring that "All men by nature desire to know," Aristotle traces the path of cognition from sensation to art. All animals have the faculty of sensation, and some have memory. Man has not only sensation and memory, but the capacity for developing experience on the basis of a number of memories of the same thing. Finally, "art arises,

[21] Scholars have long recognized that Montaigne sets himself up in opposition to the Aristotelian tradition and that the Cartesian method is at odds with the style of the *Essais*. On the relation between Montaigne and Aristotle, see Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne*: *Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55-57 and 162-163. For a helpful comparison of Montaigne and Descartes, see Philip Hallie, *The Scar of Montaigne: An Essay in Personal Philosophy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 157-177.

when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgment about similar objects is produced. For to have a judgment that when Callias was ill of this disease this did him good, and similarly in the case of Socrates and in many individual cases, is a matter of experience; but to judge that it has done good to all persons of a certain constitution, marked off in one class, when they were ill of this disease, e.g. to phlegmatic or bilious people when burning with fever, - this is a matter of art."[22] Art, then is knowledge of universals, whereas experience is knowledge of particulars (981a12). Yet "in general it is a sign of the man who knows, that he can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot" (981b7). The man of experience simply knows what treatment has been effective for Socrates, or for Callias, or for some other individual. But the artist, by constructing a category under which he can subsume the particular cases, has made a universal judgment about the effectiveness of a treatment with a particular type of patient. The artist can teach because he knows the cause and the reason why a particular treatment is effective for a certain patient. That is, he knows that hydration, for example, is an effective treatment of Socrates' fever because he knows that "all bilious people with fever benefit from hydration" and that "Socrates is bilious."

Nonetheless, practically speaking, experience is as good as art: "With a view to action experience seems in no respect inferior to art, and we even see men of experience succeeding more than those who have theory without experience…. If, then, a man has theory without experience, and knows the universal but does not know the individual included in this, he will often fail to cure" (981a12). The artist may know that there

[22] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1552 (981a5-10). Hereafter I will cite the text with parenthetical references to the Bekker edition.

exists a group of similar individuals, "the bilious," and that "all bilious people with fever benefit from hydration," but if he cannot identify the individuals who belong to this category, he cannot be of any use. To be effective, he must possess the judgment that comes only with experience.

Yet neither the man of experience nor the artist possesses wisdom. For wisdom is characteristic of the man who seeks knowledge for its own sake, rather than for the sake of action or production (983b28). This man of science seeks not the means to particular ends, but the knowledge of the primary causes and principles of all things. These primary causes and principles, being the most universal causes and principles, are the furthest from the senses and thus the things "hardest for men to know" (982a25), which are the most fitting objects of knowledge for the wise man, who "can learn things that are difficult, and not easy for man to know" (982a10). Finally, this science is the most divine science in two ways. First, it is divine in that God, being a primary cause and first principle, is one of its objects. Second, it is divine because it is knowledge that would be most fitting for God to have (983a1-10). Attaining this knowledge, then, is a way of becoming like God.

Men began seeking this knowledge, Aristotle says, because of their experience of wonder. They "wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g., about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe" (982b15). According to Aristotle, then, men philosophized to overcome their puzzlement and to arrive at knowledge, or an explanation of why things are the way they are. Philosophy thus begins in wonder but ends in knowledge, at which point the initial wonder has been

eliminated. For example, the fact that the diagonal of a square is incommensurable with the sides is wonderful to the man who has not yet perceived the explanation. But to those who know the explanation for this there is nothing wonderful about it; in fact, this fact has become quite ordinary: "there is nothing that would surprise a geometer so much as if the diagonal turned out to be commensurable" (983a20). Philosophy, or the search for the primary principles and causes of things, is, then, the cure for wonder.

Montaigne begins the final chapter of the *Essais* with an allusion to Book 1 of the *Metaphysics*: "There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge" (3.13.815, VS1065). Yet the similarities between "Of experience" and the *Metaphysics* end there, for Montaigne goes on to suggest that there are some things that cannot be known by reason and that to know these things we must appeal to experience. Whereas the interest of the Aristotelian metaphysician always lies in the universal, Montaigne emphasizes the diversity, and so the particularity, of things and events in the world. He warns that the move from experience to art, from the particular to the universal, is sometimes problematic: "The inference we try to draw from the resemblance of events is uncertain, because they are always dissimilar: there is no quality so universal in this aspect of things as diversity and variety…. Nature has committed herself to making nothing separate that was not different" (3.13.815, VS1065). Reason generates rules and definitions of universals, and is incapable of judging the particular; for, as Montaigne reminds us with examples from the law, there cannot be a rule for the interpretation of every rule: at some point judgment is necessarily called upon to determine whether or not a particular belongs to a universal. Experience of particulars, rather than reason, makes judgment

possible. And this judgment is more reliable than knowledge of universal definitions. "I know better what is man than I know what is animal, or mortal, or rational" (3.13.819, VS1069). It is judgment that allows me to recognize my son as a man, whether he is rational or not. Of course one cannot come to know a particular without having a sense of what sort of thing it is, and this requires the recognition of similarity among things. The intelligibility of things consists in relations of both sameness and difference: "If our faces were not similar, we could not distinguish man from beast; if they were not dissimilar, we could not distinguish man from man" (3.13.819, VS1070). Thus, in studying himself, a particular, Montaigne pays attention to the actions and characters of as many different people as he can, whether through books or daily interactions with others. But in studying himself as a man, he does not compare himself with a universal concept of Man; he compares himself directly with other individuals.

In a passage worth quoting at length, Montaigne unequivocally distinguishes himself, a man of experience, from the scholars of the arts and sciences:

> This long attention that I devote to studying myself trains me also to judge passably of others, and there are few things of which I speak more felicitously and excusably. It often happens that I see and distinguish the characters of my friends more exactly than they do themselves. I have astonished at least one by the pertinence of my description, and have given him information about himself.… I do not attempt to arrange this infinite variety of actions, so diverse and so disconnected, into certain types and categories, and distribute my lots and divisions distinctly into recognized classes and sections… The scholars distinguish and mark off their ideas more specifically and in detail. I, who cannot see beyond what I have learned from experience, without any system, present my ideas in a general way, and tentatively.… I leave it to artists, and I do not know if they will achieve it in a matter so complex, minute, and accidental, to arrange into bands this infinite diversity of aspects, to check our inconsistency and set it down in order. (3.13.824, VS1076)

The language of this passage is clearly opposed to the program of research announced in *Metaphysics* 1.1. Montaigne is more concerned to train his judgment by studying

particular men than to arrange those particulars into classes and kinds. Thus he does not speculate concerning the universals that these people and actions might fall under. Again, this is not to say that he does not remark the similarities that appear between things, but rather that he is more interested in difference than in sameness ("*distinguo* is the most universal member of my logic" (2.1.242, VS335)), in knowing the particular rather than the universal.

Montaigne goes on in "Of experience" to attack medicine, the very art that Aristotle uses in the *Metaphysics* to make his distinction between experience and art. "The arts that promise to keep our body in health… promise us much; but at the same time there are none that keep their promise less. And in our time those who profess these arts among us show the results of them less than any other men" (3.13.827, VS1079). Thus he has taken it upon himself to take care of his bodily health. As a man of experience of one particular only, namely himself, he cannot, like Aristotle's wise man, teach others universal judgments concerning the means to health. He simply presents his own experience, without speculating on its general causes: "as for bodily health, no one can furnish more useful experience than I, who present it pure, not at all corrupted or altered by art or theorizing" (8.13.826, VS1079). If the experience he relates teaches anyone anything about maintaining their own health, this is purely accidental, for he merely provides readers with his own example, and "example is a hazy mirror, reflecting things in all ways" (3.13.834, VS1088). As he says in "Of practice," "What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but a lesson for me. And yet it should not be held against me if I publish what I write. What is useful to me may also by accident be useful to another" (2.6.272, VS377).

Since Montaigne refuses to ascend from experience to art, it should come as no surprise that he does not concern himself with the objects of first philosophy. Rather than studying the "most difficult" matters that lie "furthest from the senses," Montaigne studies what lies closest to him. "I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics" (3.13.821, VS1072). Further, he does not seek to know the causes and first principles of all things. As Eric Auerbach has observed, Montaigne's method "confines itself to pure observation. It undertakes no search into general causes. When Montaigne cites causes, they are of an immediate kind and themselves susceptible to observation."[23] Thus Ann Hartle has shown how Montaigne gives a complete causal account of his book in "To the reader."[24] But of course his book is one of the very few things of which he can give a complete causal account. For it is only because he is the author and subject of his book that he can give the formal, material, efficient, and final causes of it. The complete account of a thing's causes is only enjoyed by the creator of that thing. Thus Montaigne writes: "The knowledge of causes belongs only to Him who has the guidance of things, not to us who have only the enduring of them, and who have the perfectly full use of them according to our nature, without penetrating to their origin and essence" (3.11.785, VS1026). Unlike the Aristotelian philosopher, Montaigne does not aspire to know God or to become like God by possessing divine wisdom. Throughout the *Essais* Montaigne resolutely focuses his attention on human things. Even in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," where Montaigne deals with natural theology, he concentrates on man's ability to know God rather than on the nature of divinity itself.

---

[23]Eric Auerbach, "L'humaine condition," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 299.
[24] See Hartle, 57.

Finally, whereas philosophy for Aristotle begins in wonder and ends in explanation, Montaigne's philosophical project both begins and ends in wonder. "Iris is the daughter of Thaumas. Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its progress, ignorance its end. I'll go further: There is a certain strong and generous ignorance that concedes nothing to knowledge in honor and courage, an ignorance that requires no less knowledge to conceive it than does knowledge" (3.11.788, VS1030). It is only by recognizing one's ignorance of a phenomenon that one begins to wonder at that phenomenon, and this wonder leads to inquiry. Yet rather than culminating in an explanation of the causes of the object of wonder, Montaigne's inquiry leads to a new recognition of ignorance and deeper wonder than that with which he began: "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself" (3.11.787, VS1029). As he puts the point in "Of experience," "I, who make no other profession [than knowing myself], find in me such infinite depth and variety, that what I have learned bears no other fruit than to make me realize how much I still have to learn" (3.13.823, VS1075). For Montaigne, reflection does not eliminate wonder; it creates it anew.

Thus Montaigne, unlike the philosopher of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, remains on the lowest level of human knowledge, that of experience. Rather than contemplating Man, he concerns himself with particular men. Hence the great number of stories and historical accounts that pervade the *Essais*. He seeks neither universals nor the knowledge of causes and principles. Rather, he trains his judgment to distinguish the

particulars that he confronts in experience. Nor does he seek either to know or to become like God. His concern is always with the human, and he does not define the human in relation either to the divine or to a systematic conception of the cosmos. Further, his inquiry leads him back to wonder rather than away from it towards explanation. Simply put, Montaigne does not engage in speculative metaphysics. He does not construct theories of the nature of the relationship between Being and Becoming, the immortality of the soul, or the nature of the divine. If there is a conception of philosophy that can make sense of Montaigne's project, it will be one in which speculative metaphysics has no place.

Cartesian Philosophy and the *Essais*

Over forty years after Montaigne's death, in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes gives an account of the methods, attitudes, and goals of the truly rigorous philosopher. His principal method consists of four rules that he had resolved "not to violate…even in a single instance":[25]

> The first rule was never to accept anything as true unless I recognized it to be certainly and evidently such: that is, carefully to avoid all precipitation and prejudgment, and to include nothing in my conclusions unless it presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that there was no reason or occasion to doubt it.
> The second was to divide each of the difficulties which I encountered into as many parts as possible, and as might be required for an easier solution.
> The third was to think in an orderly fashion when concerned with the search for truth, beginning with the things which were simplest and easiest to understand, and gradually and by degrees reaching toward more complex knowledge, even treating, as though ordered, materials which were not necessarily so.

[25] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence Lafleur (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1952), 15. Hereafter, Lafleur's translation of the *Discourse* and *Meditations* will be cited parenthetically.

> The last was, both in the process of searching and in reviewing when in difficulty, always to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I would be certain that nothing was omitted. (15)

Theoretically requiring certainty to ground the beliefs of the philosopher obviously poses serious practical problems. Descartes' search for indubitable moral principles leads him to a state of theoretical uncertainty regarding the nature of the Good. While it is possible to be theoretically agnostic regarding the Good, the practical necessity of action requires that one at least temporarily subscribe to some set of values. To solve this problem Descartes establishes a provisional moral code designed to reconcile this tension between theory and practice that emerges as a result of his methodological principles. He will use the provisional moral code as a guide for action until he has found certain principles on which to base a conception of morality.

Since he has resolved not to assent to anything less than clear and distinct impressions, but he has no clear and distinct impressions of the Good, he must treat all possible values and moral imperatives alike. Therefore it seems he must arbitrarily choose a set of values to abide by provisionally, until he can ground his practical choices on apodictic knowledge of the Good. For the truly rigorous philosopher, the moral commitments according to which one lived before taking up philosophy cannot serve as the grounds for choosing which moral code to abide by. Thus Descartes chooses to abide by the moral values of European culture not because he feels some pre-reflective allegiance to them, but because, he says, it is more practical for him to abide by the norms of the society in which he will live (18). In order to avoid the indecision and inaction that come with uncertainty, Descartes must vow to live according to his provisional moral code as if he knew it to be true, despite the fact that he judges it to be

theoretically unjustified. Hence his second maxim: "not to act on the most doubtful decisions, once I had made them, any less resolutely than on the most certain" (19). What separates the philosopher from the common man, then, is that the philosopher acts ironically, pretending really to believe in the truth of the customs and laws of his society while reserving for himself the knowledge that he is simply taking on a *persona* for practical purposes, while the common man, insufficiently reflective, believes himself to be acting in accord with an objective moral order. With these first two maxims, then, Descartes follows the path of the Pyrrhonists who, acknowledging that they do not know the nature of the Good, continue to live according to the values of their community without believing them to be objectively true.

Descartes' third maxim is inherited from the Stoics rather than the Skeptics. "My third maxim was always to seek to conquer myself rather than fortune, to change my desires rather than the established order, and generally to believe that nothing except our thoughts is wholly under our control…" (20). Thus he will follow the model of the Stoic sage, who controls his thoughts, regulates his desires, and conquers his passions (21). Finally, with his fourth maxim, he resolves to determine the best possible occupation in human life, and to apply himself to it (21). In the end, Descartes concludes that the occupation of the philosopher is the best possible occupation for a human being. It consists in "discovering day after day truths which seemed fairly important and generally unknown to men" (21). The importance of such discoveries comes from the purpose of philosophy as he understands it. Armed with the principles of his method for determining truth, Descartes hopes to replace "the speculative philosophy now taught in the schools" with "a practical one, by which… we can employ [the entities of the natural

world] for all the purposes for which they are suited, and so make ourselves masters and possessors of nature" (45). Thus the task of the philosopher is to accumulate knowledge of all things for the sake of controlling nature and ameliorating human life. Descartes writes: "It was my intention to devote my whole life to the pursuit of this much-needed service, and I had found a method which, it seemed to me, should infallibly lead me to it unless I was prevented whether by the brevity of life or the paucity of experiments" (46).

In "The Essay as Form," T.W. Adorno argues that "the essay gently defies the ideals of *clara et disincta perceptio* and of absolute certainty. On the whole it could be interpreted as a protest against the four rules that Descartes' *Discourse on Method* sets up at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory."[26] Though Adorno is speaking primarily of the essay as it appears in the twentieth century, his insight can be applied to Montaigne's *Essais* equally well, despite the fact that they appeared over forty years prior to the *Discourse*. Moreover, not only do the *Essais* run counter to Descartes' rules for attaining truth generally, but Montaigne's attitudes and practices are at odds with Descartes' provisional moral code as well. In fact, as I hope now to bring out, Montaigne's *Essais* exhibit in a spirit at odds with Descartes' entire conception of philosophical *praxis*.

To begin, Montaigne violates Descartes' first principle by accepting many historical accounts of doubtful authenticity, accounts which, due to their extraordinary nature, offer many reasons and occasions for doubt. Montaigne seems to put faith in most stories that he comes across, whether he reads them in Plutarch or hears them from a neighbor. This remarkable display of credulity is very much opposed to Descartes'

[26] "The Essay as Form," *New German Critique* 32 (Spring-Summer, 1984): 161.

own attitude towards history and literature. For Descartes, historical and literary accounts of men's actions are to be avoided in the quest for knowledge: "Fiction makes us imagine a number of events as possible which are really impossible, and even the most faithful histories, if they do not alter or embroider episodes to make them more worth reading, almost always omit the meanest and least illustrious circumstances so that the remainder is distorted" (7). Montaigne, on the other hand, is unconcerned with whether or not the events described in certain stories really took place: "In the study I am making of our behavior and motives, fabulous testimonies, provided they are possible, serve like true ones. Whether they have happened or no, in Paris or Rome, to John or Peter, they exemplify, at all events, some human potentiality, and thus their telling imparts useful information to me. I see and profit from it just as well in shadow as in substance. And of the different readings that histories often give, I take for my use the most rare and memorable. There are authors whose end is to tell what has happened. Mine, if I could attain it, would be to talk about what can happen" (1.21.75). Ann Hartle offers a compelling interpretation of Montaigne's seemingly willful credulity. She argues that it is really the result of an openness to possibility achieved through the overcoming of presumption.[27] The presumption overcome is the belief that we can determine the limits of the possible according to our experience of what is probable. Thus, Montaigne argues, "We must not judge what is possible and what is not, according to what is credible and incredible to our sense (*sens*)… and it is a great error, and yet one into which most men fall… to balk at believing about others what they themselves could not do – or would not. It seems to each man that the ruling pattern of nature is in him; to this he refers all other forms as to a touchstone. The ways that do not square with his are counterfeit and

[27] See Hartle, 13-25.

artificial. What brutish stupidity!" (2.32.548, VS725). Descartes, Montaigne would undoubtedly argue, is presumptuous to think that he knows the bounds of the possible and that he can therefore dismiss the accounts of seemingly improbable events in both fiction and history.

Behind these two very different attitudes toward apparently fabulous accounts are two very different aims in reflecting upon them. Descartes is always interested in whether propositions are true or false. It is the concern he has to judge correctly the true and the false that prompts him to develop his method in the first place. Thus he counsels us to withhold judgment until we have determined whether our impressions are clear and distinct. Only if they are clear and distinct is it safe to assent to the proposed belief. Montaigne, on the other hand, is less interested in the veracity of the account. It is not so much that he simply believes the stories he recounts, but rather that he withholds judgment regarding their truth. He is more interested in what our belief or disbelief reveals about us. In "It is folly to judge the true and the false by our own capacity" Montaigne reveals that he has learned something about himself by reflecting upon the way that he used to behave towards accounts of improbable events. Recounting how in the past he used to go around disdaining and condemning what seemed unlikely to him, and how he pitied those who believed in such unlikely things, he writes: "And now I think that I was at least as much to be pitied myself" (1.27.132, VS179). "For to condemn [these unlikely stories] as impossible is to pretend, with rash presumption, to know the limits of possibility" (1.27.133, VS180). When we find ourselves laughing at others' belief in improbable events, this demonstrates our presumption, and when we admit improbable events as possible, this reminds us of our ignorance. For Montaigne,

the goal of reflecting upon historical accounts is not so much to know the truth about the events themselves as to discover truths about ourselves.

Descartes employs his second rule both in natural-scientific inquiries and in conceptual or metaphysical ones. He divides the problem of the life of the body into smaller problems, such as the functioning of the heart and the circulatory system. He divides the problem of the nature of the human being into two separate problems: the nature of mind and the nature of body. This allows him to argue that he is essentially mind, and that the mind continues to be "all that it is" regardless of whether the body exists or not (25). Montaigne, on the other hand, never shows any interest in the problems of natural science except insofar as he is concerned to remind us of the limits of our scientific knowledge. Nor does he analyze the phenomena of the moral world into parts in order to deal with the difficulties that they present. For example, he is not interested in "dealing with" or "solving" such philosophical problems as the relation between mind and body. He does recognize the "problem" of the mind's relation to the body, but he is not concerned to explain the mysterious connection between the two. Rather, he is more interested in noting the fact that we never doubt that there is some such connection between something we take to be spiritual and something we take to be material: "How a spiritual impression can cut such a swath in a massive and solid object, and the nature of the relation and connection between these wonderful springs of action, no man has ever known…. And yet we never doubt this, for men's opinions are accepted in the train of ancient beliefs, by authority and on credit, as if they were religion and law. They accept by rote what is commonly held about it…. Thus the world is soaked with twaddle and lies" (2.12.403, VS539). Montaigne mentions the question of the relation of

mind to body but then he simply moves on to discuss other issues, for he is convinced that spending time attempting to demonstrate that there is a spiritual "thing" called the mind that interacts with the material body that contains it would distract him from his project of attending to himself and his lived experience of the world. He describes phenomena as he apprehends them in experience, and he neither experiences minds nor bodies; he experiences men. One may talk about a man's mind, or about a man's body, but when discussing the man himself, this is not a matter of discussing an embodied mind. Therefore, in trying to understand himself, treating himself piecemeal would amount to a failure to represent himself as he finds himself in experience. Hence Montaigne resists the temptation privilege particular aspects of his being, whether it is his mind or a particular role that he plays in social life: "Authors communicate with the people by some extrinsic mark; I am the first to do so by my entire being, as Michel de Montaigne, not as a grammarian or a poet or a jurist" (3.2.611, VS805).

It is evident after only a few chapters of Montaigne's book that he violates as well the third Cartesian maxim, namely, to think in an orderly and systematic fashion. With a few exceptions, there is no apparent order to the chapters of his book. A chapter on smells is succeeded by a chapter on prayer; he goes from the chapter "Not to counterfeit being sick" to "Of thumbs." Nor is order very often apparent within the chapters themselves. Digressions abound. In "Of drunkenness," Montaigne goes from talking about the relation between drunkenness and lechery to talk about his father's life, before abruptly concluding the digression: "Let's get back to our bottles" (2.2.248, VS344). In "Of vanity," after a digression concerning political prudence, he remarks: "I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes

it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance… The ancients do not fear these changes, and with wonderful grace they let themselves thus be tossed in the wind, or seem to. The titles of my chapters do not always embrace their matter; often they only denote it by some sign… I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols…. It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room. I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming" (3.9.761, VS994-995). It may be that there is more order in his book than there initially appears, but nevertheless, whatever order there is in the *Essais* differs in kind from Cartesian order. Descartes' order is that of the accumulation of knowledge. He begins with what is most evident and uses it to discover what is least evident. Each conclusion is made to serve as the premise for the next argument. Further, it is order directed towards a practical end: that mastery and possession of nature, and the subsequent amelioration of human life mentioned above. There is no hierarchy of questions for Montaigne: "Any topic is equally fertile for me. A fly will serve my purpose" (3.5.668, VS876). All questions which relate to lived human life are equally interesting to Montaigne, and so he moves among them at random. The only order that manifests itself in the *Essais* is the sort occurs in a conversation among friends. The subject is changed not when the first subject has been completely dealt with, but when it reminds a participant in the conversation of something else that is interesting to discuss. Only the most tenuous connection between themes is required for the discussion to turn from one to the other. Stuart Hampshire puts it best: "In their cultivated discontinuities, in their unexpected division into chapters, in their lightness of tone, in their allusiveness

and their tumbling into anecdote and into historical gossip, [Montaigne's] essays have brought writing as near as it can come to talk among friends."[28] This "conversational order" is of course one feature of the *Essais* that inevitably strikes readers as the mark of a literary rather than a philosophical project.

Montaigne explicitly rejects the call for generality and a complete treatment of every question found in Descartes' fourth maxim. I have already discussed Montaigne's refusal to abandon the particular for the universal or the general. The notion of completeness is foreign to him; he never takes himself to have dealt sufficiently with any subject: "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. For I do not see the whole of anything; neither do those who promise to show it to us" (1.50.219, VS302). It is because he only gives partial treatments of questions that he returns to the same questions over and over again. Death, reason, nature, custom, possibility, and many other subjects are dealt with repeatedly in the *Essais*, each time from a slightly different vantage point.

Closely related to his lack of concern for completeness is his lack of concern for avoiding contradiction. Systematic philosophy aims not only at completeness, but also at consistency. It aims to be able to give a coherent account of all things, one in which there are no contradictions. Montaigne consciously tolerates what appear to be contradictions within his *Essais*: "This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects. So, all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not

[28] Stuart Hampshire, introduction to *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M Frame, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), xxv. Hampshire takes Montaigne's project to be one of self-description, an "entirely original topic in literature" (xvii).

contradict. If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial" (3.2.611, VS805). That one might have to contradict oneself in order to represent the truth is a conclusion that Descartes would not accept. True to Montaigne's word, one finds many apparent contradictions in the *Essais*. For example, in "Of cruelty" Montaigne claims that Socrates's character is the result of his own hard work, but in "Of physiognomy" Montaigne claims that "so excellent a soul was never self-made" (2.11.310, VS426; 3.12.810, VS1058). At one point he finds that his faculty of judgment undergoes change, while at another he claims: "My feelings change; my judgment, no" (2.1.242, VS335; 2.17.500, VS659).

More troubling perhaps are Montaigne's contradictory claims about nature and reason. At times, Montaigne treats both nature and reason as standards by which we ought to live and judge. "As I have said elsewhere, I have very simply and crudely adopted for my own sake this ancient precept: that we cannot go wrong by following Nature, that the sovereign precept is to conform to her" (3.12.811, VS1059). In this vein Montaigne seems to assert the existence of natural law, referring to certain peoples who are still ruled by the "laws of nature (*les loix naturelles*)" (1.31.153, VS206). *Raison*, which he describes as "inflexible and impassive," "alone must guide our inclinations" (3.7.701, VS918; 2.8.279, VS387). Yet at other points in the *Essais*, Montaigne seems to argue that neither nature nor reason provide us with any objective standards. "The laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature, are born of custom" (1.23.83, VS115). There is evidently no natural law, for of the laws asserted by natural law theorists, "there is not a single one that is not contradicted and disavowed, not by one nation but by many"

(2.12.437, VS580). Further, reason is not the objective standard that it is taken to be: "I always call reason (*raison*) that semblance of intellect that each man fabricates in himself. That reason, of which, by its condition, there can be a hundred different contradictory ones about one and the same subject, is an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable, and adaptable to all biases and measures; all that is needed is the ability to mold it" (2.12.425, VS565).

Not only does Montaigne violate Descartes' four primary methodological principles, but he also violates the provisional moral code that follows from them. Both Descartes and Montaigne observe the great variation in customs, laws, and values that exists in the human world. This leads Descartes to take up an ironic stance towards the customs of his own culture. He follows them like everyone else, only he does so while professing not to know whether they are true. This seems to be the only philosophically rigorous response to his lack of knowledge concerning the Good. Montaigne makes the same sorts of remarks about the diversity of human customs and values that he finds in the world. In "Of cannibals," a chapter widely regarded as Montaigne's endorsement of moral relativism, he writes: "each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in" (1.31.152, VS205). Yet rather than adopting the first two maxims of the provisional moral code, Montaigne seems to continue to judge the practices of other cultures as though he had access to an absolute standard. He claims that the actions of the cannibals is barbarous, not just according to him, but according to reason itself: "So we may well call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every

kind of barbarity" (1.31.156, VS210). Rather than acknowledge that he cannot adjudicate between the values of the cannibals and the values of the Europeans, he claims to judge them both by the same rules of reason. Thus he neither takes up an ironic stance towards his own values nor needs to make use of the second maxim in order to be resolute in his decisions and judgments. He appears to take himself to occupy an objective position from which to judge others, despite having argued that such a position cannot be secured.

With respect to the third and fourth maxims of Descartes' provisional code, Montaigne appears nonchalant and uninterested. He recognizes his faults ("As for me, if someone praised me for being a good pilot, for being very modest, or for being very chaste, I would owe him no thanks" (3.5.643, VS847)), but he seems to make little effort to reform himself. In "Of cruelty" he recounts how the little virtue he has is really more due to innocence than to discipline. He makes no effort to train himself to be unaffected by pain and anguish: "I am no philosopher. Evils crush me according to their weight; and their weight depends on their form as much as on their matter, and often more. I have more experience of them than the common people; so I have more patience. In short, if they do not wound me, they hurt me" (3.9.725, VS950). Thus while Descartes, like the Stoics, tries "to rise above fortune" by "much practice and frequently repeated meditations," Montaigne takes no great trouble to achieve such self-control.[29] Further, he does not claim to be engaged in the best occupation available to man. Rather than producing something useful for mankind, Montaigne engages in a project that is useful chiefly to himself (2.6.272-273, VS377-378).

[29] David Quint goes farther, arguing that Montaigne finds the discipline and self-control required by Stoic virtue to be forms of cruelty against oneself. See Quint's *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 57.

Conclusion

In sum, then, in the *Essais* Montaigne is doing something quite different from Aristotle and from Descartes. The question remains as to what conception of philosophy could make sense of what it is that he does there. Such a conception of philosophy must explain the features of the *Essais* that I have discussed here - the absence of both metaphysical speculation and methodological rigor, the reluctance to move beyond the particular, the attention that Montaigne devotes to himself, and the presence of a seemingly lackadaisical attitude towards both contradiction and moral improvement. Perhaps these features cannot be coherently explained by any simple conception of philosophy. It may be that the scholars who are reluctant to talk of Montaigne as a philosopher at all are in fact correct. He may be best understood as a "writer" rather than a philosopher. On the other hand, we might explain many of the features of the *Essais* discussed above by interpreting Montaigne as a skeptic. Such an interpretation could explain both the presence of skeptical tropes in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" as well as the apparently unphilosophical material that runs throughout the *Essais*, and it would satisfy many scholars of differing viewpoints. On the one hand, it would vindicate those who believe he has a place in the history of philosophy as the thinker whose presentation of skepticism prompted Descartes to begin his own project, which in turn signaled the beginning of modern philosophy. On the other hand, it would also placate literary theorists who wish to think of Montaigne as a "writer" whose project is to create himself on the written page. It is, then, to the question of Montaigne's "skepticism" that I will turn in the next chapter.

2

Montaigne's Skepticism

Montaigne's skepticism is one of the most-discussed and most-disputed subjects in Montaigne scholarship. Indeed, some argue that in the final analysis, Montaigne is not really a skeptic at all.[30] On the other hand, among those who take him to be a skeptic, there is disagreement as to about which school he belongs to, some placing him in the Academic tradition[31] while others take him to be a Pyrrhonist.[32] Still others argue that his skepticism is quite distinct from that of the ancients, and that it must be understood on its

---

[30] Richard Regosin, *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's Essais as the Book of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 57, recognizes a number of skeptical positions in Montaigne's philosophy, but argues that Montaigne's deep concern with self knowledge and his commitment to the validity of the project of knowing oneself fundamentally distinguish him from the ancient skeptics. Ann Hartle, *Montaigne*, 13-25, argues that Montaigne is not a skeptic but that there is a skeptical moment of "openness to possibility" that is essential to his philosophy. Most recently, Bernard Sève, *Montaigne. Des règles pour l'esprit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007), 82-83, has argued that the essence of Montaigne's philosophy cannot be reduced to skepticism. Rather than being the driving force behind all of Montaigne's thought, skepticism is an instrument that Montaigne uses in order to respond to the false theoretical problems created by his unregulated spirit.

[31] Alan Levine and Elaine Limbrick interpret Montaigne as an Academic Skeptic, but for different reasons, as I shall indicate below. See Alan Levine, *Sensual Philosophy: Toleration, Skepticism, and Montaigne's Politics of the Self* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2001) and Elaine Limbrick, "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonian?" *Bibliothéque d'humanisme et renaissance* 39 (1977): 67-80.

[32] The Pyrrhonian interpretation of Montaigne enjoys by far the most widespread agreement among scholars. Here I mention only those who have thematized Montaigne's Pyrrhonism. Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 52-54, argues that Montaigne is a skeptic-fideist in the Pyrrhonian tradition. Philip P. Hallie, *The Scar of Montaigne*, 49, takes Montaigne to have been "an orthodox skeptic after the manner of Sextus." David R. Hiley, "The Politics of Skepticism: Reading Montaigne" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1992): 387, argues that "Montaigne can be read as a model of the Pyrrhonian way of life." Floyd Gray, "Montaigne's Pyrrhonism" in *O un amy! Essays on Montaigne in Honor of Donald M. Frame*, ed. Raymond C. La Charité (Lexington, Ky.: French Forum Publishers, 1977), 132, claims that Montaigne understands Pyrrhonism to provide "a means of thinking and of living in conformity with the essential movement of things." Marcel Conche, *Montaigne et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 27-43, distinguishes between the phenomenalistic Pyrrhonism of Sextus and the Pyrrhonism of Pyrrho himself and attributes to Montaigne a methodological Pyrrhonism that corresponds to that of Pyrrho. This Pyrrhonism is more radical than that of Sextus in that it does not presuppose any reality behind the appearances. The Pyrrhonist, according to Conche, makes judgments and has beliefs, but does not "absolutize" them, that is, he does not take them to be true *of* anything. On the question of the scope of Montaigne's suspension of judgment, see Markus Wild, "Les deux pyrrhonismes de Montaigne" *Bulletin de la sociéte des amis de Montaigne VIIIè Série*, no.19-20 (2000): 45-56.

own terms.[33] My aim here is to offer a new interpretation of Montaigne's skepticism and its place in the history of philosophy. I shall argue that Montaigne draws on particular elements of both the Academic and Pyrrhonian traditions, but that the fundamental desire for self-knowledge that initially led him to recognize the insights of ancient skepticism ultimately leads him in a new direction. In short, my suggestion is that what lies at the heart of Montaignian skepticism is neither an epistemological position nor the experience of doubt, but rather the determination to philosophize self-consciously.

Academic Skepticism

Understanding Montaigne's relation to the Academics is made difficult from the start by the fact that the school's two most celebrated leaders, Arcesilaus and Carneades,

[33] Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne,* ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2, suggests that Montaigne's "skepticism" consists in "a *peering in* that leaves the world and men richer, not poorer." He is not a skeptic in the ancient sense of the term (see also 128-135). Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 289, takes Montaigne's skepticism to consist of philosophical modesty and a desire to think in concrete terms. It has nothing to do with "unbelief… universal denying, nor… universal doubting." On the other hand, some commentators have found Montaigne's skepticism to be more radical than the ancients'. Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 31, like Popkin, takes Montaigne to be a skeptic-fideist. Yet unlike Popkin, Brahami emphasizes that Montaigne's skepticism occurs within a Christian context, and he argues that Christian theology dramatically alters the nature of skepticism for Montaigne (47,55). As a result of the Christian conception of God, Montaigne's skepticism is more radical than Pyrrhonian skepticism, which Brahami interprets as a form of rationalism (73). Similarly, Jan Miernowski, *L'Ontologie de la contradiction sceptique: Pour l'étude de la métaphysique des Essais* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998), 60, argues that Montaigne's skepticism is more radical than that of the Pyrrhonists insofar as it is relativised by an ontological negativity inspired by the negative theologies of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa. Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irrésolution:Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer: Trois itineraries sceptiques* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998), 35-36, argues that Montaigne's skepticism is more radical than that of both the Academics and the Pyrrhonists. Giocanti argues that Montaigne's skepticism is best characterized by irresolution and doubt. Nicola Panichi, *Liens à renouer: Scepticisme, possibilité, imagination politique chez Montaigne*, trans. Jean-Pierre Fauquier (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 85-92, distinguishes between Montaigne's conceptions of theoretical and practical reason. With respect to his conception of theoretical reason, Panichi takes Montaigne to be a "*nouveau pyrrhonien,"* while his conception of practical reason, with its commitment to the idea of non-relativised moral truth, transcends the limits of ancient skepticism. Renzo Ragghianti, "Montaigne lecteur sceptique de l'*Ecclésiaste*," *Montaigne Studies* 21 (2009):137-153, has recently argued that there are significant connections between Montaigne's skepticism and the skepticism of the author of *Ecclesiastes*.

left behind no written records of their work. Thus the evidence for reconstructing the Academic position comes exclusively from secondary sources, many of which are hostile. So, for example, one of the most influential interpretations of Academic Skepticism, according to which it is a form of negative dogmatism, comes from Sextus Empiricus, a Pyrrhonist trying to distinguish his own school from that of the Academics. On this interpretation, the Academics know that they do not know anything.[34] The other traditional interpretation of the Academics is to take them to have been, beginning with the arrival of Carneades, probabilists. On this view one cannot know anything with certainty, but one can hold beliefs as to what is most likely true based on convincing or plausible impressions.[35] What both of these traditional interpretations of Academic Skepticism have in common, then, is that they attribute a particular theory of knowledge to the Academics.

There is also a third possible interpretation of Academic Skepticism that takes more seriously Arcesilaus' reputed claim that nothing can be known, not even that one knows nothing.[36] Under Arcesilaus the Academics argued for and against all theses and

---

[34] This is the interpretation of Levine, *Sensual Philosophy*, 38: Montaigne, like the Academics, "knows that he knows nothing." Ultimately Levine explains that it is possible for Montaigne to know that he knows nothing because he is actually equivocating when he utters this phrase. What he really means is that he knows phenomenologically that he cannot know anything regarding that which exists outside his consciousness (78). Thus Levine attributes to Montaigne a theory according to which the only possible knowledge is phenomenological knowledge of the self (78). Thierry Gontier, "L'essai et l'expérience: le scepticisme montaigniste par-delà le fidéisme" in *L'écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne*, 223-237, argues similarly that Montaigne rejects the notion of wisdom as communication with being for a conception of human wisdom consisting in communication with one's self through bodily experience.

[35] This is the interpretation to which Limbrick refers when she argues that Carneades' probabilism, which "relied upon experience, observation, testing, and everyday usage in order to establish criteria of what is true" inspired Montaigne's "final acceptance of experience as a commonsense solution to the skeptical dilemma" (75).

[36] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum, Academica*, trans. H. Rackam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 453.

by doing so came to suspend their judgment.[37] Unlike the Pyrrhonists, who seem to have been motivated by a desire for tranquility, the Academics appear to have been motivated by a desire for intellectual integrity.[38] Thus Cicero reports Arcesilaus to have said that one "must always restrain his rashness and hold it back from every slip, as it would be glaring rashness to give assent either to a falsehood or to something not certainly known (*incognita*), and nothing is more disgraceful than for assent and approval to outstrip knowledge (*cognitio)* and perception."[39] According to this third interpretation, then, the first two interpretations are the results of misunderstanding Academic methods of argument.[40] The Academics, because they found no propositions to be indubitable, could not argue on the basis of premises that they themselves accepted. Therefore they argued on the basis of premises put forth by their opponents.[41] Thus the conclusions that they are recorded as having reached are not indicative of their own positions. The Academics themselves would only assent to such conclusions if they took the premises upon which

---

[37] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 1:405.

[38] See A.A. Long and David Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1:447. For a contrary view regarding the Academics' motivation, see David Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Scepticism," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Universityof California Press, 1983), 9-30. Sedley suggests that the Academics may have also been motivated by the tranquility supposedly attained by Pyrrho through the suspension of his judgment.

[39] Cicero, *Academica*, 453. It is interesting to note that the principle that Arcesilaus articulates here is identical to the Stoic principle that the sage withholds assent to any impression that is not cognitive. Is Arcesilaus speaking *in propria persona* here? This is a question that I cannot answer in the course of this essay. Either Arcesilaus is expressing his assent to a normative belief, or he is mentioning a Stoic belief in the course of constructing an argument from Stoic premises. If it is the former, then it seems that he knows something after all; otherwise he would be guilty of performative contradiction. If it is the latter, then the Academics' suspension of judgment is not the result of a belief in this normative principle, but rather it is the result of a psychological fact: the Academics find arguments both for and against a thesis to be equally compelling, and as a result they are incapable of assenting to one or the other. As I will show later in this essay, Montaigne's position is distinct from that of the Academics in either case.

[40] For an excellent account of this interpretation of Academic Skepticism, see Gisela Striker, "On the difference between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics," in Gisela Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:447, also remark the Academics' reliance on their opponents' premises.

[41] See Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, trans. Rachel Woolf, ed. Julia Annas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26.

they are based to be true, but of course, as skeptics, they do not assent to any such premises. For instance, the Stoics hold that all knowledge originates in sense impressions and that there exists a particular class of sense impressions that they call "cognitive impressions" (*phantasia katalēptikē*). A cognitive impression is defined as "that which proceeds from a real object, agrees with the object itself, and has been imprinted seal-fashion and stamped upon the mind."[42] These impressions, being clear and distinct (*tranē kai ektupon*), constitute the sources of the sage's knowledge. Since the sage does not opine, he assents only to impressions that are cognitive. Yet the Academics argue that there are cases in which true and false impressions are qualitatively indistinguishable. If this is the case, then one can never be sure that one's impression is cognitive. Assuming the premises of Stoic epistemology, this means that knowledge is impossible and - since the sage never opines - that he must universally withhold assent. In this way the Academics argue that the Stoics must suspend judgment. As for themselves, the Academics will argue that there is an equally plausible argument that knowledge *is* possible.[43] Otherwise they would be forced to assent to the proposition that there can be no knowledge and they would become the negative dogmatists that Sextus accuses them of being. Thus, having constructed two equally plausible arguments, the Academics suspend judgment.

This view, that the dogmatic positions attributed to the Academics do not actually reflect the beliefs of the Academics themselves, may be the most charitable interpretation of Academic Skepticism itself, given that the ancient skeptics as a rule denied having any doctrines. Further, this interpretation has the merit of justifying the Academics' claims to

---

[42] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2:156.
[43] See Striker, 141.

be Socratic, by attributing to the Academics the Socratic method of working from the premises offered by an interlocutor. However, my concern is not with the question of which of these three possible interpretations of Academic Skepticism is historically correct, but with how Montaigne's skepticism stands in relation to each of them. It is to this question that I shall return later on.

Pyrrhonism

In addition to the three different ways of viewing Montaigne as an Academic Skeptic, there is also the widely accepted view that he is working in the Pyrrhonian tradition. According to Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonism is "an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to the suspension of judgment (*epochē*) and afterwards to tranquility (*ataraxia*)."[44] This tranquility that Sextus mentions as the outcome of the suspension of judgment is in fact the goal of Pyrrhonism.[45] But in order to achieve this goal, one must learn how to suspend judgment. Thus, beginning with Aenesidemus in the 1st Century B.C., different Pyrrhonists offered different sets of tropes, or "modes," through which suspension of judgment could be achieved. Sextus then catalogued these sets of tropes sometime around the 2nd Century A.D. in order to explain in specific terms how suspension of judgment comes about for the Pyrrhonists. Sextus lists three such sets: one set of ten

---

[44] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism,* trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

[45] *Ibid*., 10. For the standard Greek text, see H. Mutschmann and J. Mau, *Sexti Empirici Opera* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1958), 1:10: "*Phamen de achri nun telos einai tou skeptikou tēn en tois kata doxan ataraxian kai en tois katēnagkasmenois metriopatheian*."

attributed to Aenesidemus, another set of five attributed to Agrippa, and finally a set of two, attributed to "more recent skeptics." But each set of Pyrrhonian tropes works in essentially the same way. They all begin by drawing attention to anomaly or dispute: "We oppose what appears to what appears, or what is thought of to what is thought of, or crosswise."[46] If we acknowledge that there are conflicting views about and perceptions of things in the world, and we subscribe to the principle of non-contradiction (a necessary but unacknowledged premise on the part of the Pyrrhonists), then we must acknowledge that some of these thoughts and perceptions must be wrong. This generates a general distinction between appearance and reality, because it means that the truth somehow lies behind the "appearances," or the thoughts and perceptions that are at odds with one another. "Reality," then, is defined as that which lies beyond all the appearances, and the question becomes: Which appearances accurately represent reality?

At this point the Pyrrhonist demands that we justify our belief in the appearance we take to be true. Demanding justification for every premise we propose in order to justify our original conclusion, the Pyrrhonist makes clear to us that our initial belief rests upon a set of unjustifiable premises. Insofar as our premises are unjustifiable, they have the logical status of assumptions. Then the Pyrrhonist introduces the trope deriving from relativity, which consists in reminding us that the assumptions that seem plausible or necessary to us are not necessarily anything more than a function of the particular perspective we occupy. Hypothesizing different assumptions, the Pyrrhonist argues for a different conclusion, and then challenges us to choose which conclusion represents reality. Each of the opposed conclusions is equally unjustifiable, and therefore "equipollent." By "equipollent" Sextus means equal "with regard to being convincing or

[46]*Ibid*., 11.

unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing."[47] This produces "a standstill of the intellect" which Sextus calls "suspension of judgment."[48] It seems that the Pyrrhonists hold that the move from recognition of equipollence to suspension of judgment takes place naturally, that is, without any deliberate decision being made on the part of the person reflecting. Thus, according to Sextus' account, the two opposing arguments are not only equipollent with respect to their rational justifiability, but also equipollent with respect to their ability to compel belief.

As my completely general presentation suggests, the Pyrrhonists take the tropes to be applicable to any thesis put foward concerning reality. Once we acknowledge the general distinction between appearance and reality and the necessarily subjective status of our beliefs, we realize that we are *never* in a position to determine how things really are, that is, whether the way things appear to us is the way they are in reality. We are trapped among the appearances, and recognizing this leads to the suspension of judgment regarding what is real. Using the tropes to secure the suspension of judgment about everything, then, the Pyrrhonists have no beliefs. A Pyrrhonist will assent to "the feelings forced upon him by appearances," but this assent is passively accorded to the appearance without any act of the will.[49] Hence this completely passive acceptance of the appearance as it appears involves no reflective opinion about the truth-value of the appearance. Pyrrhonists simply "say what is apparent to themselves and report their own

---

[47] *Ibid*., 5. (See Mutschmann and Mau, 6: *"Isosthenian de legomen tēn kata pistin kai apistian isotēta, hōs mēdena mēdenos prokeisthai tōn machomenōn logōn hōs pistoteron.*")
[48] *Ibid*., 6. (See Mutschmann and Mau, 6: "*Epochē de esti stasias dianoias di' hēn oute airomen ti oute tithemen.*")
[49] *Ibid*., 6,8.

feelings without opinions, affirming nothing about external objects."[50] The Pyrrhonist, then, acts in accord with the appearances as they appear to him, without questioning them or even reflecting upon them: "Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions – for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold, and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise."[51] The Pyrrhonists, according to Sextus, act in a way very similar to that of the vulgar, who have never reflected philosophically about the nature of reality. Since they cannot use reason to determine what is actually best or just, they have no grounds upon which to criticize the society. So they abide by the customs and practices of their community and behave much as other people behave. Yet they differ from the vulgar insofar as they hold no beliefs. Not having beliefs is of course essential to Pyrrhonian quest for tranquility. For those who hold beliefs about the appearances are more troubled by those that appear bad than the Pyrrhonists, who suffer only from the appearance, and not from the opinion that the appearance is "bad in its nature."[52] In this way the Pyrrhonist maintains the tranquility that fortuitously follows suspension of judgment "as a shadow follows a body."[53]

---

[50] *Ibid.,* 7. (See Mutschmann and Mau, 8: "*To heautō phainomenon legei kai to pathos apaggellai to heautou adoxastōs, mēden peri tōn exōthen hupokeimenōn diabebaioumenos.*")
[51] *Ibid*., 9.
[52] *Ibid*., 11. (See Mutschmann and Mau, 11: "*Hupo tou tas peristaseis tautas kakas einai phusei dokein.*")
[53] *Ibid*.

The "Apology"

The question of the nature of Montaigne's skepticism has, for most scholars, turned on the interpretation of one part of one chapter of the *Essais*: the second part of "Apology Raymond Sebond." This is understandable, given that it contains Montaigne's most lengthy and focused treatment of skepticism. Yet this approach presents a problem when we compare the apparent skepticism of the second part of the "Apology" with the first part of that same chapter and then with the rest of the *Essais*. For in the first part of the "Apology" and in other places in the *Essais* we find Montaigne making judgments and distinctions that the skepticism of the second part seems to rule out as illicit and confused. One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that Montaigne did not care to be consistent, and that the essays are really a "register" of Montaigne's "ever-mobile thought processes."[54] By refusing to adjust his thoughts in order to make them consistent with each other, he escapes the pitfalls of systematic philosophy and produces a work that accurately represents the changing and contradictory nature of his thought. Yet there may be more consistency among Montaigne's thoughts than appears at first glance. Indeed, in considering the question of Montaigne's consistency, we might do well to heed his own advice: "I see ordinarily that men, when facts are put before them, are more ready to amuse themselves by inquiring into their reasons than by inquiring into their truth. They leave aside the cases and amuse themselves treating the causes" (3.11.785, VS1026). So, before we attempt to make sense of the causes of the inconsistencies in

[54] This interpretation of the *Essais* is suggested by Terence Cave, *How to Read Montaigne* (London: Granta Books, 2007), 38. Thus, in discussing apparent contradictions, Cave suggests that they are due to the fact that the *Essais* are the record of a "listening process" that registers what Montaigne is thinking at a given moment (93).

Montaigne's text, we must determine whether in fact they exist. By paying close attention to the context of Montaigne's reply to Sebond's secular critics in the second part of the "Apology," I shall argue that the implications of Montaigne's skeptical arguments are in fact quite limited, with the result that the tension between his apparent skepticism and his refusal to suspend judgment resolves itself.

The "Apology" is Montaigne's "defense" of Raymond Sebond's *Natural Theology*. Sebond was a professor of medicine, philosophy, and theology at Toulouse in the 15th Century. Montaigne reports that in his *Natural Theology*, Sebond "undertakes by human and natural reasons to establish and prove against the atheists all the articles of the Christian religion" (2.12.320, VS440).[55] This is of course an enormously ambitious project. Two hundred years before Sebond wrote his book, Thomas Aquinas had distinguished between the preambles to the faith, which can be demonstrated by natural reason, and the articles of faith, which cannot be demonstrated and therefore must be believed through faith rather than reason.[56] According to Aquinas, we can demonstrate by natural reason that God exists and that God is one and eternal, for example, but we cannot prove that Christianity is the true religion. Our beliefs in the Gospels must be founded upon faith rather than reason. And for faith we are dependent upon God, since we rely upon God's revelation of himself and the gift of his grace in order for us to believe. Sebond presents a different picture of Christian belief. Not only does he believe that the preambles to the faith can be proven, but he believes he can prove the truth of all the articles of faith of the Christian religion. Sebond's project, then, implies that faith is

[55] "*Il entreprend, par raisons humaines et naturelles, establir et verifier contre les atheists tous les articles de la religion Chrestienne.*"
[56] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia q.2.

unnecessary and that man can achieve knowledge of the truth of Christianity through "human and natural reasons" alone.

Sebond's position is, within the context of the Christian religion, a clear case of human presumption. Presumption, Montaigne writes, "is our natural and original malady. The most vulnerable and frail of all creatures is man, and at the same time the most arrogant" (2.12.330, VS452). The necessary condition for the possibility of presumption is a lack of self-knowledge. The presumptuous man either thinks he knows something that he does not know or he mistakes himself for something better than he is. Sebond, however, is not the only presumptuous figure to emerge in the "Apology." In fact, Montaigne does not explicitly accuse Sebond of presumption. Instead, he presents the "Apology" as a defense of Sebond against two objections to Sebond's project. Montaigne "defends" Sebond by exposing the presumption that seems to be behind each of the objections. Yet in doing so, as I shall argue, Montaigne implicitly undermines Sebond's project as well. Ultimately, I shall argue that presumption and the lack of self-knowledge that makes it possible are the unifying themes of the "Apology" and that to recognize this is a necessary first step towards understanding the nature of Montaigne's skepticism.

Before he begins to discuss Sebond and his critics, however, Montaigne opens the chapter with a short but important paragraph:

> In truth, knowledge (*la science*) is a great and very useful quality; those who despise it give evidence enough of their stupidity. But yet I do not set its value at that extreme measure that some attribute to it, like Herillus the philosopher, who placed in it the sovereign good, and held that it was in its power to make us wise and content. That I do not believe, nor what others have said, that knowledge is the mother of all virtue, and that all vice is produced by ignorance. If that is true, it is subject to a long interpretation. (2.12.319, VS438)

To readers who know what is coming in the remainder of the essay, this passage is striking. First, it seems to imply that human beings can and do possess knowledge. Then, rather than skeptically suspending judgment regarding the much-disputed philosophical thesis that knowledge is the source of virtue, Montaigne expresses his belief that it is false. He does so, however, with some qualification. Qualification is necessary because the claim can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending upon the context in which it is understood. Thus the question "Is virtue identical with knowledge?" is unintelligible until we have specified what we mean by "virtue" and what we mean by "knowledge." Once we have specified their meaning, the claim can be evaluated as true or false. But its truth remains relative to the meanings we attributed to its terms. Thus in this case Montaigne suggests that as we ordinarily construe the terms "virtue" and "knowledge," it is not true that "virtue is knowledge." Yet if we were to understand the claim in another sense, one which he thinks would require a good deal of explanation, we might find the claim to be true. This possibility, I want to suggest, is of crucial importance if we are to understand the result of Montaigne's skeptical attack on knowledge in the second part of the "Apology." But it is not the only evidence early in the "Apology" that caution is required in assessing that skeptical attack. In remarking that it is a dangerous time for believers, since the new beliefs being circulated may have the unintended effect of weakening the people's faith in general, Montaigne writes: "The common herd, not having the faculty of judging things in themselves, let themselves be carried away by chance and appearances.… And when some articles of their religion have been set in doubt and upon the balance, they will soon after cast easily into like uncertainty all the other parts of their belief…" (2.12.320, VS439). Here again we find

Montaigne seeming to subscribe to the idea that it *is* possible to distinguish appearance from reality, which is of course a notion antithetical to the skepticism he will appear to espouse later in the chapter.

The first objection

Montaigne then announces that he will defend Sebond's book against "two principal objections that are made against it." The first objection is that "Christians do themselves harm in trying to support their belief by human reasons, since it is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace" (2.12.321, VS440).[57] This objection is made by Christians themselves. Thus Montaigne senses "a certain pious zeal" in it which deserves to be treated with "mildness and respect" (2.12.321, VS440). Moreover, he recognizes a partial truth couched in this objection, namely the idea that reason alone cannot replace or justify faith. Thus he writes: "It is faith alone that embraces vividly and surely the high mysteries of our religion" (2.12.321, VS441). Here he implicitly expresses his judgment that Sebond fails to achieve his goal of demonstrating the truth of all the articles of the Christian religion. Montaigne does credit Sebond with showing that "there is no part of the world that belies its maker" (2.12.326, VS447). Yet Sebond of course had hoped to show much more than this. Demonstrating

[57] *"La premiere reprehension qu'on fait de son ouvrage, c'est que les Chretiens se font tort de vouloir appuyer leur creance par des raisons humaines, que ne se conçoit que par foy et par une inspiration particuliere de la grace divine."* Frame renders "*particuliere*" as "particular," but it is important to note the connotation of privacy that comes with the term in French. The Christian critics believe their "faith" comes to them directly from God, unmediated by the Church. Thus we might interpret the critics to be Protestants. Yet the force of the critique of Christian faith that follows is aimed at both Catholics and Protestants, so it would be a mistake to understand Montaigne's reply to the first objection to be aimed only at the presumption of Protestants.

that faith and reason do not contradict one another belongs to the project of Aquinas, not of Sebond.[58]

Montaigne, then, finds that the first objection has some truth to it. Yet he also detects the possibility of presumption behind it. Do the Christian critics who level this objection against Sebond presume to possess the faith they speak of and to have received it "by a particular inspiration of divine grace"? If so, have they stopped to ask themselves what this faith amounts to? Montaigne suggests that while they are right to hold that true faith is a result of God's grace rather than purely human efforts (2.12.321, VS441), they have not recognized the possibility that their own "faith" is not the genuine article. He suspects that this lack of self-knowledge concerning their faith is not only a problem for Sebond's Christian critics, but for many Christians. Thus he takes advantage of the opportunity to call all Christians to reflect upon the nature of their faith.

Where, Montaigne asks, are the fruits of our Christian faith? "Compare our morals with a Mohammedan's, or a pagan's; we always fall short of them. Whereas, in view of the advantage of our religion, we should shine with excellence at an extreme and incomparable distance, and people ought to say: 'Are they so just, so charitable, so good? Then they are Christians'" (2.12.322, VS442).[59] Instead, Christians make war on Christians, each side making use of the faith as a mere tool to advance their own partisan interests. He writes: "See the horrible impudence with which we bandy divine reasons about, and how irreligiously we have both rejected them and taken them again, according

[58] For Aquinas' discussion of this project, see *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 1, Chapter 9. On the apparent ambivalence in Montaigne's "defense" of Sebond in the opening pages of the "Apology," see Philippe Desan, "Apology de Sebond ou justification de Montaigne?" in *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*, ed. Philippe Desan, André Tournon, Frédéric Brahami, Bernard Sève (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 175-197.

[59] On Montaigne's critique of the behavior of Christians, see Frédéric Brahami, "Théologie, religion, vérité chez Montaigne" in *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*, 39-48.

as fortune has changed our place in these public storms" (2.12.323, VS443). Montaigne then juxtaposes Christian "faith" with everyday belief: "If we believed in [God], I do not say by faith, but with a simple belief… if we believed in him just as in any other history…. At least he would march in the same rank in our affection as riches, pleasures, glory, and our friends" (2.12.324, VS444). Thus he challenges the "faithful" to ask themselves: "What place does God really occupy in your life?" Having called into question Christians' understanding of the nature of their faith, he goes on to call into question its provenance. Whereas the Christian critics of Sebond claim that their faith comes to them by "a particular inspiration of divine grace," Montaigne suggests that Christian "faith" can be explained by purely human causes such as respect for one's elders and the location of one's birth: "We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans" (2.12.325, VS445).

In none of this does Montaigne prove that Christians have no faith. Nor does he prove that all Christian "belief" stems from purely human or natural causes. He does not essay Christian faith in order to establish these conclusions. Rather, his goal is to call into question what may go unquestioned by Christians who claim to possess the faith espoused by Sebond's Christian critics. He is drawing attention to the possibility of a tension between what these Christians say and what they do. "Some make the world believe that they believe what they do not believe. Others, in greater number, make themselves believe it, being unable to penetrate what it means to believe" (2.12.322, VS442). Members of the latter group, with which Montaigne is chiefly concerned, fail to essay their faith. They may have some faith, but it is not the Christian faith that they claim to have, since according to the Gospels, true faith manifests itself in the lives of the

faithful ("You will know them by their fruits").[60] As a result of failing to essay themselves, they are quick to focus their attention on others, such as Sebond, who they think are failing to be true to the faith to which they themselves claim to adhere.

It is significant that although he undermines the objections of Sebond's Christian critics by problematizing their faith, the most that Montaigne musters in defense of Sebond himself is the remark that even if we examine Sebond's arguments according to purely rational criteria, "they will still be found as solid and firm as any others of the same type (*de mesme condition*) that may be opposed to them…" (2.12.327, VS448). What Montaigne means by arguments "of the same type," and the degree to which he takes them to be "firm and solid," becomes clear in the next paragraph, for there he begins to take up the second objection to Sebond's book.

The second objection

The second group of critics "say that [Sebond's] arguments are weak and unfit to prove what he proposes, and undertake to shatter them with ease" (2.12.327, VS448).[61] That Montaigne recognizes the truth of the second objection is clear from his reply to the first objection, in which he declares that "it is faith alone that embraces vividly and surely the high mysteries of our religion" (2.12.321, VS441). Indeed, in his reply to this second objection Montaigne will demonstrate its truth: he will show that Sebond's arguments, regardless of their content, cannot demonstrate the truth of the articles of the Christian religion. Yet Montaigne also detects presumption in Sebond's critics, who seem to think

[60] See Matthew 7:15.
[61] "*Aucuns dissent que ses argumens sont foibles et ineptes à verifier ce qu'il veut, et entreprennent de les choquer ayseément.*"

that they stand on firmer ground than their Christian counterparts. The critics who advance the second objection are what we might call "secular rationalists." They appeal to "reason" to attack both Sebond's arguments and the Christian faith in general. Assenting only to what "reason" demonstrates to be true, "they hold those parts of our belief to be false which our reason fails to establish" (2.12.328, VS449). Thus the rationalists distinguish themselves from the Christians by claiming that whereas the Christians must defend Christian beliefs by appealing to faith (Sebond's project of grounding Christian belief in reason having failed), they are able to justify their own beliefs by appealing to reason. Thus they take their beliefs, e.g. the belief that the articles of faith are false, to have attained objectivity through "reason." Yet just as Sebond's Christian critics appear insufficiently self-conscious in their talk of "faith," so his secular critics appear insufficiently self-conscious in their talk of "reason."

In the context of the rationalists' attack on Christian faith, their appeal to "reason" consists in a demand for justification of Christian beliefs that the rationalists take to lack "rational" foundations. To Christians, these beliefs are a matter of faith and as such, they require no justification by "reason." But to the rationalists, this is unacceptable: every belief must be defended with reasons for having such a belief. Yet the rationalists do not seem to have subjected their own beliefs to this demand for justification. For if they if they had, they would have found that their beliefs are themselves founded upon first principles. Thus they seem unconsciously to allow themselves first principles, a luxury they deny the Christians. For, logically speaking, an appeal to principles held through faith is an appeal to first principles. So it is not that the rationalists reject Christian principles because they are unjustified, but rather because those principles are not in

accord with the unjustified principles that the rationalists themselves accept. But until the rationalists have shown that *their* first principles accurately represent reality and that those of the Christians do not, they stand upon equal ground with their Christian opponents. Thus Montaigne describes the conflict between the Christians and the rationalists not in terms of which side has the support of "*raison*," but in terms of "*notre raison*" against "*leur raison*."[62] *Leur raison* demands justification for all first principles but its own, and Montaigne will make use of the Pyrrhonian tropes to make this clear, thereby turning the rationalists "reason" against them.

Before he deals with the presumption of the rationalists, however, Montaigne deals with that of Sebond, albeit under the pretext of attacking "the philosophers." After exposing unjustified human pride by reminding us of how much we resemble the animals that we hold in such low esteem (see 2.12.330-58, VS452-486), Montaigne turns to attack the philosophers, or those who claim to have achieved knowledge of things human and divine (2.12.371,VS502). "The opinion of knowledge" Montaigne calls "the plague of man" (2.12.360, VS488). He will respond to the presumption of the philosophers much as he promised to respond to the presumption of the rationalists: "We must tread this stupid vanity underfoot, and sharply and boldly shake the ridiculous foundations on which these false opinions are built" (2.12.361, VS490).

Examining the different sects of the ancient philosophers, he looks with the most approval upon the Pyrrhonists, who suspend judgment and maintain "a perpetual confession of ignorance, a judgment without leaning or inclination, on any occasion whatever" (2.12.374, VS505). Of Pyrrhonism he writes: "There is nothing in man's invention that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness. It presents man naked and

[62] See VS 448-449.

empty, acknowledging his natural weakness, fit to receive from above some outside power; stripped of human knowledge, and all the more apt to lodge divine knowledge in himself, annihilating his judgment to make more room for faith; neither disbelieving nor setting up any doctrine against the common observances" (2.12.375, VS506). Montaigne seems to find this form of skepticism so compelling that he interprets the dogmatic philosophers as crypto-skeptics: "I cannot easily persuade myself that Epicurus, Plato, and Pyrhagoras gave us their Atoms, their Ideas, and their Numbers as good coin of the realm. They were too wise to establish their articles of faith on anything so uncertain and debatable" (2.12.379, VS511).

Montaigne goes on to discuss the attempts of Greek and Roman philosophers to determine the nature of the divine. Though Montaigne does not mention him by name, Sebond belongs among the ranks of these philosophers who have presumed to discover the nature of God through "reason alone," and insofar as Montaigne undermines the attempts at natural theology on the part of the ancients, he undermines Sebond's project as well. In all of these attempts to determine the nature of God, Montaigne finds only philosophical presumption: "Man can only be what he is, and imagine only within his reach. It is greater presumption, says Plutarch, for those who are mere men to venture to talk and discourse about the gods and demigods than it is for a man ignorant of music to want to judge singers… presuming to understand by some flimsy conjecture the products of an art that is outside his knowledge" (2.12.387, VS520). When man uses "human reasons" to establish the truth concerning ultimate reality, he builds his arguments from premises that he takes to be self-evident. Assuming that his arguments are valid, the

presumption of the philosopher consists in his assumption that they are sound, that the premises that *he* finds self-evident are true of reality itself.

In undermining the arguments of natural theology, then, Montaigne suggests that what appears to be self-evident may have more to do with the subject to whom the self-evident propositions appear than it has to do with reality itself. In some cases, it is our limited experience that makes propositions seem self-evident. Experience suggests that from nothing, nothing comes. But this does not indicate a limitation to the power of God: "'Because nothing is made of nothing, God cannot have built the world without material.' What! Has God placed in our hands the keys and ultimate springs of his power? Has he pledged himself not to overstep the bounds of our knowledge?… You see only the order and government of this little cave you dwell in, at least if you do see it…. It is a municipal law you allege; you do not know what the universal law is" (2.12.389, VS523-24). If, then, we take our "reason" to be capable of abstracting first principles from experience, we must acknowledge that the limits of our experience limit the validity of our principles. In other cases, it is the logical grammar of our concepts that lies behind the apparent self-evidence of our principles and the conclusions that we draw from them. So Montaigne reminds readers of what *a priori* arguments taught the Greeks about reality: Melissus holds that there is no movement, and Parmenides that the plurality of things is an illusion. Philosophers tend to take these conclusions as indications of the nature of reality, whereas in fact they represent the grammar of our concepts. Likewise, arguments about what God can and cannot do reveal the nature of our ideas about God rather than the nature of reality itself: "It has always seemed to me that for a Christian this sort of talk is full of indiscretion and irreverence: 'God cannot die, God cannot go

back on his word, God cannot do this or that.' I do not think it good to confine the divine power thus under the laws of our speech" (2.12.392, VS527). Such *a priori* arguments are a function of grammar, and "our speech has its weaknesses and its defects, like all the rest" (2.12.392, VS527). There are no grounds for taking the rules of our language to reflect the nature of ultimate reality.

In all of this, Montaigne reminds us that "human eyes can perceive things only in the forms they know" (2.12.399, VS535). By doing so, he employs the Pyrrhonian mode of relativity: we cannot escape our own perspective in order to verify as true the "self-evident" propositions that that perspective yields concerning ultimate reality. If we take "reason" to be responsible for the first principles to which we assent, we must acknowledge that we are unable to distinguish these principles of our "reason" from beliefs that we find indubitable. Thus "reason" is no guarantor of objectivity. Philosophers must give up the project of determining the nature of ultimate reality: "In Socrates' opinion, and in mine too, the wisest way to judge heaven is not to judge it at all" (2.12.400, VS535). What "those who judge heaven" take to be a matter of discovering the nature of reality is perhaps nothing more than a discovery about the logical implications of the beliefs they happen to have. For man, there can be no knowledge of ultimate reality. In fact, it is not clear that there can be any knowledge at all. Montaigne began his reply to the second objection by suggesting that "all subjects alike, and nature in general, disavow [reason's] jurisdiction and mediation" (2.12.328, VS449). Now, having undermined Sebond's claim to know the nature of the divine, he challenges the rationalists' claim to knowledge even of things human and natural: "These people, who think Sebond's reasons too weak, who are ignorant of nothing, who govern

the world, who know everything… have they not sometimes sounded, amid their books, the difficulties that present themselves in knowing their own being?" (2.12.402, VS538). Not having essayed their own beliefs, the rationalists do not realize the trouble they will have demonstrating even their beliefs concerning those things that seem most obvious and unproblematic. For instance, have they considered how "reason" could justify the common beliefs that they hold concerning the sensible world? Anyone else could "demonstrate" the fact that fire is hot by encouraging the skeptic to leap into the fire itself. But this sort of commonsense justification of a belief relies upon unsubstantiated perceptions, and so is unavailable to the rationalists. Applying the Pyrrhonian mode of infinite regress, Montaigne puts the point in colorful terms:

> We must know whether fire is hot, whether snow is white… as for those answers about which ancient stories are made, as when the man who doubted heat was told to throw himself into the fire… they are most unworthy of the philosophical profession. If [the rationalists][63] had left us in our natural state, receiving external impressions as they present themselves to us through the senses, and had let us follow our simple appetites, regulated by the condition of our birth, they would be right to speak thus. But it is from them that we have learned to make ourselves judges of the world; it is from them that we get this fancy, that human reason is the controller-general of all that is outside and inside the heavenly vault, embracing everything, capable of everything, by means of which everything is known and understood…. They must not tell me: 'It is true, for you see it and feel it so.' They must tell me whether what I think I feel, I therefore actually do feel… or let them abandon their profession, which is to accept or approve nothing except by the way of reason. (2.12.405, VS541)

Thus Montaigne shows the rationalists their ignorance of themselves. They criticize Christian beliefs held by faith for being unjustified, and yet they fail to demand the same justification of their own beliefs. If they had held themselves to the same standard to which they hold the Christians, they would have recognized that ultimately, if they are to claim to have any beliefs, those beliefs must be grounded upon first principles. So, when

[63] By "they" Montaigne refers to those who claim to abide by "reason" alone. This includes the secular critics of Sebond as well as the philosophers and Sebond himself.

they appeal to those first principles as the foundations of their beliefs, they will have to acknowledge that strictly speaking, their beliefs are no more justified than those of the Christians.

Through his critique both of first principles and of the demand for justification, Montaigne has shown that the knowledge claimed by both Sebond and his secular critics is illusory and presumptuous. On the one hand, Sebond takes himself to have used "reason" to transcend mere belief and arrive at certain knowledge of reality. On the other hand, the rationalists think that whereas the Christians' beliefs are founded upon subjective and unjustifiable premises, their own beliefs rest on the "objective" foundations provided by "reason." But neither Sebond nor his rationalist critics have essayed their notion of "reason." The idea that there is an ultimate distinction to be drawn between beliefs based on "reason" and beliefs based upon other more fundamental beliefs is confused. For underlying our beliefs about reality are simply more fundamental beliefs. These most fundamental beliefs, or first principles, are expressions of how things seem *to us*, rather than expressions of how things necessarily *are*. They are expressions of how things appear from a particular perspective, and as human beings, each of us is unable to transcend the particular perspective that he or she occupies. Ultimately, then, Sebond's quest for certain knowledge of ultimate reality is equivalent to the desire to raise himself above his humanity. But desiring to transcend one's condition, Montaigne says, is "absurd." "For to make the handful bigger than the hand, the armful bigger than the arm, and to hope to straddle more than the reach of our legs, is impossible and unnatural. Nor can man raise himself above himself and humanity; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only with his own grasp" (2.12.457, VS603). Likewise, the

rationalists, by understanding themselves to have used "reason" to confirm the objective truth of their beliefs, have also forgotten the limits of the human condition. In both cases the fundamental target of Montaigne's attack is the presumption that is caused by a lack of self-knowledge. It is not that Sebond's ultimate conclusion, that the articles of the Christian religion are true, is necessarily false, but that he is confused about his epistemic relation to those articles. Nor is it that the rationalists' criticism of Sebond is incorrect – in fact Montaigne has shown that it is correct – but that they are confused about the grounds for their own beliefs. Still, the implications of Montaigne's critique of Sebond and his secular critics seem to transcend his concern with the presumption of these overzealous thinkers. Indeed, Montaigne seems to have shown that there can be no knowledge at all, which finally brings us to the question of his own skepticism.

Montaigne's Skepticism

Given his expressions of approval for the Pyrrhonists, his use of their arguments and tropes, and his apparent conclusion that there can be no knowledge,[64] it might seem

[64] This seems to be the conclusion that Montaigne reaches at the end of the essay, though he does not say so explicitly. At the conclusion of the chapter, having attacked knowledge of the divine, the human, and the sensible world, he writes: "nothing certain can be established about one thing by another, both the judging and the judged being in continual change and motion. We have no communication with being…" (2.12.455, VS601). To link the notion that there can be no knowledge to the Pyrrhonists is controversial, since of course they deny being dogmatic skeptics and claim that they are still inquiring (see Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3,59). Yet Sextus also reports the following argument: "In another sense we sometimes oppose present things… and sometimes present to past or future things. For example, when someone propounds to us an argument we cannot refute, we say to him: 'Before the founder of the school to which you adhere was born, the argument of the school, which is no doubt sound, was not yet apparent, although it was really there in nature. In the same way, it is possible that the argument opposing the one you have just propounded is really there in nature but is not yet apparent to us; so we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument" (12). This argument essentially rules out the possibility of the Pyrrhonist ever acknowledging that there is knowledge (Montaigne, too, refers to this argument at 2.12.429, VS570). It is to be sure a puzzling passage since it implies that the Pyrrhonists argued for suspension of judgment differently in each case, whereas the tropes seem to be understood to be

that Montaigne's skepticism is best understood as a version of Pyrrhonism. Not only does he seem to follow the theoretical teachings of Sextus, but he also seems to follow the Pyrrhonists when it comes to practical matters. Thus we seem to find him "returning to common life," apparently on the basis of a suspension of judgment: "Now from the knowledge (*cognoissance*) of this mobility of mine I have accidentally engendered in myself a certain constancy of opinions, and have scarcely altered my original and natural ones…. And since I am not capable of choosing, I accept other people's choice and stay in the position where God put me…Thus I have, by the grace of God, kept myself intact, without agitation or disturbance of conscience, in the ancient beliefs of our religion, in the midst of so many sects and divisions that our century has produced" (2.12.428, VS569).

Yet at another point in the "Apology" Montaigne seems to reject the Pyrrhonian "return to common life": "What then will philosophy tell us in this our need? To follow the laws of our country – that is to say, the undulating sea of opinions of a people or a prince, which will paint me justice in as many colors, and refashion it into as many faces, as there are changes of passion in those men? I cannot have my judgment so flexible" (2.12.437, VS579). Moreover, while Montaigne suspends judgment on questions concerning ultimate reality, he does not suspend judgment universally. Even at the beginning of the "Apology" itself, as we saw, he does not cease talking of knowledge as though it were possible (2.12.319, VS438). Finally, his criticism of the Christian critics of Sebond was intended to suggest that they might have been fooled by the appearances to the point of thinking that they have a faith that they do not have. For a Pyrrhonist,

---

universally applicable. Nonetheless, both the tropes and the argument rehearsed above rule out the possibility of knowledge. Sextus' denial of the Pyrrhonists' negative dogmatism must be understood as an *ad hoc* defense against opponents who accused the Pyrrhonists of self-contradiction.

such a critique would be impossible, since identifying a mistake and distinguishing reality from appearance presuppose the possibility of identifying truth, and this is precisely what the Pyrrhonist finds impossible to do. Is Montaigne simply being inconsistent?

We can begin to answer this question by returning to the Pyrrhonian understanding of the relation between equipollence and suspension of judgment.[65] Sextus seems to imply that equipollence is a matter of psychological "convincingness": one is equally persuaded of both of two conflicting claims. Being equally persuaded results in a "standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything."[66] Montaigne does not experience this standstill of the intellect because he does not always find both of the equipollent arguments equally convincing, psychologically speaking. The arguments for and against a thesis may be logically equipollent, but they are not always psychologically equipollent. The notion that the senses convey the qualities of foreign objects accurately is no more justifiable than the notion that they do not (see 2.12.454, VS601). These two conflicting theses are equipollent with respect to rational justifiability. Yet one of them does not convince.

Having essayed the nature of belief in chapters such as "Of the imagination," "Of diversion," and "Of cripples," Montaigne recognizes that arguments and "reasons" do not

---

[65] For a different interpretation of the fact that Montaigne does not universally suspend judgment, see Sève, *Montaigne. Des régles pour l'esprit*. Sève argues that Montaigne's skepticism frees him to make judgments concerning things that he does not know insofar as it prevents his judgments from crystallizing into certitudes (354-359).

[66] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 5. See Annas' and Barnes' introduction, xxi. They agree that Sextus seems to view suspension of judgment as a psychological consequence of equipollence, but also raise the possibility that he might understand it to be "a requirement of rationality: if you are faced by equipollence, then rationality requires that you do not yet form any view on the question." In this case, one might actually find one of the two conflicting and equally unjustified theses more compelling psychologically, but suspend judgment because of a desire to remain "rational." I address this possibility below.

necessarily compel belief. Beliefs can only be explained by reference to other beliefs, and if, following Montaigne, we pay careful attention to ourselves, we find that our most basic beliefs defy explanation. We simply find ourselves with certain beliefs, some of which are strong enough to remain unmoved in the face of the realization that they cannot be justified, and that therefore there exist logically equipollent counterarguments. Montaigne, then, does not suspend judgment universally because he has beliefs that turn out to be resistant to skeptical attack.[67] When we realize that we have such beliefs, it becomes clear that the beliefs that are threatened by skepticism are not in most cases our first-order beliefs about the world, but rather our second-order beliefs about the epistemological status of those first-order beliefs. That is, skepticism undermines the belief that our beliefs about the world are the result of "reason" and thus constitute knowledge of objective reality. These are the beliefs that we find are susceptible to skeptical attack, and rightly so, since they are confused.

It is important to note that it is not through argument that we come to recognize the fact that we actually have certain fundamental beliefs that we do not doubt even when their justification has been undermined logically. This is a lesson that can be learned only by paying attention to oneself. Thus it is a lesson learned by Montaigne, who can speak of himself as "I who spy on myself more closely, who have my eyes unceasingly

---

[67] On Montaigne and the subject of belief, see André Tournon, "Les convictions d'un sceptique" in *Cuardenos de Filología Francesca 10* (1997-1998): 83-97 and Charles Larmore, "Un scepticisme sans tranquillité: Montaigne et ses modèles antiques" in *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie*, ed. V. Carraud and J.-L. Marion (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 15-31. For Tournon, Montaigne's beliefs result in part, at least, from his will (86,93). Larmore argues that Montaigne does not attempt, as a matter of principal, to avoid all belief, but rather he accepts opinions which strike him as plausible (24). While I agree with much that Tournon and Larmore have to say about Montaigne's beliefs, I wish to emphasize those beliefs that Montaigne holds independently of any act of his will or intellect in order to bring out the sense in which such beliefs provide the framework of conviction that makes choice and determinations of plausibility possible. These beliefs are those that are not susceptible to skeptical attack, and it is only with these beliefs in place that Montaigne can begin to view certain claims as more plausible or worthy of choice than others.

intent on myself, as one who has not much business elsewhere" (2.12.425, VS565). It is this recognition of the brute fact that he has beliefs immune to skeptical attack that enables Montaigne to escape the self-deception of the Pyrrhonists. The Pyrrhonists admit to being moved by appearances but deny that they have any beliefs concerning them. They claim that insofar as they reflect at all, their intellect is brought to a standstill by the equipollent opposition they find in all things. Montaigne, on the other hand, paying more attention to himself than to the arguments, recognizes the fact that he has beliefs that are ultimately unjustifiable and yet nonetheless impervious to arguments and "reasons." For he recognizes the logical force of the argument that "to judge the appearances that we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle" (2.12.455, VS600). Nonetheless, when it comes to the question of whether fire really is hot, Montaigne cannot shake off the conviction that comes from his senses. To those who refuse to believe anything not proven by reason, an appeal to the senses is folly. But among those not so presumptuous as to refuse to believe what they cannot demonstrate, a group in which Montaigne includes himself, the answer given by our senses is sufficient: "Not only we ourselves, but all the animals, and everything over which the domination of natural law is still pure and simple, would be capable of using this answer" (2.12.405, VS541). We cannot characterize Montaigne's "skepticism," then, in terms of a general attitude of irresolution and doubt. For, as we have seen, the recognition of the ultimate unjustifiability of all beliefs does not, as a matter of fact, lead him to doubt all his beliefs. This is not to say that Montaigne is *absolutely* certain concerning his beliefs, but that the relatively insignificant degree of uncertainty produced by Pyrrhonian arguments does not

prevent him from having beliefs about the way things really are. Absolute certainty is not a necessary psychological condition for the possibility of belief. [68] The doubts that Montaigne does experience arise in particular situations and are constructed in the context of general belief, rather than on the basis of a general sense of doubt produced by Pyrrhonian arguments. [69]

Here the Pyrrhonists might object that regardless of whether Montaigne *is* moved to suspend his judgment by the logically equipollent arguments, he *should* be moved, and he should attempt to bring his beliefs in line with the dictates of "reason." If he were to do so, then when faced with two equally unjustified claims, he would suspend judgment. Since Montaigne himself has shown that no claim can be ultimately justified, then, on this Pyrrhonian argument, he *ought* to suspend judgment universally. Yet this argument is the expression of a principle similar to that which we saw Arcesilaus articulate at the beginning of this chapter.[70] That principle is that one should never assent to or believe a claim that is not known with certainty. But the Pyrrhonists take themselves to have shown that nothing can be known with certainty. So how is it that they assent to or believe in this very principle? They could only do so by violating the principle itself. Therefore they must acknowledge that they can provide no argument for why anyone ought to suspend judgment universally.

Montaigne, then, is no Pyrrhonist. He neither universally suspends judgment nor uses skeptical arguments to attain tranquility. While it may be the case that he defers to

---

[68] On the relative unimportance of epistemological certainty in Montaigne's eyes, see Marcel Conche, "Montaigne, penseur de la philosophie" in *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie*, 175-196. Conche argues that the concern with certitude is born out of Christian theology rather than Greek philosophy. For Montaigne and the Greeks, epistemological uncertainty is not the cause for concern that it is for Descartes and certain theologians.

[69] On the selective nature of Montaigne's doubt and its relation to his experience as a jurist, see Philippe Desan, "Montaigne et le doute judiciaire," 179-187.

[70] See pp. 43-44 above.

tradition when it comes to religion,[71] he does not abide by the four-fold practical canon described by Sextus. He does, however, recognize the value of the Pyrrhonian insight into the fact that our beliefs terminate in unjustifiable premises, and that as a consequence of our subjectivity, we cannot verify those first principles. Thus while Montaigne finds that he believes that his judgments are true, he also recognizes that he cannot justify them. In this way he avoids the presumption of the rationalist, who not only believes that his judgments are true but also believes that he knows his judgments are true because he has transcended his subjective condition by means of reason. At the same time, by recognizing that he does have beliefs, he avoids the self-deception of the Pyrrhonist who, because he pays more attention to arguments than to himself, claims that he has no beliefs. Thus Montaigne occupies what might be understood as a middle position between the rationalist and the Pyrrhonist, distinguished from each side by the self-knowledge that each of these two extreme positions lacks.

Nor is Montaigne best understood as an Academic Skeptic, regardless of which interpretation of Academic Skepticism we take to be historically correct. Probabilism is sometimes viewed as a solution to "the skeptical dilemma." Thus, if we interpret the Academics as having been probabilists, there is a temptation to view Montaigne, who exhibits skeptical tendencies and yet seems to accept experience as an indicator of truth, as a modern Academic.[72] Yet this interpretation fails to recognize that Montaigne did not see skepticism as a problem to be overcome. For skeptical arguments present a dilemma

[71] I say "may" because it is not at all clear what really motivates Montaigne's Catholicism. Fortunately, this is not an issue that needs to be dealt with here.

[72] Thus while Limbrick, who takes the Academics to have been probabilists under Carneades, rightly acknowledges that Montaigne rejects "Academic" probabilism (see 2.12.422, VS561), she asserts that there is "a conceptual link" between the probabilism of the New Academy and "Montaigne's final acceptance of experience as a commonsense solution to the skeptical dilemma" (75).

only to those who think that they act on the basis of knowledge or who desire to justify their most basic beliefs. That is, as I discussed above, it presents a dilemma only to those with certain second-order beliefs about the epistemic status of their first-order beliefs or about how their beliefs ought to relate to "reason." In other words, it is a problem only for philosophers, and in this sense of the term, Montaigne is no philosopher.[73] Montaigne neither makes the mistake of thinking that he acts on the basis of the sort of knowledge that skeptical arguments undermine, nor does he undertake to justify his most basic beliefs. To do so is to desire to be more than human and to be guilty of the greatest presumption of all, which is to think that man is capable of having the sort of knowledge that belongs to God alone (see 2.12.328, VS449). Montaigne is content with the imperfection that comes with being human, and recognizes that this ultimate justification of one's beliefs is irrelevant, practically speaking, and inappropriate (which is to say unintelligible) for a being in man's position.[74] Therefore, to desire it is foolishness: "If man were wise, he would set the true price of each thing according as it were most useful *and appropriate* (*propre*) for his life" (2.12.359, VS487, my emphasis).

Nor will we find Montaigne to be a modern Academic according to the second interpretation noted earlier, the interpretation that takes the Academics to have been negative dogmatists. This becomes clear when we recognize that he *does* bear a resemblance, at least methodologically speaking, to the Academics as described in the

[73] Nor does he advise others to be "philosophers" in this sense. This is the purpose of the "warning to the princess" that Jessica Berry, "The Pyrrhonian Revival in Montaigne and Nietzsche," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 3 (July 2004): 510, finds "curious" in light of the skepticism that she takes to be Montaigne's general epistemological position. The "warning," in which Montaigne advises the princess that Pyrrhonism is only a tool to be used defensively against the professors, is perfectly consistent with the quite limited scope of Montaigne's suspension of judgment and the fact that he does not view epistemological skepticism as relevant to non-philosophers.

[74] Cf. Descartes' notion that one can avoid error completely, which "comprises the greatest and principal perfection of man" (117).

third interpretation above. According to this third interpretation, the Academics never argued *in propria persona*, but instead argued from the premises of their opponents. This is exactly what we find in the "Apology," where Montaigne writes the only chapter of his book that he characterizes as a direct response to theses of opponents. Indeed, he makes explicit the fact that the two objections he is considering emanate from two different groups, and that the two groups must be treated differently, according to the particular objections they make. Thus Montaigne treats each criticism on its own terms, using premises acceptable to the Christian (that true faith bears fruits) when essaying the first objection, and using premises acceptable to the rationalist (that each claim must be defended with reasons) when essaying the second. Moreover, each discussion occurs within a context that allows Montaigne to make claims that would be unacceptable if he made them within the context of the other discussion. For instance, his demand that one justify through reason the beliefs that snow is white and fire is hot is reasonable only given the beliefs concerning justification held by the rationalists. Outside the context of those beliefs, such a demand would be absurd, as he himself points out.[75] In this way we see that what holds the chapter together as a whole is the attack on presumption at work in both discussions. One group has not reflected sufficiently on the nature of faith, and the other group, which includes both Sebond and his rationalist critics, has not reflected sufficiently on the nature of reason. Therefore the conclusion to be drawn from Montaigne's reply to the second objection, namely, that there is no knowledge, is not the dogmatic and general conclusion that we know that we know nothing. Rather, it is a

[75] "We cannot conceive of an absurdity more extreme than to maintain that fire does not heat, that light does not illumine, that there is no weight or hardness in iron; these are items of knowledge brought to us by the senses; and man has no belief or knowledge that can compare with this sort for certainty" (2.12.444, VS588).

much more qualified conclusion: *if* one understands "knowledge" to mean certitude regarding reality achieved through "reason," *then* there is no knowledge. Just as the Academics show the Stoics that according to their own premises, knowledge is impossible, so Montaigne uses the premises of the rationalists to demonstrate the same conclusion. In both cases the truth of the conclusion is dependent upon the truth of rather questionable premises. This limits the scope of the claim dramatically. All that Montaigne has done is to show that one way of understanding "knowledge" is utterly confused. Thus, when at the beginning of the "Apology" Montaigne talks of knowledge as though it were an unproblematic concept, as long as he is not employing the term "knowledge" in this sense, he is not contradicting the conclusions he draws in the second part of the essay.

While Montaigne employs the Academic mode of argument, he neither makes a habit of arguing for and against all judgments nor suspends judgment universally. The skepticism of the Academics, like that of the Pyrrhonists, is both too extreme and too general. There is no need to argue for and against every thesis once we have understood the nature of the relation between belief and reason. Each of the skeptical schools made the equal and opposite mistake made by the dogmatists: "The pride of those who attributed to the human mind a capacity for all things produced in others, through spite and emulation, the opinion that it is capable of nothing. These men maintain the same extreme in ignorance that the others maintain in knowledge; so that it cannot be denied that man is immoderate in all things, and cannot be stopped except by necessity and inability to go further" (3.11.792, VS1035). While Montaigne does often introduce arguments against established opinions, he does not do so in order to suspend the

judgment of his readers, but rather to enlighten it: “Feeling you tensed and prepared in one direction, I propose the other to you with all the care I can, to enlighten your judgment, not to compel it. God holds your heart and will provide you with your choice. I am not so presumptuous as even to desire that my opinions should tip the scale in a thing of such importance; my fortune has not trained them for such powerful and exalted decisions” (3.11.790, VS1033). To enlighten our judgment is to broaden the context of that judgment, so that when we judge, we do so with greater understanding both of ourselves and of the object we judge. This concern to think more self-consciously, rather than doubt or the suspension of judgment, is the key to Montaigne’s “skepticism.”

3

Skepticism and Moral Judgment

"Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in" (1.31.152, VS205). Remarks such as this from "Of cannibals" have led commentators to argue that Montaigne subscribes to a theory of moral relativism, that is, to the notion that there is no objective moral order.[76] Yet later in that same chapter, Montaigne condemns the cannibals' brutal treatment of their enemies (1.31.155, VS209) and concludes that "we may call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity" (1.31.156, VS210). Remarks such as this one, on the other hand, have led other commentators to hold that Montaigne is a moral objectivist who thinks that "reason" can provide us with a standard according to which we may determine moral truth.[77] Still other scholars, recognizing the tension between remarks such as those cited

[76] Thus in his introduction to Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) xvii-xviii, Desan writes: "All the critics agree on one point: moral relativism emerges forcefully from the *Essais*. The cause of this relativism is not very difficult to pinpoint. The late Renaissance experienced a series of serious crises in almost every domain (moral, political, scientific, philosophical, cosmological). These crises brought about a questioning of the authority of the Ancients and sapped the foundations of humanism. It is no longer possible to believe in universal truth." Likewise, Raymond La Charité, *The Concept of Judgment in Montaigne*, 135, remarks that "For Montaigne, there is no absolute morality; the dictates of conscience are consequently relative." On possible connections between Montaigne's relativism and his skepticism, see Sayce, 188-201. For some commentators, Montaigne's relativism is one of his virtues. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Histoire de Lynx* (Paris: Plon, 1991) 284, recognizes in Montaigne a thinker ahead of his time, who pushes cultural relativism to its limits (see Chapter 18, "En relisant Montaigne"). Dudley Marchi, "Montaigne: A Practical Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century" *Montaigne Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (2000), 1:147-166, seems to suggest that Montaigne's relativism is part of what makes the *Essais* relevant to us and "our 'postmodern condition'" (160).

[77] See Marcel Conche, *Montaigne et la philosophie*, vii-xi, 125. Conche argues that for Montaigne, it is reason that founds our moral duties. Ann Hartle, *Montaigne*, 99-105, argues that Montaigne appeals to the

above, have criticized Montaigne's apparent inconsistency concerning the nature of "reason" and accused him of either discursive or performative contradiction.[78]

In this chapter I will attempt to strike a compromise between those who hold that Montaigne is a relativist and those who take him to reject relativism through an appeal to "reason." Thus in the first section I will argue that, on the one hand, Montaigne's well-known appreciation for cultural diversity does not lead him to embrace moral relativism, while, on the other hand, he does not think that we can appeal to "reason" to provide the foundations for moral objectivism. Nonetheless, Montaigne does appeal to "reason" when making particular moral judgments. Thus in the second section of this chapter I will show how his appeals to "reason" are non-foundational and do not involve him in the contradictions mentioned above. Finally, in the third section of this chapter I will defend Montaigne's objectivism against two possible objections. The first objection is that his moral judgments are arbitrary. The second is that he ought to abandon any moral beliefs that he cannot justify. In sum, then, my aim in this chapter is to show that Montaigne is a

---

criterion of "truth and reason," "not defined in terms of some original nature but rather in terms of returning to what was already there in one's starting points" (100), in order to escape the confusion of skeptical relativism. See also Panichi, 85-92 and 461-465. Panichi takes a position similar to that of Conche. She writes: "*Chez Montaigne, il n'y a pas de relativisme moral, la seule morale qu'il reconnaisse depend des règles de la raison, universelle et naturelle*" (465).

[78] Caroline Locher, "Primary and Secondary Themes in Montaigne's *Des cannibales*," *French Forum* 1 (1976) notes both that Montaigne has shown truth to be relative (123) and that he condemns the cannibals according to the rules of reason (125) but she is not critical of this contradiction. Richard Handler, "Of Cannibals and Custom: Montaigne's Cultural Relativism," *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 5 (1986): 13, writes that Montaigne's appeal to reason in "Of custom" reflects "a key ambiguity, if not contradiction, in Montaigne's position." Tzvetan Todorov, "L'Etre et l'Autre: Montaigne," *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 125, argues that Montaigne "would like to be a relativist as he undoubtedly thinks he is; in reality he has never ceased to be a universalist." In other words, Montaigne is confused. By judging others, including the "cannibals" by his own standards, he fails to carry out in practice the relativism to which he subscribes theoretically. Philippe Desan, "*Montaigne et le doute judiciaire*," 185, does not accuse Montaigne of contradiction, but remarks an ambivalence in Montaigne's conception of justice, suggesting that while Montaigne understands that all truth is particular, he was unable to accept the idea of a justice that was so particular that it served only to protect the interests of those in power.

moral objectivist and that his objectivism, which is ultimately unjustifiable, is nonetheless defensible.

Two types of moral relativism

It has been argued that Montaigne's recognition of moral differences existing among human societies leads him to subscribe to the theory of moral relativism.[79] Such arguments tend to appeal to three chapters of the *Essais*: "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law," the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," and "Of cannibals." In "Of custom" Montaigne reflects upon cultural diversity, spending about one quarter of the chapter reporting various practices and beliefs in credit around the world, most of which would strike his European readers as strange and, in some cases, morally offensive. These moral differences between cultures seem to settle at least one question: the question of the provenance of our moral beliefs. Given the variety of moral values that seems to exist in the world, Montaigne concludes that our varied moral beliefs cannot emanate from a common source: "the laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature, are born of custom. Each man, holding in veneration the opinions and behavior approved and accepted around him, cannot break loose from them without remorse, or apply himself to them without self-satisfaction" (1.23.83, VS115). Montaigne, then, seems to identify the question of the existence of profound moral differences among human beings with the question of the existence of natural laws, or particular beliefs,

[79] See Todorov, 114-117, Handler, 12-13, and Wild, 51. Also, see Zachary Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity: Relativism in the French Renaissance* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Schiffman holds that it was Montaigne's awareness of human diversity that caused his "normative view of the world" to crumble (57).

inclinations, and behaviors that exist universally among human beings.[80] Given the apparent lack of moral agreement, he concludes that there are no natural laws. In the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," Montaigne arrives at a similar conclusion. There he explains that some philosophers "say that there are some [laws] which are firm, perpetual, and immutable, which they call natural, which are imprinted on the human race by the condition of their very being" (2.12.437, VS579). This thesis can be empirically tested, since if there were natural laws, they would manifest themselves in human behavior: "for what nature had truly ordered for us we would without doubt follow by common consent. And not only every nation, but every individual, would resent the force and violence used on him by anyone who tried to impel him to oppose that law" (2.12.437, VS580). But it seems that no such law is to be found: "there is not a single one that is not contradicted and disavowed, not by one nation but by many" (2.12.437, VS580). Montaigne, then, seems to argue from the existence of different customs and values to the non-existence of "natural laws," which, as I noted above, he conceives in terms of sets of innate inclinations and beliefs that give rise to similar behavior across cultures. The various systems of moral values found in the world must be the effects of arbitrary custom rather than of nature.

But perhaps Montaigne has judged prematurely. As he reminds us in "Of cripples," it is always necessary to examine the facts themselves before we seek their causes: "I see ordinarily that men, when facts are put before them, are more ready to amuse themselves by inquiring into their reasons than by inquiring into their truth. They leave aside the cases and amuse themselves treating the causes. Comic prattlers!"

[80] Thus for Montaigne, given his use of the expression "natural law," it is unintelligible to say that there is natural law but that it is not obeyed by all human beings in all places and times.

(3.11.785, VS1026). Montaigne has suggested that custom is the cause of the moral differences that he observes. But has it actually been established that these moral differences exist on a fundamental level? Certainly people of different cultures behave differently in myriad ways. But do these different behaviors express fundamentally different moral beliefs? Not more than twenty lines later Montaigne is more cautious concerning the existence of natural laws: "It is credible that there are natural laws, as may be seen in other creatures; but in us they are lost; that fine human reason butts in everywhere, domineering and commanding, muddling and confusing the face of things in accordance with its vanity and inconsistency" (2.12.438, VS580).[81] It may be, then, that there are natural laws, that is, universal inclinations and beliefs, that underlie the differences that appear on the "surface." "Things may be considered in various lights and from various viewpoints: it is principally from this that diversity of opinions arises. One nation looks at one side of a thing and stops there; another at another" (2.12.438, VS581). Perhaps, then, Montaigne had judged too quickly when he asserted that *fundamental* differences in moral values exist among different cultures, and that therefore all moral beliefs ultimately derive from custom rather than nature. The mistake may have been to think that he had discovered profound differences in what were (perhaps) only superficial differences. Montaigne illustrates this distinction with a passage that is worth quoting at length:

> There is nothing so horrible to imagine as eating one's father. The nations which had this custom in ancient times, however, regarded it as testimony of piety and

[81] See also "Of the affection of fathers for their children" for another instance where Montaigne seems to countenance the possibility that there are natural laws: "If there is any truly natural law, that is to say, any instinct that is seen universally and permanently imprinted in both animals and ourselves (which is not beyond dispute), I may say that in my opinion, after the care every animal has for its own preservation and the avoidance of what is harmful, the affection that the begetter has for his begotten ranks second" (2.8.279, VS386).

> good affection, trying thereby to give their progenitors the most worthy and honorable sepulture, lodging in themselves and as it were in their marrow the bodies of their fathers and their remains, bringing them back to life in a way and regenerating them by transmutation into their living flesh by means of digestion and nourishment. It is easy to imagine what a cruelty and abomination it would have been, to men saturated and imbued with this superstition, to abandon the mortal remains of their parents to the corruption of the earth and to let it become the food of beasts and worms. (2.12.438, VS581)

To fail to move beyond the initial inclination to be disgusted with the notion of eating one's father is to forget that "things may be considered in various lights and from various viewpoints." Recognition of this allows Montaigne to understand how a superficially strange and offensive act actually expresses a fundamental value shared by both the cannibals and Montaigne's own people: respect for the dead. In the end, then, "Of custom" and the "Apology" suggest more than anything else that each act that apparently expresses a value incommensurable with one's own values must be explored before judgment can be rendered as to whether the act does in fact express a moral value at odds with one's own beliefs.[82] It has not yet been established that fundamental moral differences exist among human beings, and that the "natural law" is merely a myth.

Yet perhaps Montaigne resolves the issue in "Of cannibals." There Montaigne seems to recognize that such fundamental differences exist and that therefore we cannot judge those whose customs occur in a cultural context different from our own. Early in the chapter, discussing a nation of cannibals discovered in the "New World," he writes: "Now, to return to my subject, I think that there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the

[82] In this Montaigne seems to anticipate contemporary approaches to the problem of cultural differences such as that demonstrated by Peter Winch in "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 307-324.

opinions and customs of the country we live in" (1.31.152, VS205). Here Montaigne seems to acknowledge an unbridgeable gap between human beings of two different cultures. Certainly, the cannibals portrayed in "Of cannibals" seem to qualify as a group whose customs and moral opinions differ fundamentally from those of Montaigne's European culture. This point seems to be reiterated at the conclusion of the chapter, when Montaigne reports how the cannibals find aspects of European culture, such as hereditary monarchies and inequalities of wealth, quite strange (1.31.159, VS214).

Yet in the middle of the chapter Montaigne had seemed to suggest that perhaps these cannibals are not so different from Europeans after all. Whereas in the "Apology" Montaigne showed how the apparently barbarous actions of one set of cannibals actually expressed values shared by the Europeans, here he suggests that the truly barbarous practices of another set of "savage" cannibals actually resemble certain practices of "civilized" Europeans. Having described the torture that the cannibals inflict upon their enemies, Montaigne writes:

> I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen with fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead. (1.31.155, VS209)

Thus Montaigne has taken his readers from feeling outrage at the cannibals' cruel and strange behavior abroad to recognizing the cruelty of familiar acts perpetrated at home.[83] Further, Montaigne condemns the customs of both societies: "we may well call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who

[83] For a discussion of the dialectical character of "Of cannibals," see Steven Rendall, "Dialogical Structure and Tactics in Montaigne's 'Of cannibals,'" *Pacific Coast Philology* 12 (1997): 56-63.

surpass them in every kind of barbarity" (1.31.156, VS210). Montaigne's critique of practices occurring in his own community reminds us of further difficulties involved in definitively determining the existence of profound moral differences between cultures. First, it problematizes the notion of "culturally-determined moral beliefs." For it reminds us that one's moral beliefs may differ from those of others considered to be members of one's "culture," which would mean that fundamental moral differences exist within a "culture."[84] Yet not even this much is easy to establish. For it may also be the case that the Europeans whom Montaigne is criticizing are acting contrary to their most deeply held moral beliefs, in which case such behavior does not indicate a profound moral disagreement between Montaigne and those Europeans whom he criticizes. As Montaigne often reminds us, human beings seem to perpetually fail to live up to their own moral standards: "there never was any opinion so disordered as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty, which are our ordinary vices" (1.31.156, VS210). In some cases vices are sanctioned and even institutionalized, as Montaigne reminds us with his reference to the public torture that occurs in towns throughout Europe. But this of course means that we cannot be sure that the "institutionalized" or ritual torture that the cannibals inflict upon their enemies expresses their most deeply held moral beliefs either. Or, then again, perhaps both the European and "New World" practices of torture *do* reveal deeply held moral beliefs that are not openly acknowledged. Rather than settling the question of the origin of moral beliefs, then, Montaigne seems to have further

[84] This of course complicates our understanding of the relation between an individual and his or her culture. See 2.12.437, VS579: "What then will philosophy tell us in this our need? To follow the laws of our country – that is to say, the undulating sea of opinions of a people or a prince, which will paint me justice in as many colors, and refashion it into as many faces, as there are changes of passion in those men? I cannot have my judgment so flexible."

problematized the project of determining whether incommensurable moral differences exist among human beings.

So where, in the end, does Montaigne stand on the question of the existence of the natural law? Can we uncover fundamentally similar moral values in the hearts of all human beings? This latter question is an empirical question, and as such it is a question for anthropologists, who debate whether what we take to be "cultural differences" are "surface phenomena" or "deep phenomena" expressing absolute differences.[85] There can be debate about this question because we can find examples and counterexamples in the world that seem to confirm or disconfirm one of the two theses. Of course the question is a special kind of empirical question, for it requires not only that we "find" the "evidence" that is "out there" in the practices of other cultures, but also that we *interpret* this evidence. As Montaigne so helpfully reminds us, a practice that *appears* to be utterly different and morally unintelligible can become morally intelligible when we understand the practice from within the cultural context in which it occurs. Montaigne's own examples suggest that perhaps "deep" similarities are more widespread than the "surface" differences suggest.[86] Yet this does not mean that these "deep" similarities are universal. In sum, Montaigne offers us no definitive argument in support of either thesis.

Thus Montaigne does not seem to take a clear stand on the question of what we might call "empirical moral relativism." Yet even if Montaigne were to take a consistent position on the question of empirical moral relativism, this would have absolutely no bearing on his stance with respect to what we will call the question of "metaphysical moral relativism," or the notion that there is no objective moral order. The question of

---

[85] See Handler, 13.

[86] See also 2.12.438, VS581, where Montaigne makes sense of the Spartans' permissive attitude toward theft.

empirical moral relativism is a question about whether fundamental moral values are held in common by all human societies, as a matter of empirical fact. This is what Montaigne takes to be the question of the existence of "natural laws." Either such values are held universally among human beings or they are not. But the question of metaphysical moral relativism is a question about whether there is an objective moral order, that is, whether there is absolute truth concerning the nature of good and evil, right and wrong. If the theory of metaphysical moral relativism is true, then it is unintelligible to ask whether an act is truly wrong, because there is no objective moral truth. There are only anthropological truths about what people regard as permissible and impermissible. Perhaps all human beings agree concerning what is permissible and what is impermissible, or perhaps they do not. This is, again, the question of empirical moral relativism. But the answer to the question of empirical moral relativism has no implications with respect to the question of metaphysical moral relativism. Neither the presence of absolute disagreement over fundamental moral values nor the existence of universal agreement concerning fundamental moral values (the existence of what Montaigne calls "natural laws") has any implications with respect to the existence of an objective moral order. There is nothing about the notion of an objective moral order that suggests that people cannot disagree about its nature. If an objective moral order exists, that means that there is something for people to disagree about, and perhaps, get wrong. In fact, it is the possibility of being wrong about what is truly "good" that fundamentally distinguishes metaphysical moral objectivism from metaphysical moral relativism. For instance, if there is no objective moral order, we cannot be mistaken about what is truly just. We can only make mistakes about what a certain group means by the term "justice."

While the presence of universal moral values might initially seem to suggest an objective moral order, Montaigne reminds us that such an inference from intersubjectivity to objectivity is invalid. In the first place, what we take to be "universal agreement" is often really a phenomenon that is limited both temporally and geographically: "What am I to make of a virtue that I saw in credit yesterday, that will be discredited tomorrow, and that becomes a crime on the other side of the river? What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is falsehood to the world that lives beyond?" (2.12.437, VS579). Yet even if we were to discover values that are and have always been universally held by human beings, this would be no indication of anything more than the fact that human beings agree with each other: "It is a municipal law that you allege; you do not know what the universal law is" (2.12.389, VS524). The difference between intersubjectivity and objectivity is not a difference of degree, but one of kind.

Thus, whether or not metaphysical moral relativism is true depends not on an empirical fact but on a metaphysical "fact": whether or not there is an objective moral order, a standard that determines whether a particular culture or person's moral beliefs are "right" or "wrong." What is meant by an "objective moral order"? Philosophers have referred to this notion in various ways throughout the history of western philosophy. Plato talked of "Forms" as the objective standards against which we measure moral beliefs. Aristotle referred to "nature" as his objective standard for how humans ought to order themselves morally and socially. For Christian philosophers in Montaigne's time, the objective moral order was identified with God.[87] Then, during the "Enlightenment," philosophers such as Kant took "reason" to be the objective standard that dictates what is

[87] For example, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.II q. 91 a.1, where the "Eternal Law" is identified with God.

objectively "right" from what is objectively "wrong." In each case, whether the objective moral order is conceived of in terms of "Forms," "nature," "God," or "reason," the essential feature of the proposed order is its thoroughly objective nature. Each of the philosophers mentioned above believes that human beings can be and often are wrong about what the order amounts to, since its existence and nature remain independent of human beings' conception of it.

Yet Montaigne finds that its objective nature is precisely what prevents us from determining its existence and nature. For from a human perspective, there is nothing that could distinguish an objective moral order (as represented in a first principle or categorical imperative) from a subjective or culturally-relative moral order. An objective moral order's existence, in virtue of its objectivity, transcends my subjective apprehension of it. Therefore, whether I am in all actuality apprehending a subjective moral order or an objective moral order is a fact that necessarily remains unknowable to me, since I am cognitively incapable of transcending my subjective perspective on that order. Thus I know neither whether such an order exists nor whether my understanding of it is correct.

The problem of trying to achieve knowledge of the existence and nature of an objective moral order is essentially the problem of coming to know the nature of ultimate reality, a problem that Montaigne discussed in the "Apology." There, as I argued in the previous chapter, Montaigne shows that we cannot attain knowledge of the existence or nature of God through the use of "reason." Further, he shows that we cannot we appeal to "reason" itself as an *objective* moral standard, since the rationalists' appeal to "reason" is ultimately an appeal to that which is *subjectively* self-evident: "I always call reason that

semblance of intellect that each man fabricates in himself. That reason, of which, by its condition, there can be a hundred different contradictory ones about one and the same subject, is an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable, and adaptable to all biases and measures; all that is needed is the ability to mold it" (2.12.425, VS565). Appeals to "nature" as an objective moral standard, on the other hand, tend to have rhetorical force because they suggest an empirical source of objectivity. When we invoke "nature" in moral debate, the implication is that rather than arguing on the basis of our own particular values, we are supporting our argument with observations that we have made of "nature." But of course the rhetorical force of such a move depends upon the conflation of two conceptions of "nature." We can either treat "nature" descriptively, in which case it refers to all that happens in the universe, or normatively, in which case it is a synonym for "good." But the latter conception of "nature" is not based on simple observation; it is constructed on the basis of our own moral presuppositions and prejudices. Thus, when we appeal to "nature" as a moral standard, we conflate these two concepts: "we call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be" (2.30.539, VS713). If by "nature" we mean that order which we observe in the world, it will provide us with no standard by which to discriminate right from wrong, since on this conception of "nature," *everything* that we observe is natural, and therefore "good." On the other hand, if by "nature" we mean to refer to an order which consists of only a limited portion of what happens in the world, then human beings must distinguish the "ordered" from the "disordered," and "nature" becomes a standard similar to "reason," that is, a standard subjectively apprehended. In the latter case, Montaigne finds that "men have done with Nature as

perfumers do with oil: they have sophisticated her with so many arguments and farfetched reasonings that she has become variable and particular for each man" (3.12.803, VS1049). However human beings have attempted to talk about an objective moral order, whether as "God," "nature," or "reason," if they have gone so far as to claim knowledge of such an order, they have been guilty of presuming that what seems self-evident to them is actually representative of an objective reality that lies beyond their human grasp.

"Reason" and Montaigne's Objectivism

Yet what, then, are we to make of the fact that in both "Of custom" and "Of cannibals" Montaigne seems to appeal to "reason" as though it were an absolute or universal standard from which to criticize custom?[88] Is he contradicting the conclusions he reached concerning "reason" in the "Apology"? In answering this question, we must be careful to avoid imposing the standards of a traditional philosophical text upon a text that so deliberately and explicitly sets itself in opposition to those standards. That is, we must take into account the particularity of the essay as a literary form whenever we attempt to discuss Montaigne's use of language. Specifically, we must recall that the

[88] A number of commentators have understood Montaigne's references to "reason" in these chapters to be references to universal or absolute reason. Handler holds that this appeal to "absolute reason" reflects a contradiction in Montaigne's thought (13). Todorov seems to suggest that Montaigne only thinks of reason as universal for a moment, before he recognizes that reason must be culturally specific (116). Jack Abecassis, "'Des cannibales' et la logique de la representation de l'alterité chez Montaigne" *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne* VIIe série, no. 29-32, (1993): 204, argues that Montaigne cannot help but appeal to universal reason insofar as he is attempting to describe the cannibals as though they were not incommensurably different from his own culture. He may be a relativist theoretically speaking, but in practice, he cannot help but translate the practices of the cannibals into his own language. Bernard Sevè, *Montaigne: des règles pour l'esprit*, 46, also reads Montaigne's appeal to the "rules of reason" in "Of cannibals" as an appeal to "universal reason."

order of the essay is the order of ordinary conversation. This means at least three things. First, each essay, or chapter of the *Essais*, constitutes a new conversation, and just as each conversation has a particular context which determines the senses of the terms we use and the purpose of our use of such terms, so each chapter of the *Essais* begins a new conversation with its own contexts and purposes, and does not continue a line of argument extending from the first chapter to the last. Second, we must remind ourselves that the essay is marked by the absence of technical terminology. Montaigne writes: "The speech I love is a simple, natural speech, the same on paper as in the mouth; a speech succulent and sinewy, brief and compressed; not so much dainty and well-combed as vehement and brusque… rather difficult than boring, remote from affectation, irregular, disconnected and bold; each bit making a body in itself; not pedantic, not monkish, not lawyer-like, but rather soldierly" (1.26.127, VS171). We must avoid the temptation, then, to take familiar philosophical terms, such as "reason" or "truth" in a technical sense. For Montaigne uses terms just as they would be used "on the street": "I do not avoid any of those [words] that are used in the streets of France; those who would combat usage with grammar make fools of themselves" (3.5.667, VS875). And he expresses disgust with the excessively fastidious use of language found in the "schools": "Do we witness more of a jumble in the chatter of fishwives than in the public disputations of the professional logicians? I would rather have my son learn to speak in the taverns than in the schools of talk" (3.8.707, VS926). Finally, we must remember that in conversation, the definition of terms is the result of a breakdown in communication; it is not a necessary condition for communication to occur in the first place. Montaigne does not define his terms, and, just as in conversation we do not speak

on the condition of having a definition in mind for every term which we employ, so when he employs terms in his essays, he does not necessarily do so with a conscious sense of their precise meaning. Thus, when speaking of his style, he calls it "a formless and undisciplined way of talking, a popular jargon, and a way of proceeding without definitions, without divisions, without conclusions" (2.17.483, VS637). All of this is to say that we ought to assume neither that Montaigne is using philosophically familiar terms in philosophical or technical senses nor that he is attempting to remain consistent in his employment of a term throughout the *Essais*. Each use of a term such as "reason" in the *Essais* must be examined on its own terms.

Appeals to "reason" in "Of custom" ("*De la coustoume*") occur within the context of a discussion of the power of *coustume*, which can mean either "custom" or "habit."[89] Montaigne argues that the force of habit is more powerful than we tend to recognize: "For in truth habit (*coustume*) is a violent and treacherous schoolmistress. She establishes in us, little by little, stealthily, the foothold of her authority; but having by this mild and humble beginning settled and planted it with the help of time, she soon uncovers to us a furious and tyrannical face against which we no longer have the liberty of even raising our eyes" (1.23.77, VS109). What is customary or habitual is that which we do without thought or reflection, and what we "do" includes holding beliefs and making judgments concerning ourselves and others. Thus, through its power to make what we do seem "right" and "natural," habit - to borrow a formulation of Ann Hartle's – creates "the unreflective milieu of prephilosophical certitude, the sea of opinion in which we are

[89] I will follow Frame's practice of choosing one or the other translation as seems appropriate, and in some cases refer to "custom/habit" to convey the dual sense of the term in French.

immersed."[90] Habit makes what is familiar appear necessary, and what we take to be necessary we do not question. Thus Montaigne writes: "Habituation (*assuefaction*) puts to sleep the eye of our judgment. Barbarians are no more marvelous to us than we are to them, nor for better cause; as everyone would admit if everyone knew how, after perusing these new examples, to reflect on his own and compare them sanely" (1.23.80, VS112). Reflection, on the other hand, counteracts the effects of habituation by making the familiar appear strange.[91] That is, reflection allows us to step out of the "sea of opinion in which we are immersed" in order to gain critical distance from that which we take for granted. To reflect upon something, then, is to call it into question, to treat it as strange and therefore in need of investigation. In the passage just cited Montaigne suggests that one way of achieving this is by comparing what is customary in one's own culture with different practices from other cultures, so that what seemed to be necessary and natural is now revealed as contingent.[92] In "Of custom," Montaigne recalls an example of how being confronted with the strangeness of the unfamiliar helped him to see the familiar as strange:

> One French gentleman always used to blow his nose into his hand, a thing very repugnant to our practice. Defending his action against this reproach… he asked me what privilege this dirty excrement had that we should prepare for it a fine delicate piece of linen to receive it, and then, what is more, wrap it up and carry it carefully on us; for that should be much more horrifying and nauseating than to see it dropped in any old place, as we do all other excrements. I found that what he said was not entirely without reason; and habit had led me not to perceive the strangeness of this action, which nevertheless we find so hideous when it is told us about another country. (1.23.80, VS111)

---

[90] Hartle, 106.
[91] On this, see Hartle's chapter on "The Circular Dialectic of Self-Knowledge," 91-120.
[92] Thus, in "Of ancient customs," Montaigne writes: "I want to pile up here some ancient fashions that I have in my memory, some like ours, others different, to the end that we may strengthen and enlighten our judgment by reflecting upon this continual variation of human things" (1.49.216, VS297).

Habit, then, is the enemy of self-knowledge in two respects. First, it prevents us from paying attention to ourselves and calling into question that which we take for granted. Second, it discourages us from earnestly trying to understand others who seem dramatically different from ourselves. In situations that call for reflective judgments, habit leads us to make thoughtless, customary judgments regarding both ourselves and others.

In "Of custom" Montaigne goes on to spend a number of pages detailing various exotic customs before concluding, "In short, to my way of thinking, there is nothing that custom will not or cannot do; and with reason Pindar calls her, so I have been told, the queen and empress of the world" (1.23.83, VS115). What is especially troubling about habit/custom is the way that it seems to control the way we view the world:

> The principal effect of the power of custom is to seize us and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances. In truth, because we drink them with our milk from birth, and because the face of the world presents itself in this aspect to our first view, it seems that we are born on condition of following this course. And the common notions that we find in credit around us and infused into our soul by our fathers' seed, these seem to be the universal and natural ones. Whence it comes to pass that what is off the hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason: God knows how unreasonably, most of the time. (1.23.83, VS115)

We are taught in childhood to judge things in particular ways, and when these judgments become habitual for us, we forget the fact that we are judging at all; it seems that the world "presents itself" to us, as though it were simply *given* rather than interpreted through the lens of these judgments. Such judgments are rightly called prejudices, insofar as they are based upon preconceived and unexamined notions. To Montaigne, again, these judgments of habit/custom lead us to believe that whatever is "off the hinges" of custom, whatever seems at odds with the "common notions we find in credit

around us," is "off the hinges of reason." But clearly, then, Montaigne does make a distinction between "custom" and "reason." The question is how we are to characterize this distinction. We may be tempted to take the distinction to be between two normative standards. "Custom" would then denote culturally-specific standards of behavior, and "reason" would denote an objective or universal standard for behavior that somehow remains unconditioned by local customs. Yet this interpretation is at odds both with Montaigne's argument in the "Apology" against the possibility of conceiving of "reason" as an objective standard and with his reluctance, described above, to postulate universal agreement in judgment among human beings. Further, it ignores not only the emphasis that "Of custom" places upon the relationship between, on the one hand, custom or habit and, on the other hand, judgment, but also the fact that in this passage Montaigne refers to custom in terms of "common notions," or beliefs, which of course express themselves in judgments. Instead of distinguishing between a standard that is culturally conditioned and a standard unconditioned by cultural prejudices, it seems to me that Montaigne is distinguishing between two modes of making judgments. On the one hand, there are what I will call "judgments of *coustume*" or unreflective, "snap-judgments" that rely on exclusively on habit, while, on the other hand, there are "judgments of reason" or self-conscious judgments made on the basis of thoughtful consideration and reflection, with recognition of the fact that they are not made from a perspective totally unconditioned by prejudice or presupposition. So, for example, when confronted with the cannibals of the "Apology," the judgment of *coustume* is that these are strange and immoral people, whereas the judgment of reason is that these are people to whom we appear strange, and

whose cannibalism is in fact an expression of a fundamental value that they share with us, one which itself cannot be justified in any non-circular way.

We tend to understand most of the practices of our community through judgments of *coustume* and thus we tend to think of them of as though they were necessary and natural. Montaigne views this "customary mode" of judgment as the default mode of judgment for human beings: "I should be prone to excuse our people for having no other pattern and rule of perfection than their own manners and customs; for it is a common vice, not of the vulgar only but of almost all men, to fix their aim and limit by the ways to which they were born…. But I do complain of their particular lack of judgment in letting themselves be so thoroughly fooled and blinded by the authority of present usage that they are capable of changing opinion and ideas every month, if custom pleases, and that they judge themselves so diversely" (1.49.216, VS296). Once called into question, however, we can recognize these customary judgments for what they are, and thereby either transform them into "judgments of reason" or reject them. Thus Montaigne describes his experience of having recognized the lack of justification for a widely-observed custom: when he realized the meager foundations upon which the custom was established, he "nearly became disgusted with it" (1.23.84, VS117). He goes on to write: "And whoever wants to essay himself in the same way, and get rid of this violent prejudice of custom will find many things accepted with undoubting resolution, which have no support but in the hoary beard and the wrinkles of the usage that goes with them; but when this mask is torn off, and he refers things to truth and reason, he will feel his judgment as it were all upset, and nevertheless restored to a much surer status" (1.23.84,

VS117).[93] To refer things to "truth and reason" is to essay them, to question them and so become self-conscious of our relation to them. It can be unsettling to have our judgments of *coustume* undermined by judgments of reason, since so often judgments of reason reveal the fact that our beliefs are supported by nothing more than past usage. Yet our judgment is thereby "restored to a much surer status" in that it is no longer blinded by unreflective custom. Our judgment thus "raises its eyes" and liberates itself from the tyranny of custom. To be liberated from the tyranny of custom, of course, does not necessarily mean to reject customary practices as useless or arbitrary. As Montaigne discusses in "Of custom," even in those cases where a particular custom is discovered to have arbitrary foundations, there may be good reasons for a community to uphold it.

On the other hand, in some cases reflection does undermine customary practices and beliefs, as we see in "Of cannibals." Whereas in "Of custom" reflection undermined habit by making the familiar appear strange, here reflection achieves the same end by making what is strange appear familiar. Montaigne opens the chapter with anecdotes about how certain Greeks recognized that strangeness is not necessarily a sign of inferiority. He concludes the opening paragraph: "Thus we should beware of clinging to vulgar opinions, and judge things by reason's way, not by popular say" (1.31.150, VS202). Here, judging according to "reason's way" is not a matter of judging in accord with a universal or objective standard, but rather a matter of reflectively probing beneath superficial and thoughtless judgments. The Greeks in question saw through the "barbarity" of the Romans and recognized their sophistication. Montaigne maintains this distinction between "reason" and "popular say" two pages later when he remarks: "I

[93] This quotation comes from the 1588 edition of the *Essais*, the last edition published in Montaigne's lifetime. In the Bordeaux Copy, he eliminates the reference to essaying himself, so that the passage reads "Whoever wants to get rid of this violent prejudice of custom…."

think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. *There* is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things" (1.31.152, VS205). If one listens to "popular say," it would seem that there is no distinction to be made between judgments of *coustume* and judgments of reason, for we seem to be incapable of calling into question our own practices: they are all perfect. But of course Montaigne will go on to demonstrate that this is in fact too simplistic a view of the relation between "custom" and "reason" when he criticizes the common practice of torture within his own society.

Later in the same chapter, after having both praised the cannibals for their many virtues and criticized them for their cruelty, Montaigne again refers to "reason" as providing the "rules" for judgment: "We may call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity" (1.31.156, VS210). The cannibals are barbaric not because they are strange or because their customs appear different from "our own," but because of what their culture actually shares in common with "our own," namely, institutionalized cruelty. Thus Montaigne remarks in "Of cruelty": "Savages do not shock me as much by roasting and eating the bodies of the dead as do those who torment and persecute them living" (2.11.314, VS430). Montaigne's moral judgment of the cannibals is not based upon his initial reaction to what is different about them, namely, their practice of eating human flesh, but rather it is based upon his recognition that they are guilty of something quite

familiar to him: cruelty. Thus in this case the difference between judging "in respect to ourselves" and judging "in respect to the rules of reason" is the difference between judging according to the simple prejudice of "popular say" versus judging after having penetrated such prejudice in order to recognize the familiar that underlies a veneer of difference. Judgments of reason, then, are not distinguished from judgments of *coustume* on the basis of their foundations - they are not founded upon principles that are themselves unconditioned by custom - but rather by the degree of self-consciousness and reflection that enter into them.[94]

Thus Montaigne's appeals to "reason" in "Of custom" and "Of cannibals" are not appeals to "reason" as conceived in the "Apology," that is, as a universal or absolute standard for judgment. Montaigne has not revised his view, expressed in the "Apology," that human beings are cognitively alienated from ultimate reality. Therefore there are no grounds upon which to argue for the existence or nature of an objective moral order. Regardless, Montaigne seems to believe that there is an objective moral order and that he has at least a rough sense of what it entails. For the moral discourse that he employs throughout the *Essais* presupposes an objective moral order in a number of ways. First, he makes moral judgments, not only concerning practices taking place in his own culture, but also concerning the practices of other cultures. Thus, regarding the behavior of the cannibals, he remarks: "I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own" (1.31.155, VS209). Whether or not the cannibals actually share the same fundamental

[94] For of course while we may criticize certain customs of our society, we cannot ever completely abstract ourselves from our own culturally-conditioned perspective. On the role that custom plays in Montaigne's judgments of the cannibals, see Gerard Defaux, "Un cannibal en haut de chausses: Montaigne, la différence et la logique de l'identité," *MLN* 97 (1982): 919-57.

values as the French, what the cannibals do is wrong. Such moral condemnation presupposes the existence of an objective moral order according to which both the cannibals and the French can be judged. Second, Montaigne talks of categorical duties. In "Of cruelty," for example, he writes: "There is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it" (2.11.318, VS435). Such categorical obligations presuppose, again, the existence of an objective moral order that requires certain behaviors from human beings regardless of how those behaviors square with their own interests or their cultural background. Third, Montaigne distinguishes between relative and absolute values, and criticizes others for failing to make the distinction between relative and objective moral orders: "You are not afraid to offend the universal and indubitable laws, and are proudly intent on your own laws, which are partial and fanciful; and the more particular, uncertain, and contradicted they are, the more you devote your effort to them. The positive rules of your own invention possess and bind you, and the rules of your parish; those of God and the world leave you untouched" (3.5.671, VS879). And in "Of the useful and the honorable," he writes: "Justice in itself (*La justice en soy*), natural and universal, is regulated otherwise and more nobly than that other, special, national justice, constrained to the need of our governments" (3.1.604, VS796). Finally, Montaigne clearly thinks that it is possible to make mistakes concerning the nature of the objective moral order. Thus, in "Of drunkenness," for example, he argues that "even our teachers often rank sins badly" (2.2.245, VS340). As I discussed above, we cannot

conceive of mistakes being made unless we think there is something to be mistaken about.

While there are these clear expressions of moral objectivism in the *Essais*, there are no clear expressions of metaphysical moral relativism, and as we have seen, Montaigne's discussions of empirical relativism are both inconclusive and, more importantly, beside the point. Montaigne clearly believes, then, that there is an objective moral order and that he has some conception of what that order entails. Yet, we may ask, on what grounds does he hold such beliefs?

Objections to Montaigne's Objectivism

Having established that Montaigne is an objectivist, we must now deal with possible objections to his position. A relativist, for example, might argue that Montaigne's moral judgments are arbitrary. For as we have seen above, Montaigne criticizes both the cannibals *and* the French, which suggests that he aspires to judge both cultures from a neutral perspective that is ultimately unconditioned by the customs of either the cannibals or the French. But if he has also rejected the notion that "reason" can provide us with that neutral perspective, then on what grounds can he make moral judgments? And if he cannot justify his beliefs that there is in fact an objective moral order and that his judgments reflect that order, must not we hold his judgments to be merely arbitrary personal preferences? As Todorov writes in "L'être et l'autre: Montaigne," "The conscious universalist has to formulate the criteria that he thinks universal and try to justify them. He cannot afford to declare just his own values

universal; at least he ought to anticipate any objection."[95] We may be inclined to think that since Montaigne makes assertions regarding the existence and nature of the objective moral order and the relativist makes no such assertions, the burden of proof is on Montaigne to justify his moral judgments and demonstrate that they are not merely arbitrary. What I will attempt to show below, however, is that the burden of proof in this dispute is equally distributed between the Montaigne and the relativist, and that Montaigne's moral judgments are not merely arbitrary.

Let us begin with the claim that Montaigne's judgments are arbitrary. There are at least two senses in which moral judgments could be considered arbitrary. First, moral judgments may be considered arbitrary insofar as they fail to reflect any objective moral order because, as the relativist argues, there simply is none. In order to show that his judgments are not arbitrary in this sense, Montaigne would have to be capable of providing what I will call a "positive justification." "Positive justification" would consist in demonstrating that one's theoretical claim is actually corroborated by objective evidence. Thus a "positive justification" of a moral judgment would require demonstrations both that an objective moral order exists and that one's particular moral judgment is consistent with that order. Yet Montaigne has argued that this is impossible: human beings are incapable both of demonstrating the existence of an objective moral order and, assuming that such an order exists, of distinguishing a subjective moral order from an objective moral order. Thus, since Montaigne cannot "positively" justify his moral judgments, he cannot demonstrate that his moral judgments are not arbitrary in this "objective" sense of the term.

---

[95] Todorov, 125.

The second sense in which moral judgments may be judged arbitrary is with respect to the subject who asserts them. That is, they may be considered arbitrary in relation to the other beliefs to which the moral subject subscribes and the other judgments that he makes. To be "arbitrary" in this sense means to be unconnected with these other beliefs and judgments insofar as the judgment in question seems to be merely adventitious or even at odds with those other beliefs and judgments. In order to show that one of his moral judgments is not arbitrary in this second sense, Montaigne would have to be capable of providing what I will call a "negative justification." "Negative justification" would consist in essaying, or testing, one's moral judgments to see whether they can withstand the pressure of critical scrutiny. By essaying these judgments, we can discover whether they can, upon reflection, be integrated with other reflective beliefs to which we find ourselves committed, or whether they are merely adventitious judgments uncorroborated by other judgments that we make or are even at odds with those other judgments. It is important to note that there is no final "negative" justification of a moral judgment: Montaigne cannot be certain that he has adequately scrutinized a particular moral judgment. Nonetheless, by reaffirming that judgment through reflection, he can demonstrate that it is not "subjectively" arbitrary.

An example of "negative justification" can in fact be found in "Of cruelty." There Montaigne remarks that he holds most vices "in horror, I say, from an attitude so natural and so much my own that the same instinct and impression that I brought away from my nurse I have still retained" (2.11.312, VS428). Yet the moral judgments that he learned to make as a child have not simply remained judgments of habit or custom. They have, through the exercise of the essay, become reflective: "Among the other vices, I

cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature *and by judgment*, as the extreme of all vices" (2.11.313, VS429, my emphasis). Having essayed his judgment of cruelty, he is now capable of giving reasons for his judgment; in other words, he is capable of showing how his judgment is not - in the second sense of the term - merely arbitrary. This is precisely what Montaigne does in "Of cruelty," and his procedure here merits close attention.[96] Montaigne first establishes that there is some precedent for his judgment of cruelty and torture by appealing to the judgment of other famous and well-respected men, such as Julius Caesar and Suetonius (2.11.314, VS430-431). He then connects his hatred of cruelty and torture to the principles of his Christian faith: "As for me, even in justice, all that goes beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty, and especially for us who ought to have some concern about sending souls away in a good state; which cannot happen when we have agitated them and made them desperate by cruel tortures" (2.11.314, VS431). Next he shifts from the perspective of the observer of torture to the perspective of the victim in order to appeal to his sense of sympathy for other human beings, recounting the story of an imprisoned soldier whose fear of being tortured was so great that he attempted, unsuccessfully, to kill himself with a rusty nail, and was relieved to learn that his head was to be cut off straightaway.[97] Finally, he connects his condemnation of cruelty and torture with his political views. Thus he criticizes the attempt to justify torture on the grounds that it is politically necessary for the purpose of maintaining order. Montaigne has seen for himself the effect of beholding the brutal treatment of a

[96] For a different interpretation of Montaigne's "argument" against the permissibility of cruelty, see Bernard Sève, *Montaigne. Des règles pour l'esprit*, 278-290. Sève presents Montaigne's argument as composed of two lines of argumentation, one theological and the other philosophical.

[97] On Montaigne's emphasis on the perspective of the victim, see Philip P.Hallie, "The Ethics of Montaigne's '*De la cruauté*'" in *O un amy! Essays on Montaigne in Honor of Donald M. Frame*, ed. Raymond C. La Charité (Lexington, Ky.: French Forum Publishers, 1977), 156-171.

criminal's corpse, and he argues that the people will be just as discouraged from crime by watching the dead body of the criminal be dismembered as they will by watching a live body tortured (2.11.315, VS431). None of these remarks on torture and cruelty constitutes any "positive" justification of his initial judgment that cruelty is objectively wrong. But together they do constitute a "negative" justification of his judgment of cruelty insofar as they demonstrate that his condemnation of cruelty is neither adventitious nor contrary to his other deeply-held beliefs, but rather is connected with other judgments he makes, whether they are theological, political, or simply moral. Through reflection, Montaigne has reaffirmed and transformed what was initially a judgment of habit or custom into what I have called a judgment of reason.[98]

Part of what we see through a closer look at Montaigne's procedure of negative justification here is that for him, sentiments are bound up in our judgments, and reflection upon our moral judgments must ultimately be founded upon other judgments to which we already assent. Yet he does not hold that reflection vindicates *all* of our sentiments and pre-reflective judgments. For instance, in "Of drunkenness," as Ann Hartle has shown, Montaigne considers and rejects his initial judgment concerning the viciousness of drunkenness.[99] Nor does Montaigne claim that we can distinguish the sentiments and judgments to be retained from those to be rejected by determining which of them are "natural" or "pre-reflective;" the source of a particular sentiment or judgment is irrelevant in deciding whether or not it can stand the pressure of critical scrutiny. For instance, Montaigne seems to think that human beings have a *natural* appetite for violence and cruelty. Often, this appetite is satisfied by abusing animals: "Nature herself, I fear,

[98] See pp. 93-94 above.
[99] See Hartle, 98-99.

attaches to man some instinct for inhumanity. No one takes his sport in seeing animals play with and caress each one another, and no one fails to take it in seeing them tear apart and dismember one another" (2.11.316, VS433). Yet this is not a sentiment that he reaffirms through reflection; he judges that "we owe… mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it" (2.11.318, VS435). Therefore in this case we must combat our what seems to be a natural appetite.

The determination of which sentiments and judgments are to be rejected is made on the basis of other judgments and sentiments that each human being finds himself making. For the innumerable moral sentiments and judgments that we find ourselves making are not systematically linked to one another and in some cases they conflict. Since Montaigne does not think there is any guarantee that all human beings share the same basic moral judgments and beliefs, he cannot be assured that all who reflect upon cruelty or drunkenness will reach the same conclusions that he does. Yet for himself, he can say that his judgments have been "negatively justified": those concerning cruelty insofar as they have passed the test of the essay and those concerning drunkenness insofar as they have been transformed as a result of having been essayed. Thus, to the extent that they are "negatively justified," his moral judgments are not "subjectively" arbitrary.

Still, supposing that Montaigne's moral judgments are not "subjectively" arbitrary, are they not still "objectively" arbitrary? The relativist, of course, will argue that in fact there is no objective moral order, and therefore *all* Montaigne's moral judgments must be "objectively" arbitrary: they neither reflect nor fail to reflect an objective moral order. The locus of the dispute, then, between Montaigne and the relativist is the question of whether an objective moral order exists or not. It may seem

that the burden of proof is on Montaigne, who makes moral judgments, some of which condemn the actions of others, rather than on the moral relativist, who refuses to make moral judgments at all. Since Montaigne has shown that he *cannot* justify his moral judgments in the "positive" sense, it may seem more reasonable to become a relativist and stop making moral judgments altogether. Yet in fact the burden of proof in this dispute is distributed equally upon Montaigne and the relativist. Since Montaigne has shown that it is impossible for human beings to determine the nature of ultimate reality, the relativist is in no better position to argue that there is not an objective moral order than Montaigne is in to argue that there is. Simply put, the relativist has no theoretical grounds for believing that there is no objective moral order. The relativist cannot even appeal to arguments of plausibility, since arguments of plausibility rely upon experience, and what is at stake here is a matter of metaphysics. Since the relativist cannot show that there is no objective moral order, he has no grounds to make the charge that Montaigne's moral judgments are "objectively" arbitrary. Therefore, despite the fact that Montaigne cannot "positively" justify his objectivism, there are no grounds upon which to argue that his moral judgments are arbitrary in the "objective" sense.[100]

Further, since the relativist has no grounds upon which to argue that relativism is "objectively" true, he has no way of undermining Montaigne's objectivism. The only way to criticize moral objectivism is to show that it is confused insofar as the objectivist takes himself to be capable of "positively" justifying his objectivism. Yet Montaigne's position does not suffer from this confusion. He believes that there is an objective moral order and that his reflective judgments reflect that order, but he does not believe that he

[100] It thus becomes clear that moral relativism is not a skeptical position; that is, it is not the result of a suspension of judgment. Rather, it consists in a dogmatic belief in a metaphysical state of affairs.

can "positively" justify those beliefs, since his human condition prevents him from distinguishing a subjective moral order from an objective one. Thus it seems that the relativist cannot undermine Montaigne's objectivism with arguments to the effect that it is "objectively" arbitrary. Further, it should be noted that the relativist cannot undermine Montaigne's objectivism with arguments to the effect that it is "subjectively" arbitrary. For Montaigne's belief in an objective moral order is implicit in the moral judgments that he finds himself making again and again throughout his life. Thus it is necessarily tied to the other beliefs that he has and the judgments that he makes. Just as Montaigne can "negatively" justify his particular moral judgments about cruelty, then, so he can "negatively" justify his moral objectivism.

Yet there is one more objection to Montaigne's objectivism that we must consider. While the burden of proof may lie equally on the shoulders of Montaigne and his relativist opponent with respect to the question of the existence of an objective moral order, it may be that in fact there is a third position from which to criticize both Montaigne and the relativist. For should not one's beliefs be limited to what one knows to be the case? We might label this the "Cartesian objection" to Montaigne's position. In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes recounts how he discovered that he was unable to demonstrate the truth of his moral beliefs. Due to his uncertainty concerning the nature of moral truth, he says, "reason obliged me to be irresolute in my beliefs."[101] Is not Montaigne faced with a similar obligation? Should he not restrict his moral beliefs to those which he can "positively" justify? But then again, we must ask: whence comes this obligation? Does not an obligation presuppose an objective moral order? Perhaps not. Perhaps Descartes' obligation is an obligation in the sense of a hypothetical imperative,

[101] Descartes, 18.

in which case its normative force depends upon the desire to achieve some other end. That is, it may be that the normative force of Descartes' "obligation" is the result of his commitment to the first principle of his method: "never to accept anything as true unless I recognized it to be certainly and evidently such: that is, carefully to avoid all precipitation and prejudgment, and to include nothing in my conclusions unless it presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that there was no reason or occasion to doubt it."[102] But if this is the case, then it is an obligation that holds only for those who choose to commit themselves to this principle. To argue that one *ought* to choose to abide by this principle is to have already presupposed the existence of an objective moral order. Thus it is inconsistent for the Cartesian, who claims to believe neither that there is an objective moral order nor that there is not one, to argue for a principle that presupposes the existence of such an order. Further, if Montaigne is right that human beings cannot "positively" justify their moral judgments, then the principle itself, regardless of who presents it, is incoherent. For in order to accept the principle itself, we would have to know that it in fact accurately reflects the objective moral order, and this is precisely what we cannot do. The "Cartesian objection," then, poses no threat to Montaigne's objectivism. If this shows us anything, it is that there can be no fruitful theoretical disputes among objectivists, relativists, and agnostics.[103] Further, it shows that one's position, if it is coherent, cannot be understood to be the conclusion of a "positive" argument, but rather it must be understood as the result of reflection upon the judgments that one actually makes in life. That is, one's position is the result of a discovery about

[102] *Ibid*., 15.
[103] That is, there can be no fruitful dispute so long as each objectivist, relativist, and agnostic is fully self-conscious of the lack of "positive" justification for his or her position as well as the commitments that follow from his or her position.

oneself rather than a discovery of the objective truth: "these are my humors and opinions; I offer them as what I believe, not as what is to be believed" (1.26.108, VS148).

Just as in the last chapter we began to understand why Montaigne abstains from the project of Aristotelian metaphysics, so here we have begun to understand why Montaigne abstains from the project of Cartesian moral philosophy. In the *Discourse*, Descartes announces that his moral project is deliberative: he will seek to set morals upon indubitable foundations so that he can determine what to do. Such a project presupposes the possibility discovering some ultimate justification for moral principles. In the meantime, Descartes must resolve to act in accordance the customary values of his society, despite the fact that he does not take himself to believe in the truth of those values. For Montaigne, on the other hand, this resolution is unnecessary. Montaigne, unlike Descartes, recognizes that there can be no "positive" justification of moral principles. Yet he finds that the realization that his moral beliefs cannot be "positively" justified neither eliminates those beliefs nor suggests that they ought to be eliminated. As a result of these two insights, moral philosophy in the *Essais* is a matter of coming to better understand oneself and one's condition as a human being living with moral beliefs. It is a matter of self-study, which is to say that for Montaigne, moral philosophy is not deliberative, but contemplative.

4

Essaying as Contemplative A*skēsis*

For many of the ancients, being a philosopher was not simply a matter of engaging in theoretical discourse concerning ultimate questions. It also involved the attempt to form one's character in accord with principles generated by theoretical discourse. This formative side of the philosophical life seems to have been mostly forgotten by modern philosophers. Yet in the latter half of the twentieth century Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault attempted to redirect our attention to the formative side of ancient philosophical practice. Hadot and Foucault disagreed regarding the ultimate meaning of the exercises that certain Greek and Roman philosophers undertook in their efforts to form themselves, and this is reflected in the terms they used to describe such exercises: Hadot spoke of "spiritual exercises" while Foucault spoke of "technologies of the self." Yet both Hadot and Foucault were interested in the ways that the ascetical practices of these ancient philosophers, when stripped of their cultural and doctrinal trappings, might prove relevant to philosophers today. Therefore they did not consider their work to be of purely historical interest. They took themselves to be providing instructive examples of the ways in which projects of character-formation had been carried out in the past for the sake of opening up new possibilities in the present. Inspired by Foucault's work on the technologies of the self, Montaigne scholars have recently suggested that in the *Essais* Montaigne appropriates and transforms various technologies

of the self found in the Classical and early Christian traditions.[104] My aim here is to continue this line of inquiry into the ascetical side of the *Essais* by arguing for an interpretation of essaying as a contemplative *askēsis* that produces a text whose unique literary style is a direct result of the distinctive *philosophical* project of which it forms an essential part. By elucidating the sense in which Montaigne can be said to be "working on himself" when he writes his *Essais*, I will show that Montaigne's *Essais* constitute a so far underappreciated example of philosophy practiced as a form of exercise that results in a way of life.

The meaning of *"Essais"*

Before we can examine the sense in which essaying is a contemplative *askēsis*, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term "essay." Many English-speaking readers are unlikely to ask this question, since the term "essay" has come to denote a familiar

[104] Zahi Zalloua, "Montaigne, Seneca, and 'le Soing de la Culture de l'Ame'" *Montaigne Studies* 21 (2009): 155-168, argues that Montaigne, like Seneca, is concerned with self-mastery, but unlike Seneca, he does not turn to reason as an ethical standard. Rather, he governs his behavior according to his own accidental ethical sensibility (165). Jesús Navarro-Reyes, "Le divin interlocuteur: le souci de soi, la confession et l'essai" in *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la theologie*, 221-240, argues that essaying is similar to Christian confession insofar as it involves a deciphering of the self, and yet different in that Montaigne, unlike Augustine, for example, does not take God to be his interlocutor, and he is not aiming to make public his sins; rather, he aims to speak of himself to his anonymous readers, thereby constituting a more unified self out of the chaos of his experience (237). Jack I. Abecassis, "'Le Maire et Montaigne ont tousjours este deux, d'une separation bien claire': Public Necessity and Private Freedom in Montaigne," *MLN* 110, no. 5 (1995): 1086, appeals to Hadot's work and argues that essaying "shares certain traits in common with spiritual meditations: lucidity as to the limits between freedom and necessity, and the practice of searching, examining, turning toward oneself, self governement," but that given the skepticism that underlies this practice, it represents "a new type of essayistic spiritual meditation." Jean-Yves Pouilloux, *Montaigne, L'éveil de la pensée* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995), 215-226, refers to Montaigne's attempt to overcome presumption as "*un veritable exercice spirituel*." Bernard Sève, *Des règles pour l'esprit*, 359, argues that the primary function of Montaigne's skepticism is to keep vigilant watch over his thoughts to prevent them from crystallizing into certitudes. Sève's description of skepticism's function in Montaigne's thought is reminiscent of the way that Stoics attempted to exercise vigilance over their thoughts in order to prevent themselves from falling into error and, consequently, into vice.

literary genre. We are inclined to think that when Montaigne titles his book "*Essais*," he is announcing a new literary form, and that his title refers to a collection of 107 essays, or short, informal, often personal reflections on accessible subjects. Bacon interpreted the title this way in 1597 when he wrote of the term "essay": "The word is late, but the thing is ancient. For Seneca's Epistles to Lucilius, if one mark them well, are but essays, - that is, dispersed meditations, though conveyed in the form of epistles."[105] This view - that Montaigne's title refers to the separately titled pieces that compose his book - is not entirely incorrect.[106] As I will show below, Montaigne does at times seem to refer to the individually titled units that make up his book as "essays," and these "essays" undoubtedly exhibit similarities with the literary genre that we know as "the essay." Yet Montaigne rarely uses the term "essay" in this sense; more often, he uses the term "*chapitre*" to refer to the units of which his book is composed. "Essay," when Montaigne uses it in its primary sense, refers to a human action rather than a literary genre.[107] Thus it is necessary to distinguish between the sense in which "essay" refers to a human act and the sense in which it refers to a poetic artifact. Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish among the various acts to which Montaigne refers when he uses the term

---

[105] Francis Bacon, *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed.Clark Sutherland Northup (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1936). This remark comes from the canceled dedicatory epistle to Bacon's *Essays*. See Northup's introduction, xxiii.

[106] Some scholars hold that for Montaigne, the term "essay" in no way refers to a literary form. For example, see M.A. Screech (1983), *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essay* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 13. Screech prefers to render the term "essay" as "assay," and thus holds that the *Essays* are "assays of Montaigne's character undertaken by himself…They are assays, too, of his ideas and those of the authors he read and of the people he met, judged against his own." Simply put, then, "Montaigne did not write 'essays.'" Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 340, also argues that "In contrast to the later imitators of this title, [Montaigne] does not associate any literary concept with this, but only a methodical one." While both are right to recognize the danger in interpreting Montaigne's title through the lens of our contemporary understanding of the term "essay," Screech and Friedrich seem to go too far when they deny any literary meaning to the term. We must not underestimate the degree to which literary form and philosophical act are tied together for Montaigne.

[107] For this reason Cave, 3, argues that rendering "*Essais*" as "Essays" is actually a mistranslation. Cave prefers "Trials" or "Soundings."

"essay."[108] For a quick glance at the text reveals that he uses the term in a number of different senses. Therefore understanding what those different but, I shall argue, related activities are requires investigating the many ways in which Montaigne uses the terms "*essayer*" and "*essay*" throughout his book. The following seven of these ways seem to deserve particular attention.

1. "To try or attempt": The term "*essayer*" first appears in "By diverse means we arrive at the same end," the very first chapter of the *Essais*: "As Scanderberg, prince of Epirus, was pursuing one of his soldiers in order to kill him, this soldier, after trying (*ayant essayé*) by every sort of humility and supplication to appease him, resolved in the last extremity to await him sword in hand" (1.1.3, VS7).[109] This is one of the many instances in which Montaigne employs the verb "*essayer*" in its most generic sense, meaning "to try" or "to attempt." He also uses the substantive form of the term, "*essay*," to mean "an attempt": "a man, having resolved to die and not having struck deep enough on his first attempt (*essay*)…wounded himself again very hard two or three times afterward, but never could force himself to strike the blow home" (2.13.460, VS608).[110] Thus we might translate the title of his book as "Attempts." Just what it is that Montaigne would then be attempting is a question that I shall discuss below.

2. "To try-out or experiment": In some cases "*essayer*" means "to try out for oneself." Of his antipathy for doctors, and his practice of ignoring them, Montaigne

---

[108] For the sake of clarity, when referring to a particular unit of the *Essais*, for the most part I will use the term "chapter"; thus "essay" will usually be reserved to denote the act of essaying something, except in certain cases where context makes it clear that I am using the term "essay" to refer to a "*chapitre*."

[109] "Scanderberch, prince de l'Epire, suyvant un soldat des siens pour le tuer, et ce soldat ayant essayé, par toute espece d'humilité et de supplication, de l'appaiser, se resolut à toute extrémité de l'attendre l'espée au poing" (7).

[110] "Il est advenu de nostre temps que tel, resolu de mourir, et de son premier essay n'ayant donné assez avant, la demangeson de la chair luy repoussant le bras, se reblessa bien fort à deux ou trois fois apres, mais ne peut jamais gaigner sur luy d'enfoncer le coup" (608).

writes: “I have lived long enough to give an account of the practice that has guided me so far. For anyone who wants to try it I have tasted it (*j’en ay faict l’essay*) like his cupbearer” (3.13.827, VS1080).[111] In this case and others like it, the essayist serves as both the subject and the object of the experiment. In other cases, “essay” is used substantively and has the sense of an “experiment”: “I believe that a child who had been brought up in complete solitude, remote from all association (which would be a hard experiment (*essay*) to make), would have some sort of speech to express his ideas” (2.12.335, VS458).[112] In both cases the term “essay” has to do with experimentation and discovery. Indeed, as I shall argue later on, we might understand Montaigne’s title to refer to the experiments that he performs on what he calls his “judgment.”

3. “To critically examine or assay”: “Similarly, men who have tried (*essayé*) everything and sounded everything, having found in that pile of knowledge and store of so many various things nothing solid and firm, and nothing but vanity, have renounced their presumption and recognized their natural condition” (2.12.370, VS500).[113] Here “to essay” something is to critically examine it in order to see what it amounts to, or to assay it to determine what it is made of. The object of such an essay can be any type of phenomenon, including oneself. For instance, in “Of custom,” Montaigne essays his own opinions and the customs of his society. Thus he writes: “And whoever wants to essay (*essayer*) himself in the same way, and get rid of this violent prejudice of custom…”

---

[111] “J'ay assez vescu, pour mettre en compte l'usage qui m'a conduict si loing. Pour qui en voudra gouster, j'en ay faict l'essay, son eschançon” (1080).

[112] .”..je croy qu'un enfant qu'on auroit nourry en pleine solitude, esloigné de tout commerce (qui seroit un essay mal aisé à faire), auroit quelque espece de parolle pour exprimer ses conceptions...” (458).

[113] “Pareillement, les hommes ayant tout essayé et tout sondé, n'ayant trouvé en cet amas de science et provision de tant de choses diverses rien de massif et ferme, et rien que vanité, ils ont renoncé à leur presomption et reconneu leur condition naturelle” (500).

(1.23.84, VS117).[114] These critical examinations, or essays, are identical to what in Chapter 3 I referred to as the "acts of reflection" that allow Montaigne either to "negatively justify" or to reject particular beliefs and values to which he finds himself pre-reflectively committed.

4. "To test the strength of or to exercise": In a slightly different sense Montaigne writes: "I leave it to death to test (*l'essay*) the fruit of my studies" (1.19.55, VS80).[115] Here the test is less an investigation of the nature of things and more a trial or test of something's strength. Sometimes this use of "essay" seems to go together with the notion that the essay is an examination. Therefore when Montaigne speaks of his book as "the essay" of his "natural faculties" (1.26.107, VS146), this can be understood to mean that in his book he examines his natural faculties by testing their strength.[116] In this way, "essaying oneself" sometimes refers to exercising, so to speak, one's moral or cognitive "muscles." Thus Montaigne writes: "Socrates, it seems to me, tested himself (*s'essayoit*) still more roughly, keeping for his exercise the malignity of his wife, which is a test with the naked blade" (2.11.307, VS423).[117] Again: "Now our faculties are not so trained. We neither essay them nor know them. We invest ourselves with those of others, and let our own lie idle" (3.12.808, VS1055).[118] Thus another way to understand "*Essais"* would be to take it to mean "exercises" or "tests."

---

[114] "Et qui se voudra essayer de mesme, et se desfaire de ce violent prejudice de la coustome…"These lines were included in every edition of the *Essais* published during Montaigne's lifetime. He altered them in the Bordeaux Copy, where they read: "Qui voudra se desfaire de cette violent prejudice de la coustome…" (117).

[115] "Je remets à la mort l'essay du fruict de mes estudes" (80).

[116] "Quant aux facultez naturelles qui sont en moy, dequoy c'est icy l'essay, je les sens flechir sous la charge" (146).

[117] "Socrates s'essayoit, ce me semble, encor plus rudement, conservant pour son exercice la malignité de sa femme: qui est un essay à fer esmoulu" (423).

[118] "Or nos facultez ne sont pas ainsi dressées. Nous ne les essayons ny ne les cognoissons; nous nous investissons de celles d'autruy, et laissons chomer les nostres" (1055).

5. "To experience": "*Essayer*" sometimes simply means "to experience or undergo." One finds Montaigne writing that he has "experienced (*essayé*) in many other occasions what Caesar says..." (1.20.63, VS90).[119] In "Of friendship," Montaigne remarks: "I should like to talk to people who have experienced (*qui eussent essayé*) what I tell. But knowing how far from common usage and how rare such a friendship is, I do not expect to find any good judge of it" (1.28.143, VS192).[120] This is perhaps one of the senses in which we ought to interpret the following remark from "Of experience": "In fine, all this fricassee that I am scribbling here is nothing but a record of the essays of my life, which, for spiritual health, is exemplary enough if you take its instruction in reverse" (3.13.826, VS1079).[121] This remark seems to be pregnant with multiple levels of meaning. The *Essais* are on one level a record of the first-order experiences of his life. For example, in "Of practice" he describes a near-death experience that he had while horseback riding. But the *Essais* are also a record of the examinations or essays that he makes of that first-order experience. These examinations constitute the second-order experience of essaying the first-order experience and they serve as the fodder for his examinations of the experience of essaying, which is itself recorded in his book. In an essay such as "Of practice," we see all three levels of experience being recorded: he discusses his fall, then his reflections on the implications of his experience of being near

---

[119] "Tout ainsi que j'ay essayé en plusieurs autres occurrences ce que dit Cesar, que les choses nous paroissent souvent plus grandes de loing que de pres..." (90).

[120] ."... je souhaiterois aussi parler à des gens qui eussent essayé ce que je dis. Mais, scaçhant combien c'est chose eslongneé du commun usage qu'une telle amitié, et combien elle est rare, je ne m'attens pas d'en trouver aucun bon juge" (192).

[121] "En fin, toute cette fricassée que je barbouille icy n'est qu'un registre des essais de ma vie, qui est, pour l'interne santé, exemplaire assez à prendre l'instruction à contre-poil" (1079). This interpretation finds support in the passage that follows these lines, in which Montaige seems to be contrasting the experience he has had with bodily health, which may be helpful to others, with the experiences that he has related concerning spiritual matters (see 3.13.826ff., VS1079ff.)

to death, and then his reflections on the practice of studying himself in this way (see especially 2.6.273-274, VS378).

6. "To learn through experience": In certain contexts to have essayed something is not simply to have experienced it, but to have drawn some conclusion on the basis of that experience. Montaigne writes: "Edward I, king of England, found [*ayant essayé*] in his long wars with King Robert of Scotland how much advantage his presence gave to his affairs, so that he always carried off the victory in what he undertook in person" (1.3.10, VS18)[122] and "Pomponius Atticus… having found [*ayant essayé*] by experience that he was gaining nothing by trying to cure himself…" (2.13.461, VS609).[123] Given these uses of the term, we might translate the title of Montaigne's book as "Lessons," meaning not lessons for others but lessons that he has learned through studying himself ("What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but a lesson for me" (2.6.272, VS377)).

7. "Essay or draft": There are cases in which Montaigne seems to use the term "essay" much like contemporary English speakers use the term "essay," that is, to denote a piece of literature. Thus Montaigne writes: "I know well that when I hear someone dwell on the language of these essays, I would rather he said nothing…. Yet I am much mistaken if many other writers offer more to take hold of in their material than I do, and, whether for better or for worse, if any writer has sown his materials more substantially or at least more thickly on his paper. In order to get more in, I pile up only the headings of subjects. Were I to add on their consequences, I would multiply this volume many times

---

[122] "Edouard premier, Roy d'Angleterre, ayant essayé aux longues guerres d'entre luy et Robert, Roy d'Escosse, combien sa presence donnoit d'advantage à ses affaires, rapportant tousjours la victoire de ce qu'il entreprenoit en personne…" (18).

[123] "Ce Pomponius Atticus à qui Cicero escrit, estant malade, fit appeller Agrippa, son gendre, et deux ou trois autres de ses amys, et leur dit qu'ayant essayé qu'il ne gaignoit rien à se vouloir guerir…" (609).

over. And how many stories have I spread around which say nothing of themselves, but from which anyone who troubles to pluck them with a little ingenuity will produce numberless essays" (1.40.184, VS251).[124] This type of writing is provisional and disavows authority. At times Montaigne refers to his essays as though they were mere drafts, conveying the sense that they are unfinished: "I set forth notions that are human and my own, simply as human notions considered in themselves, not as determined and decreed by heavenly ordinance and permitting neither doubt nor dispute; matter of opinion, not matter of faith; what I reason out according to me, not what I believe according to God; as children set forth their essays to be instructed, not to instruct…" (1.56.234, VS323).[125] In these instances, "essays" seems to refer to his writings rather than to the act of testing or examining things. As I shall argue below, the act of writing is itself an essential element in Montaigne's practice of essaying himself.

Each of these senses of the term "essay" captures an aspect or moment of Montaigne's work in the *Essais*. Yet none of them, when taken alone, can do justice to Montaigne's project as a whole. The range of meaning encompassed by Montaigne's title

---

[124] "Je sçay bien, quand j'oy quelqu'un qui s'arreste au langage des Essais, que j'aimeroye mieux qu'il s'en teust. Ce n'est pas tant eslever les mots, comme c'est deprimer le sens, d'autant plus picquamment que plus obliquement. Si suis je trompé, si guere d'autres donnent plus à prendre en la matiere, et, comment que ce soit, mal ou bien, si nul escrivain l'a semée ny guere plus materielle ny au moins plus drue en son papier. Pour en ranger davantage, je n'en entasse que les testes. Que j'y attache leur suitte, je multiplieray plusieurs fois ce volume. Et combien y ay-je espandu d'histoires qui ne disent mot, lesquelles qui voudra esplucher un peu ingenieusement, en produira infinis Essais" (251).

[125] "Je propose les fantasies humaines et miennes, simplement comme humaines fantasies, et separement considerées, non comme arrestées et reglées par l'ordonnance celeste, incapables de doubte et d'altercation: matiere d'opinion, non matiere de foy; ce que je discours selon moy, non ce que je croy selon Dieu, comme les enfans proposent leurs essais: instruisables, non instruisants…" (323). This sense of "essay" as exercise comes out perhaps more clearly in "Of friendship," where Montaigne seems to substitute "essay" for "*exercitation*." Describing La Boetie's *La Servitude Volontaire*, he writes: "Il l'escrivit par maniere d'essay, en sa premiere jeunesse, à l'honneur de la liberté contre les tyrans" (184). Then, in the penultimate paragraph of the chapter: "je les advise que ce subject fut traicté par luy en son enfance, par maniere d'exercitation seulement, comme subjet vulgaire et tracassé en mille endroits des livres" (194).

mirrors the range of themes, projects, and judgments that one finds in the book itself. And while this is what makes "*Essais*" the appropriate title for Montaigne's book, "a book with a wild and eccentric plan" (2.8.278, VS385), it also suggests, as I shall argue, a number of distinct but related activities that, taken together, constitute a "contemplative *askēsis*." Such a use of the adjective "contemplative," however, requires some explanation.

Essaying as a contemplative mode of inquiry

For most philosophers, the term "contemplation" will evoke Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and since my interpretation of essaying as a contemplative mode of inquiry is meant both to invoke and yet depart from the Aristotelian conception of contemplation, it will be useful to pause for a moment to recall the basic features of that conception.

For Aristotle, contemplation is first of all the act of studying things that cannot be otherwise (1140b31-1141b8). Thus it is distinct from the deliberative or practical thought that focuses upon the ever-changing world of human affairs. Given that the objects of contemplative and deliberative thought differ, it is unsurprising that human beings can excel at one form of thought while failing to excel at the other. As examples of this phenomenon, Aristotle points to Thales and Anaxagoras: "it is said that men like Anaxagoras and Thales have theoretical but not practical wisdom: when we see that they do not know what is advantageous to them, we admit that they know extraordinary, wonderful, difficult, and superhuman things, but call their knowledge useless because the

good they are seeking is not human" (1141b4-7).[126] Not only do contemplative and practical thought differ in their objects, but they also differ in their ends. Whereas one deliberates for the sake of determining an object of choice (1141b7-15), one contemplates for the sake of understanding, without any concern for the application of the knowledge that is attained through the act of contemplation.[127] Thus deliberative thought is valuable because of the advantages it brings in the sphere of action, but contemplative thought is loved for its own sake: "For while we derive a greater or smaller advantage from practical pursuits beyond the action itself, from study (*theōria*) we derive nothing beyond the activity of studying (*to theōrēsai*)" (1177a33-b5). Aristotle also considers contemplation to be among the most leisurely or free activities available to man. For in contemplating, one's thought is not conditioned by the practical exigencies that factor into the project of determining an object of choice. The life of the philosopher, then, who spends his time in contemplation, is more leisurely than that of the politician or general, since each of these lives requires deliberation for the sake of actions that are, in turn, performed for the sake of other ends (1177b4-25). Keeping this outline of the Aristotelian concept of contemplation in mind, we can now ask whether there is anything "contemplative" in the practice of activity of essaying oneself.

Clearly the knowledge that Montaigne seeks in essaying is quite different from that sought by Aristotle through contemplation. Montaigne alludes to this fact himself, albeit in a fairly subtle manner:

---

[126] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Library of Liberal Arts, 1999), 157. I use Ostwald's translation throughout this chapter, and will parenthetically cite it by referring to the Bekker numbers.

[127] It should be noted that there is some ambiguity in Aristotle's presentation of the activity of *theōria*. At 1177a23 he seems to suggest that contemplation involves the enjoyment of knowledge already attained, while at 1177a34 it seems that contemplation involves the process of attaining knowledge. But the crucial point in the present context is that the knowledge involved in contemplation is not sought out of any concern for its application in the sphere of action.

> Most minds need foreign matter to arouse and exercise them; mine needs it rather to settle down and rest… for its principal and most laborious study is studying itself.… Nature has given to it as to all minds enough material of its own for its use, and enough subjects of its own for invention and judgment. Meditation is a powerful and full study for anyone who knows how to examine and exercise himself vigorously: I would rather fashion my mind than furnish it. There is no occupation that is either weaker or stronger, according to the mind involved, than entertaining one's own thoughts. The greatest minds make it their profession, *to whom living is thinking* [Cicero]. Thus nature has favored it with this privilege, that there is nothing we can do so long, and no action to which we can devote ourselves more commonly and easily. It is the occupation of the gods, says Aristotle, from which springs their happiness and ours. (3.3.621, VS819)

Of course it is contemplating necessary truths concerning things divine and unchanging, not studying oneself, that Aristotle claims we can do longer than anything else (1177a22), and which he says constitutes the happiness of ourselves and the gods (1178b). Here Montaigne plainly replaces Aristotelian study of divine truths with study of oneself as the "profession of the greatest minds."

It is not simply a matter of having different theoretical concerns that leads Montaigne to replace the divine with himself as the object of philosophical study *par excellence*. As we saw in Chapter 2, Montaigne thinks that it is confused to take oneself to have demonstrative knowledge of the divine as such; the subjectivity of the human condition does not allow us to distinguish between our subjective beliefs concerning the divine and the objective truth that our beliefs claim to represent. Therefore, strictly speaking, we are never in a position to make definitive assertions concerning the divine as such. In the passage above, Montaigne expresses his consciousness of the subjective nature of all philosophical inquiry when he characterizes his occupation as consisting in the study of "one's own thoughts" rather than "reality itself." Again, as I also discussed in Chapter 2, Montaigne holds that the recognition of the impossibility of demonstrating the truth of one's beliefs about ultimate reality does not necessarily lead to the

abandonment of those beliefs. Moreover, this realization about the relation between belief and epistemological skepticism is one of the results of Montaigne's project of self-study.

Since the object of Montaigne's study is the human rather than the divine, the fruits of his study are not practically useless in the same sense in which Aristotle maintains that the fruits of contemplation are useless. As I shall make clear below, there most definitely are what we would usually call "practical" benefits to his self-study; that is, his self-study does yield advantages in the sphere of action. Nonetheless, it is not for these sorts of practical benefits that Montaigne undertakes his project of self-study. Montaigne's study of himself is not directed toward the determination of an object of choice in the sphere of action; it is directed at theoretical self-knowledge: "I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics" (3.13.821, VS1072). Therefore, while Montaigne's theoretical study differs from Aristotle's with respect to its object, it is nonetheless contemplative in that its end is understanding rather than action.

But what is the nature of Montaigne's contemplative end? What does he take self-knowledge to be? For Montaigne, the self-knowledge that forms the end of his contemplative project involves a critical understanding of the human condition, of one's cultural *milieu*, and of oneself as a particular individual. These different types of understanding that together constitute Montaigne's theoretical or contemplative end are each attained through essaying himself in the different ways outlined above. Understanding of the human condition is gained through reflecting upon and learning from his experiences as well as the experiences of others. This accounts in large part for

the importance of reading (and citing) classical literature for Montaigne. Not only does he measure his experiences against those of his contemporaries, but he turns to his literary ancestors for insights into the most universal aspects of the human condition. Montaigne gains a critical understanding of his own cultural *milieu* by testing the common conceptions that he finds in credit around him in chapters such as "Of custom" and the "Apology" and by comparing the practices of his own society with those of others, both contemporary and ancient (see "Of ancient customs" and "Of cannibals"). Then he experiments with himself, testing his critical faculties to see what he is capable of: "Sometimes in a vain and nonexistent subject I try to see if it will find the wherewithal to give it body, prop it up, and support it" (1.50.219, VS301). In this way he learns about both his abilities and their limits: "If it is a subject I do not understand at all, even on that I essay my judgment, sounding the ford from a good distance; and then, finding it too deep for my height, I stick to the bank. And this acknowledgment that I cannot cross over is a token of its action, indeed one of those it is most proud of" (1.50.219, VS301). Finally, he records his observations of himself – of his habits both moral and intellectual – in writing, creating an objective representation of himself that can serve as a tool for his pursuit of self-understanding. This act of recording his theoretical reflections in writing objectifies his thoughts on a particular topic at a particular moment in time, allowing Montaigne to gain greater critical distance from which to reflect upon his thoughts and himself: "Those who go over themselves only in their minds and occasionally in speech do not penetrate the essentials of their examination as does a man who makes that his study, his work, and his trade, who binds himself to keep an enduring account, with all his faith, with all his strength" (2.18.504,

VS665). Writing his essays, then, he attempts to reveal himself to himself: "For… these are my humors and my opinions; I offer them as what I believe, not what is to be believed. I aim here only at revealing myself, who will perhaps be different tomorrow, if I learn something new which changes me" (1.26.109, VS148). Taken together, the different sorts of understanding that he gains of his being constitute what I call "propositional self-knowledge," or knowledge of oneself that can be expressed and recorded in language. This is the contemplative end of Montaigne's practice of essaying himself.

Contemplation and the style of the *Essais*

There is no hierarchical order among the different types of self-understanding that together constitute Montaigne's propositional self-knowledge. Nor does Montaigne organize his book into sections that deal with these different types of self-understanding one at a time. Instead, these various "sub-projects" are intertwined throughout his book, creating a sense of disorder when one runs headlong into another, breaks off, and is only taken up again later, perhaps in another chapter. This sense of disorder is only increased by the digressions scattered throughout the book. These include references to himself (remarks about his experiences, tastes, or habits) as well as passages that seem only tangentially related to what comes before and after them. Yet each element of this disorder has a place in his overall project, and the way that one line of thought runs into and is interrupted by another represents the movements of his mind at work: "Don't I represent myself to the life? Enough, then. I have done what I wanted. Everyone

recognizes me in my book, and my book in me" (3.5.667). Moreover, the disorder and digressions are also a testament to the contemplative nature of his project. For they are tied to the intellectual freedom that comes with Montaigne's contemplative project.[128] Digression is a luxury that only contemplative thinkers can afford. For deliberative thought is temporally constrained by its end; that is, it is conditioned by the fact that it is undertaken for the purpose of determining an object of choice. Given the need to act, there is a sense of urgency that prevents deliberative thought from straying from the path towards a decision.[129] Montaigne discusses this fact in "We taste nothing pure": "It is true that for the uses of life and for the service of public business there may be an excess of the purity and perspicacity of our minds. That penetrating clarity has too much subtlety and curiosity in it…. That acute vivacity of mind, that subtle and restless versatility, disturbs our negotiations. Human enterprises must be handled more roughly and superficially…. There is no need to light up affairs so deeply and subtly. You get lost considering so many contrasting aspects and diverse shapes" (2.20.511, VS675). When essaying oneself, on the other hand, one is unconcerned with action, and can afford to follow a discussion wherever it leads regardless of whether or not the original topic of discussion has been treated in a complete way. Thus Montaigne profits by following new lines of inquiry that emerge in the course of an essay: "Any topic is equally fertile for me… Let me begin with whatever subject I please, for all subjects are linked with one another" (3.5.668, VS876). Since Montaigne is simply interested in gaining understanding, then, he is free to explore the diverse aspects of things without being concerned that he will fail to attain a final result. His attention is not on where he is

[128] On the non-systematic nature of the essay, see Marcel Conche, "Montaigne, penseur de la philosophie," 175-196.
[129] Sève, 292, formulates the issue similarly.

going, but rather it is on where he is: "Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself, I take stock of myself, I taste myself. Others always go elsewhere, if they stop to think about it; they always go forward… as for me, I roll about in myself" (2.17.499, VS657). Thus, "considering so many contrasting aspects and diverse shapes" of things is exactly what essaying is about: "This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects. So, all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict. If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial" (3.2.611, VS805). Like Aristotelian contemplation, then, essaying is marked by a freedom that is absent from deliberative modes of thought, and this freedom manifests itself in the "disorder" of the *Essais* as a book. Moreover, while this "disorder" would be an adventitious feature of most "philosophical" works, in Montaigne's case, it is internally related to his philosophical project.

Like Aristotelian *theōria*, then, essaying is contemplative insofar as the understanding sought in essaying is sought for itself. In other words, essaying involves a mode of thought unconditioned by practical concerns. Yet whereas Aristotle characterizes *theōria* as useless - since it deals with eternal and unchanging objects remote from the concerns of human life - Montaigne characterizes essaying himself as the most useful form of study available to man: "It is many years now that I have had only myself as object of my thoughts, that I have been examining and studying only

myself; and if I study anything else, it is in order promptly to apply it to myself, or rather within myself. And it does not seem to me that I am making a mistake if – as is done in the other sciences, which are incomparably less useful – I impart what I have learned in this one, though I am hardly satisfied with the progress I have made in it. There is no description equal in difficulty, or certainly in usefulness, to the description of oneself" (2.6.273, VS378). Essaying is not useful in the sense that Aristotelian deliberation is useful. It does not determine objects of choice and courses of action. Rather, as I shall argue in the next section, essaying oneself is "useful" to Montaigne in the way that *askēseis* were useful to the ancient Greeks and Romans who undertook the "care of the self."

Essaying as *askēsis*

While Hadot and Foucault disagreed about the ultimate meaning of "care of the self" as it was practiced by the ancients, they agreed concerning its basic features.[130] For the ancients they discuss, caring for oneself meant occupying oneself with oneself as an object requiring attention and cultivation. Such care required the employment of *askēseis*, or formative exercises. To be precise, an *askēsis*, as Foucault uses the term, is "an ascetic practice… in other words… an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being."[131] In

[130] On their disagreements, see Hadot, 206-14. On the similarities and differences between Foucault and Hadot on the question of philosophy as a way of life, see Thomas Flynn, "Philosophy as a Way of Life: Foucault and Hadot," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (2005): 609-622.

[131] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 282. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol.2: The Use of Pleasure*, 9, Foucault, in the course of discussing the nature of philosophy, refers to what he calls the "essay" as an *askēsis*: "But, then, what is philosophy today – philosophical activity, I mean – if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know

both Classical and Hellenistic times *askēseis* took a number of forms, including bodily exercises, dietary restrictions, meditations, and examinations of conscience. Each of these exercises contributed to the transformation of the subject's mode of being or way of life. In some cases these exercises were attempts to transform one's moral character, or the customary way that one behaved in the sphere of action. For instance, Seneca prescribes the daily examination of one's conscience as an exercise that will contribute to controlling one's tendency to become angry.[132] In other cases, certainly not unconnected with the moral sphere, the exercises focused on altering what I would call one's intellectual character, or the customary ways in which one behaved in the sphere of thought. Epictetus, for example, prescribes meditation for the purposes of altering the way that one interprets events in life. For instance, whereas the customary way to interpret the death of one's child is to understand it as a terrible misfortune, the Stoic is to train himself, through meditating on such possible painful scenarios, to interpret such an event as ultimately indifferent.[133]

Essaying oneself is an *askēsis* in that it aims at the formation of one's judgment for precisely the purposes of cultivating the "intellectual character of the philosopher." But before I can make clear what exactly I mean by "the intellectual character of the philosopher" and how it relates to judgment, we must linger for a moment over Montaigne's conception of judgment itself, for as Raymond La Charité has shown in *The*

---

how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? …The "essay" – which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication – is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it was in times past, i.e., an "ascesis," *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought."

[132] Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. John M. Cooper and J.M. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110.

[133] See Epictetus, *The Discourses, The Handbook, Fragments*, ed. Christopher Gill, trans. Robin Hard (London: Everyman, 1995), 167.

Concept of Judgment in Montaigne, understanding Montaigne's conception of judgment is crucial for understanding the *Essais*.[134] It is also, I will argue, crucial for understanding essaying as a form of contemplative *askēsis*.

Montaigne himself makes very clear how closely the concepts of judgment and essaying are connected. Twice he refers to the *Essais* as the essays of his judgment (1.50.219, VS301; 2.17.495, VS653), and the theme of the cultivation of one's judgment is one that runs throughout the *Essais*. He best describes his conception of judgment in a passage from "Of Democritus and Heraclitus." It is worth quoting at length:

> Judgment is a tool to use on all subjects, and comes in everywhere. In the *essais* that I make of it here, I use every sort of occasion. If it is a subject I do not understand at all, even on that I essay my judgment, sounding the ford from a good distance; and then, finding it too deep for my height, I stick to the bank. And this acknowledgment that I cannot cross over is a token of its action, indeed one of those it is most proud of. Sometimes in a vain and nonexistent subject I try to see if it will find the wherewithal to give it body, prop it up, and support it. Sometimes I lead it to a noble and well-worn subject in which it has nothing original to discover, the road being so beaten that it can only walk in others' footsteps. There it plays its part by choosing the way that seems best to it, and of a thousand paths it says that this one or that was the most wisely chosen. (1.50.219, VS301)

In this passage we see that for Montaigne, the acts of one's judgment include understanding, self-examination, invention, and evaluation. In short, one's judgment is responsible for the way that one relates to the world in thought. Though the acts of judgment described in the passage may give the impression that judgment is a purely intellectual faculty that acts independently of one's emotions and desires, this is not the case. As La Charité has pointed out, for Montaigne, "*jugement* frequently represents total psychological life as opposed to the physical body."[135] Thus, one's judgment is affected by emotions (2.31.540, VS715), past experiences (hence Montaigne's concern with the

[134] Raymond La Charité, *The Concept of Judgment in Montaigne*, 12.
[135] La Charité, 55.

formation of children's judgment), and values. Moreover, it performs the duties of conscience (1.37.169, VS229-230). So closely tied to every aspect of one's being does Montaigne take judgment to be, that, on La Charité's view, it may be said that the actions of one's judgment serve to represent, in large part, the sum-total of one's being, or one's very self.[136] It is in this vein, I think, that Montaigne writes: "What I chiefly portray is my cogitations…. My actions would tell more about fortune than about me…. It is not my deeds that I write down; it is myself, it is my essence" (2.6.274, VS379). Thus the cultivation of judgment is the most important part of a man's formation: "His education, work, and study aim only at forming this" (1.26.111, VS152).

In sum, then, Montaigne takes his "judgment" to be responsible for the way he apprehends reality and for this reason he often speaks of it metaphorically in terms of vision. Judgment's duty is to see (*voye*) in its subject what truth sets before it (*ce que la verité luy presente*) (2.17.478, VS632). Whether the "eye" of our judgment performs its task well depends on a number of conditions, such as our emotional state and our relation to the object to be considered. Being overly familiar with an object, for instance, can lull our judgment into a false sense of understanding, leading to superficial interpretations of phenomena. In this way "habituation puts to sleep the eye (*la veuë*) of our judgment" (1.23.80, VS112).

Given such a broad conception of judgment, it seems quite natural to speak of essaying one's judgment as a matter of transforming one's intellectual character. This transformation will involve the acquisition of a set of skills, habits, and attitudes that constitute what in particular I am calling "the intellectual character of the philosopher." The notion of "intellectual character" is analogous to that of "moral character." Just as

[136] *Ibid*., 29.

one's "moral character" designates one's customary mode of behavior in the sphere of action, so one's "intellectual character" refers to the customary way that one behaves in the sphere of thought. Thus we can equate one's intellectual character with the way one lives one's intellectual life. Moreover, we can distinguish between philosophical and unphilosophical ways of living that life. The unphilosophical life can be summed up by two intellectual "vices": passivity and presumption. Those with the intellectual character of the non-philosopher live passive intellectual lives in that they are unreflective; they neither question common conceptions nor test their own understanding. They fail to exercise their capacity for judgment in a self-conscious way and thus they lack the self-knowledge necessary for skilled judgment. For example, they judge the cannibals to be guilty of horrible cruelty and fail to recognize the presence of similar acts in their own society, because, as we saw in the discussion of "Of cannibals" in Chapter 3, they fail to turn a critical eye upon themselves. Further, they are presumptuous in that they assume that they know more than they know, and as a consequence, they are intellectually untroubled. Caught up in the affairs of daily life, they are incapable of experiencing wonder at anything but what is unusual and extraordinary in the context of daily life. Thus Montaigne characterizes those leading unphilosophical lives as asleep (2.12.371, VS501 and 1.23.80, VS112). For instance, in the "Apology," when proposing an examination of the philosophers, he writes: "Let us leave the people aside, *Who waking snore… Whose life is dead, although they live and see,* [Lucretius], who are not conscious of themselves, who do not judge themselves, who leave most of their natural faculties idle" (2.12.371, VS501). Whereas the non-philosophers live as though they were asleep, the philosophers live wakefully. To be a philosopher, as Montaigne defines the

philosophical life here, is to live self-consciously, to actively reflect on oneself, and to be in the habit of exercising one's intellectual faculties.

Arguably, the unphilosophical life is the default mode of life for human beings. For it often seems that only "extraordinary" occurrences prompt us to the acts reflection and self-consciousness characteristic of the philosopher. To escape our natural intellectual sluggishness without the promptings of such extraordinary events, to "awaken" ourselves from our customary slumber, then, requires work. In particular, it requires that form of exercise that Montaigne calls "essaying oneself" – a kind of training that helps us to achieve the wakefulness characteristic of the philosopher in two related ways: it produces the propositional self-knowledge necessary for wakeful living and it exercises and forms one's judgment.

These two processes occur simultaneously, and yet they are distinct. Again, by "propositional self-knowledge" I mean to the sort of articulate self-knowledge that is generated through essaying as discussed above. As seen there, it is by critically examining himself and his world in various ways that Montaigne comes to know himself. He articulates this knowledge in the essay as a poetic representation of the process of essaying himself, and in achieving this type of self-knowledge, he combats "our first and original malady," presumption. This, then, is the contemplative side of Montaigne's project. At the same time, however, the activity of essaying involves the formation of one's judgment through the cultivation of the habits, skills, and attitudes that constitute to the intellectual character of the philosopher. So, for example, Montaigne forms his own judgment by focusing his attention on the diversity to be found in the human world. Thus Montaigne announces the plan of "Of ancient customs": "I want to pile up here some

ancient fashions that I have in my memory, some like ours, others different, to the end that we may strengthen and enlighten our judgment by reflecting upon this continual variation of human things" (1.49.216, VS297). To form or enlighten one's judgment, then, sometimes involves broadening the background of understanding against which one judges by expanding the reservoir of examples from which one can draw in order to interpret a particular phenomenon. But Montaigne also trains his judgment to consider things from different perspectives (3.11.790, VS1033). So, too, by training himself to write his thoughts down, he cultivates the habit of articulating his thoughts in clear and concrete terms. This is an important exercise, for the habit of passivity that seems to come naturally to human beings inclines us to rest satisfied with the intuition that we have understanding of something, when our inarticulate understanding many times turns out to be empty: "I hear some making excuses for not being able to express themselves, and pretending to have their heads full of many fine things, but to be unable to express them for lack of eloquence. That is all bluff. Do you know what I think those things are? They are shadows that come to them of some shapeless conceptions, which they cannot untangle and clear up within, and consequently cannot set forth without: they do not understand themselves yet…. Whoever has a vivid and clear idea in his mind will express it…" (1.26.125, VS169). By exercising his judgment in these ways, Montaigne cultivates one of the virtues of the philosophic intellectual character: the habit of active reflection. Moreover, by exercising his judgment he improves its ability to recognize similarities, differences, and questions to be asked where he had not seen them before.

In addition to establishing habits of thought and improving his judgment, essaying oneself cultivates the attitudes characteristic of the philosophical way of life. By

repeatedly essaying his judgment in the self-conscious way that Montaigne does, he makes a habit of facing up to the limitations of his understanding, especially with respect to what are taken to be "ordinary" features of everyday life. This infuses Montaigne's consciousness with an awareness of both his own ignorance and the strangeness of the world ("the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself" (3.11.787, VS1029)). In this way he cultivates both a general attitude of wonder at the world and a general attitude of diffidence toward his judgments: "I set forth notions that are human and my own, simply as human notions considered in themselves, not as determined and decreed by heavenly ordinance and permitting neither doubt nor dispute; matter of opinion, not matter of faith; what I reason out according to me, not what I believe according to God; as children set forth their essays to be instructed, not to instruct" (1.56.234, VS323). These attitudes, taken together with the habits and skills of active reflection, are the virtues of the philosophic intellectual character. When these habits, skills, and attitudes are joined with propositional self-knowledge, they produce a way of being toward the world that I will call "existential self-knowledge." This form of self-knowledge involves not only knowledge of one's condition but also a habitual mode of relating intellectually to the world. It is this most comprehensive form of self-knowledge that is the ultimate goal of Montaigne's practice of essaying himself.

Askēsis and the style of the *Essais*

Not only do Montaigne's theoretical goals create, in part, the distinctive style of his text, but so do his ascetical goals. Just as acting virtuously is the way in which one cultivates moral character, so essaying oneself is the way that one cultivates the intellectual character of the philosopher that is a necessary condition for existential self-knowledge. This is of course a task for a lifetime: the project of testing and exercising his judgment never ends, and once Montaigne has put his essays in writing, they, like all other parts of himself, become the object of his critical judgment. Continuing to essay his judgment on his already-published essays leads Montaigne to make interpolations in the text, and these interpolations augment the discontinuities that permeate individual chapters of the book. Since Montaigne is aware of the infinite task that he has set before himself, and thus he does not hesitate to leave chapters incomplete in a variety of ways: "I take the first subject chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. For I never see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us…. I would venture to treat some matter thoroughly, if I knew myself less well" (1.50.219, VS302). Thus Richard Sayce has remarked the incompleteness that characterizes the style of the *Essais*, pointing out that it "appears that not only the book as a whole but each individual essay is infinitely expandable."[137]

Montaigne's habit of experimenting with his judgment, which sometimes takes the form of testing it to see what it can make out of some "vain or non-existent subject," also manifests itself in the number of apparently trivial themes that are discussed throughout the *Essais*, from war horses (1.49) to thumbs (2.26). So, too, Montaigne's

[137] Sayce, 277. On the infinite expandability of the *Essais*, see also Sève, *Des règles pour l'esprit*, 299.

constant appeal to particular cases and examples reveals a mind exercising and training itself to remain at the level of concrete experience so as to avoid the lazy thought that manifests itself in general formulations: "All judgments in gross are loose and imperfect" (3.8.721, VS943). Generality simplifies the complex reality that human beings face, and thus it has no place in Montaigne's attempt to judge actively and self-consciously: "These universal judgments that I find so common signify nothing. They are like men who salute a whole people in a crowd and in a body. Those who have a real acquaintance with them salute them and notice them by name and individually" (3.8.715, VS936). The presence of a seemingly infinite number of examples that characterizes the *Essais*' literary style is the product of Montaigne's efforts to train his judgment to think in terms of the particular so as to develop his faculty of judgment.

Essaying as a contemplative *askēsis*

To say that essaying is a contemplative *askēsis* is to say that it is a contemplative – i.e. non-deliberative – mode of thought employed both for the purposes of self-knowledge and for the purposes of self-transformation, i.e., the cultivation of the intellectual character of the philosopher. But these two ends are of course essentially related to one another. For cultivating the intellectual character of the philosopher involves achieving some degree of propositional self knowledge, and one cannot acquire any propositional self-knowledge without engaging in the activities that, when made habitual, make the intellectual character of the philosopher possible.

Achieving the ultimate goal of this form of contemplative *askēsis* requires practice and the desire to live a certain type of intellectual life: one characterized by wakefulness and self-understanding. I have stressed the intellectual nature of the project in order to distinguish it from projects directly aimed at moral self-transformation. Montaigne is not trying to change the way that he behaves towards others politically or socially; nor is he attempting to alter the patterns of pleasure and pain that govern his life. His moral character is the result of the combination of his nature and the education that he received as a child; he takes no responsibility for it (see 2.11.311-313, VS427-29). This is not to say that essaying does not have consequences with respect to his relations to others or his experience of pleasure. Montaigne remarks a number of the "practical" benefits of self-study. For instance, working on his judgment improves his ability to judge the people with whom he deals in daily life:

> This long attention that I devote to studying myself trains me also to judge passably of others, and there are few things of which I speak more felicitously and excusably. It often happens that I see and distinguish the characters of my friends more exactly than they do themselves. I have astonished at least one by the pertinence of my description, and have given him information about himself. By training myself from my youth to see my own life mirrored in that of others, I have acquired a studious bent on that subject, and when I am thinking about it, I let few things around me which are useful for that purpose escape my notice: countenances, humors, statements. I study everything, what I must flee, what I must follow. So I do reveal to my friends, by their outward manifestations, their inward inclinations. (3.13.824, VS1076)

Among the other benefits he derives from cultivating in himself an attitude of wakefulness is the intensification of his pleasures: "Others feel the sweetness of some satisfaction and of prosperity; I feel it as they do, but it is not in passing and slipping by. Instead we must study it, savor it, and ruminate it, to give proper thanks for it to him who grants it to us. They enjoy the other pleasures as they do that of sleep, without being

conscious of them. To the end that sleep itself should not escape me thus stupidly, at one time I saw fit to have mine disturbed, so that I might gain a glimpse of it. I meditate on my satisfaction; I do not skim over it, I sound it, and bend my reason, now grown peevish and hard to please, to welcome it" (3.12.854, VS1112). But it is not for the sake of these incidental benefits that he essays himself.

Unlike the ancients who undertook the care of the self, Montaigne does not work on himself for the purposes of achieving self-rule or gaining insight into the nature of ultimate reality. Rather, he essays his judgment for the sake of achieving existential self-knowledge, which, as I have argued, amounts to leading a particular type of intellectual life. Such an intellectual life bears no necessary connection with any set of moral principles. The logic of essaying oneself can be captured, I think, in a remark of Wittgenstein's concerning the nature of philosophy. Wittgenstein writes: "Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)."[138] The adherents of Stoicism and Epicureanism examined by Hadot and Foucault attempted to work on the way that they interpreted the world, but they did so dogmatically, based on the doctrinal beliefs that they were attempting to appropriate existentially. Montaigne, on the other hand, works on his interpretation of things simply for the sake of attaining greater self-understanding. In this way, his practice of essaying himself is of a piece with what I have called his "skepticism."

[138] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 16.

5

Philosophy, Politics, and the Self

Thus far I have argued that Montaigne's way of doing philosophy is not quite at home in the tradition of western metaphysics; that Montaigne is a skeptic; that he realizes that logical arguments are beside the point when it comes to our most fundamental beliefs; and that he takes philosophy to be essentially a matter of working on oneself. These features of his conception of philosophy might suggest an affinity between Montaigne and what has come to be called "postmodern" philosophy, by which I mean the philosophical tradition inaugurated by Nietzsche's question: "What is the value of truth?" Unsurprisingly, then, some commentators have directly and indirectly linked Montaigne's position to that of the "liberal ironist" described by Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.[139] So, for example, David Hiley argues that Montaigne and Rorty share the desire for "a form of private irony and public responsibility" and that Montaigne provides us with a more compelling account of the private side of the ironic life.[140] But while Montaigne and Rorty share a number of philosophical views, it seems to me that they are engaged in two incommensurable

---

[139] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), hereafter cited parenthetically as "CIS." The supposed affinity between Montaigne and the postmoderns has been remarked by Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81, and Levine, *Sensual Philosophy*, 14. Levine writes: "Seemingly forgotten during much of the twentieth century, Montaigne has recently reemerged in France, becoming the darling of the deconstructionists and called postmodern by of postmodernity's leading lights [Lyotard]" (16). Nehemas, *The Art of Living*, describes Montaigne as practicing an "aestheticist art of living," the purpose of which is to create a self unlike any other self before or after oneself. This of course sounds much like the aim of the private life of the ironist as described by Rorty.

[140] Hiley, "The Politics of Skepticism: Reading Montaigne," 380. Montaigne has also been linked with Rorty and ironism by Jack I. Abecassis, "'Le Maire et Montaigne," 1067-1089 and Alven Neiman, "Ironic Schooling: Socrates, Pragmatism and the Higher Learning," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 4 (1991): 371-384.

projects, and that this has not been sufficiently acknowledged by Montaigne's commentators.[141] To show how this is the case will be to articulate Montaigne's views on the relations among philosophy, politics, and the self, and thereby to further elucidate his conception of philosophy as the pursuit of self-knowledge.

Rorty and the "liberal ironist"

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty attempts to fuse the postmodern ethic of poetic self-creation with the political institutions of modern liberal democracy. The fundamental difficulty facing such a project is that the ends of postmodern ethics seem to be incommensurable with the ends of modern liberal democracies. Thus Rorty proposes that rather than aim at a theoretical union between these two distinct sets of ends, we should aim at some form of practical accommodation between them, such that we allow them to peacefully co-exist in the same individual, who will be both a poetic self-fashioner and a fellow citizen. In order to achieve this accommodation, he suggests that we completely divorce our conception of the private sphere from our conception of the public sphere, that we learn to speak in two distinct and incommensurable vocabularies, and so learn to compartmentalize our very selves. The end result of this practical accommodation is the emergence of a figure whom Rorty calls the "liberal ironist."

In equating, as I have done, "divorcing our conceptions of public and private life" with "speaking in two distinct and incommensurable vocabularies" and "compartmentalizing our selves," I have in fact invoked three different ways of

[141] One notable exception is Ann Hartle, who argues in *Montaigne*, 1, that Montaigne is at odds with the postmodern tradition insofar as "his rejection of the authority of autonomous reason does not imply a rejection of the possibility of truth."

describing the life of the liberal ironist. But to understand how they can be equated with each other, it is necessary to understand what a Rortian "vocabulary" is and how any such vocabulary relates to the lives of both ironists and non-ironists. Rorty himself uses the terms "vocabulary" and "final vocabulary" interchangably, and I shall follow him in this, as both terms refer to "a set of words which [human beings] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell… the story of our lives" (CIS 73). Rorty in turn equates "vocabulary" with other terms such as "Weltanschaung," "conceptual framework," and "language game" (CIS 75). Thus my final vocabulary conditions my conception of myself, my beliefs, and my values, insofar as it provides me with the terms in which to describe all of these things. For Rorty and his fellow ironists, "persons and cultures are… incarnated vocabularies" (CIS 80). That is, my self is delineated by my self-description, so I *am* in effect my vocabulary (see CIS 74). There is nothing "behind" my vocabulary, or my conception of myself, that my vocabulary or self-conception can succeed or fail at describing (CIS 80). But here we are getting ahead of ourselves, for we have already been drawn into the vocabulary of the ironist. Before going any further, it will be helpful to introduce the non-ironist.

Rorty sets up the ironist in opposition to the person of "common sense." The person who trusts in common sense is the person who unselfconsciously believes that his final vocabulary represents objective reality; that is, that it gives him the means to describe himself and the world as they *really* are. Common-sensical people "describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around

them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that the statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies" (CIS 74). The person of common sense, then, does not separate his conception of private life and his conception of public life. He understands that one can divide life into a public sphere governed by law and a private sphere in which individuals are legally free to do what they please, but he sees both the private and the public spheres as answerable to a single vocabulary, a single set of values and beliefs. Moreover, he interprets both his public and his private actions in the context of that single vocabulary. Indeed, the person of common sense never even bothers to ask whether his final vocabulary might not represent reality correctly. Philosophers who have asked this question, and seek to answer it, Rorty calls "metaphysicians." Metaphysicians believe that there is "a single permanent reality to be found hidden behind the many temporary appearances" because "the presence of a term in his final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence" (CIS 74). This means that "'reality', if properly asked, will help us determine what our final vocabulary should be" (CIS 75). Hence metaphysicians use the language of "discovery" to talk about their philosophical conclusions, as if they were coming to find out something about how the world really is, or about the nature of the self, independent of their final vocabulary. Where the person of common sense fails to ask whether his particular final vocabulary is correct, the metaphysician fails to ask whether it makes sense for *any* final vocabulary to be correct; the latter simply assumes that there *must* be something lying behind the appearances to which her vocabulary might correspond, and

so he sets out to determine whether it corresponds or not. Moreover, he assumes that this something, "reality," can be fully articulated by a single vocabulary.

The ironist, on the other hand, neither assumes that his final vocabulary corresponds to reality nor that there is a reality for it to correspond to. He believes that his final vocabulary is "contingent." This means that it is the product of arbitrary historical circumstances and that it neither fails nor succeeds in representing some ultimate reality that lies behind all appearances (CIS xv). He believes that there is no "world" or "self" independent of his final vocabulary to go out and discover, and that the ways of talking about the "world" and the "self" offered by his current final vocabulary are altogether arbitrary. Not only are they completely arbitrary, but they are in a sense foreign to him, for he has inherited them from others. Instead of trying to discover or find a "reality" that lies beneath his current vocabulary, then, he attempts to create his own reality for himself, by constructing a new, idiosyncratic vocabulary of his own: "Her description of what she is doing when she looks for a better final vocabulary than the one she is currently using is dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding…. She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria" (CIS 77). In modifying his current vocabulary, his tool is not logical analysis or argument from uncontroversial first principles, but rather redescription. In poetically redescribing his reality according to his own privately-formulated vocabulary, he does not claim that his descriptions are any more "correct" than those inherited vocabularies against which he reacts – the idea of "correctness" makes no sense to him with respect to final vocabularies – but rather he

understands himself to be achieving autonomy.[142] Thus Rorty writes: "[The ironist] is just doing the same thing which all ironists do – attempting autonomy. He is trying to get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own contingencies, get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own" (CIS 97). In creating a new final vocabulary, then, he creates a new way of describing himself, and thus creates - as far as he is concerned - a new self. Thus whereas the metaphysician can be said to aim at knowledge of *the* world and of *the* self, the ironist aims at creating new worlds and new selves. Indeed, with Nietzsche, he simply sees self-knowledge as self-creation. Rorty writes: "The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language – that is, of thinking up some new metaphors" (CIS 27).

Ironists compose the intellectual elite of Rorty's "ideal liberal society," but not the entire society. The majority of the society will be composed of people who are "commonsensically nominalist and historicist" (CIS 87).[143] This means that they will unselfconsciously take for granted the idea that their most central beliefs and desires are historically contingent and do not refer back to some objective order. Not having been "raised to play the language game" in which one seeks for justifications of one's beliefs beyond of their social utility, the people in such a regime will not be troubled by

[142] It may begin to sound as though Rorty is talking about the formulation of an entirely idiosyncratic, and so private, language. Rorty recognizes this, and so is careful to acknowledge that the idiosyncratic language of the ironist is not *completely* so: "no project of self-creation through imposition of one's idiosyncratic metaphoric, can avoid being marginal and parasitic. Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways" (CIS 41).

[143] It is not clear how we are to understand the way in which the average citizen in Rorty's liberal utopia will be *commensensically* nominalist and historicist, since when Rorty introduces common sense (CIS 74), it seems that he means to refer to the notion that our beliefs actually represent reality *per se*, and of course the historicists and nominalists will not believe this. In any case, it seems that at least part of what he is pointing up here is the idea that the average citizen in his utopia will not question his or her vocabulary in the way that the ironist will.

historicism and nominalism in the way that many people in our own society are. Thus they will have no doubts about their historicist and nominalist final vocabulary. The ironists, on the other hand, will remain continually dubious about the final vocabulary of the rest of their society. For ironists need to have inherited vocabularies against which to react. Rorty writes: "On my definition, an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated" (CIS 88). It is this self-imposed alienation, this escape from inherited contingencies to novel contingencies through the process of redescription, which constitutes Rorty's conception of autonomy.

And yet, if the ironist necessarily conceives of himself as alienated from society, and he thinks there is no truth, nor any objective moral order, what is it that could bind him in solidarity with other members of his community? One answer is liberalism, according to Rorty. In his "liberal utopia," both the ironists and the non-ironists will be liberals, for to Rorty, "liberals" are simply "the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (CIS xv). Rorty borrows this definition of a liberal from Judith Shklar, who in her book *Ordinary Vices* takes Montaigne to have been the first thinker in the western tradition to have marked cruelty as the worst vice.[144] I will return to the question of the nature of Montaigne's hatred of cruelty later on, but for now I wish to outline the sense of Shklar's claim that liberals "put cruelty first" in order to make clear Rorty's conception of the liberal.

For Shklar, to take cruelty to be the worst thing that we can do is to reject a theological vision of the world in which the worst thing we can do is to offend God. For

[144] See Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 42-44.

a liberal, it is the worst thing we do because it produces fear in others, and fear is the greatest threat to freedom. Rorty presumably finds Shklar's formulation of the nature of the liberal congenial because he describes the de-divinization of the world as a central feature of his liberal utopia. To de-divinize the world is essentially to remove from it any traces of non-contingent being, whether in the form of God or the self. It is to remove any conception of absolute truth from the minds of the members of the ideal liberal society. Since there will be no conception of non-contingent truth, there will be no need for any justification for the liberalism of his society. This is consistent, of course, with Rorty's view that the notion that cruelty is the worst thing we do cannot be justified by recourse to some more fundamental principle that is guaranteed to compel the assent of all human beings. Thus Rorty avoids grounding his politics on philosophy, insofar as he does not look for some ultimate and uncontroversial justification for the political principle that guides his society. The young will be socialized into their hatred of cruelty not through dogmatic teachings concerning philosophical first principles, but through literature, which will increase their ability to recognize the suffering of others whom they had previously failed to recognize as, like themselves, creatures capable of suffering pain and humiliation. While this may appear to be a matter of gaining insight into some common human nature, Rorty insists that this is not how we ought to understand it. According to the ironist, fellow-feeling is being *created* in this process of socialization based on the creative descriptions of strong poets.[145]

One difficulty that Rorty recognizes in all of this is that irony is potentially quite cruel. As he writes, "most people does not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The

[145] Rorty borrows the expression "strong poet" from Harold Bloom (CIS 20).

ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless" (CIS 89). Rorty argues that the fact that redescription can humiliate does not necessarily mean that the ironist will be a source of others' humiliation. For if the ironist is a liberal, he will distinguish between public and private redescriptions. According to Rorty, he will say: "For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everyone else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated" (CIS 92).[146] Thus the liberal ironist divides himself, compartmentalizing himself into two parts with independent and incommensurable final vocabularies, each of which interprets who he is and what he is about in its own terms. Neither side has any necessary priority over the other: "[O]ur responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives…. Moral obligation is, in this view, to be thrown in with a lot

[146] It is interesting that in this passage Rorty talks as if there were *one* final vocabulary into which fits both the private and public vocabularies of the ironist. Elsewhere he acknowledges the incommensurability of these two vocabularies (CIS xiv-xv) and the "compartmentalization of the self, [the] division of one's final vocabulary into two independent parts…" (CIS 68). Since Rorty insists that there is no way to attain "a more comprehensive outlook [that] would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision" (xiv), it seems that we must take the wording in this passage to be a temporary slipping-back into the language of the non-ironist.

of other considerations, rather than automatically trump them" (CIS 194).[147] In this way one is able to be both a liberal *and* an ironist.

Montaigne on Politics and Philosophy

As a liberal who is also an ironist, Rorty does not attempt to justify his preference for modern liberal democratic institutions. After all, as an ironist, he thinks that such justification is both philosophically impossible and politically unnecessary.[148] Some philosophers, however, think that it is necessary and important to justify the institutions of democratic liberalism. As it turns out, both those who think that we can and must justify our liberal political values and those who think we cannot and need not do so count Montaigne among their numbers. On the one hand, it has been argued that in fact Montaigne provides some philosophical justification of liberalism insofar as he provides a justification of the principle of tolerance, one of the essential principles of modern liberalism.[149] On the other hand, it has been argued that Montaigne's skepticism produces the conviction that all political principles and institutions are ultimately arbitrary (and therefore unjustifiable), thereby leading him to distinguish radically between public and private life and to espouse an intractable political conservatism.[150] It seems to me that Montaigne actually falls somewhere in the middle of these two

---

[147] Here is another instance in which Rorty seems to slip back into the language of the non-ironist. For if the two vocabularies, the two selves, are incommensurable, and there is no third, comprehensive self that can take in both selves in one view, how is it that deliberation between interpreting a situation in one vocabulary versus the other supposed to take place?

[148] For Rorty's argument that justifying liberalism is politically unnecessary, see CIS 85-87.

[149] See Levine, *Sensual Philosophy*.

[150] See Jack I. Abecassis, "'Le Maire et Montaigne," 1067-1089. On Montaigne's conservatism, see Sayce, 233-259. I am in agreement with Sayce insofar as he implies that Montaigne's political conservatism is founded upon prudential considerations rather than philosophical ones.

possibilities. It is correct, I believe, that Montaigne's skepticism sets him in agreement with Rorty's claim that the project of justifying political principles – in the way that would satisfy those who demand such justifications – is both philosophically impossible and politically unnecessary. On the other hand, that same skepticism leads neither to a rigid distinction between public and private vocabularies nor to intractable political conservatism. Montaigne's concern to distinguish between his public and private self is, unlike Rorty's, a function of his philosophical project, while his conservatism is the product not of ironism but of political prudence. In this respect, for Montaigne, skepticism does not have determinate political implications.[151] But to get clear about all of this, it is perhaps best to begin with the issue of the separation of the public and privates spheres in the *Essais*.

One fundamental feature of the liberalism that Montaigne is sometimes thought to justify is its insistence on a strict separation between the private and public spheres, the point being to ensure that citizens are free to live their lives as they please so long as they are not harming others. But in order for the private sphere to exist, toleration must be a fundamental value of the members of society; for the people must be content to leave each other alone with respect to matters not dictated by law. Indeed, Rorty, who portrays himself as an unqualified and unapologetic proponent of liberalism, remarks that "J.S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word" (CIS 63). To many, however, it seems that such a commitment to toleration requires some justification. Thus, Alan Levine, in *Sensual Philosophy: Toleration, Skepticism, and Montaigne's Politics of the Self*, writes: "Justifying toleration is an

[151] For an alternative view, see Hiley's "The Politics of Skepticism: Reading Montaigne."

important philosophical and political issue, because if we cannot explain why it is necessary and good, the institutions that uphold it cannot help being weakened."[152]

Coupling Rorty with John Rawls, Levine writes:

> Rather than justify their views on first principles, they choose to appeal to "our" contemporary political intuitions and preferences. By "our"intuitions, Rorty and Rawls refer to the beliefs of Western, democratic capitalists at the end of the twentieth century. Far from attempting to justify liberalism to outsiders or on first principles, Rorty and Rawls do not take up the challenge. Instead, they strive only to harmonize our preexisting opinions and do not address the fundamental challenges that Nietzsche, for example, poses. They rely instead on political traditions, and they thus rely excessively on tradition and convention when articulating their normative visions. Their work is compelling to the extent that one accepts their premises…. However their views are not compelling *philosophically* insofar as they do not even try to justify the presuppositions or intuitions of "our" age.[153]

According to Levine, then, our inability to provide liberalism with some "philosophically" compelling foundations – in other words, our inability "to justify the presuppositions or intuitions of 'our' age" – is a serious problem, both theoretically and practically speaking. Yet, Levine argues, it is a problem that Montaigne overcomes with his conception of the self: when we combine Montaigne's skepticism with his conception of the self, we find that Montaigne has shown how true self-interest requires a life tolerant of others. The fundamental difficulty with this is in the idea that Montaigne could understand himself to be justifying tolerance or any other political principle in a way that escapes the "problems" that beset Rorty's account. We may feel that something more than what Rorty and Rawls offer us is necessary, that we must able to appeal to something more than the intuitions and preferences of "our" community in order to maintain our liberal democratic institutions. But on this matter Montaigne sides with Rorty: such justifications are both unnecessary and impossible. "Philosophical

[152] Levine, 8.
[153] *Ibid*., 14.

justification" of political institutions is first of all unnecessary because social and political institutions, as a matter of *fact,* are not founded upon justified true belief, but rather upon pre-reflective beliefs. This is a psychological claim: Montaigne's observations of human nature lead him to believe that most people's beliefs and actions are not the results of philosophical argument but rather the results of habit (see 1.23.83, VS115).[154] Breaking people of these habits is extremely difficult: "Let us return to the sovereignty of custom. Nations brought up to liberty and to ruling themselves consider any other form of government monstrous and contrary to nature. Those who are accustomed to monarchy do the same. And whatever easy chance fortune offers them to change, even when with great difficulties they have rid themselves of the importunity of one master, they run to supplant him with another, with similar defects, because they cannot make up their minds to hate domination itself" (1.23.83, VS116). Montaigne recognizes that it is possible to undermine theoretically the laws and values of a community by tracing them to their historical source and yet he simultaneously acknowledges that this fact is irrelevant when it comes to their truth in the eyes of the people: "The laws take their authority from possession and usage; it is dangerous to trace them back to their birth. They swell and are ennobled as they roll, like our rivers: follow them uphill to their source, it is just a little trickle of water, barely recognizable, which thus grows proud and strong as it grows old" (2.12.440, VS583). Whereas Montaigne says that his people are Christians as they are Perigordians, he would say of us today that we are liberals as we are Americans. This of course, is not to say that people's beliefs do not change, but that when they do change it is not because they discover that their former beliefs lack "philosophical justification."

[154] See also Frédéric Brahami's "'Être à soi': la place du politique dans les *Essais*" in *Montaigne Politique: Actes du colloque international tenu à University of Chicago (Paris) les 29 et 30 avril 2205*, ed. Philippe Desan (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), 47.

Nietzsche, we might say, does not pose a threat to the stability of modern liberal democracies any more than Berkeley poses a threat to our belief in the external world.

While Montaigne argues on psychological grounds that a "philosophical justification" of liberal institutions is unnecessary, he argues on logical grounds that this sort of justification is impossible, at least if it is thought to differ in kind from the sort of circular justifications that Rorty would offer. For Montaigne, all justification comes to a rest upon first principles, and no first principles are immune to theoretical criticism: "Now there cannot be first principles for men, unless the Divinity has revealed them; all the rest – beginning, middle, and end – is nothing but dreams and smoke…. Every human presupposition and every enunciation has as much authority as another, unless reason shows the difference between them. Thus they must all be put on the scales, and first of all the general ones, and those which tyrannize over us. The impression of certainty is a certain token of folly and extreme uncertainty…" (2.12.404, VS540). For Montaigne, to appeal to a first principle is simply to announce a belief that you cannot imagine rejecting. In this way, such an appeal is indistinguishable from an appeal to one's "preexisting opinions" or "political intuitions." We may criticize certain intuitions and opinions on the basis of others, but there is no way of appealing to anything but *our* intuitions at one level or another. If this seems inadequate, that is only because we imagine that we can somehow transcend those opinions and intuitions. But Montaigne judges this idea to be one intuition that can be easily dismissed as illusory. We cannot transcend the limits of our human condition.

Montaigne on Politics and the Self

On the question of the justification of political principles and institutions, then, Montaigne is in agreement with Rorty and the liberal ironists. But some have thought that the similarities between the positions of Montaigne and Rorty do not end there. Indeed, it may seem that one way to explain the apparent inconsistency between, on the one hand, Montaigne's remarks regarding the separation of private and public life and his so-called conservatism, and, on the other hand, his consistently critical attitude towards the beliefs, values, and customs of his community, is to interpret Montaigne as a precursor to Rorty's ironist. Thus Jack I. Abecassis argues that rather than using philosophy to justify a particular political program, Montaigne's skepticism leads him to become a Pyrrhonian conventionalist who takes his political beliefs and values to be arbitrary.[155] In this way Montaigne's philosophical commitments provide what Abecassis calls a "theoretical basis" for his separation of public and private life: "If you hold skeptical views with respect to Truth claims and, at the same time, because of your class duty, you *must* exercise politics, there will be an inevitable tension between ideological Truth claims which underpin your political practice and your skepticism concerning beliefs. You will become ironic about your political practice. If you are Montaigne, your conception of philosophy and of class duty already contains the implacable logic of the divorce of critical thought from customary social practice – as if the two belong to worlds which do not share a common denominator."[156] In this way Montaigne's recognition that we cannot provide transcendent justification for our beliefs

[155] See Abecassis, "Le Maire et Montaigne."
[156] *Ibid*., 1072.

and values, political or otherwise, may be thought to lead him to adopt a conservative politics grounded upon the observation of custom: "As in Hume, epistemological skepticism leads invariably to social conventionalism…. Paradoxically, skepticism – a hyper-critical problematology – ends up adhering to custom, the least reflective of human institutions."[157] This, Abecassis argues, allows us to understand both Montaigne's notorious conservatism and his emphasis on the distinction between his public and private life. With respect to the public/private distinction, Montaigne appears to foreshadow Rorty's ironist: "Montaigne's essayistic practice satisfies all the Rortian conditions for irony and… ultimately this irony provides the theoretical basis for his strict separation of the private from the public, that is, the separation of the exercise of reason from political practice."[158] Thus it is proposed that Montaigne's skepticism has political implications not with respect to the founding of political institutions, but with respect to the life of the skeptical self within the confines of those institutions. Just as the Pyrrhonists' skepticism leads to a return to the customs and traditions of common life for lack of any justifiable alternative, so Montaigne's skepticism leads him to his "intractable conservatism" in the political sphere.[159]

Once again, however, it is necessary to follow Montaigne's own advice when interpreting his book. In "Of cripples," Montaigne reminds us that we must carefully study the phenomenon before our eyes before we set out to explain it: "How free and vague an instrument human reason is. I see ordinarily that men, when facts are put before them, are more ready to amuse themselves by inquiring into their reasons than by inquiring into their truth. They leave aside the cases and amuse themselves treating the

[157] *Ibid*., 1077.
[158] *Ibid*., 1071.
[159] *Ibid*., 1069.

causes" (3.11.785, VS1026). What exactly, then, is the meaning of his remarks concerning politics and the distinction between private and public life? Montaigne, who always insists on attending to the particularity of human beings, actions, and institutions, certainly does argue throughout the *Essays* that his countrymen ought to settle in favor of the *status quo* rather than introduce innovations into public life. Yet he is not making these recommendations in a vacuum. Rather, his arguments are directly aimed at his place and time. Regarding his tenure as mayor, he writes: "I had nothing to do but conserve and endure, which are noiseless and imperceptible acts. Innovation has great luster, but it is forbidden *in these times, when we are hard pressed and have to defend ourselves mainly against innovations*" (3.10.783, VS1023, my emphasis). This is an argument based on experience rather than epistemology: "I am disgusted with innovation, in whatever guise, and with reason, for I have seen very harmful effects of it. The one that has been oppressing us for so many years is not the sole author of our troubles, but one may say with good reason that it has accidentally produced and engendered everything…" (1.23.86, VS119). The key word in this last passage is "accidental," for Montaigne's conservatism is in fact born out of a respect for what he calls "Fortune," which essentially denotes forces at work in human affairs that inevitably transcend human comprehension: "Thus we are quite wont to say, with reason, that events and outcomes depend for the most part, especially in war, on Fortune, who will not fall into line and subject herself to our reason and foresight, as these lines say: *The ill-advised may win; the wise may lose; / Fortune cares not what cause prevails, or whose, / But wanders in our midst, unheeding, free. / Something beyond, whatever it may be, / Commands and rules, and bends us to its laws [Manlius]*" (1.47.209, VS286). This is why we must be

wary of those who claim to know how to control fortune, as Machiavelli did: "Machiavelli's arguments, for example, were solid enough for the subject, and yet it was very easy to combat them; and those who did so left it no less easy to combat theirs. In such an argument there would always be matter for answers, rejoinders, replications…. For the reasons have little other foundation than experience, and the diversity of human events offers us infinite examples in all sorts of forms" (2.17.497, VS655). Montaigne's skepticism in the political sphere, then, is a prudential skepticism: it is not epistemology but experience and reflection upon the course of history that leads him to be circumspect about what *ought* to be done in the political realm. It is for this reason that he generally advises against "reform." The "generally" here needs emphasis, for, as he says, even in times such as his own, there are moments when it is necessary to break the laws and innovate (1.23.89, VS122).

In sum, then, Montaigne's political conservatism is quite different from that of the Pyrrhonists: he does not advocate the *status quo* because he thinks he has no grounds for making any claims regarding what is truly good; rather, he advises against innovations on the grounds of his experience and his belief that the cruelty and disorder that results from civil war are worse than the deficiencies of an imperfect government. This sort of political conservatism has nothing to do with universal skepticism concerning truth claims. But just as Montaigne's conservatism can be explained without appealing to his epistemological skepticism, so can his apparent distinction between his public and private selves be explained without interpreting him as a precursor to Rorty's ironist.[160]

Montaigne sounds most like an ironist in "Of husbanding your will," where he discusses his tenure as mayor of Bordeaux. There he repeatedly insists on the need to

[160] *Pace* Abecassis, "Le Maire et Montaigne," 1071.

distinguish oneself from one's public roles: "Most of our occupations are low comedy. *The whole world plays a part* [Petronius]. We must play our part duly, but as the part of a borrowed character. Of the mask and appearance we must not make a real essence, nor of what is foreign what is our very own. We cannot distinguish the skin from the shirt. It is enough to make up our face without making up our heart" (3.10.773, VS1011). Thus he distinguishes himself from his public *persona* as mayor: "The mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a clear separation" (3.10.774, VS1012). Not surprisingly, then, it has been argued that Montaigne's separation of his private and public selves is substantially the same as that of Rorty's ironist, and that "In both thinkers, the collapse of the idea of a unified subject able and willing to act everywhere with an identical set of beliefs, gives way to a precarious act of juggling seemingly contradictory practices unified only by its underlying irony."[161]

Yet when we examine these remarks in the context of the entire chapter, we find that they convey not an ironic view of the self but a concern with self-knowledge and the freedom of one's judgment. Montaigne begins the essay thus: "In comparison with most men, few things touch me, or, to put it better, hold me; for it is right that things should touch us, provided they do not possess us…. My sight is clear, but I fix it on few objects; my sensitivity is delicate and tender. But my perception and application are heard and deaf: I do not engage myself easily. As much as I can, I employ myself entirely upon myself" (3.10.766, VS1003). His concern not to become possessed by things is due to the fact that everywhere he observes men "who seek business only for busyness" and

[161] Abecassis, "Le Maire et Montaigne," 1070. On Montaigne's distinction between his private and public life, see also Nannerl Keohane, "Montaigne's Individualism" *Political Theory* 5, no.3 (1977): 385, who argues that Montaigne "reached the conclusion that the best course of action is to take advantage of a capacity for doubleness within ourselves – to maintain a strict demarcation between the public and the private world."

who thus "give themselves for hire" to other persons and public causes (3.10.767, VS1004). "Their faculties are not for them, they are for those to whom they enslave themselves; their tenants are at home inside, not they. This common humor I do not like. We must husband the freedom of our soul and mortgage it only on the right occasions; which are very small in number, if we judge sanely" (3.10.767, VS1004).

Part of Montaigne's concern with limiting the degree to which he lends himself to public affairs stems from his having watched his father become so embroiled in public matters that he became "truly heedless of his life" (3.10.769, VS1006). His father "had heard it said that we must forget ourselves for our neighbor, that the individual was not to be considered at all in comparison with the general" (3.10.769, VS1006). This, Montaigne argues, is advice given under the assumption that people love themselves too much, and that it is necessary to motivate them to act on behalf of others in order to compensate for their natural self-love. But for someone not overwhelmed by concern for himself, it is dangerous advice. Thus Montaigne insists that there is a friendship that we all owe to ourselves, one that is not at odds with serving others. Of the man who knows how to be a friend of himself, how to care for himself, he writes: "This man, knowing exactly what he owes to himself, finds it in his part that he is to apply to himself his experience of other men and of the world, and, in order to do so, contribute to public society the duties and services within his province. He who lives not at all unto others, hardly lives unto himself" (3.10.769, VS1006). In other words, in "Of husbanding your will" Montaigne is primarily concerned with striking a balance between private and public duties. He clearly recognizes duties that one has to one's community: "I do not want a man to refuse, to the charges he takes on, attention, steps, words, and sweat and

blood if need be…. But this by way of loan and accidentally, the mind holding itself ever in repose and in health, not without action, but without vexation, without passion" (3.10.770, VS1007). Vexation and passion are to be feared in public affairs because they impair one's judgment (3.10.775, VS1013). Therefore Montaigne attempts to remain somewhat aloof from his public duties in order to maintain the freedom of judgment that he so values: "I do not know how to involve myself so deeply and so entirely. When my will gives me over to one party, it is not with so violent an obligation that my understanding is infected by it. In the present broils of this state, my own interest has not made me blind to either the laudable qualities in our adversaries or those that are reproachable in the men I have followed" (3.10.774, VS1012).

The other danger in becoming "possessed" by public life is that one becomes so distracted by one's public role that one's very sense of self is reduced to fit the confines of that role: "I see some who transform and transubstantiate themselves into as many new shapes and new beings as they undertake jobs, who are prelates to their very liver and intestines, and drag their position with them even into their privy. I cannot teach them to distinguish the tips of the hat that are for them from those that are for their office, or their retinue, or their mule. *They give themselves up so much to their fortune that they even unlearn their natures* [Quintus Curtius]" (3.10.774, VS1011). In failing to distinguish between themselves and their offices these men develop false conceptions of themselves. Like children being rocked in cradles, their judgment is put to sleep by their constant "movement" in public affairs (3.10.767, VS1004). It is in this context, a few lines below the passage just cited, that Montaigne writes the famous line: "The mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a very clear separation" (3.10.774, VS1012). His point is

that he does not fail to recognize that his role as mayor does not exhaust what he is, and that to think that it does would be the act of a slavish judgment that cannot distinguish what he is from what others take him to be as a result of his public role. He must play his part, and fulfill the duties of his office as best he can, but he must also maintain a sense of himself beyond the confines of his office and maintain the liberty of his judgment. The same goes for the holder of any office, no matter how highly regarded an office it is: "the judgment of an emperor should be above his imperial power, and see and consider it as an extraneous accident; and he should know how to find pleasure in himself apart, and to reveal himself like any Jack or Peter, at least to himself" (3.10.774, VS1012). Indeed, for the purposes of self-knowledge, it is necessary to recognize that one's public position and the success of one's public actions are largely due to Fortune, and so do not reveal oneself as well as an examination of one's judgment does. Thus in "Of practice" Montaigne writes: "What I chiefly portray is my cogitations, a shapeless subject that does not lend itself to expression in actions…. *My actions would tell more about fortune than about me.* They bear witness to their own part, not to mine, unless it be by conjecture and without certainty: they are samples which display only details. I expose myself entire: my portrait is a cadaver on which the veins, the muscles, and the tendons appear at a glance, each part in its place…. It is not my deeds that I write down; it is myself, it is my essence" (2.6.274, VS379, my emphasis).

Montaigne's remarks about the clear separation between the mayor and himself, then, are generated by his concern to remain present to himself in his entirety and to avoid enslaving his judgment to his passion for a public cause. They do not reflect the fracturing of his self into two incommensurable ways of interpreting the world (two

"vocabularies," in Rorty's terms), one private and the other public. Rather, they reflect his concern with self-knowledge. His remarks concerning the separation between himself and the mayor, between his actions in private and those in public, and between the image he projects to others and that which he beholds for himself must all be interpreted in terms of his fundamental philosophical project, which is to cultivate what I have called the intellectual character of the philosopher.

Moreover, unlike the Rortian ironist, he does not seem to see social and political values as ultimately arbitrary. Rorty himself seems to consider cruelty as the worst thing that we can do for two reasons. First, it accords with his desire to de-divinize the world: cruelty is at least primarily an act of violence towards man rather than God.[162] Second, it effectively marks the divide between the public and private sphere along the lines already established by traditional liberalism. If the avoidance of cruelty is our only public end, then that allows for the utmost freedom with respect to private life, where our actions do not affect others.[163] Given Rorty's primarily political purpose, choosing cruelty as the worst vice makes perfect sense.[164] Montaigne's condemnation of cruelty, on the other hand, seems to be categorically different from Rorty's. For he clearly distinguishes between conventional and objective justice: "Justice in itself, natural and universal, is

[162] It is true that to take cruelty as the worst vice is to give it priority over impiety, and this may indeed tell us something about the nature of Montaigne's belief or lack of belief in the God revealed by Christian religion. The question of Montaigne's faith is of course one that I cannot deal with here. But to put cruelty first is not necessarily to deny the existence of an objective moral order or the Christian God. Even if Montaigne did take impiety to be the worst sin, we can hardly expect him to say so in the midst of civil wars waged largely over the nature of piety. In any case, given his consistent avowal of belief in an objective moral order, it is clear that Montaigne, unlike Rorty, does not view his attitude toward cruelty as the expression of arbitrary convention.

[163] This is of course a difficult distinction to make. I do not mean to pretend that drawing the line between actions that affect others and those that do not is an unproblematic task.

[164] What may be more difficult to make sense of is Rorty's contention that people will be willing and able to stand "unflinchingly" against cruelty when they understand their hatred of cruelty to be historically contingent and arbitrary. See Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley, "Biting the Bullett: Rorty on Private and Public Morality" in *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature *(and Beyond)*, ed. Alan R. Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 358-361.

regulated otherwise and more nobly than that other, special, national justice, constrained to the need of our governments" (3.1.604, VS796). Montaigne, then, takes cruelty to be wrong in an objective sense, not according to the conventions of his place and time, but according to an objective moral order. Hence at the end of "Of cruelty," he writes: "There is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it" (2.11.318, VS435). This is the language – that of "respect" and "duty" – in which we express belief in an objective moral order. It expresses what Montaigne thinks is required of us insofar as we are human beings.

In sum, Montaigne's attitudes toward his relation to public life and politics do not arise out of a post-reflective theory concerning the nature of reality. Rather, they arise from his concern with self-knowledge (in the case of his attitude toward his "public self") and his prudential assessment of the conditions currently governing public affairs (in the case of his conservatism). Thus his reflections on the possibility of justifying or undermining political institutions philosophically are not meant to have any political implications. Put differently, Montaigne's skepticism concerning both the possibility of an ultimate justification or rejection of political institutions does not ground any political project. Rorty's irony, on the other hand, is a post-reflective position that does seem to have political implications insofar as it seems to ground both the rigid public/private distinction and the historicism necessary for the establishment of Rorty's liberal utopia. Hence it appears that for Rorty philosophy has political implications that it does not have for Montaigne. Yet to think that Rorty takes philosophy to ground politics in some way

would be to fail both to understand Rorty's position and to understand how deep the differences between him and Montaigne run. In order to show how this is the case, it will be helpful to compare and contrast Montaigne and Rorty with respect to the question of autonomy.

Philosophy and the Self: Autonomy

Autonomy is one of the main themes of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. For Rorty, autonomy does not denote a metaphysical capacity such as free-will, but rather a way of relating to the world intellectually. Freedom is also a theme that runs throughout the the *Essais*. Montaigne is concerned with a number of types of freedom: freedom from political coercion, freedom from the passions, and freedom from social conventions. Each of these types of freedom can be connected with another type of freedom: the freedom of one's judgment. Indeed, this type of freedom seems to play a fundamental role Montaigne's project, and it is in many ways similar to the autonomy sought by Rorty's ironist. For both thinkers, we begin to achieve freedom when we start to ask critical questions about the things that we and those around us say and do. The path to freedom thus begins with philosophical questions concerning one's life and the conditions that govern one's understanding of that life. Rorty characterizes this move as the move out of common sense. Montaigne characterizes it as the awakening of one's judgment. It marks the difference between the philosophers and the non-philosophers, or the people "*Who waking snore… Whose life is dead, although they live and see,* [Lucretius], who are not conscious of themselves, who do not judge themselves, who leave most of their natural faculties idle" (2.12.371, VS501).

Yet autonomy has not been achieved for either thinker simply by stepping back and gaining the critical distance from which to question one's life. For, as Rorty points out, often one frees oneself from what we might call the tradition of common sense only to enslave oneself to another tradition of unselfconscious assumptions, such as those of the "metaphysician" who "takes the question 'What is the intrinsic nature of (e.g. justice, science, knowledge, Being, faith, morality, philosophy)?' at face value. He assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence" (CIS 74). When these assumptions are not self-conscious, they serve as heteronomous forces that limit one's thinking insofar as they prevent one from questioning them and thereby achieving intellectual autonomy. Thus Montaigne, in describing the Pyrrhonian sect, distinguishes dogmatism, or, in Rorty's terminology, "metaphysics," from skepticism, or the autonomy of judgment: "And where others are swept – either by the custom of their country, or by their parental upbringing, or by chance – as by a tempest, without judgment or choice, indeed most often before the age of discretion, to such and such an opinion, to the Stoic or Epicurean sect, to which they find themselves pledged, enslaved, and fastened as to a prey they have bitten into and cannot shake loose – *to whatever doctrine they have been driven, as by a storm, to it they cling as to a rock* [Cicero] - why shall it not be granted similarly to [the skeptics] to maintain their liberty, and to consider things without obligation and servitude? *The more free and independent because their power to judge is intact* [Cicero]" (2.12.373, VS503).

Here is autonomy according to Montaigne: the freedom of his judgment. The freedom of one's judgment is not a metaphysical state. When Montaigne talks of the freedom of his judgment, he does not mean that his judgment is unconditioned. Rather,

"freedom of judgment" refers to a way of relating to the world intellectually; it refers to the habit of reflecting upon the world self-consciously and without concern for the opinions of others: "the wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely" (1.23.86, VS118). For Montaigne, then, intellectual autonomy is achieved through essaying oneself. Yet for Rorty, the freedom of judgment does not constitute full autonomy. He insists that autonomy consists in having redescribed oneself and one's world in an unprecedented way, so as to have transcended the limits of one's inherited vocabularies. Thus whereas both Montaigne and Rorty agree that autonomy is a matter of how one relates to the world through thought, Rorty holds that we must view the world in a certain way in order to be autonomous. That is, we must first view it through the eyes of the ironist, who believes all of his values and beliefs to be arbitrary, and who re-describes the attempt to come to know oneself as the attempt to create oneself, since he believes that there quite simply is no self to be known. Then, if we wish to be truly autonomous, we must somehow get out from under the vocabulary imposed upon us by our upbringing. Montaigne, on the other hand, finds autonomy even within the borrowed metaphors of others. He constantly reminds us of his habit of borrowing formulations from other authors, and points out that sometimes he acknowledges these borrowings and other times he does not. Drawing upon the judgments of others may seem to pose a threat to the autonomy of his own judgment. But as Jean Starobinski has eloquently observed, in the end such borrowings pose no threat to Montaigne's autonomy insofar as he reflectively acknowledges them: "If the text of the essays is borrowed, the metatext, which indicates the borrowing, restores Montaigne to the position of sovereign judge: the very act of borrowing,

described for its own sake, becomes a novel feature of the self-portrait…. The more freely dependency is avowed, the more fully the new *author* comes into the world via critical reflection, beyond those 'subjects' on which his views happened to coincide with those of others and which he sometimes treats with their aid. Submission to others thus helps to establish a reflective relationship with oneself."[165] By remaining self-conscious about his borrowings, Montaigne's judgment remains free. Montaigne's description of the student's relation to truth and tradition in "Of the education of children" offers us a precise account of how he relates to the metaphors and language that he borrows from others:

> Truth and reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later. It is no more according to Plato than according to me, since he and I understand and see it in the same way. The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment. His education, work, and study aim only at forming this. (1.26.111, VS152).

Who first formulated a thought is not important; whether it accurately describes one's world or one's self is what counts. So long as the words of others help Montaigne to come to better know himself, they pose no threat to the autonomy of his judgment.

For the Rortian ironist, on the other hand, the language of self-knowledge has no place, for there is no self to come to know. Thus it seems that Rorty would insist that Montaigne has not achieved autonomy until he redescribes his project as one of self-creation rather than self-knowledge. Yet Montaigne will resist this redescription insofar as it is a totalizing redescription. For he does speak of self-creation as an element of his work: "In modeling this figure upon myself, I have had to fashion (*dresser*) and compose

---

[165] Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne in Motion*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 108. See also 110-120.

myself so often to bring myself out, that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me – a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life; not concerned with some third-hand, extraneous purpose, like all other books" (2.18.504, VS665).[166] Montaigne, then, clearly acknowledges that in describing ourselves, we sometimes engage more in the act of creation than the act of discovery: sometimes we paint ourselves with colors clearer and lines sharper than those we would find if we carefully examined ourselves. Other times we simply falsify ourselves. Nonetheless, we often can distinguish cases of creation from those of discovery: we can recognize that a particular description does not exactly conform to its object.[167] In other particular cases the distinction between self-creation and self-discovery may be harder to draw. And on the metaphysical level, it is not a distinction that we can make at all: we cannot distinguish self-creation from self-discovery in any ultimate way any more than we can distinguish between an objectively true and objectively false account of reality in an ultimate way. But this does not change the fact that we can distinguish what appears to be an act of self-creation from what appears to be an act of self-discovery, and that for someone like Montaigne, who is interested in seeing things as clearly as possible, this is a useful distinction to make. Therefore Montaigne retains the distinction between self-creation and self-discovery even as he acknowledges the role that self-creation has played in his project of describing himself. The "consubstantiality" passage, for instance,

[166] On the sense in which Montaigne takes his book to be consubstantial with his self, see Regosin, *The Matter of My Book*.

[167] I do not mean to suggest that Montaigne conceived of the self as a substance. As he says in "Of repentance," "I do not portray being: I portray passing" (3.2.611, VS805).

continues this way: "Have I wasted my time by taking stock of myself so continually, so carefully? For those who go over themselves only in their minds and occasionally in speech do not penetrate the essentials of their examination as does a man who makes that his study, his work, and his trade, who binds himself to keep an enduring account, with all his faith, with all his strength" (2.18.504, VS665). For the most part, then, Montaigne takes himself to be coming to know himself rather than creating himself,[168] and in coming to know himself, he achieves the form of intellectual autonomy that comes with self-consciousness: "If others examined themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, fully of inanity and nonsense. Get rid of it I cannot without getting rid of myself. We are steeped in it, one as much as another; *but those who are aware of it are a little better off* – though I don't know" (3.9.766, VS1000 my emphasis).

Montaigne's insistence on retaining the distinction between self-creation and self-discovery may make it seem that Montaigne and Rorty disagree with each other and are on opposite sides of an important philosophical debate regarding the way that we ought to talk about how one actually relates to his self (or selves). But this is not the case; they are not engaged in that sort of theoretical disagreement. In fact it may be best not to describe their differences as disagreements at all. For the differences in the ways that they talk about the self and the possibility of an objective moral order stem from the fact that they seem to be engaged in radically different projects. Rorty is quite clear that he is not making theoretical assertions about the nature of reality. This is an aspect of his account that often causes trouble, as he himself admits: "The difficulty faced by a philosopher…

[168] See 3.2.611, VS805: "no man ever penetrated more deeply into his material, or plucked its limbs and consequences cleaner, or reached more accurately and fully the goal he had set for his work. To accomplish it, I need only bring it to fidelity; and that is in it, as sincere and pure as can be found. I speak the truth, not my fill of it, but as much as I dare speak; and I dare to do so a little more as I grow old, for it seems that custom allows old age more freedom to prate and more indiscretion in talking about oneself."

like myself… is to avoid hinting that [his account] gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are…. To say that there is no such thing as intrinsic nature is not to say that the intrinsic nature of reality has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be extrinsic. It is to say that the term 'intrinsic nature' is one which it would pay us not to use…. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter" (CIS 8). "Our interests" refers to the interests of liberal democrats like Rorty. Hence Rorty inverts the traditional relation between politics and philosophy: instead of philosophy determining the ends of politics, politics determines the ends of philosophy. This explains why Rorty is prepared to say that there is no objective moral order, and no self to come to understand, at least in the traditional sense: not because he has independent reasons for saying so, but because believing that there is no objective moral order or self to be known is useful for the political ends that he espouses. Thus, at the conclusion to his book, he writes: "the only argument I could give for the views about language and about selfhood put forward in Chapters 1 and 2 was that these views seemed to cohere better with the institutions of a liberal democracy than the available alternatives do" (CIS 197). Rorty's "philosophical" claims are thus conditioned "all the way down" by his politics.[169]

Thus Rorty and Montaigne are engaged in deeply different forms of philosophy. To Rorty, philosophy is a tool to be used for our political purposes: his ironist will "make philosophy one's servant rather than one's master" (CIS 97). This is traditional

[169] In Rorty's "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Reading Rorty*, 282, he writes that those who share Dewey's pragmatism will hold that "the philosopher of liberal democracy may wish to develop a theory of the human self that comports with the institutions he or she admires. But such a philosopher is not thereby justifying these institutions by reference to more fundamental premises, but the reverse. He or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit." This seems to be what he has done in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* with his creation of the liberal ironist.

philosophy politicized. To Montaigne, on the other hand, philosophy remains the pursuit of wisdom, which is distinct from the pursuit of the solution to political problems. He subscribes neither to the traditional view according to which philosophy can provide justification for a political order, nor to Rorty's inversion of that view, according to which philosophy's task is to serve a particular political order. For Montaigne, philosophy is autonomous in relation to politics.[170]

[170] For a quite different view, see David Lewis Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), who argues that Montaigne's central concern in the *Essais* is politics rather than self-knowledge.

6

Philosophy and the Good Life

In the last five chapters I have argued for an interpretation of Montaigne's book as the product of a contemplative *askēsis* undertaken for the purposes of cultivating the intellectual character of the philosopher. It is this contemplative *askēsis* that accounts for Montaigne's particular form of skepticism, which culminates not in doubt and the suspension of judgment, but in self-knowledge. Part of this self-knowledge includes the recognition that he is committed to beliefs and values that he cannot justify. Among the beliefs to which he finds himself committed are beliefs in an objective moral order and the notion that there is a self that he is discovering through the process of essaying. To conclude my study of Montaigne's conception of philosophy, then, I will address the relations among philosophy, the good, and the self within the context of his conception of the good life for human beings. Unsurprisingly, the question of how Montaigne understands the relation between philosophy and the good life is complicated by the fact that in the *Essais* Montaigne uses the term "philosophy" much like he uses other philosophical terms such as "nature" and "reason," which is to say, in more than one sense.[171] We must begin, then, by distinguishing the two senses in which Montaigne takes the *Essais* to represent his "philosophy."

[171] On the different senses of the term "*philosophie*" current in France at the end of the Renaissance, see Ian Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 18-20.

Philosophy as *meurs*

Most often Montaigne uses the term "philosophy" to refer to a body of moral knowledge that ought to guide our conduct. Thus Montaigne refers to philosophy and theology as "the branches of knowledge that regulate men's morals (*Les sciences qui reglent les meurs des hommes*)" (1.30.147, VS198).[172] Philosophy, he says, "teaches us how to live" (1.26.120, VS163), and it is thus the "lessons" of philosophy "by which human actions must be measured as their rule" (1.26.117, VS158). It is in this sense, then, that Montaigne refers to the "teaching" of Seneca and Plutarch on how to regulate one's life as "the cream of philosophy" (2.10.300, VS413).

"Philosophy," in this sense, refers to morals, and the true philosopher is the one who has appropriated the lessons of philosophy so completely that they have become instantiated in his *meurs*, or conduct. In "Of cruelty," Montaigne suggests that this is how Cato and Socrates became so virtuous: "We see in the souls of these two persons… so perfect a habituation to virtue that it has passed into their nature. It is no longer a laborious virtue, or one formed by the ordinances of reason and maintained by a deliberate stiffening of the soul; it is the very essence of their soul, its natural and ordinary gait. *They have made it so by a long exercise of the precepts of philosophy, coming upon a fine rich nature.* The vicious passions that come to life in us can find nowhere to enter in these men; the strength and rigidity of their soul stifles and extinguishes lusts as soon as they begin to stir" (2.11.310, VS425, my emphasis). To be a philosopher, then, is to live a life that expresses virtue not in words, but in deeds.

---

[172] Hence we often find Montaigne referring to the "lessons of philosophy" or the "opinions of philosophy" (2.31.541, VS716; 3.13.855, VS1113).

After describing Socrates and Cato in these terms Montaigne ranks three different types of virtue according to merit. The virtue of Socrates and Cato ranks highest: it is finest to have so successfully rooted out one's inclinations to vice that virtue has become second nature. Second best is to act virtuously through constantly overcoming the vice that still lingers within one's soul. Last comes the sort of virtue enjoyed by those who are "simply provided with a nature easy and affable and having an inborn distaste for debauchery and vice. For it certainly seems that this third and last type makes a man innocent, but not virtuous…. Besides this condition is so close to imperfection and weakness that I do not very well know how to separate their confines and distinguish them. The very names of goodness and innocence are for this reason to some extent terms of contempt" (2.11.310, VS426). Montaigne places himself in the third category: "My virtue is a virtue, or should I say an innocence, that is accidental and fortuitous" (2.11.311, VS427).

It is in this sense that Montaigne famously refers to himself as an "accidental philosopher": "My behavior (*meurs*) is natural; I have not called in the help of any teaching to build it. But feeble as it is, when the desire to tell it seized me, and when, to make it appear in public a little more decently, I set myself to support it with reasons and examples, it was a marvel to myself to find it, simply by chance, in conformity with so many philosophical examples and reasons. What rule (*regiment*) my life belonged to, I did not learn until after it was completed and spent. A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!" (3.12.409, VS546). Montaigne has not had to train himself to live according to the precepts of philosophy; his moral habits were formed long before he

discovered philosophy and thus it seems that the degree to which his conduct resembles that of the ancient philosophers is purely accidental.

Montaigne is a philosopher, then, because he *lives* in conformity with the wisdom of philosophy: "My philosophy is in action, in natural and present practice, little in fancy" (3.5.639). To be precise, then, philosophy in this sense refers not only to moral precepts but to the way of life that expresses those precepts. In order for the lessons of philosophy to become a way of life, to be transformed from precepts to *meurs*, they must be incorporated into one's judgment (or, as in Montaigne's case, they must pre-reflectively govern one's judgment). Hence Montaigne refers to philosophy as "the molder of judgment (*jugement*) and conduct (*meurs*)" (1.26.121, VS164).

As I discussed in Chapter 4, Montaigne uses the term "judgment" to refer to a great variety of intellectual activities; for him it is a term synonymous with thought. To judge is to discriminate, apprehend, compare, evaluate, or conceive of an idea. It stands in opposition to faculty of memory and the possession of knowledge, which Montaigne takes to be, in the words of Raymond La Charité, "sterile and futile abstract appendages" to one's mind.[173] Yet since judgment is the faculty of interpretation it must draw on one's beliefs, values, and experiences. Hence memory and knowledge do play a role in judgment's activity. The way that one judges, then, is conditioned by other judgments that one makes: they form the background against which one evaluates the matter at hand. In order for philosophy to govern one's *meurs*, its precepts must form that background of judgments against which one interprets moral phenomena. That is, philosophy must mold what might aptly be called one's moral judgment. Montaigne does

[173] La Charité, 142.

not use the term "moral judgment"; instead he refers to that part of one's judgment that governs the interpretation of moral phenomena as *conscience*.[174]

Conscience is one of a number of terms (including *sens*, *entendement*, *discours*, and *raison*) that Montaigne relates to the faculty judgment.[175] In his study of judgment in the *Essais*, Raymond La Charité finds that Montaigne employs these terms rather casually, without precisely demarcating their semantic fields.[176] Yet we can say that each term refers to a fairly distinct role played by the faculty of judgment, and it is possible identify those roles and the ways that these various sub-faculties relate to each other and to judgment in general. Thus La Charité writes: "*Conscience* is a function of judgment; it can also be a separate and autonomous faculty. Not all questions which properly belong to judgment's field of experience require the participation of conscience. By the same token, concepts formulated by *conscience* are not necessarily susceptible to the investigative powers and prerogatives of judgment."[177] Sometimes Montaigne uses the term "conscience" to refer to an independent faculty of judgment that can oppose other faculties such as understanding, while at other times he does not mention conscience by name but rather uses the term "judgment" to refer to acts of conscience. For instance, in "Of Cato the Younger" Montaigne discusses his conscience in terms of "judgment" and "will": "My weakness in no way alters my necessarily high regard for the strength and vigor of those who deserve it…. Crawling in the slime of the earth, I do not fail to observe, even in the clouds, the inimitable loftiness of certain heroic souls. It is a great

---

[174] La Charité, 139: "*Jugement* is both an intellectual and moral guide, analyzing and establishing the truth or falsehood, good and evil of new appearances; *conscience* concerns itself only with the morality of events and of man's actions."
[175] On this see La Charité, 110-143.
[176] La Charité, 111: "It cannot be said that Montaigne maintains a high degree of fixed parallelism within his use of a psychological term and its referential object or topic."
[177] La Charité, 136.

deal for me to have my judgment regulated, if my actions cannot be, and to maintain at least this sovereign part free from corruption. It is something to have my will good when my legs fail me" (1.37.169, VS229). Here Montaigne's talk of a regulated judgment and a good will indicate that he is referring to the fact that his moral judgment, or conscience, is intact even though his actions are not perfect. On the other hand, in "Of pedantry," Montaigne distinguishes among the various faculties of judgment, remarking how teachers in his day educate neither the conscience nor the understanding of their students (1.25.100, VS136).[178] We can see, then, that Montaigne recognizes conscience to have a domain of its own, namely, that of moral phenomena.

One important feature of conscience is its affective dimension. Not only does conscience apprehend the moral value of an action, but it also inspires in us feelings of attraction or revulsion. There is always some degree of pleasure in acting virtuously because a good conscience never fails to reward us for a deed well done: "There is… no good deed that does not rejoice a wellborn nature. Indeed there is a sort of gratification in doing good which makes us rejoice in ourselves, and a generous pride and accompanies a good conscience…. These testimonies of conscience give us pleasure; and this natural rejoicing is a great boon to us, and the only payment that never fails" (3.2.612, VS807). Likewise, a good conscience punishes us for opposing its judgments by producing feelings of guilt and repentance: "There is no vice truly a vice which is not offensive, and which a sound judgment does not condemn…. Vice leaves repentance in the soul, like an ulcer in the flesh, which is always scratching itself and drawing blood"

[178] For an example of a case where Montaigne distinguishes between judgment and conscience, see 3.8.706, VS925. There he complains that those who refuse to argue in an orderly fashion corrupt not only his judgment, but also his conscience, in that they cause him to get angry and act cruelly toward those with whom he is conversing.

(3.2.612, VS806). This affective dimension of moral judgment allows it to effectively regulate our actions, and thus Montaigne closely aligns conscience with character. We may occasionally act contrary to conscience: there are some "impetuous, prompt, and sudden sins." Virtuous souls are sometimes incited to evil by "some extraneous impulse," and these actions will breed repentance. "But as for these other sins so many times repeated, planned, and premeditated, constitutional sins, or even professional or vocational sins, I cannot imagine that they can be implanted so long in one and the same heart, without the reason and conscience of their possessor constantly willing and intending it to be so" (3.2.617, VS812). Thus while conscience is not always effective in preventing us from acting against its judgments, Montaigne has a hard time imagining how it could be so ineffective that we could distinguish the quality of one's ordinary behavior from the quality of one's conscience. Conscience and *meurs*, then, go together as habits of judgment and habits of conduct.

Since conscience and character are habits, they are very difficult to change, even in the face of opposition from other parts of one's judgment. Thus while his reason may break away from "the common road," Montaigne finds that his conscience, as expressed in his character, maintains him along the path he has followed since childhood:

> I hold [most vices] in horror, I say, from an attitude so natural and so much my own that the same instinct and impression that I brought away from my nurse I have still retained. Nothing has been able to make me alter it, not even my own reasonings, which, having in some things broken away from the common road, would easily give me license for actions which this natural inclination makes me hate. It is a monstrous thing that I will say, but I will say it all the same: I find in that area, in many things, more restraint and order in my morals (*meurs*) than in my opinions, and my lust less depraved than my reason. (2.11.312, VS428)

Thus in order to become a philosopher one must have a well-formed sense of moral judgment, or conscience. This can be acquired "naturally," as was the case with

Montaigne, or (perhaps) by working on oneself, as seems to have been the case with Socrates and Cato.[179] Significantly, nowhere in the *Essais* does Montaigne express any doubts or misgivings about the teachings of philosophy-as-morals. The skepticism so widely believed to be essential to Montaigne's thought seems to be completely absent here. This of course would seem to confirm my thesis in Chapter 3, that while Montaigne's skepticism changes the way that understands his moral judgments, it does not significantly reduce the strength of his moral convictions.

Philosophy as essaying

While most often Montaigne uses "philosophy" to refer to morals, in some cases he uses the term quite differently. In these contexts, "philosophy" refers to an intellectual activity whose scope extends beyond the sphere of morals. For instance, in the "Apology," he writes: "Whoever seeks anything comes to this point: he says either that he has found it, or that it cannot be found, or that he is still in quest of it. All philosophy is divided into these three types. Its purpose is to seek out truth, knowledge, and certainty" (2.12.371, VS502). Here "philosophy" denotes intellectual inquiry, as it does when Montaigne talks of the relation between philosophy and wonder: "Iris is the daughter of Thaumas. Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its progress, ignorance its end. I"ll go further: There is a certain strong and generous ignorance that concedes nothing to knowledge in honor and courage, an ignorance that requires no less

[179] In "Of physiognomy" Montaigne expresses doubt about whether Socrates was able to construct his own *meurs*: "So Socrates said of his ugliness that it betrayed what would have been just as much ugliness in his soul, if he had not corrected it by training. But in saying this I hold that he was jesting according to his wont. So excellent a soul was never self-made" (3.12.810, VS1058).

knowledge to conceive it than does knowledge" (3.11.788, VS1030). The philosopher in this context is distinguished by his participation in a project of endless inquiry: "It is only personal weakness that makes us content with what others or we ourselves have found out in this hunt for knowledge…. There is no end to our researches; our end is the other world. It is a sign of contraction of the mind when it is content, or of weariness. A spirited mind never stops within itself; it is always aspiring and going beyond its strength; it has impulses beyond its powers of achievement. If it does not advance and press forward and stand at bay and clash, it is only half alive. Its pursuits are boundless and without form; its food is wonder, the chase, ambiguity (3.13.817, VS1068).

In these passages, then, we have a conception of philosophy as inquiry, in which the philosopher is moved by wonder to seek understanding, only to find that such understanding brings with it the recognition of still deeper ignorance. It is this conception of philosophy that gives birth, I have argued, to the *Essais*. Hence it is also in terms of this passage from wonder to inquiry to ignorance that Montaigne describes the experience of essaying himself: "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself" (3.11.787, VS1029).

The goal of this form of philosophy is self-knowledge. Yet just as philosophy-as-morals consists not merely in the learning of its precepts but rather in a mode of conduct in the moral sphere, so the end of philosophy-as-inquiry is not simply the accumulation of propositional knowledge but rather a mode of conduct in the sphere of thought. In Chapter 4 I described this mode of conduct in terms of the intellectual character of the

philosopher. Just as the moral character of the philosopher discussed above includes habits, skills, and affective attitudes, so does the intellectual character of the philosopher. The philosopher who practices philosophy-as-inquiry must develop habits of reflection, the skills of critical judgment, and an attitude of diffidence towards the understanding he seems to achieve through the process of inquiry. Here too, as in philosophy-as-morals, in order to become a philosopher, one's judgment must be formed; yet here the focus is on one's intellectual judgment, that is, one's *sens, raison,* and *entendement*. The method of forming one's intellectual judgment is the essay. For Montaigne, then, "philosophy-as-inquiry" means "philosophy-as-essaying." It is this form of philosophy, then, that generates the text to which he refers as the "essays of my judgment" (1.50.219, VS301).

Essaying oneself, I have argued, trains one's judgment to be active and wakeful. For the philosopher-as-essayist is distinguished by his intellectual wakefulness. The enemy of wakefulness is habit, which Montaigne describes as a second nature, no less powerful than the first (3.10.772, VS1010). While habit guides our conduct in general, it puts to sleep the eye of our judgment, preventing us from living self-consciously (1.23.80, VS112). The philosopher, then, must resist the soporific effects of habit by keeping his judgment active and critically examining the habits and customs that govern both his own life and that of his community. In addition to studying the customs of his own people, he seeks knowledge of the customs and characters of human beings living in places and times different from his own in order to provide his judgment both with new material upon which to exercise itself and with a broader context within which to interpret the phenomena of his experience (see 1.49).

Part of the skill of the essayist's judgment, then, consists in his ability to view the familiar as though it were strange and the strange as though it were familiar. This involves seeing questions to be asked where others have taken things to be self-evident. Thus, discussing the interminable debates waged in the commentaries on Aristotle, he writes: "Ordinarily I find subject for doubt in what the commentary has not deigned to touch on. I am more apt to trip up in flat ground like certain horses I know which stumble more on a smooth road" (3.13.817, VS1067). Through practice, he accustoms himself to view things "from some unaccustomed point of view" so as to reveal them more fully, and yet in doing so he remains conscious of the incompleteness of his understanding: "I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us…. I would venture to treat some matter more thoroughly, if I knew myself less well" (1.50.219, VS302). For the more he inquires, the more sensitive he becomes to the limits of his understanding. Thus essaying oneself engenders an attitude of diffidence towards one's judgments. In all of this, Montaigne keeps one eye trained on himself. Essaying his judgment, he "shakes up" his reason "sharply and attentively," observing himself while he calls into question his judgments past and present, in order to remark changes in his views and attitudes (3.2.619, VS815).

It is Montaigne's practice of philosophy-as-essaying that engenders his skepticism. For recognizing the changes that take place in his judgment, he becomes reluctant to make dogmatic pronouncements:

> Not only does the wind of accident move me at will, but, besides, I am moved and disturbed as a result merely of my own unstable posture; and anyone who observes carefully can hardly find himself twice in the same state. I give my soul now one face, now another, according to which direction I turn it. If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion… and

> whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself, yes, even in his judgment, this gyration and discord. I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word. Distinguo is the most universal member of my logic. (2.1.242, VS335)

Moreover, testing his judgment leads him to recognize its faults: "The reason why we doubt hardly anything is that we never test our common impressions. We do not probe the base, where the fault and weakness lies; we dispute only about the branches" (2.12.403, VS539). When, in the "Apology," Montaigne "probes the base," he discovers that "reason" cannot justify itself, that we cannot claim to have certain knowledge of ultimate reality: "there cannot be first principles for men, unless the Divinity has revealed them; all the rest – beginning, middle, and end – is nothing but dreams and smoke. To those who fight by presupposition, we must presuppose the opposite of the same axiom we are disputing about…. The impression of certainty is a certain token of folly and extreme uncertainty…" (2.12.404, VS540). Thus he judges that "the wisest way to judge heaven is not to judge it at all" (2.12.400, VS535). Montaigne, then, does not engage in speculation concerning questions of metaphysics or natural philosophy. This is because he understands such speculation to be more a matter of expressing one's opinions than determining the truth. Since he does not feel the same conviction about these matters distant from his experience, he sticks to expressing the stronger opinions that he has concerning human life, albeit while recognizing that here, too, he can only express the way things *seem* to him: "I speak my mind freely on all things, even on those which perhaps exceed my capacity and which I by no means hold to be within my jurisdiction. And so the opinion I give of them is to declare the measure of my sight, not the measure of things" (2.10.298, VS410).

Yet for all his talk of doubt and uncertainty, in the end Montaigne does not seem to be much in doubt about certain matters. For while his investigations into human affairs lead him to doubt his judgments more than the ordinary human being who has not essayed himself, they do not engender feelings of such doubt that Montaigne finds himself suspending his judgment. Rather, he judges self-consciously, aware of the fact that he cannot be certain that judgments are true as well as the fact that consciousness of the fallibility of his judgment does not deeply disturb most of his convictions. In other words, part of what *seems* to him to be true is that his deepest commitments and judgments *do* represent reality. As I argued in Chapter 3, this is especially the case when it comes to questions concerning the good. There he finds that his conscience and his *meurs* are unmoved by the possibility that they could be wrong about both the existence and nature of an objective moral order. Montaigne, then, finds that his conception of the good life is untroubled by his skepticism. What remains to be understood, then, is what his conception of the good life amounts to.

The human good

The dominant conceptions of the human good in philosophy and common life during Montaigne's life were of course those of Aristotle and Christianity. For Aristotle, whom Montaigne calls the "monarch of modern learning" (1.26.107, VS146), the human good is the activity in conformity with the best part of the human being. As the intellect seems to Aristotle to be the best part of the human being, he judges that a life of contemplation is the human end; second best is a life guided by practical virtue, the life

of politics. For Christians, it is a life lived according to the theological virtues that constitutes the best life for human beings, for this life culminates in salvation, the goal of human existence. Montaigne, I shall argue, complicates the predominant ancient and medieval conceptions of the good life by distinguishing between two notions of the good: one objective and normative, and the other subjective and idiosyncratic.[180] Montaigne seems to understand the objective good (hereafter denoted by "Good") to be the moral life. The good subjectively speaking, on the other hand, he takes to be happiness. As it turns out, the two do not necessarily go together. Therefore these two conceptions of the good life must be formulated separately. To begin, then, I turn to three chapters of the *Essais* in order to bring out Montaigne's conception of the Good. In the first, "Of the most outstanding men," Montaigne depicts his ideal human being in the figure of the Theban general Epaminondas. In the second and third, "Of pedantry" and "Of the education of children," Montaigne offers a theory of education. Taken together, I shall argue, these three essays reveal Montaigne's conception of the objective Good for human beings.

In "Of the most outstanding men" (*De plus excellens hommes*) Montaigne discusses the three men he finds most excellent of all those of whom he has known. The first two are Homer and Alexander the Great. Montaigne seems to choose these two men because they each left a great imprint upon the world through their respective forms of

[180] Commentators have interpreted Montainge's conception of the human good in a number of different ways. Max Gauna, *Montaigne and the Ethics of Compassion* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 79, argues that Montaigne's conception of the human good is "overtly eudaimonistic." Thus he argues that Montaigne takes happiness to be the human end. Levine, 239, argues that Montaigne takes the human good to consist in "the inner calm and delight that results from self-absorbed self-seeking," a life that "is unlikely ever to serve as the basis for a whole society." Sayce, 148-159, 228-229 argues that Montaigne's conception of the goal of human life takes the form of a hedonistic paganism. Of course for those who take Montaigne to be a skeptic in the Pyrrhonian tradition, Montaigne has no conception of the human good, since that would be dogmatic; he simply desires health and tranquility without claiming that these ends are universally or objectively good (see, e.g. Hallie, *The Scar of Montaigne*, 33).

excellence. Two thousand years after his death Homer still ranks as the greatest of all poets: "What glory can be compared with his? There is nothing so alive in the mouths of men as his name and his works" (2.36.570, VS753). On the other hand, Alexander, "at the age of thirty-three, passed victoriously over all the habitable earth and attained, in half a lifetime, the utmost achievement of human nature" (2.36.571, VS754). Those concerned with ruling over men consider his life the most glorious of all: "more kings and princes have written his exploits than other historians have written the exploits of any other king or prince whatever" (2.36.572, VS755).

Having chosen two men renowned for their accomplishments, Montaigne, after announcing that the third, and "most outstanding, to my mind, is Epaminondas," quickly acknowledges that his third choice has not won anywhere near so much glory as the others (2.36.572, VS756). Yet Montaigne does argue that Epaminondas proves to have equaled the resolution and valor of Alexander,[181] and that he compares well with Homer with respect to his understanding: "As for his knowledge and ability, this ancient judgment has come down to us, that never did a man know so much, and speak so little, as he. For he was a Pythagorean in sect. And what he did say, no man ever said better. An excellent orator and very persuasive" (2.36.573, VS756). Most important, in Montaigne's eyes, however, and the reasons for his selection as the most excellent of men, are his *meurs et conscience*: "As for his character and conscience, he very far surpassed all those who have undertaken to manage affairs. For in this respect, *which must principally be considered, which along truly marks what we are, and which I weigh*

[181] On the comparison of Alexander and Epaminondas implicit in "Of the most outstanding men," see Quint, *Montaigne*, 37-41. Quint notes that Montaigne seems to have invented the opinions that he attributes to Epaminondas as example of his exceeding goodness, namely that one should not sentence a man to death without knowledge of the case and that friends should avoid encountering each other in battle, and that if they did encounter each other, they should spare one another.

alone against all the others together, he yields to no philosopher, not even to Socrates" (2.36.573, VS756, my emphasis). Thus Montaigne judges Epaminondas not so much for his intellectual or martial virtues as for his moral virtue. Notably, the qualities of Epaminondas' virtue resemble those of Montaigne's: "In this man innocence is a key quality, sovereign, constant, uniform, incorruptible" (2.36.573, VS756). Montaigne calls him "an example of exceeding goodness (*bonté*)" and expresses a deep affection for Epaminondas' character: "I know of no form or fortune of man that I regard with so much honor and love" (2.36.573, VS757). In "Of the useful and the honorable" Montaigne returns to the figure of Epaminondas. He restates his judgment that Epaminondas' is the most excellent of men, and again remarks with amazement Epaminondas' ability to combine martial excellence with goodness and humanity: "There is a soul of rich composition. To the roughest and most violent of human actions he wedded goodness and humanity, indeed the most delicate that can be found in the school of philosophy. That heart, so great, full, and obstinate against pain, death, and poverty – was it nature or art that had made it tender to the point of such an extreme gentleness and goodness in disposition? … It is a miracle to be able to mingle some semblance of justice with [the acts of battle]; but it belongs only to the strength of Epaminondas to be able to mingle with them the sweetness and ease of the gentlest ways, and pure innocence" (3.1.608, VS801). Again we find Montaigne praising Epaminondas for his innocence, gentleness and goodness: virtues that Montaigne claims to possess himself.[182]

The question that Montaigne asks concerning the origin of Epaminondas' moral virtue is a question that he also asks in "Of cruelty." After remarking how he finds his

[182] On the innocence shared by Epaminondas and Montaigne, see Hartle, *Montaigne*, 204-210.

meurs more restrained and ordered than his opinions, he mentions the cases of Aristippus and Epicurus, two philosophers known for their philosophical commitments to sensual pleasures. For they, too, seem to have had questionable opinions and yet nonetheless lived impeccably moral lives. Thus Montaigne asks, "Could it be true that to be wholly good we must be so by some occult, natural and universal property, without law, without reason, without example?" (2.11.312, VS428). It might seem that Montaigne thinks that his own virtue comes from some occult source. For he contrasts it with the virtues of the philosophers who made themselves excellent through self-discipline and the precepts of philosophy: "Socrates admitted to those who recognized in his face some inclination to vice that that was in truth his natural propensity, but that he had corrected it by discipline. And the intimates of the philosopher Stilpo said that, having been born susceptible to wine and women, he had by study made himself abstinent from both. What good I have in me I have, on the contrary, by the chance of my birth. I have gotten it neither from law, nor from precept, nor from any other apprenticeship. The innocence that it is in me is a childish innocence: little vigor and no art" (2.11.313, VS429). Yet what exactly is the distinction that Montaigne is making between himself and the philosophers? For elsewhere in the same chapter, Montaigne writes: "I hold [most vices] in horror, I say, from an attitude so natural and so much my own that the same instinct and impression that I brought away from my nurse I have still retained" (2.11.312, VS428). What does it mean to say that his hatred of the vices is "natural"? Certainly he does not mean that it is simply innate, for he acknowledges that it has remained the same not since birth but since he left his nurse. This suggests that his "natural" hatred of vices is in part the result of the upbringing he received in his early childhood.[183] This idea that our nurses play a

[183] Quint, 125, remarks: "[Montaigne] depends on a good disposition that he comes by naturally – and [in

fundamental role in forming our moral characters is also found in "Of custom," where Montaigne writes: "I find that our greatest vices take shape from our tenderest childhood, and that our most important training is in the hands of nurses…. There are fathers stupid enough to take it as a good omen of a martial soul when they see a son unjustly striking a peasant or a lackey who is not defending himself, and as a charming prank when they see him trick his playmate by a bit of malicious dishonesty and deceit. Nevertheless these are the true seeds and roots of cruelty, tyranny, and treason; they sprout there, and afterward shoot up lustily, and flourish mightily in the hands of habit" (1.23.78, VS110). In "Of experience" Montaigne relates how his father took advantage of the formative power of early childhood by sending the young Montaigne to be nursed among the common folk in a poor village. It was his father's intention that by being brought up among the common people he would be allied with the people who would one day need his help. Montaigne reports: "His plan has succeeded not at all badly. I am prone to devote myself to the little people, whether because there is more vainglory in it, or through natural compassion, which has infinite power over me" (3.13.844, VS1100).

Thus it begins to seem as though the "natural" innocence and goodness that Montaigne claims for himself may be the result of the way that he was raised. The distinction between Montaigne and the philosophers, then, is not between those for whom moral excellence is innate and those for whom it must be acquired through practice. Rather, it is between those who acquire it through deliberately working on themselves and those who acquire it through being formed by others. It should come as no surprise, then, that Montaigne devotes two chapters of his book to education, the subject that he

---

"Of physiognomy"], as in "De la cruauté," the figure of the nurse's milk blurs the distinction between the gifts of birth and those of nature, both of which he passively received."

believes presents "the greatest and most important difficulty in human knowledge" (1.26.109, VS149). An examination of Montaigne's thought on education, coupled with his praise of Epaminondas, I will argue, reveals his conception of the human Good.

The first of Montaigne's two chapters on education is "Of pedantry."[184] There Montaigne calls into question the value of theoretical knowledge. For Montaigne finds that the most learned are often also the most morally bankrupt and practically inept. Yet this cannot be blamed solely on their learning: "For the more our soul is filled, the larger it becomes. And in the examples from olden times, we see as further proof to the contrary that able men in the handling of public matters, great captains, and great counselors in affairs of state, have at the same time been very learned" (1.25.98, VS134). Montaigne then relates how the ancients had excelled both in theoretical and practical pursuits, and were admired for their exceptionally high moral standards. The problem, Montaigne suggests, is that in his day men have mistaken learnedness for wisdom: "In truth, the care and expense of our fathers aims only at furnishing our heads with knowledge; of judgment and virtue, little news" (1.25.100, VS136). Rather than cultivating the judgment of their students, teachers concentrate their attention on cultivating their memories: "We labor only to fill our memory, and leave the understanding and conscience empty. Just as birds sometimes go in quest of grain, and carry it in their beak without tasting it to give a beakful to their little ones, so our pedants go pillaging knowledge in books and lodge it only on the end of their lips, in order

[184] On Montaigne's theory of education, see Gabriel Compayré, *Montaigne and Education of the Judgment*, trans. J.E. Mansion (New York: Thomas E. Crowell, 1908). Compayré, 87, argues that the focus of Montaigne's thought on education is the cultivation of the student's moral judgment. David T. Hansen, "Montaigne and the Values in Educating Judgment," *Philosophy of Education* 2002: 237-244 and "Well-Formed, Not Well-Filled: Montaigne and the Paths of Personhood," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 2 (2002): 127-154, interprets Montaigne's pedagogical program as a response to the political turmoil that Montaigne witnesses throughout his life.

merely to disgorge it and scatter it to the winds" (1.25.100, VS136). But educating the memory of the child is not sufficient for forming the child's *meurs*, and without forming the child's character, this education is truly useless: "If our soul does not go at a sounder gait, if our judgment is no better for all our learning, I had just as lief my student had spent his time playing tennis: at least his body would be blither" (1.25.101, VS138).

The essential part of education, then, is the formation of one's moral judgment, or conscience: "Any other knowledge is harmful to a man who has not the knowledge of goodness" (1.25.103, VS141).[185] Cultivating moral judgment requires the teacher to inform the student of what is good and bad, right and wrong, and then to help the student to appropriate these lessons in such a way that they become constitutive of the way he views the moral world. In the educational program that Montaigne outlines in "Of pedantry," this moral education is coupled with exercises in critical thinking inspired by Plato's *Laws*: "The method of their teaching was to ask [students] questions on their judgment of men and their actions; and if they condemned or praised this person or that deed, they had to reason out what they said; and by this means they both sharpened their understanding and at the same time learned what was right" (1.25.105, VS142). In this way the teacher will form both parts of the students' judgment, moral and intellectual.

In "Of the education of children" Montaigne elaborates on the ideas that he had presented in "Of pedantry." What he presents in this second essay is nothing less than a comprehensive program of education designed to prepare students for the Good life. He begins with the selection of the child's teacher, which he argues is perhaps the most important choice that parents will make in providing for their sons' education.

[185] Compayré, 63, observes that one cannot read Montaigne's essays on education and remain convinced that he is a skeptic.

Specifically, the moral character of the teacher is of paramount importance. Parents must choose "a guide with a well-made rather than a well-filled head… both these qualities should be required of him, but more particularly character and understanding (*meurs et entendement*) than learning" (1.26.110, VS150). Such a teacher will go about his work "in a novel way." Rather than attempting to teach as though he were "pouring water into a funnel," he will take the mind of his student and "begin putting it through its paces, making it taste things, choose them, and discern them by itself; sometimes clearing the way for him, sometimes letting him clear his own way" (1.26.110, VS150). Thus the emphasis in a Montaignian education is on the active participation of the student in his own learning process. The end is not to accumulate a wealth of knowledge, but to develop one's capacity to think for oneself: "Let him be made to show what he has just learned in a hundred aspects, and apply it to as many different subjects, to see if he has yet properly grasped it and made it his own" (1.26.111, VS151). Indeed, there will be little memorization of canonical texts, and even less appeal to the authority of the sages of antiquity: "Let the tutor make his charge pass everything through a sieve and lodge nothing in his head on mere authority and trust: let not Aristotle's principles be principles to him any more than those of the Stoics or Epicureans…. He must imbibe their ways of thinking, not learn their precepts" (1.26.111, VS151).

Again Montaigne emphasizes the role of practice in the formation of judgment: "I wish Paluel or Pompey, those fine dancers of my time, could teach us capers just by performing them before us and without moving us from our seats, as those people want to train our understanding without setting it in motion; or that we could be taught to handle a horse, or a pike, or a lute, or our voice, without practicing at it, as those people want to

teach us to judge well and speak well, without having practice either speaking or judging" (1.26.112, VS152). In training the student to judge for himself, "everything that comes before our eyes is book enough: a page's prank, a servant's blunder, a remark at table, are so many new materials" (1.26.112, VS152). In addition to the cultivation of the student's judgment, Montaigne insists that his student be taught the social graces. The student must be taught silence and modesty, to be patient with others and tolerant of things not to his liking (1.26.113, VS153). Not only is the teacher to attend to the soul of his student, but he must also attend to the student's body. Thus Montaigne recommends rigorous physical activity and tests of endurance. The student should become tough both at work and at play: "Let a young man boldly be made fit for all nations and companies, even for dissoluteness and excess, if need be…. He will laugh, he will carouse, he will dissipate with his prince. Even in dissipation I want him to outdo his comrades in vigor and endurance; and I want him to refrain from doing evil, not for a lack of power or knowledge, but for a lack of will" (1.26.123, VS167).

Most important is to cultivate a good will in the student: "it seems to me that the first lessons in which we should steep his mind must be those that regulate his behavior (*meurs*) and his sense (*sens*), that will teach him to know himself and to die well and live well" (1.26.117, VS159). For Montaigne, this project can be expressed in terms of the cultivation of moral judgment, a task that in "Of the education of children" he delegates to philosophy-as-morals. Thus in that chapter Montaigne prescribes that the "lessons of philosophy – by which human actions must be measured as their rule" (1.26.117, VS158) – should be taught to children:

> Since it is philosophy that teaches us to live, and since there is a lesson in it for childhood as well as for the other ages, why is it not imparted to children?

> …They teach us to live, when life is past. A hundred students have caught the syphilis before they came to Aristotle's lesson on temperance…. Our child is in much more of a hurry: he owes to education only the first fifteen or sixteen years of his life; the rest he owes to action. Let us use so short a time for the necessary teachings. The others are abuses: away with all those thorny subtleties of dialectics, by which our lives cannot be amended. Take the simple teachings of philosophy, know how to choose them and treat them at the right time; they are easier to understand than a tale of Boccaccio. (1.26.120, VS162)

The lessons of philosophy to be appropriated by the student cover nearly every aspect of moral conduct: "He will be told (*on luy dira*)… what it is to know and not know, and what must be the aim of study; what are valor, temperance, and justice; what the difference is between ambition and avarice, servitude and submission, license and liberty; by what signs we may recognize true and solid contentment; how much we should fear death, pain, and shame… what springs move us, and the cause of such different impulses in us" (1.26.117, VS159). Here, then, "philosophy" is conceived as a store of moral wisdom from which the teacher will draw in educating the student to "be able to do all things, and love to do only the good" (1.26.123, VS167).

The end of the education which Montaigne prescribes is the learning of what he calls "a new lesson": "that the value and height of true virtue lies in the ease, utility, and pleasure of its practice, which is so far from being difficult that children can master it as well as men, the simple as well as the subtle. Virtue's tool is moderation, not strength" (1.26.120, VS162). At first glance, we may well wonder why it is that we are supposed to believe that this "new lesson" will be easy to learn. After all, if it were so easy and pleasant, would not the world be a better place than it is? Yet we must not forget that this is a lesson that Montaigne prescribes to be taught to *children*, as a part of an education in moral judgment, or conscience. As we saw above, to educate the conscience is to educate the sentiments: "Where their profit is, let their frolic be also. Healthy foods should be

sweetened for the child, and harmful ones dipped in gall" (1.26.123, VS166). Montaigne writes: "my tutor… knows he must fill his pupil's mind as much, or more, with affection as with reverence for virtue" (1.26.119, VS161). Thus after describing his own education, he concludes: "To return to my subject, there is nothing like arousing appetite and affection; otherwise all you make out of them is asses loaded with books. By dint of whipping, they are given their pocketful of learning for safekeeping; but if learning is to do us any good, we must not merely lodge it within us, we must espouse it" (1.26.131, VS177). Virtue will be easy, then, because goodness and innocence will be instilled in the child in such a way that they become a part of the child's *conscience et meurs*. For such a child, virtue will be as easy and pleasant as it is for Montaigne himself.

The objective Good: The moral life

From Montaigne's praise of Epaminondas and his program for the education of children, then, a picture of the objective goal of human life begins to emerge. It is neither Aristotle's life of contemplation nor the life of political excellence. For while Epaminondas was certainly a public figure, his goodness and innocence are matched by Montaigne, who goes to great lengths to emphasize the fact that he has led a private life in which glorious deeds are conspicuously absent. Indeed, Montaigne is explicit on this point: "I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the entire form of man's estate (*chaque homme porte la forme entiere de l'humaine condition*)" (3.2.611, VS805). Bearing the entire form of the human condition

brings with it both limits and obligations. Human beings are not angels, and ought not to expect to be perfect. Thus Montaigne declares that his conscience is content with itself, "not as the conscience of an angel or a horse, but as the conscience of a man" (3.2.612, VS806). Those who forget this fact tend to fail to satisfy the obligations that come with the human condition: "Between ourselves, these are two things that I have always observed to be in singular accord: supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct" (3.13.856, VS1115). The obligations that we have are obligations not only to ourselves but to all living things, and they arise for us due to our very humanity: "There is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it" (2.11.318, VS435). To fulfill these obligations, to live a life of goodness and humanity, is to play the role of the human being appropriately. It is our inheritance of ancient conceptions of virtue and the best life that prevent us from recognizing wherein true human excellence lies:

> We are great fools. "He has spent his life in idleness," we say; "I have done nothing today." What, have you not lived? That is not only the fundamental but the most illustrious of your occupations. "If I had been placed in a position to manage great affairs, I would have shown what I could do." Have you been able to think out and manage your own life? You have done the greatest task of all. To show and exploit her resources Nature has no need of fortune; she shows herself equally on all levels and behind a curtain as well as without one. To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquility in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately. (3.13.850, VS1108) [186]

[186]Cf. 3.2.614, VS809: "To scold, to laugh, to sell, to pay, to love, to hate, and to deal pleasantly and justly with our household and with ourselves, not to let ourselves go, not to be false to ourselves, that is a rarer matter [than commanding men, conducting an embassy, governing a people], more difficult and less noticeable."

Just as Montaigne departs from ancient conceptions of the Good life, so he departs from the Christian understanding of the human end.[187] Although Montaigne appeals to Christian virtues such as innocence, mercy, and gentleness, he removes them from their theological context. The goal of life is not salvation; rather, it is to lead a moral life in the present world: "Death is indeed the end, but not therefore the goal (*le but*), of life; it is its finish, its extremity, but not therefore its object. Life should be an aim (*visée*) unto itself, a purpose (*dessein*) unto itself; its rightful study is to regulate, conduct, and suffer itself" (3.12.805, VS1051). As commentators have remarked, Montaigne's moral discourse gives the impression that our primary ethical relationships are with others and ourselves, not with God.[188] Thus cruelty is the worst vice, followed by dishonesty.[189] Yet Montaigne does not completely remove God from his conception of the Good life; God's law is the objective moral order that produces our universal obligation *qua* human beings, to live moral lives. Nonetheless, the God to whom Montaigne appeals in his moral discourse resembles more closely the God of Socrates than the God of Aquinas.

The Good life according to Montaigne, then, is similar to what we would today call a "moral" life. Alasdair McIntyre suggests that the word "moral" acquires its present sense sometime during the period between 1630 and 1850, during which "morality"

---

[187] See Marcel Conche, *Montaigne ou la conscience heureuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 11-25. Conche argues that Montaigne's morality is un-Christian in that love is not its centerpiece and the obligation to aid others is limited in ways that it is not limited for Christians.

[188] See Shklar, 43-44: Montaigne is the first to take cruelty to be the worst human vice. Ann Hartle, "Cruelty, Liberalism, and Liberal Education," *The Common Good* Vol.15 No. 2 (2006): 9 cites Montaigne's new ranking of the vices as marking a shift from understanding evil as a transgression of divine law to understanding it in terms of harm done to other human beings. See also Gauna, 65, who argues that Montaigne's ethics is based on the premise that pain defines what is bad. Such an ethical foundation locates the primary ethical relation as existing between human beings.

[189] Thus Hallie, "The Ethics of Montaigne's 'De la cruauté,'" 167, argues that Montaigne initiates a shift from an ego-centered morality in which the primary concern is the soul of the ethical subject to a relational morality in which the primary concern is "man's interaction with his fellow creatures."

became "the name for that particular sphere in which rules of conduct which are neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic are allowed a cultural space of their own."[190] Montaigne's conception of the Good life closely resembles this modern understanding of morality insofar as it imposes universal obligations upon human beings without privileging any particular religious commitments or comprehensive doctrines. The moral life we are all obligated to live does not necessarily involve any particular system of religious or metaphysical beliefs. Montaigne is famously tolerant of views that differ fundamentally from his own: "Because I feel myself tied down to one form, I do not oblige everybody else to espouse it, as all others do. I believe in and conceive a thousand contrary ways of life (*façons de vie*); and in contrast with the common run of men, I more easily admit difference than resemblance between us. I am as ready as you please to acquit another man from sharing my conditions and principles. I consider him simply in himself, without relation to others; I mold him to his own model" (1.37.169, VS229). Montaigne is willing to accept a thousand contrary ways of life because he takes it for granted that individuals can lead objectively Good lives while also pursuing other more idiosyncratic ends. Among those idiosyncratic ends is what Montaigne would call "happiness."

The subjective good: happiness

The ultimate end that Montaigne seeks is happiness, which he understands to be a form of satisfaction expressed by such terms as *bonheur*, *contentement*, *tranquilité*, and *felicité*. These terms denote a subjective sense of well-being: "Each man is as well or

[190] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1994), 39.

badly off (*bien ou mal*) as he thinks he is. Not the man of whom it is thought, but the one who thinks it of himself, is happy (*content*). And by just this fact belief gains reality and truth" (1.14.46, VS67). Marcel Conche has called this "*le 'Cogito' eudaimonique de Montaigne*": I think I am happy; therefore I am happy.[191] While goodness is the objective and universal Good, happiness, then, is the subjective and particular good that each man seeks for himself. Thus Montaigne writes: "All the glory that I aspire to in my life is to have lived it tranquilly – tranquilly not according to Metrodorus or Arcesilaus or Aristippus, but according to me. Since philosophy has not been able to find a way to tranquility that is suitable to all, let everyone seek it individually" (2.16.471, VS622).

Philosophy has not been able to find a common way to happiness for all because it has failed to pay attention to the particular. Montaigne finds more differences than similarities among human beings: "Plutarch says somewhere that he does not find so much difference between one animal and another as he does between one man and another…. I would willingly outdo Plutarch and say that there is more difference from a given man to a given man than from a given man to a given animal" (1.42.189, VS258). Thus he is given to talk more of human natures than human nature. For custom and habit form us in such a way that our natures are best understood in terms of their particularity: "It is for habit to give form to our life, just as it pleases; it is all powerful in that; it is Circe's drink, which varies our nature (*nostre nature*) as it sees fit" (3.13.827, VS1080). Thus Montaigne talks of happiness as private and particular: "Men are diverse in inclination and strength; they must be led to their own good (*à leur bien*) according to their nature and by diverse routes" (3.12.805, VS1052). According to Montaigne, then, the nature of one's happiness is determined not by one's participation in the human

[191] Conche, *Montaigne ou la conscience heureuse*, 98.

species but rather by the nature of one's "*forme maistresse*," that ruling pattern that each individual feels to be all his own and that manifests itself in one's inclinations and conduct (3.2.615, VS811).

In "Of solitude" Montaigne writes that "the greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself" (1.39.178, VS242). It seems to me that this expression, "to belong to oneself," characterizes what happiness is for Montaigne. For to enjoy the sense of well-being that Montaigne equates with happiness, one must enjoy one's being. To Montaigne this means having a conscience at peace with itself: "I customarily do wholeheartedly whatever I do, and go my way all in one piece" (3.2.616, VS812). This is why he does not repent often: "My actions are in order and conformity with what I am and with my condition. I can do no better. And repentance does not properly apply to the things that are not in our power; rather does regret" (3.2.617, VS813). Enjoying one's being also means being satisfied with the pleasures that one's life has to offer: "It takes management to enjoy life. I enjoy it twice as much as others, for the measure of enjoyment depends on the greater or lesser attention that we lend it" (3.13.853, VS1111). This satisfaction, both with himself and with his life, is what Montaigne takes happiness to be *for him*, because it corresponds to the nature, or *forme maitresse* with which he finds himself. For someone else, who possesses a different *forme maitresse*, happiness will be different.

Naturally this raises the question: How does the universal and objective end of goodness relate to the particular and subjective ends of happiness in the lives of individuals? It seems that this will depend on the individual. On the one hand, if one has been poorly brought up or has an incurably bad nature (a possibility that Montaigne

considers at 1.26.120, VS162), then the necessary conditions for one's happiness may conflict with one's objective (and therefore perhaps unrecognized) duty to live a moral life. On the other hand, if one's conscience and *meurs* have been well-cultivated, then the possible paths to one's happiness will be limited by one's affection for what is objectively good. That is, one will only find happiness in activities that are consistent with morality. Thus the happiness of those who lead moral lives may take a variety of shapes. For some it may be that happiness involves the consolations of Christianity while for others it may require abandoning the Christian faith for a life dedicated to secular humanism. Thus there is room for disagreement about questions of religion and ultimate reality among those whose lives express the human Good. This would seem to explain Montaigne's well-known openness to opinions different from his own, especially in matters of religion and politics: "I do not hate all opinions contrary to mine. I am so far from being vexed to see discord between my judgments and others, and from making myself incompatible with the society of men because they are of a different sentiment and party from mine, that on the contrary, since variety is the most general fashion that nature has followed, and more in minds than bodies, inasmuch as minds are of a substance suppler and susceptible of more forms, I find it much rarer to see our humors and plans agree" (2.37.598, VS785).

Conclusion

Where, then, does philosophy fit into this picture of the human goods? It seems that philosophy-as-morals actually constitutes the objectively Good life, insofar as it

refers to the *meurs* that make humans objectively Good. To be a philosopher in this sense simply means to live a moral life; there are no particular metaphysical or religious doctrines involved in being a philosopher in this sense. Thus we can say of anyone who lives a life of goodness and innocence that he is a philosopher, regardless of whether his basic beliefs correspond to a Christian, Muslim, or secular worldview. In this sense Montaigne is a philosopher of the accidental variety. Philosophy-as-essaying, however, is not a necessary condition for the objectively Good life. To those who have a deep-seated desire to understand themselves and to live their lives wakefully, it may seem to be a necessary part of the happy life. Such is the case with Montaigne. But as it is a morally-neutral activity, that is, an activity that does not necessarily have any salutary effects on one's character, philosophy-as-essaying is not a necessary ingredient for the moral life. One can achieve the human Good without seeking the self-knowledge of the essayist. Thus Montaigne consistently valorizes those who live moral lives in a simple manner, without troubling themselves with learning and philosophical reflection.

In "To the reader," Montaigne assures us that in writing his *Essais* he has only a private and domestic end. I have argued that we should take him at his word: that he writes his *Essais* as part of an effort to work on himself by cultivating his judgment and the intellectual habits of the philosopher-as-essayist. Yet he clearly has other concerns in mind when he sends his book out into the public realm. He admits as much in "Of giving the lie": "I listen to my reveries because I have to record them. How many times, irritated by some action that civility and reason kept me from reproving openly, have I disgorged it here, not without ideas of instructing the public!" (2.18.504, VS665). It

seems to me that that this tension - between writing for oneself and writing for others - is resolved by a remark that Montaigne makes in "Of practice": "What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but a lesson for me. And yet it should not be held against me if I publish what I write. What is useful to me may also by accident be useful to another" (2.6.272, VS377).[192]

In writing his *Essais,* Montaigne simultaneously engages in the pursuit of self-knowledge and the project of self-revelation. Studying himself, he comes to recognize that his character is "a bit new and unusual" (3.9.749, VS980), and that it deserves the consideration of those "few souls so orderly, so strong and wellborn, that they can be trusted with their own guidance, and that can sail with moderation and without temerity, in the freedom of their judgments, beyond the common opinions" (2.12.420, VS559). Thus he offers a portrait of himself to the outside world.[193] Not in the manner of a teacher instructing his students, but rather in the non-authoritative style of a participant in a conversation.[194] He writes: "I set forth notions that are human and my own, simply as human notions considered in themselves, not as determined and decreed by heavenly ordinance and permitting neither doubt nor dispute; matter of opinion, not matter of faith; what I reason out according to me, not what I believe according to God; as children set forth their essays to be instructed, not to instruct" (1.56.234, VS323). Montaigne presents himself to the public in order to communicate human possibilities, both moral and

---

[192] On the accidental authority of Montaigne's example, see Hartle, *Montaigne,* 193-194.

[193] Jerome Schwartz, "'La Conscience d'un Homme': Reflections on the Problem of Conscience in the *Essais*" in *O un amy! Essays in Honor of Donald M. Frame* (Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1977), 271, puts the dual task of Montaigne's book nicely: "To write a book like the *Essais* is to put one's conscience on display and, in addition, to be self-conscious about it, to observe the act of self-revelation, and to make of one's conscience an object of reflection." I would add, of course, that not only are Montaigne's conscience and moral character on display and being self-consciously examined, but also his intellectual character.

[194] See Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen and Co., 1962), 489-490.

intellectual, that go against the grain of common practice and opinion. In this way he not only essays himself, but he invites his readers to essay themselves by reflecting on the figure, a little bit new and unusual, that his *Essais* reveal.

Bibliography

Abecassis, Jack. "'Des cannibales' et la logique de la representation de l'alterité chez Montaigne" *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne* VIIe série, no. 29-32 (1993):195-208.

_____. "'Le Maire et Montaigne ont tousjours este deux, d'une separation bien claire': Public Necessity and Private Freedom in Montaigne," *MLN* 110, no. 5 (1995): 1067-1089.

Adorno, T.W. "The Essay as Form." *New German Critique* 32 (Spring 1984): 151-171.

Aristotle. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

_____. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Martin Ostwald. Upper Saddle River: Library of Liberal Arts, 1999.

Auerbach, Eric. "L'humaine condition." In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask, 285-312. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

Bacon, Francis. *The Essays of Francis Bacon*. Edited by Clark Sutherland Northup. Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1936.

Berry, Jessica. "The Pyrrhonian Revival in Montaigne and Nietzsche." *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 3 (July 2004): 497-514.

Bouwsma, William J. *The Waning of the Renaissance: 1550-1640.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Brahami, Frédéric. "'Être à soi': la place du politique dans les *Essais*." In *Montaigne Politique: Actes du colloque international tenu à University of Chicago Paris les 29 et 30 avril 2005*, edited by Philippe Desan, 39-56. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006.

_____. *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

_____. "Théologie, religion, vérité chez Montaigne." In *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*, edited by Philippe Desan, André Tournon, Frédéric Brahami, Bernard Sève, 39-48. Geneva: Droz, 2008.

Brown, Frieda S. “De la solitude: A Re-examination of Montaigne’s Retreat from Public Life.” In *From Marot to Montaigne: Essays on French Renaissance Literature*, edited by Raymond C. La Charité. *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 19 (1972): 137-46.

Craig Brush, “Montaigne Tries Out Self-Study.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 20 (1980): 25-35.

Burrow, Colin. “Frisks, Skips, and Jumps.” *London Review of Books* 25, no. 21 (November 2003): 21-22.

Carraud, Vincent, and J.-L. Marion, eds. *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

Cave, Terence. *How to Read Montaigne*. London: Granta Books, 2007.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *De Natura Deorum, Academica*. Translated by H. Rackam. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933.

_____. *On Moral Ends*. Translated by Rachel Woolf. Edited by Julia Annas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Compayré, Gabriel. *Montaigne and Education of the Judgment*. Translated by J.E. Mansion. New York: Thomas E. Crowell, 1908.

Conche, Marcel. *Montaigne et la philosophie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996.

_____. *Montaigne ou la conscience heureuse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002.

_____. “Montaigne, penseur de la philosophie.” In *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie*, edited by Vincent Carraud and Jean-Luc Marion, 175-196. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

Curley, E.M. “Skepticism and Toleration: The Case of Montaigne.” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy Vol. 2*, edited by Daniel Garber, 1-33. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.

Defaux, Gerard. “Un cannibal en haut de chausses: Montaigne, la différence et la logique de l’identité.” *MLN* 97 (1982): 919-57.

Demonet, Marie-Luce. *À plaisir: Semiotique et scepticisme chez Montaigne*. Orléans: Editions Paradigme, 2002.

Demonet, Marie-Luce, and Alain Legros, eds. *L’écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004.

Desan, Philippe. "Apology de Sebond ou justification de Montaigne?" In *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*, edited by Philippe Desan, André Tournon, Frédéric Brahami, Bernard Sève, 175-197. Geneva: Droz, 2008.

_____. "Montaigne et le doute judiciaire" in *L'écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne*, edited by Marie-Luce Demonet and Alain Legros, 179-187.

_____, ed. *Montaigne Politique: Actes du colloque international tenu à University of Chicago Paris les 29 et 30 avril 2205*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006.

Desan, Philippe, André Tournon, Frédéric Brahami, and Bernard Sève, eds. *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie.* Geneva: Droz, 2008.

Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method and Meditations*. Translated by Laurence Lafleur. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1952.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic." In *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher, 284-301. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957.

Epstein, Joseph. "The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery." In *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, edited by Joseph Epstein, 11-24. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Flynn, Thomas. "Philosophy as a Way of Life: Foucault and Hadot." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (2005): 609-622.

Force, Pierre. "Innovation As Spiritual Exercise: Montaigne and Pascal." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66. no.1 (2005): 17-35.

Foucault, Michel. *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Vol. 1, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. Translated by Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 1997.

_____. *Fearless Speech*. Edited by Joseph Pearson. Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2001.

_____. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

_____. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 3, *The Care of the Self*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

_____. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Edited by Luther H. Martin and Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

Frame, Donald M. *Montaigne's Discovery of Man: The Humanization of a Humanist*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1955.

Friedrich, Hugo. *Montaigne*. Edited by Philippe Desan. Translated by Dawn Eng. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Gauna, Max. *Montaigne and the Ethics of Compassion*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000.

Giocanti, Sylvia. *Penser l'irrésolution:Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer: Trois itineraries sceptiques*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998.

Gontier, Thierry. "L'essai et l'expérience: le scepticisme montaigniste par-delà le fidéisme." In *L'écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne*, edited by Marie-Luce Demonet and Alain Legros, 223-237. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004.

Gray, Floyd. "Montaigne's Pyrrhonism." In *O un amy! Essays on Montaigne in Honor of Donald M. Frame*, edited by Raymond C. La Charité, 119-136. Lexington.: French Forum Publishers, 1977.

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Edited by Arnold Davidson. Translated by Michael Chase. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995.

Hallie, Philip. "The Ethics of Montaigne's '*De la cruauté*.'" In *O un amy! Essays on Montaigne in Honor of Donald M. Frame*, edited by Raymond C. La Charité, 156-171. Lexington, Ky.: French Forum Publishers, 1977.

_____. *The Scar of Montaigne: An Essay in Personal Philosophy*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966.

Hampshire, Stuart. Introduction to *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Works*, translated by Donald M Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Handler, Richard. "Of Cannibals and Custom: Montaigne's Cultural Relativism." *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 5 (1986): 12-14.

Hansen, David T. "Montaigne and the Values in Educating Judgment," *Philosophy of Education* (2002): 237-244.

_____. "Well-Formed, Not Well-Filled: Montaigne and the Paths of Personhood." *Educational Theory* 52, no. 2 (2002): 127-154.

Hartle, Ann. "Autonomy and Cruelty: Rorty and Montaigne on the Social Bond." In *Democracy Reconsidered, ed. Elizabeth Kaufer Busch and Peter Augustine Lawler*. New York: Lexington Books, 2009.

_____. "Cruelty, Liberalism, and Liberal Education." *The Common Good* 15, no. 2 (2006): 8-12.

_____. *Michel de Montaigne*: *Accidental Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Hiley, David R. "The Politics of Skepticism: Reading Montaigne." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1992): 379-399.

Hiley, David, and Charles B. Guignon. "Biting the Bullett: Rorty on Private and Public Morality." In *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature *and Beyond*, edited by Alan R. Malachowski, 358-361.Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Keohane, Nannerl. "Montaigne's Individualism." *Political Theory* 5, no.3 (1977): 363-390.

La Charité, Raymond C. *The Concept of Judgment in Montaigne*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968.

_____, ed. *From Marot to Montaigne: Essays on French Renaissance Literature. Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 19 (1972).

_____, ed. *O un amy! Essays on Montaigne in Honor of Donald M. Frame*. Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1977.

Larmore, Charles. "Un scepticisme sans tranquillité: Montaigne et ses modèles antiques." In *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie*, edited by V. Carraud and J.-L. Marion, 15-31. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

Levine, Alan. *Sensual Philosophy: Toleration, Skepticism, and Montaigne's Politics of the Self*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Histoire de Lynx*. Paris: Plon, 1991.

Limbrick, Elaine. "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonian?" *Bibliothéque d'humanisme et renaissance* 39 (1977): 67-80.

Locher, Caroline. "Primary and Secondary Themes in Montaigne's *Des cannibales*." *French Forum* 1 (1976): 119-126.

Long, A.A. and David Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1994.

Maclean, Ian. *Montaigne philosophe*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996.

_____. "'Le païs au delà': Montaigne and Philosophical Speculation.: In *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, edited by I.D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean, 101-32. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Malachowski, Alan R., ed. *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature *and Beyond*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Marchi, Dudley. "Montaigne: A Practical Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century." *Montaigne Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (2000): 147-166.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Reading Montaigne." In *Signs*, translated by Richard C. McCleary, 198-210. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Miernowski, Jan. *L'Ontologie de la contradiction sceptique: Pour l'étude de la métaphysique des Essais*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998.

Montaigne, Michel de. *Essais*. 2nd Ed. Edited by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992.

_____. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943.

_____. *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Works*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Nacas, Athanase "Le sens du mot *essai* et les intentions de Montaigne." *Bulletin de la societé des amis de Montaigne* VIè série, no.3-4 (1980): 87-96.

Navarro-Reyes, Jesús. "Le divin interlocuteur: le souci de soi, la confession et l'essai." In *Dieu à nostre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*, edited by Philippe Desan, André Tournon, Frédéric Brahami, Bernard Sève, 221-240. Geneva: Droz, 2008.

Nehamas, Alexander. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Neiman, Alven. "Ironic Schooling: Socrates, Pragmatism and the Higher Learning." *Educational Theory* 41, no. 4 (1991): 371-384.

Oakeshott, Michael. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. London: Methuen and Co., 1962. Reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991.

O'Neill, John. *Essaying Montaigne: A Study of the Renaissance Institution of Writing and Reading.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

_____. "The Essay as a Moral Exercise: Montaigne." *Renaissance and Reformation* 9 (1985): 209-18.

Panichi, Nicola. *Liens à renouer: Scepticisme, possibilité, imagination politique chez Montaigne*. Translated by Jean-Pierre Fauquier. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008.

Popkin, Richard. *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

Pouilloux, Jean-Yves. *Montaigne, L'éveil de la pensée*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995.

Poulet, Georges. "Montaigne." In *Studies in Human Time*, translated by Elliot Coleman, 39-49. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956.

Quint, David. *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Ragghianti, Renzo. "Montaigne lecteur sceptique de l'*Ecclésiaste*." *Montaigne Studies* 21 (2009): 137-153.

Regosin, Richard. *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's Essais as the Book of the Self*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Rendall, Steven. "Dialogical Structure and Tactics in Montaigne's 'Of cannibals.'" *Pacific Coast Philology* 12 (1997): 56-63.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

_____. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

_____. "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," In *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature *and Beyond*, edited by Alan R. Malachowski, 279-302. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Sayce, Richard. *The Essays of Montaigne: A Critical Exploration*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972.

Screech, M.A. *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essay*. London: Duckworth, 1983.

Schaefer, David Lewis. *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Schiffman, Zachary. *On the Threshold of Modernity: Relativism in the French Renaissance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Schwartz, Jerome. "'La Conscience d'un Homme': Reflections on the Problem of Conscience in the *Essais*." In *O un amy! Essays in Honor of Donald M. Frame*, edited by Raymond C. La Charité, 242-276. Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1977.

Shklar, Judith. *Ordinary Vices*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Sedley, David. "The Motivation of Greek Scepticism." In *The Skeptical Tradition,* edited by M. Burnyeat, 9-30. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Sedley, David. "Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne." *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 113 (October 1998): 1079-92.

Sève, Bernard. *Montaigne. Des règles pour l'esprit*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007.

_____. "Les 'vaines subtilitez': Montaigne et le renversement du pour et contre." *Montaigne Studies* 16 (2004): 185-196.

Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Scepticism*. Translated by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Shusterman, Richard. *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Starobinski, Jean. *Montaigne in Motion*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Striker, Gisela. *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Struever, Nancy S. *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "L'Etre et l'Autre: Montaigne." *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 113-144.

Tournon, André. “Les convictions d’un sceptique.” *Cuardenos de Filología Francesca 10* (1997-1998): 83-97.

Walton, Craig. “Montaigne on The Art of Judgment: The Trial of Montaigne.” In *The Skeptical Mode in Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Richard Popkin*, edited by Richard A. Watson and James E. Force, 87-102. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1988.

Wild, Markus. “Les deux pyrrhonismes de Montaigne.” *Bulletin de la sociéte des amis de Montaigne VIIIè Série*, no.19-20 (2000): 45-56.

Winch, Peter. “Understanding a Primitive Society.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 307-324.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. Edited by G.H. von Wright. Translated by Peter Winch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Woolf, Virginia. “Montaigne.” In *The Common Reader,* 87-100. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925.

Zalloua, Zahi. “Montaigne, Seneca, and ‘le Soing de la Culture de l’Ame.’” *Montaigne Studies* 21 (2009): 155-168.