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Accidental Philosopher

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Note on the Texts

References to the French text of the *Essais* are to the edition by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, "Quadrige," 1992). The English translation is that of Donald Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1943). The citation (VS16; F9), for example, refers to p. 16 of the Villey-Saulnier edition and to p. 9 of the Frame translation. In some instances, I have emended Frame's translation. I have consulted the translation by M. A. Screech, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne* (London: Penguin Press, 1991). References to the Screech translations are cited by the letter S and the page number – (S614), for example.

Introduction

This book is intended to show that Michel de Montaigne is a philosopher – that is, that he takes up the most fundamental philosophical questions in a profoundly original, comprehensive, and coherent way. Although his *Essays* have always been acknowledged as the origin of a new literary genre, they have never been recognized as philosophical in the deepest sense. Montaigne invented the essay because his thought could not be expressed in the traditional philosophical forms.

Those who have written on the philosophical aspects of the *Essays* have generally placed Montaigne in one or more of three categories. They have seen him as a skeptic of some kind, as a humanist, or as having evolved in his thought through Stoic, Skeptical, and Epicurean stages. Each of these views does capture something of the tone and substance of the *Essays*, but all are partial and none is as radical as Montaigne's own thought.

The interpretation I present here is based on the moment of self-discovery that occurs in the "Apology for Sebond." Montaigne is "a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!" I take him at his word: what he is doing in the *Essays* has never been done before.

Montaigne, then, breaks with both ancient philosophy and medieval theology. Is he, therefore, the first modern? If modernity is essentially the progress of autonomous reason that culminates in the Enlightenment, then Montaigne is not a modern philosopher. His philosophical position and the essay form in which it is embodied constitute a rejection of the claim to authority of autonomous reason, a claim that he recognized in its earliest stirrings.

Because Montaigne is a critic of modernity, can we then say that he is, as Lyotard has it, a postmodern thinker?[1] There are indeed several aspects of Montaigne's critique of modernity that postmodernists would find attractive and sympathetic. But Montaigne is deeply at odds with the most fundamental claims of postmodernism. His rejection of the authority of autonomous reason does not imply a rejection of the possibility of truth.

His affirmation of human diversity does not entail a denial of a common bond of truth.

It would not, then, be appropriate to characterize Montaigne as either modern or postmodern. It would be more accurate to locate him within the premodern tradition of classical thought and Christianity.[2] That is, his break with ancient philosophy and medieval theology is the kind of break that actually carries the tradition forward by deepening it.

George Steiner's critique of modern and postmodern hermeneutics can be taken, in reverse, as a description of Montaigne's relation to the premodern tradition: "What we have done since the masked scepticism of Spinoza, since the critiques of the rationalist Enlightenment and since the positivism of the nineteenth century, is to borrow vital currency, vital investments and contracts of trust from the bank or treasure-house of theology. It is from there that we have borrowed our theories of the symbol, our use of the iconic, our idiom of poetic creation and aura. It is loans of terminology and reference from the reserves of theology which provide the master readers in our time (such as Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger) with their license to practice. We have borrowed, traded upon, made small change of the reserves of transcendent authority. At its key points of discourse and inference, hermeneutics and aesthetics in our secular, agnostic civilization are a more or less conscious, a more or less embarrassed act of larceny."[3] The *Essays* are unintelligible apart from the context of transcendent authority.

Steiner's account of "true reading," on the other hand, captures precisely the ontological condition for the *Essays*: "To be 'indwelt' by music, art, literature, to be made responsible, answerable to such habitation as a host is to a guest – perhaps unknown, unexpected – at evening, is to experience the *commonplace mystery of a real presence*. . . . Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text . . . *incarnates* (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) *a real presence of significant being*. This real presence, as in an icon, as in the enacted metaphor of the sacramental bread and wine, is, finally, irreducible to any other formal articulation, to any analytic deconstruction or paraphrase. It is a singularity in which concept and form constitute a tautology, coincide point to point, energy to energy, in that excess of significance over all discrete elements and codes of meaning which we call the symbol or the agency of transparence. These are not occult notions. They are of the immensity of the commonplace."[4]

At the end of the preface to his historical study of Montaigne, Hugo Friedrich invites philosophers to provide a philosophical interpretation of Montaigne's thought. That is what I attempt to do here. My account of Montaigne locates him in relation to the philosophical tradition, especially because he himself defines his originality in relation to that tradition. But this book is not a historical study or a work in the history of ideas. I do not attempt to understand Montaigne within the historical context of the Renaissance and, in particular, I do not claim to treat his views on faith and

religion within the full context of Renaissance and medieval theology. My interpretation is conceptual rather than historical.

Part I takes up the ways in which Montaigne breaks with the philosophical-theological tradition and presents himself as a "new figure." In Chapter 1 I discuss the differences between Montaigne and the ancient skeptics, and I show that there is indeed a skeptical moment in Montaigne's mode of thought but that this is a moment of openness to the possible rather than a suspension of judgment. In particular, I argue that Montaigne's apparent credulity, especially with respect to the stories he borrows from Plutarch, is compatible with this skepticism. Montaigne incorporates the skeptical moment into the dialectical movement of his thought: the moment of openness to the possible allows him to find the strange in the familiar.

The mode of philosophy from which Montaigne distinguishes himself most explicitly is what I refer to as "deliberate philosophy" (in contrast with his own accidental philosophy). Deliberate philosophy is the exercise of reason as rule within the soul, a place and function that reason claims for itself on the basis of its superiority within the hierarchy of nature. Indeed, reason asserts its own divinity insofar as it sees itself at one with the divine ruling principle within the whole. Montaigne criticizes and ridicules the deliberate philosophers' pretensions to divinity by reminding them in vivid and often comic terms of their bodies, of the most base and shameful bodily functions, of their vulnerability to all of the accidents of human life, and thus of the human condition that they share in common with the lowliest and most ignorant.

I conclude Chapter 1 with a preliminary account of what accidental philosophy is. First, in contrast with deliberate philosophy, accidental philosophy is nonauthoritative and purely human. Accidental philosophy implies that truth is prephilosophical and prereflective: the truth that is discovered is just the truth that was already there. Second, accidental philosophy is circular dialectic: thought moves from the common and familiar to the rare and strange, then returns to find the rare in the common and the strange in the familiar. Third, accidental philosophy involves getting beyond what Montaigne calls "the appearance of the first sense." Those who stop at the first sense remain in error. The essay uncovers, through circular dialectic, a deeper, second sense. The struggle with error that is implicit in the dialectic suggests that the meaning of Montaigne's title, *essai,* is "temptation": the essays are Montaigne's way of living the life of the intellect, the examined life, within the inescapable condition of the temptations of the intellect. Finally, what must being be if philosophy is accidental? Accidental philosophy implies that the world is a radically contingent, created world.

Chapter 2 deals with Montaigne's treatment of the traditional metaphysical categories: being and becoming, nature, causality, the particular and the universal. In each case, he transforms the meaning of the terms, not by stipulating or inventing new definitions, but by "lowering" them, that is,

bringing them back to their prephilosophical meanings. In the minds of the learned, being is an abstract notion, far removed from what is common and familiar. In the *Essays*, being is revealed as the accidental particular. Nature has become the ideal of perfection from which we have fallen and the measure against which we must be judged. Montaigne blurs the distinction between nature and custom, including habit in the meaning of nature. The primary distinction for him is not between nature and custom but between nature and learning, especially philosophy. Nature is just how we are here and now. "Human nature" becomes "the human condition." With respect to the metaphysical category of causality, Montaigne contrasts himself with Aristotle from the very beginning of the *Essays*. In "To the reader" he takes up Aristotle's four causes – final, formal, efficient, and material – and presents himself as deficient and defective in each case. He cannot reveal himself apart from his imperfections. His own accidental philosophy is not the search for causes: he distinguishes the search for causes from the discovery of truth. Finally, Montaigne resists the philosophical tendency to ascend to universals. The essays stay at the level of particulars, and Montaigne uses the language of images more than the philosophical language of universals. And yet, "each man bears the entire form of the human condition." Montaigne's presentation of his own particular – and very imperfect – self communicates the universal human condition. Why does Montaigne lower or weaken each of the traditional metaphysical categories? His way of inquiring into "that which is" presupposes that truth is present in the imprecision and richness of common language and opinion, not in the abstract metaphysical jargon of the schools.

The third chapter deals with the form of the essay as the proper mode for Montaigne's accidental philosophy. The meaning of *essai* as "trial" or "test" is explored in relation to the essay's circular mode of thought, and to the way in which the essay articulates "that which is." Montaigne presents several formulations of his purpose throughout the *Essays*: to tell his *mœurs*, to communicate himself, to encourage others to liberty, to give authority to accidental opinion, and to make his mind ashamed of itself. All of these formulations reveal a unity of intention, namely, an attack on a certain kind of rationalism.

Montaigne's audience, then, is that "middle region" of men who are prone to error but who are able to come through error and the presumption of the learned and to think for themselves. In this regard, Montaigne is the best example of an educated man who engages fully in what Oakeshott calls "the conversation of mankind." The metaphor of conversation raises the issue of Montaigne's practice of quotation. I identify three levels of quotation in the *Essays* and I argue that Montaigne's stance of quotation, as he moves among the three levels, reveals what it means to think for oneself. So also, the dialectic of history and poetry that runs through the essays implies a necessary relationship between "borrowed" truth and the ability to witness

what is before one's own eyes. The apparent disorder of the essays manifests an oracular origin in opinion; it is a daemonic-poetic order that allows to the accidental its role of discovery, in contrast to the premeditated outcome of the syllogism and the treatise.

Part II takes up the question of the meaning of accidental philosophy and the way in which Montaigne deepens the tradition. In Chapter 4 I set out the circular dialectic of accidental philosophy and show how it is circular, dialectical, accidental, and philosophical. I begin by discussing five essays and the first essay of each of the three books in order to trace out Montaigne's circular movement of thought. That circular movement might be described as a movement from low to high to low, from familiar to strange to familiar, from common to rare to common. Thought returns to its starting points and possesses those beginnings in a new way. Circular dialectic does not ascend from opinion to new knowledge. Rather, it brings to light the truth that was already there in opinion. Here I contrast Montaigne's circular dialectic with the skeptical mode of thought of Sextus Empiricus and Hume.

Montaigne refers to presumption as "our first and original malady" and as the greatest obstacle to wisdom. He recognizes two kinds of presumption, the presumption of the ignorant and the presumption of the learned. Circular dialectic overcomes both kinds of presumption and incorporates each of those moments of overcoming into its circular form. In order to see how Montaigne comes to terms with presumption, we must consider the ways in which he deals with the errors of presumption and the role of memory and imagination in overcoming presumption. His "monstrously deficient" memory is actually his freedom from the unexamined authority of both prephilosophical and philosophical opinion. His rich imagination allows him to be open to the unfamiliar and thus not subject to the presumption of the learned who dismiss as false whatever seems impossible to them. The imagination, when properly disciplined, is also essential for the proper formation of the judgment. Essay I.27, "It is folly to measure the true and the false by our own capacity," is one of the very few places where Montaigne reveals a decisive change in himself. That change is presented in terms of the two forms of presumption and it allows us to see that the circular dialectic is always a return to Montaigne himself: circular dialectic is the dialectic of self-knowledge.

The question about Montaigne over which there has been the deepest disagreement concerns his sincerity in religious matters. Some have argued that he is really an atheist who veils his atheism for rhetorical and political purposes. Others have seen him as a devout, orthodox (although perhaps weak) Christian. Between these extremes are the views of Montaigne as an unorthodox Christian, an indifferent Christian, and an agnostic. In Chapter 5 I begin to examine "what it means to believe" for Montaigne. The first section deals with the way in which Montaigne blurs the traditional theological distinction between nature and grace. Montaigne's attitude toward

"the world," death, and repentance and his criticisms of the Reformation reveal not an indifference to religion but his own way of understanding the life of faith. Montaigne's faith is present in the *Essays* at a level deeper than the level of learning: it is present as the pretheoretical background in terms of which the *Essays* are intelligible. Montaigne blurs the distinction between nature and grace not because he denies the presence of the sacred in human life but because he sees the presence of grace everywhere. Or, to put the matter in skeptical terms, human reason cannot make the distinction between nature and grace. In this sense, Montaigne's skepticism is his faith: faith cannot presume to know and does not need to know whether the cause of any given action is nature or grace.

In the second section I discuss the "Apology for Sebond," the essay that addresses most explicitly the question of faith. I argue that, in the "Apology," Montaigne works through the dialectic of faith and reason, a dialectic that is expressed in terms of the two objections to Sebond's natural theology and Montaigne's replies to those objections. The first objection is usually seen as the objection that faith makes to the project of natural theology: reason is a threat to faith. The second is usually seen as the objection that reason makes to faith: faith cannot command universal assent and, therefore, cannot defend itself before the court of reason. The tendency has been to see Montaigne as either an atheist (placing him on the side of the second objection) or as a fideist (placing him on the side of the first objection) or as a skeptic-fideist (placing him on the side of the first objection and interpreting his response to the second objection as a skeptical response to the claims of reason). Montaigne, however, responds to both objections, so that any attempt to place him simply on one side would be an inadequate account of his position. In interpreting the "Apology" as a dialectic, we can see how the understanding of faith expressed in the first objection (faith is belief held by particular divine inspiration) is transformed through the dialectic with the second objection, and how the understanding of reason expressed in the second objection is reformed through its dialectic with the first objection. Faith is not particular inspiration, and reason is not autonomous. The dialectical understanding of the "Apology" leads to the conclusion that the essay is indeed a defense of Sebond, but a defense of a transformed version of Sebond's most fundamental premise concerning the harmony of faith and reason.

In Chapter 6 I discuss the ontological dimension of Montaigne's thought by working out what is implied in the beginning and end of the circular dialectic of accidental philosophy. Circular dialectic begins in opinion and testimony. This implies a prereflective harmony of thought and being, the location of the mind in the human world of opinion, and a notion of experience as participation in custom. Beginning in testimony also suggests an openness to mystery, to truth that cannot be fully articulated because it cannot be fully comprehended by the witness. Heidegger's discussion of

"true humanism" is helpful in bringing out the ontological aspects of the *Essays*: for Heidegger, true humanism means that "the essence of man is essential for the truth of being." In its beginnings in opinion and testimony, we can identify an oracular and daemonic quality in thought itself in its openness to the essential mystery of being.

Circular dialectic ends in wonder at the most familiar. This implies an absolutely contingent, created world, a world created out of nothing and, at the same time, a world in which the divine is somehow present. Contingency is the fundamental condition for being and for thought. Montaigne's reconciliation to nothingness shows itself especially in the way he embraces our temporal condition. Creation out of nothing implies the ontological primacy of contingency and possibility. Therefore, being must be such as to allow for the most radical transformation, the "divine and miraculous metamorphosis" that Montaigne refers to at the end of the "Apology." Creation out of nothing also entails the complete absence of the divine from nature – that is, the divine is not a part of nature. This, in turn, means that the ancient hierarchy within nature, the ordering of nature in relation to the divine principle that is highest, can no longer be maintained. Accidental philosophy is the mode of philosophy in a world where the divine is present in the world in an astonishing way; that is, it implies a created and "incarnational" world. Distinctions can be made within this world but they are not the same kinds of distinctions that are made within a hierarchically ordered world: distinctions are made and the divine is made manifest only in the encounter with the particular and with the most familiar.

Part III deals with the character of the accidental philosopher, a character that is different in several important ways from the character of the deliberate philosopher. Chapter 7 argues that Montaigne presents himself in the *Essays* as a new possibility, the great-souled man without pride. A character such as that could not be expressed in terms of the ancient categories: for Aristotle, the great-souled man is necessarily proud. Montaigne's character is his graceful response to contingency, the harmonization of classical magnanimity and Christian humility. This harmonization is possible because Montaigne separates self-love from self-esteem and thus relocates the great-souled man from the public arena to the private realm.

Montaigne wrote his *Essays* because he was seized by the desire to tell his *mœurs*.[5] Those ways of being, he says, are "a bit new and unusual." In Chapter 8, I take up the subject of Montaigne's moral philosophy and focus on what is new in his character. Although Montaigne's admiration of classical heroic virtue is sincere, he does regard certain aspects of the self-mastery required by deliberate philosophy as excessive. In particular, he seems to associate the extremes of self-discipline with cruelty. He distinguishes between virtue, which involves inner conflict, and natural goodness or innocence, which does not involve inner struggle and which is, therefore, unworthy of honor. But it turns out that the heights of virtue, where struggle has

been transcended, look remarkably like natural goodness. Montaigne locates himself among the innocent rather than the virtuous. His character is what it is not on account of any philosophical discipline but on account of his nurse's milk. What is new in Montaigne's *mœurs* is his reordering of the vices. He hates especially both lying and cruelty. The vices associated with the weaknesses of the flesh, such as drunkenness, are ranked as lesser vices than those that are all in the soul, such as ambition. Montaigne's reform is not reform by "new opinions" but is rather a return to what he learned in the nursery.

In Chapter 9 I draw out the political implications of Montaigne's presentation of his *mœurs*. I do this against the background of modern political philosophy, especially as articulated by Rousseau in his account of the conflict between Christianity and politics. Three principles of modern political philosophy emerge from that account: the subordination of religion to politics, the privacy of religion, and the rule of autonomous reason. Montaigne is at odds with each of these principles. The nonauthoritative character of the *Essays* implies Montaigne's denial of the claims of autonomous reason over tradition. Montaigne's defense of the private life is not a preference for "bourgeois individualism" but is rather his resistance to the tendency of the state to crush all intermediary sources of institutional authority.

Montaigne belongs to two worlds – this world and the other world – but both occupy the same space of appearances. Christianity and politics are in conflict because politics is the realm of mastery and subjection whereas Christianity is the realm of sociability. For Montaigne, Christianity provides in a preeminent way the conditions of sociality – that is, truth, goodness, and beauty. Christianity is the religion of public truth. Montaigne's criticisms of the Reformation are directed at what he sees as the dangers it poses to the conditions of sociality. Although Montaigne's skepticism concerning the ability of politics to secure the human good makes him conservative in some respects, if we follow out what is implicit in the conditions of truth and goodness, we arrive at a political possibility – a Christian republic – that Rousseau regards as impossible.

1

"That Is Where He Got It!"

Montaigne's Caprices and the Humors of Ancient Philosophy

Montaigne is surprised by himself. While making his collection of the "asinine stupidities," the absurdities and whims of the ancient philosophers, he comes upon himself quite by accident. "So I let fly my caprices all the more freely in public, inasmuch as, although they are born with me and without a model, I know that they will find their relation to some ancient humor; and someone will not fail to say: 'That is where he got it!'"(VS546; F409). He will appear to others as the mere collector of the opinions of the ancients, the consummate borrower, dragging out the most obscure quotations from the storehouse of his prodigious memory. But here is the moment of self-knowledge: "A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!"

Montaigne, of course, was entirely correct. He invented the form of the essay, and his literary genius has never been in question. But, from the point of view of philosophy, the tendency has been to place him within one or another or some combination of the ancient schools. The essay form itself, as Montaigne anticipated, does make it difficult to identify his distinct philosophical voice.

Readers of Montaigne are familiar with Pierre Villey's view that Montaigne's thought developed through three stages, roughly corresponding to the three books of essays: an early "Stoical" period, a skeptical crisis, and a final period in which Montaigne's design is to portray himself. Villey's thesis may capture something of the changing tone of the three books, but it cannot stand as an accurate account of Montaigne's thought, even if one believes him to be simply a philosophical follower, for he quotes dozens of philosophers with apparent approval throughout all three books.

Among some of those who recognize the limitations of Villey's reading (and those limitations are now widely recognized), there is still a tendency to look for a development or change in Montaigne's thought.[1] Donald Frame, for example, speaks of a new sense of human unity emerging in Book III of the *Essays*.[2] Again, this may capture something of the tone of Book III as

distinguished from the earlier books. But to say that there is a change of tone is not necessarily to say that Montaigne's thought "developed." If he had changed his mind about such things as his own purpose by the time he wrote Book III, he could have expressed this development in his revisions of Books I and II, thus changing their tone as well.[3]

The current tendency is to see Montaigne as ultimately a kind of skeptic. Once again, this description captures what would seem to be the underlying skeptical tone of the *Essays* taken as a whole, and it finds support in Montaigne's highly favorable accounts of the ancient Skeptics and the absence of any explicit criticisms of the skeptical position.[4] One of the difficulties that this view faces is the fact that there are clearly nonskeptical aspects of Montaigne's thought. For example, he does make assertions and definitive moral judgments that, from the skeptical standpoint, appear to be dogmatic. He does not seem to pursue the skeptical version of the highest good, *ataraxia* or the calm that comes from true suspension of judgment, whereas he does pursue the nonskeptical goal of self-knowledge.[5]

In an effort to do justice to this underlying skeptical tone while recognizing these difficulties, interpreters such as Conche have sought to attribute to Montaigne a skeptical "method" that amounts to a refusal to "absolutize" his own beliefs or to presuppose any stable truth and fixed essences of things. Consistency requires that this refusal be extended to Montaigne's Christian belief, and here this view of his thought as a moderated skepticism shows its limits most clearly, because Montaigne does seem to hold that there is indeed truth and that it resides in God, who has revealed it in part to man.

Some have tried to reconcile Montaigne's skepticism with his apparent faith by attributing to him a kind of Christian skepticism. Human reason, on its own, can do nothing. The recognition of this impotence prepares the heart and mind to receive the truths of faith. This view of Montaigne finds support especially in the "Apology," where the tone is strongly skeptical concerning the powers of human reason and where Montaigne's purpose seems to be a defense of Christian belief. But this interpretation leaves us with a faith that is a kind of irrational clinging to beliefs just to have something to believe, a faith for which we can find no grounds and for which we can seek no understanding. In other words, this would seem to be simply a skepticism that has not the courage to go all the way. Thus, some interpreters have held that Montaigne is really a skeptic and an atheist who hides his atheism behind a facade of perfunctory declarations of religious belief and submission.

Each of these ways of describing and classifying Montaigne finds evidence and support in the text of the *Essays*. My purpose here is not to give an exhaustive account of the full range of such descriptions. Nor do I claim to have so easily refuted any of them. My point is that either Montaigne is a philosophically inconsistent and even incoherent thinker – that is, he is not a philosopher at all – or a way must be found to go somehow beneath

the philosophical chaos of the *Essays* and to locate Montaigne's distinct philosophical voice. That distinct philosophical voice is best expressed in Montaigne's own self-discovery: "A *new* figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!" Montaigne invented the essay because he needed this new form to express not a "teaching" or a "system of thought," but a way of being. Montaigne is a philosopher, but a philosopher of a certain kind. He cannot be located in any of the sects or schools of ancient philosophy: his "caprices" are "without a model."

In this chapter I begin to examine Montaigne's relationship to ancient philosophy. The first section will take up the question of his skepticism. I show that there is a kind of skeptical moment in Montaigne's mode of thought but that this skeptical moment is a transformation of ancient Skepticism: Montaigne incorporates the transformed skeptical moment into the dialectical movement of accidental philosophy. The second section deals with that aspect of ancient philosophy that Montaigne contrasts most explicitly with his own accidental philosophy: ancient philosophy is "deliberate philosophy." That is, ancient philosophy understands itself as the rule of reason within the soul of the philosopher, a rule that is achieved through the harmony of the philosopher's mind with the divine ordering principle within the whole. Deliberate philosophy directs the thoughts and actions of the philosopher to a single end, divine impassibility. In the third section, I provide a preliminary account of what Montaigne means when he calls himself an accidental philosopher.

Skepticism Transformed

Of all the attempts to locate Montaigne within the sects of ancient philosophy, the view that he is a skeptic would seem to find the greatest and most consistent support in the text. First, the repeated display of the diversity of opinion and of the disputes among the ancient sects contributes to the impression of the skeptical tone of the *Essays*. Second, Montaigne's own voice could plausibly be described as at least that of a "common sense" skepticism, the healthy dose of self-doubt that keeps one from being opinionated and stubborn and, more important, that moderates one's response to those who disagree. Third, Montaigne repeatedly and consistently speaks favorably of the skeptics. So it would seem that both the tone and the content of the *Essays* are skeptical.

As might be expected, the sheer diversity of philosophical opinion is made most manifest in the "Apology" and, in fact, constitutes one aspect of the response to the second objection against Sebond. Montaigne speaks of "the liberty and wantonness of those ancient minds which produced in philosophy and the knowledge of man many schools of different opinions, each undertaking to judge and to choose" (VS559; F420). In one section of the "Apology" he proposes to examine whether human reason has achieved

any clarity about natural and human things (VS536; F400). Here he makes his collection of philosophical opinions concerning the soul, some of them "moderate" and some of them "dreams and fantastic follies." He provides numerous examples of arguments that are not only false but inept "in the reproaches that the philosophers make to each other in the dissensions of their opinions and of their schools" (VS545; F408). On the question of divine things, the situation is the same. After running through a long list of philosophical opinions on the divine, Montaigne concludes in an exasperated tone: "Now trust to your philosophy; boast that you have found the bean in the cake, when you consider the clatter of so many philosophical brains!" (VS516; F383). Philosophical disagreement extends even to the most important question of all: "There is no combat so violent among philosophers, and so bitter, as that which arises over the question of the sovereign good of man, out of which, by Varro's reckoning, two hundred and eighty-eight sects were born." And as Cicero tells us, if we disagree on the sovereign good, we disagree on all philosophy (VS577; F435).

Even if Montaigne does not see himself as a skeptic in the strict sense, there is an undeniably skeptical tone, a "commonsense" skepticism, sometimes made explicit in the *Essays*. When Montaigne considers the question of the movement of the heavens, he notes that for three thousand years it was believed that the stars moved; then Cleanthes or Nicetas maintained that it is the earth that moves. In his own time, Copernicus had so well defended this latter view that it served to account for all astronomical effects. "What are we to get out of that, unless that we should not bother which of the two is so? And who knows whether a third opinion, a thousand years from now, will not overthrow the preceding two?" The consequence to be drawn extends well beyond the matter of astronomy: "Thus when some new doctrine is offered to us, we have great occasion to distrust it, and to consider that before it was produced its opposite was in vogue; and, as it was overthrown by this one, there may arise in the future a third invention that will likewise smash the second" (VS570; F429).

This kind of healthy commonsense skepticism also has important practical consequences, especially evident in Montaigne's attitude toward sorcerers and witches. "To kill men, we should have sharp and luminous evidence; and our life is too real and essential to vouch for these supernatural and fantastic accidents" (VS1031; F789). There are numerous places in the *Essays* where Montaigne recommends moderation based on past experience of one's mistaken beliefs. This skepticism is a version of the recognition of one's ignorance and it extends even to one's speech: "I like these words which soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions: 'perhaps,' 'to some extent,' 'some,' 'they say,' 'I think,' and the like." If he had children to educate, he would teach them to speak this way, preferring that they keep "the manner of learners at sixty than to represent learned doctors at ten" (VS1030; F788).

Besides the skeptical tone of the *Essays*, there is the even stronger and more compelling evidence of Montaigne's very sympathetic accounts of ancient Skepticism and of his admiration for the Skeptics themselves, especially Pyrrho. Of the three kinds of philosophy that Montaigne distinguishes in the "Apology," he takes the trouble to spell out quite fully just what the position of the Skeptics is because, he says, many people find it difficult to understand, and even the Skeptical authors are somewhat obscure and diverse (VS505; F374). The skeptical manner of speaking is especially attractive to him. His own personal emblem, a scale with the motto "What do I know?" is meant to capture the desirability of this mode of speech, best expressed by the interrogative rather than the affirmative (VS527; F393). But the most compelling evidence for seeing Montaigne as a skeptic and, further, as a Christian skeptic is the way he concludes his full and sympathetic account of skepticism in the "Apology": "There is nothing of man's invention that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness [as Pyrrhonism]. It presents man naked and 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; humble, obedient, teachable, zealous; a sworn enemy of heresy, and consequently free from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by the false sects. He is a blank tablet prepared to take from the finger of God such forms as he shall be pleased to engrave on it" (VS506; F375). It does seem quite clear that, of all the sects of ancient philosophy, Montaigne prefers the Skeptics. It is also clear that, in his uncharacteristically long response to the second objection to Sebond's natural theology, he does speak in a decidedly skeptical voice. But is Montaigne himself a skeptic? Does skepticism provide us with a complete and adequate understanding of Montaigne's philosophical activity?

Montaigne is not a skeptic. First, he does not conform to the most important teachings of skepticism. Second, his own mode of thought is not skeptical but dialectical. Third, his reply to the second objection in the "Apology" cannot stand on its own as a statement of Montaigne's position.

Ancient Skepticism took two forms, one that looks to Pyrrho of Elis as its founder and one that emerges out of the Academy of Plato. There are differences between these forms that center around such issues as the practice of argument to achieve suspension of judgment and the role of probability in the conduct of life. Nevertheless, the three fundamental teachings of Pyrrho define the Skeptical school: we can know nothing of the nature of things; hence, the right attitude toward them is to withhold judgment; the necessary result of suspending judgment is imperturbability.[6]

Montaigne does not conform to these skeptical teachings. The first teaching refers primarily to our inability to know whether anything is good or evil by nature. That inability leads to the suspension of judgment. Montaigne

whose end it is to tell what has happened. Mine, if I knew how to attain it, would be to talk about what is possible to happen" (VS105–6; F75).

What does Montaigne mean by "possible"? What sense of "possible" can allow us to account for his apparent credulity? And what are the human capacities that are revealed in the telling of fabulous testimonies? There are two "levels" of possibility that Montaigne seems to be addressing. The first and more obvious is the possibility of human action, especially the achievements of the soul in heroic and extraordinary deeds. The second is the level of belief itself. What is revealed in the telling of fabulous testimonies is something about the nature and the possibilities of the human capacity of belief.

The believable is, on the whole, the familiar. We tend to believe or accept as true whatever fits with what we already believe or accept. So, for example, we have no difficulty believing a story about someone if it accords with our assessment of his character. That the coward once again acted like a coward is no surprise; it is just what we would have expected. What *would* be surprising and difficult to believe is that the coward did something courageous. This would not fit with what we already believe, and listening to the report of the deed would be hearing something outside our own experience. Then other factors would come into play, including, of course, the credibility of the reporter and the witnesses.

Now, the *Essays*, from beginning to end, are full of stories. (In the first essay, only three pages long, there are nine stories.) Most of these stories are borrowed from ancient historians, some from recent histories, and a few either from Montaigne's own experience or from witnesses close to home, for example, his household or his village. At least some of these stories are difficult to believe. Yet, almost without exception, Montaigne seems to believe and accept them as true.

"Of sleep" is a good example of Montaigne's way of proceeding. He begins by claiming that reason does not require the sage to be entirely immobile and impassable. "Even if Virtue herself were incarnate, I think her pulse would beat stronger going to the attack than going to dinner; indeed it is necessary that she should be heated and stirred. For this reason it has struck me as a rare thing to see sometimes that great men remain so entirely poised, in the loftiest undertakings and most important affairs, as not even to curtail their sleep" (VS271; F198). So he begins here by pointing to the rare, the extraordinary, to "great men," the lofty, and what is above the ordinary.

Then he tells several stories: first, Alexander the Great on the day appointed for the battle with Darius slept so soundly that he had to be called two or three times by name to wake him. Second, the emperor Otho resolved to kill himself and set about putting his affairs in order. While waiting to hear that his friends had reached safety, he fell into such a deep sleep that his servants heard him snoring. Third, the great Cato had decided to kill himself and was only waiting for word that his friends had gotten away

from the port of Utica. He fell asleep until the first messenger came and woke him to tell him that a storm was keeping the ship in port. Then he went back to sleep until the second report came that the ship had sailed. The fourth story is also about Cato. The night before he was to confront Metellus in the public square (Metellus accompanied by the favor of the people and of Caesar, and by slaves and gladiators; Cato fortified only by his courage), Cato comforted his friends, his wife, and his sisters (who spent the night weeping and tormented), then he went to bed and slept soundly until morning.

The two stories about Cato are followed by this judgment: "The knowledge we have of the greatness of this man's courage from the rest of his life enables us to judge with complete certainty that his behavior proceeded from a soul elevated so far above such accidents that he did not deign to let them worry him any more than ordinary disturbances" (VS272; F199). Here it seems we have a clear case of what I mentioned earlier: these deeds of Cato are believable, even though they are rare and extraordinary, because they harmonize with the other aspects and deeds of Cato's life that we know about already. The principle here is consistency of character. Cato's character is itself extraordinary, and within the context of his extraordinary character, these deeds are believable.

The judgment on Cato is followed by two more stories. The first is about Augustus who, on the point of going into battle against Sextus Pompeius in Sicily, was overcome by such a profound sleep that he had to be wakened to give the signal for battle. The second is about the young Marius who, after having ordered his army and given the signal for battle against Sulla, lay down under a tree and fell asleep so soundly that he saw nothing of the combat and could hardly be awakened by the rout of his men. This is Montaigne's judgment on Marius and perhaps on Augustus as well: "They say that this happened because he was so extremely weighed down from work and lack of sleep that nature could hold out no longer" (VS272; F199).

If we compare the judgments, three things can be said. First, the judgment about Cato is made with "complete certainty" whereas the judgment about Marius is introduced with "they say." Montaigne presents the opinion but does not necessarily make it his own. Second, the metaphors heighten the opposition: Cato's soul is "so far elevated" above even the accident of death that he is able to sleep in its immediate presence, whereas Marius's soul is overcome or "weighed down" by sleep. Third, Cato's sleep is due to his courage, whereas Marius's sleep is due to nature. The essay then concludes in this way: "And, on this subject, let the doctors determine whether sleep is so necessary that our life depends on it. For we certainly find that they put to death King Perseus of Macedonia, when he was a prisoner in Rome, by preventing him from sleeping. But Pliny alleges that there are people who lived a long time without sleep. In Herodotus there are nations in which men sleep and wake by half-years. And those who write the life of the

sage Epimenides say that he slept for fifty-seven years on end"(VS272–73; F199).

Perhaps the first thing to notice is the way these last stories are introduced: "And, on this subject, let the doctors determine whether sleep is so necessary that our life depends on it." What is the "subject" here? The subject is "nature." He had just reported that Marius was said to have fallen asleep because "nature could hold out no longer." It seems that in each case where "nature" is the cause, Montaigne distances himself from the truth of the assertion: "they say" that Marius fell asleep because nature could hold out no longer. In some sense, he even seems to want to put aside the question of nature: "Let the doctors determine whether sleep is so necessary that our life depends on it." That is a question for the "naturalists" and, as he says elsewhere, "I am not a good naturalist" (VS75; F52).

There is, then, a certain degree of doubt expressed in the way Montaigne reports some of these stories. One possible explanation of his complete acceptance of some stories and his distancing himself somewhat from others is that he trusts some sources more than others. The stories about Alexander, Otho, and Cato are all from Plutarch. The story about Augustus is from Suetonius. The stories about Marius and Perseus are from Plutarch. Of the stories that Montaigne seems to accept without question, all except one are from Plutarch. And certainly Plutarch is one of the authors Montaigne borrows from most frequently. It may be helpful then to consider Montaigne's views on the veracity and reliability of Plutarch. Here we can look especially to two essays, "Of the power of the imagination" and the "Defense of Seneca and Plutarch."

In "Of the power of the imagination" he writes: "Plutarch might well say to us . . . that the credit belongs to others if his examples are wholly and everywhere true; but that their being useful to posterity, and presented with a luster that lights our way to virtue, that is his work. There is no danger – as there is in a medicinal drug – in an old story being this way or that"(VS106; F76). Montaigne acknowledges that Plutarch, from whom he borrows, may himself have borrowed at least some of the stories he reports. But in the context of this essay, the fabulous testimony reveals some human capacity, some possibility.

In the "Defense of Seneca and Plutarch," Montaigne defends Plutarch against an accusation that Jean Bodin makes in his *Method of History*. Bodin accuses Plutarch "not only of ignorance . . . but also of writing incredible and entirely fabulous things" (VS722; F546). Montaigne does not object to the accusation of ignorance: "Let him [Bodin] have his say, for *that is not my quarry*" (emphasis added). What Montaigne objects to is the charge that Plutarch wrote "incredible and entirely fabulous things." If Bodin had simply said "things otherwise than they are," Montaigne would not object, for "that would have been no great reproach." It would be no great reproach "for what we have not seen we take from the hands of others and on trust."

Plutarch does not try to conceal the fact that he is often working with borrowed material and he does not pretend to report "things as they are." What Montaigne objects to is Bodin's assessment of Plutarch's judgment: "[T]o charge him with having taken incredible and impossible things as genuine coin is to accuse the most judicious author in the world of lack of judgment" (VS723; F546). Lack of judgment is here identified by Montaigne with the failure to distinguish between the possible and the impossible.

Montaigne objects to Bodin's example of Plutarch's failure of judgment. Bodin finds incredible and impossible the story of the Spartan boy who let his stomach be torn up by a fox he had stolen and concealed under his robe rather than be discovered in his theft. Montaigne says that he finds Bodin's example badly chosen because "it is very hard to assign bounds to the achievements of the faculties of the soul, whereas we have more chance to assign limits to physical powers and to know them" (VS723; F546). If Montaigne had had to come up with an example of something incredible and impossible in Plutarch, he would have chosen an example having to do with physical powers rather than with powers of the soul. And there are indeed such examples in Plutarch.

But as for the story of the Spartan boy, Montaigne finds it entirely credible. The story is believable because it fits in with so many other stories about Spartan endurance (just as the story about Cato is consistent with his character). Montaigne says "I find in his example no great miracle." In fact, he says, "I am so steeped in the greatness of those people that not only does Plutarch's story not seem incredible to me, as it does to Bodin, but I do not find it even rare and strange. Spartan history is full of a thousand more cruel and uncommon examples: by this standard it is all miracle" (VS723; F547).

At this point in the essay, Montaigne makes a move that he makes repeatedly throughout the essays, a move that is most significant for understanding his transformation of skepticism. After saying that the story of the Spartan boy is entirely credible because it fits with a history that is full of such examples, Montaigne proceeds to recount three stories of amazing endurance under torture, two from ancient Rome and one from his own day. He begins, in other words, to show that Spartan endurance is not so rare after all. His non-Spartan examples are of two peasants and one woman: it is not necessary to look for examples only among the great men.

Montaigne concludes these examples with a story that he says was made up by someone. This is a story of a woman who, in the face of dire threats of punishment, refused to stop saying that her husband had lice. Finally, when she was thrown into the water and drowning, she still raised her hands above her head and made the sign of killing lice. This is an example, he says, of the stubbornness of women that we see every day and of which he has seen hundreds of examples. What has this to do with Spartan endurance? "Stubbornness is the sister of constancy, at least in vigor and firmness" (VS725; F548).

Montaigne concludes his defense of Plutarch against Bodin's accusation in this way: "We must not judge what is possible and what is not, according to what is credible and incredible to our sense. . . . 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 do. It seems to each man that the ruling pattern of nature is in himself; to this he refers all other forms as to a touchstone. The ways that do not square with his are counterfeit and artificial. What brutish stupidity!" (VS725; F548).

In this connection, it is worth noting that the great modern "mitigated" skeptic, David Hume, makes a similar point. Hume is accounting for the fact that men are so unequal in the degree of understanding they achieve. He provides a long list of reasons, including this: "After we have acquired *a confidence in human testimony*, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another."[7] Both Montaigne and Hume recommend "a confidence in human testimony" for the enlargement of experience.

But certainly Montaigne is not suggesting that we should just accept and believe everything we are told. First of all, as he says in his response to Bodin, it is not difficult to judge that certain feats of physical strength are impossible. But, with respect to feats of the soul, consistency of character seems to be a guide in determining what we can accept. So the story of the Spartan boy is completely consistent with what we know about the Spartans. And in the essay "Of cruelty" Montaigne describes Cato's suicide, Cato tearing out his own entrails. He believes that Cato, in that noble act, found bliss and manly exaltation; that he not only endured it without disturbance but "enjoyed himself more in it than in any other action of his life." Were it not for Cato's goodness, which made him prefer the good of his country to his own, Montaigne believes that Cato would not have wanted to be deprived of the opportunity for this noble act occasioned by the ruin of his country. Here Montaigne goes out of his way to reject "the popular and effeminate judgments of some men" who claim that Cato's deed was prompted by some hope of glory. That consideration, he says, is "too base" to touch a heart like Cato's. Cato's action was undertaken for "the beauty of the very thing in itself" (VS425; F309).

Montaigne's judgment of Cato's death is, of course, at odds with the popular and effeminate judgments of some men and even goes further than the judgment that Cato endured his death without disturbance as the rules of Stoic discipline require. Montaigne arrives at this judgment because he does not judge what is possible by what he himself can do. This is the skeptical moment of the movement of thought displayed here. The skeptical act admits the possibility of what is incredible by the standards of the familiar, of one's own. "It seems to each man that the ruling form of nature is in himself, and to this he refers all other forms as a touchstone." Anything that is not like him is incredible and therefore impossible. The world is

If it were not for the fact that we prefer, in some sense, what is foreign and strange, Montaigne would not have spent so much time on this long list of animal stories from ancient sources. He would not need to go collecting stories from foreign lands and centuries, for he says, "in my opinion, whoever would observe up close what we see ordinarily of the animals who live among us, would find there facts just as wonderful as those we go collecting in remote countries and centuries." In the course of the long list of animal stories from Chrysippus, Plutarch, and others, he mentions the astonishing tricks that mountebanks teach their dogs. Then he says, "but I observe with more amazement the behavior, which is nevertheless quite common, of the dogs that blind men use both in the fields and in town; I have noticed how they stop at certain doors where they have been accustomed to receive alms, how they avoid being hit by coaches and carts. . . . I have seen one, along a town ditch, leave a smooth flat path and take a worse one, to keep his master away from the ditch" (VS463; F340). The movement of Montaigne's thought is first to open us to the possibility of the strange and foreign, then to lead us back to the familiar and let us see the extraordinary in the ordinary, in the familiar and the common.[8]

Montaigne's transformed skepticism, then, is fundamentally different from ancient Skepticism. The skeptical moment is incorporated into the more comprehensive dialectic of accidental philosophy. The differences between Montaigne's skepticism and ancient Skepticism will emerge more clearly in the discussion of circular dialectic in Chapter 4.

Deliberate Philosophy

One of the most persistent motifs of the *Essays* is Montaigne's apparent preference for the ancients and their works over the men and works of his own day. He sees in the ancient philosophers "man in his highest estate." These men "have regulated the world with governments and laws; they have instructed it with arts and sciences, and instructed it further by the example of their admirable conduct [*mœurs*]" (VS502; F371). When he turns to books, he finds that he prefers the ancient to the new, "because the ancient ones seem to me fuller and stronger" (VS410; F297). And when he compares himself to the ancients, he concludes that "the productions of these great rich minds of the past are very far beyond the utmost stretch of my imagination and desire. Their writings not only satisfy and fill me, but astound me and transfix me with admiration. I judge their beauty; I see it, if not to the utmost, at least enough so that I cannot aspire to it myself" (VS637; F482–83). His respect and admiration for the ancient authors is such that "they tempt me and move me almost wherever they please. . . . I find each one right in his turn, although they contradict each other" (VS569–70; F429).

The ancients are presented as "higher" and "stronger," as though men had become lower and weaker over the centuries. When Montaigne compares

the ancient philosophers with those who call themselves philosophers in his time, the relation of philosophy to action seems most important to him. In the essays "Of pedantry" (I.25) and "On the education of children" (I.26), this distinction is especially clear with respect to the disdain that the vulgar have for the philosopher. The picture that Plato presents in the *Theaetetus*, that of the philosopher who appears to the nonphilosopher as ignorant of "the first and common things" and as presumptuous and insolent, is far from describing the philosophers of Montaigne's day. The ancient philosophers were envied as being above the common fashion, as despising public actions, as "having set up a particular and inimitable way of life regulated by certain lofty and extraordinary principles" (VS135; F98–99). The philosophers of Montaigne's day, on the other hand, are despised as being below the common fashion, incapable of public charges, as living a life of base and vile *mœurs*. The ancient philosophers were even greater in action than they were in knowledge, and if they were ever put to the test of action, they flew to marvelous heights. The ancient philosophers were both disdained and envied. The philosophers of Montaigne's day are simply disdained. Philosophy is "a thing of no use and no value, both in common opinion and in fact" (VS160; F118).

The worthlessness of contemporary philosophy and the contempt in which it is held are explained in this way: "I believe those [scholastic] quibblings . . . are the cause of this" (VS160; F118). Further, "this century in which we live . . . is so leaden that not only the practice but even the idea of virtue is wanting; and it seems to be nothing else but a piece of school jargon" (VS230; F169). Virtuous action is no longer even recognized. Montaigne sees it as his task and as part of his public purpose to place before his readers the vivid images of ancient virtue, the high and lofty actions that seem to have been so common in ancient times.

It would be easy to conclude that Montaigne is one of those people who feels so deeply dissatisfied and disgusted with the present that he tries to live in the past and tends to idealize that past, seeing it as a golden age, compared with which his own day looks pitiful and poor. Montaigne, however, sees his preference for the ancients as, in some measure, a manifestation of his own presumption. In "Of presumption" he tells us that there are two parts to the vice of presumption: esteeming oneself too much and esteeming others too little. "As for the first, . . . I feel myself oppressed by an error of my soul which I dislike, both as unjust and, even more, as troublesome. I try to correct it, but uproot it I cannot. It is that I lower the value of the things I possess, because I possess them, and raise the value of things when they are foreign, absent, and not mine. This humor spreads very far" (VS633–34; F480). One of its manifestations is that "far-off governments and *mœurs* and languages delight me; and I realize that Latin, by its dignity, beguiles me more than it should, as it does children and common people" (VS634; F480). So at the very least, Montaigne is aware of this tendency in himself. But even more

surprising, when we reach the last of the essays after having gone through so many instances of preference for the ancients, we find an explicit denial of this preference. Here Montaigne expresses his distaste for those who give credit only to what they read in books, and who do not believe the truth if it is not of sufficient age. "But I, who do not disbelieve men's mouths any more than their hands, and who know that people write just as injudiciously as they speak, and who *esteem this age just as if it were another that is past*, I quote a friend of mine as readily as Aulus Gellius or Macrobius, and what I have seen as what they have written. And, as they hold that virtue is no greater for being of longer standing, so I consider that truth is no wiser for being older. I often say that it is stupidity that makes us run after foreign and scholarly examples" (VS1081; F828, emphasis added). Montaigne is a man at home in the present, a man whose mind is not tyrannized by the authority of the ancients. Nevertheless, his admiration for the ancients is undeniably sincere, and that admiration centers on what I call the deliberate philosophy of the ancients (in contrast with Montaigne's accidental philosophy).

Montaigne himself does not use the term "deliberate philosophy." I use it as a term of distinction, derived from the passage in the "Apology" where he describes himself as an accidental philosopher in contrast with the ancient philosophers who ruled their lives by reason. "Deliberate philosophy," then, does not refer to the intentions of the philosophers in their writings. It refers first and foremost to the rule of reason in the soul of the philosopher. "Philosophy does not think it has used its resources badly when it has given to reason the sovereign mastery of our soul and the authority to hold our appetites in check" (VS728; F550). Perhaps the most obvious examples of deliberate philosophy in the *Essays* involve the Stoics and Epicureans, but the term applies to the ancient philosophers in general. Deliberate philosophers conform their actions to the precepts of philosophy. Emperor Julian the Apostate "was a very great and rare man, being one whose soul was deeply dyed with the arguments of philosophy, by which he professed to regulate all his actions; and indeed there is no sort of virtue of which he did not leave very notable examples" (VS669; F507). Pyrrho tried, "like all others who were truly philosophers, to make his life correspond to his doctrine" (VS705; F533). Seneca, speaking to his friends and his wife as he is about to cut his veins, asks "Where are those fine precepts of philosophy? What has become of the provisions against the accidents of fortune that we have been laying up for so many years?" The hour has come where he must show, no longer by discourse and disputes, but by acts, the fruit that he had taken from his studies (VS748; F566).

The goal of the deliberate philosopher is the divine *stasis*. This can be seen in the Milesian philosophers' search for the divine source of all that is, the Parmenidean attempt to articulate being as permanence and sameness; the Heraclitean union of the mind with the *logos*; the Platonic ascent to the eternal forms; the Aristotelian ascent to contemplation of the eternal

and unchanging first causes; the Stoic, Epicurean, and Skeptical striving for divine imperturbability. The philosophers all agree that the sovereign good is tranquillity of mind and body (VS488; F360). The sign of the true philosopher is the conformity of his life to his teachings. And one of the principal signs of this conformity is constancy or unity of life, a condition achieved by very few: "In all antiquity it is hard to pick out a dozen men who set their lives to a certain and constant course, which is the principal goal of wisdom. For, to comprise all wisdom in a word, says an ancient [Seneca], and to embrace all the rules of life in one, it is 'always to will the same things, and always to oppose the same things'" (VS332; F240). It is not surprising that the younger Cato is such a man: "[H]e who has touched one chord of him has touched all" (VS334; F241).

The rare excellence of the philosopher who always rules his passions and inclinations by reason is achieved only through a kind of practice. Instruction and belief are, by themselves, insufficient to lead to action. The soul must be formed by experience to face the evils of life; otherwise, when the moment for action comes, the soul will be unable to do what it knows it should do: "That is why, among the philosophers, those who have wanted to attain some greater excellence have not been content to await the rigors of Fortune in shelter and repose, for fear she might surprise them inexperienced and new to the combat; rather they have gone forth to meet her and have flung themselves deliberately into the test of difficulties" (VS370; F267). The ancient philosophers anticipate the vicissitudes of fortune, deliberately imposing upon themselves the evils to which all men are subject (e.g., pain and poverty), and testing themselves to measure how they stand with respect to the rules of their discipline.

Why, though, is the perfect rule of reason in the soul so extremely rare, so rare that it is hard to name even a dozen men among the ancients who actually succeeded? The inability to rule is associated with the fact that the philosophers can never capture the whole man. Some aspect of him will always be left out or left over after the system of causes and explanations is neatly constructed. Even in the account that they give of the human body, which is closest to them, the philosophers' accounts do not really get at what is: rather, their accounts stand somehow alongside, outside, what they are trying to explain. "There is no more retrogradation, trepidation, accession, recession, reversal, in the stars and heavenly bodies than they have fabricated in this poor little human body." After telling us how the philosophers have "forged another body" to grasp the human body, he says: "Not only in reality, but even in daydreams they cannot so regulate him that there will not be some cadence or some sound that escapes their architecture" (VS537; F401).

One of the principal limitations on the claims of philosophy to achieve the sovereign good is manifested in the case of the philosopher subjected to the force of wine, who shows us that even the "best-regulated soul in the world has only too much to do to stay on its feet" (VS345; F249); "Look at

Lucretius, that great poet, all the philosophizing and self-discipline cannot prevent him from being driven insane by an aphrodisiac. Is there anybody who believes that an apoplexy will not stun Socrates as well as a porter? Some have been driven by an illness to forget their very name, and a slight wound has overturned the judgment of others. For all his wisdom, the sage is still a man"(VS345; F249). The philosopher tends to forget his humanity, the humanity that he shares with the most lowly and common man. He overlooks and even disdains the lowly and bodily good things of life such as health: "[T]o the strongest and most rigorous arguments that philosophy would impress on us to the contrary, we have only to oppose the picture of Plato being struck with a fit of epilepsy or apoplexy, and on this supposition defy him to call to his aid those noble and rich faculties of his soul" (VS765; F580).

Here we can begin to see Montaigne's persistent "lowering" of philosophy, the persistent deflation of the pretensions of philosophy to be "higher," and in particular, its pretensions to be more than human. It seems that reason, of itself and by virtue of what it is, cannot help but regard itself as highest and therefore as entitled to rule.[9] It is on account of reason that we hold ourselves to be "masters and emperors" (VS55; F37) of all other creatures and call ourselves "master and ruler of the universe" (VS450; F329). The sciences that can claim the highest place, philosophy and theology, are the sciences that "regulate men's morals [*mœurs*]" (VS198; F147), and the role of ruling the beliefs that men hold in common belongs to "the theologians and philosophers, directors of consciences" (VS942; F720).

But in the "Apology for Sebond" we are told that "there is no philosophical wisdom of such great firmness" that would allow the philosopher to walk across a plank laid between the two towers of Notre Dame just as if he were walking on the ground. And, if a philosopher were placed in an iron cage suspended from the top of one of those towers, "he will see by evident reason that it is impossible for him to fall, and yet . . . he cannot keep the sight of this extreme height from terrifying and paralyzing him" (VS594; F449). In "Of vanity" Montaigne points to a lack of conformity between philosophical rules and practice: "In all the barracks of ancient philosophy you will find this, that the same workman publishes rules of temperance, and publishes at the same time amorous and licentious writings" (VS989; F757). Here he is addressing the question: "What is the use of these lofty points of philosophy on which no human being can settle, and these rules that exceed our use and our strength?" (VS989; F756).

Not only is the philosopher subject to all the accidents that threaten every man, but also there are accidents that he cannot withstand. Even Socrates and Cato are not exempt: the philosopher's faculties are stunned and overthrown by the mere bite of a sick dog, and his soul has "no such great stability or reason, no capacity, no virtue, no philosophical resolution, no tension of its powers, that could exempt it from subjection to these accidents.

body; I, on the contrary, because it detaches and unbinds it" (VS58; F39). And in the "Apology" he qualifies his praise of Epicurean apathy in this way: "Crantor was quite right to combat the apathy of Epicurus, if it was built so deep that even the approach and birth of evils were lacking. I have no praise for the insensibility that is neither possible nor desirable. I am glad not to be sick; but if I am, I want to know I am; and if they cauterize or incise me, I want to feel it. In truth, he who would eradicate the knowledge of evil would at the same time extirpate the knowledge of pleasure, and in fine would annihilate man" (VS493; F364).

Ancient philosophy's preference for the soul over the body and its identification of what is highest in man with the divine lead to a desire to annihilate, in some sense, the human in favor of the divine in him. When Aristotle speaks of the life of contemplation, he says that it is "more than human," and that "a man who would live it would do so not insofar as he is human but because there is a divine element within him. This divine element is . . . above our composite nature" (*Ethics* 1177b25–30). Montaigne is relentless, vivid, and bold in his attack on this attempt to rise above the human. In "On some verses of Virgil" he says: "Each one of my parts makes me myself just as much as every other one. And no other makes me more properly a man than this one [his penis]. I owe a complete portrait of myself to the public. The wisdom of my lesson is wholly in truth, in freedom, in reality" (VS887; F677). Against Aristotle's claim that the divine element of the intellect, which is highest, is "each man's true self" (*Ethics* 1178a), Montaigne puts the lowly, common, shameful, unmentionable penis.[11]

Near the very end of the *Essays*, Montaigne discusses those who want to dissociate the soul from the body even during those few hours of the day when the needs of the body have to be satisfied by food and drink: "They want to get outside of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves. These transcendental humors frighten me" (VS1115; F856). He seems to be referring to both excessive philosophical and Christian asceticism. To try to be an angel is a metaphysical failure, a failure of being and of self-knowledge, not simply a practical mistake or even moral error.

One of the few Christian beliefs that Montaigne mentions explicitly is the belief in the resurrection of the body. He does this just with respect to the question of the association of soul and body: "Christians are particularly instructed about this bond; for they know that divine justice embraces this association and union of body and soul, even to making the body capable of eternal rewards, and that God watches the whole man in action and wills that he receive, in his entirety, punishment or reward, according to his merits" (VS639; F485). The difference between ancient philosophy and Christian faith, as manifested in the difference between the philosophical argument for the immortality of the soul (based on the divinity

of the intellect) and the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body, requires a fundamental reconsideration of what the activity of philosophy can be.[12]

What Is Accidental Philosophy?

At this point a preliminary account of accidental philosophy is possible. First, we must see the context in which this description of Montaigne emerges. In the course of his response to the second objection against Sebond, Montaigne sets out his collection of the "asininities" of ancient philosophy, the absurd and witless claims that philosophers have made, especially concerning the human soul. His point here is to demonstrate the ignorance and imbecility of human reason, and to illustrate this point, he makes an analogy: he had once advised a man who was worried about how he could get by in Italy because he did not speak Italian. Montaigne advised him to "simply use the first words that came to his mouth," whether French, Spanish, Latin, or Gascon, and then to add the Italian ending. That way, he would never fail to hit upon some Italian dialect. It is here that he turns to himself: "I say the same thing about philosophy; it has so many faces and so much variety, and has said so much, that all our dreams or reveries are found in it. Human fancy cannot conceive anything good or evil that is not in it. *Nothing so absurd can be said that it has not been said by some philosopher* [Cicero]. And I let fly my caprices all the more freely in public, inasmuch as, although they are born with me and without a model, I know that they will find their relation to some ancient notion; and someone will not fail to say: 'That is where he got it!' My *mœurs* are natural; I have not called in the help of any teaching to build them. But feeble as they are, when the desire to tell them seized me, and when, to make them appear in public a little more decently, I set myself to support them with reasons and examples, it was a marvel to myself to find them, simply by chance, in conformity with so many philosophical examples and reasons. What rule my life belonged to, I did not learn until after it was completed and spent. A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!" (VS546; F408–9).

The context suggests that accidental philosophy is to be contrasted with deliberate philosophy and, in particular, with deliberate philosophy understood as the rule of reason. Montaigne's caprices and his *mœurs* are not derived from any philosophical teaching or deliberately conformed to any philosophical rule. He describes his thoughts as born with him and without a model; he describes his *mœurs* as natural. He had not called in the help of any teaching to build them. What surprises him is their conformity to philosophical teachings, especially because they are so "weak." That conformity is accidental and his surprise is a sign that the conformity is not deliberate. He has achieved by accident what the deliberate philosophers have achieved by reason.

Accidental philosophy, then, is nonauthoritative. Deliberate philosophy teaches and rules: it conforms thought and action to a rational principle. Accidental philosophy does not teach or form; it discovers and tells. We might describe accidental philosophy as the activity of the mind that discovers the truth that was already there: he sees his thoughts and *mœurs* in a new light. Whereas deliberate philosophy forms and molds thought and action so as to make them rational, accidental philosophy simply sees the truth that was there all along, before philosophy came on the scene. Accidental philosophy leaves everything just as it is. This aspect of accidental philosophy is captured in Adorno's description of the essay form as a kind of phenomenology.[13]

Montaigne marvels to see that his thoughts and *mœurs* are conformed to "so many" philosophical discourses and examples. No single philosophical system can capture his being or the meaning of what he is. This implies that truth is too great to be captured in any system and that, therefore, any philosophical system must be partial.[14] Accidental philosophy, because it leaves everything as it is, resists the pull toward system building and thus remains open to the whole. Here, too, Adorno's discussion of the essay form is pertinent: the essay is "not exhaustive" because, unlike the Cartesian "general survey," the essay does not presume to determine "in advance that the object in question can be fully grasped by the concepts which treat it; that nothing is left over that could not be anticipated by these concepts."[15]

Accidental philosophy also implies that truth is prephilosophical and prereflective.[16] Accidental philosophy brings out this truth, which is everywhere and common. It does not arrive at some "new" truth that could not exist without it. This mode of philosophy, then, appears as merely accidental – that is, in contrast with deliberate philosophy, it seems weak and lowly. Montaigne's thoughts are mere caprices, and his *mœurs* are weak: his conformity to reason's rule is merely accidental. Accidental philosophy is a "lowered" form of philosophy, but "lower" is, of course, ironic, because accidental philosophy is what philosophy truly is.[17]

In sum, then, accidental philosophy is, first, a mode of thought that discovers the truth that was already there in prephilosophical, nonphilosophical life. It does not rule. Thus it is nonauthoritative and, consequently, it leaves everything just as it is, escapes the partiality of deliberate philosophy, and remains open to the whole of all that is. Second, accidental philosophy is circular dialectic. We have seen one manifestation of this in the discussion of Montaigne's transformation of skepticism – that is, in his openness to the possible, the rare and the extraordinary, and his return to the common and familiar. Thought comes back to its starting point but only after having gone through a movement of departure and return, in this case, a dialectic of skepticism and credulity.

In "Of vain subtleties" the dialectical aspect of this circular movement is brought out more clearly. Here Montaigne gives us at least three versions

of the dialectic. First, he refers to "an abecedarian ignorance that comes before knowledge" and "a learned ignorance that comes after knowledge," that is, "an ignorance that knowledge creates and engenders, just as it undoes and destroys the first." Second, he describes those good Christians who are reverent and obedient through simplicity, and those good Christians who believe and obey because their strong minds have led them, through long investigation, to a deeper understanding of faith. But in the middle, between these two kinds of believers, is a third group comprising two types of men: those who "stick to the old ways" and those who regard sticking to the old ways as a sign of simplicity and stupidity. The dialectical dimension of this version is seen in the fact that those in the middle who stick to the old ways have, in fact and to our surprise, reached "the extreme limit of Christian intelligence."

The third version of the dialectic is the one in which he mentions himself explicitly: "The simple peasants are good men, and good men the philosophers, at least what passes for philosophers in our time: strong and clear natures, enriched by a broad education in useful knowledge. The half-breeds who have disdained the first seat, ignorance of letters, and have not been able to reach the other – their rear-end between two stools, like me and so many others – are dangerous, inept, and importunate: these men trouble the world. Therefore, for my part, I draw back as much as I can into the first and natural stage, which for naught I attempted to leave" (VS313; F227).

The dialectical aspect of the circular movement of thought is seen especially in the way he describes the kind of struggle and failure that is involved in the ascent to knowledge. Thought comes back to its starting point after having gone through a dialectic of trial and failure. It is surprised to find that when it fails, it actually sees the truth it was seeking all along, without knowing that that was what it was seeking, that is, the truth that was always there. This surprise shows the accidental quality of the dialectic and is the same surprise that Montaigne experiences when he sees the conformity of his *mœurs* to so many philosophical discourses.

Circular dialectic also allows us to make sense of the fact that Montaigne seems to be so often contradicting himself and why he appears to be in agreement with so many different philosophical positions. He shows us that he is very much aware of his contradictions but at the same time he assures us that "I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth . . . I do not contradict" (VS805; F611). Truth is "large" enough to contain all contradiction. Or, to put it differently, truth is everywhere, all contradictions contain some truth, and his contradictions are resolved in the circular dialectic.[18] Adorno compares the essay form with the Hegelian dialectic. For Adorno, "the essay is more dialectical than the [Hegelian] dialectic as it articulates itself. The essay takes Hegelian logic at its word: neither may the truth of the totality be played off immediately against individual judgments, nor may truth be reduced to individual judgments; rather, the claim of the

particular to truth is taken literally to the point where there is evidence of its untruth. . . . [T]he untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself is the element of its truth."[19]

The way in which this happens leads to the third description of accidental philosophy. The circular dialectic reveals the truth by getting beyond what Montaigne calls "the appearance of the first sense." He uses this expression in "Of vain subtleties" in connection with the middle group of men between the simple unlearned believers and the strong-minded educated believers. As I noted earlier, two kinds of men are within this middle group: those who stick to the old ways and those who regard sticking to the old ways as evidence of stupidity. Montaigne says that the latter are in a condition of "error" because they do not get beyond "the appearance of the first sense" (in Frame's translation, they "stop at the first plausible meaning"). In other words, they are wrong to regard sticking to the old ways as evidence of stupidity. Montaigne includes himself among those in the middle who stick to the old ways: "those of us who stick to the old ways."

Accidental philosophy is the mode of thought that gets beyond the appearance of the first sense to a "second sense" by way of the circular dialectic. Circular dialectic reveals the true meaning of things. What is *accidental* about this aspect of the dialectic? It cannot be known in advance what that second sense is. Hence the essay form is genuinely a process of discovery. Perhaps the most important instance of this uncovering of the "second sense" occurs in the "Apology," in what I call the dialectic of faith and reason. In his reply to the first objection against Sebond, Montaigne says that most Christians do not really understand "what it means to believe." The dialectic of the "Apology" moves him from the appearance of the first sense of faith (the sense expressed in the first objection to Sebond) through the "ascent" to autonomous reason and, finally, to the second (true) sense of "what it means to believe."

The struggle with error that is implicit in the dialectic reveals what I take to be the most fundamental meaning of the title that Montaigne gave to his work. An *essai* is a trial, a putting to the test. In religious terms, to be essayed is to be tempted, and Montaigne's essays are his temptations, his way of living with the inescapable human condition of temptation, especially the temptations of the intellect.[20] The ancient authors "tempt" him and move him almost wherever they please. The first or original sin is philosophy: Adam and Eve want to be as gods, knowing good and evil. Accidental philosophy is the mode of thought that struggles with and resists the philosophical desire for the divinity of the mind.

In "Of vanity" Montaigne writes, "I am no philosopher. Evils crush me according to their weight" (VS950; F725). This comment calls to mind what he says in "Of vain subtleties" concerning the stupid who bear evils well because they do not see them for what they are, and the wise who bear them well because they "rule and command" the evil. The philosophers weigh

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Bending and Stretching the Categories of Traditional Metaphysics

Latin was the language that Montaigne learned first, and when he dabbled for a time in composing verse, he did so in Latin. But his Latin verse was always imitative, revealing the poet he had just been reading. The *Essays* are written in French, his second language, and some of the earliest essays "smell a bit foreign" (VS875; F667), suggesting perhaps the beginning stages of breaking free from imitation.

French is "a weaker idiom," abundant in images but tending to give way under a powerful conception (VS440; F320). So it is for able minds to give value to a language, "not so much by innovating as by filling it out with more vigorous and varied services, by stretching it and bending it. They do not bring to it new words, but they enrich their own, give more weight and depth to their meaning and use; they teach the language unaccustomed movements, but prudently and shrewdly" (VS873; F665). He contrasts the many French writers of his day with the great Latin poets: these French writers care for nothing but novelty. "To seize a new word they abandon the ordinary one, which is often stronger and more sinewy." Virgil, on the other hand, "has the object more vividly imprinted in the soul," and Horace "sees more clearly and deeply into the thing." His mind "unlocks and ransacks the whole storehouse of words and figures in order to express itself. . . . The sense illuminates and brings out the words, which are no longer wind, but flesh and bone. The words mean more than they say" (VS873; F665). The *Essays* present us with a particular, an accidental being. The words to communicate this being are ordinary words, the ordinary words of the streets and markets and taverns of Paris. Montaigne does not invent new words. And he avoids almost entirely the jargon of scholastic learning. He does use some of the terms of ancient philosophy, but he gives "more weight and depth to their meaning and use." In his hands, the words are "no longer wind, but flesh and bone."

In this chapter I consider Montaigne's treatment of some of the most important categories of "traditional" metaphysics. I use the term "traditional"

here, not because I think that Montaigne invents some new metaphysical system to rival or replace the traditional one, but because Montaigne is very self-consciously speaking out of an authoritative body of knowledge and using its immediately recognizable terms. The traditional metaphysical categories that I consider here are being and becoming, nature, causality, and the universal and the particular.

Montaigne takes up each of these categories and transforms it. The transformation that he effects is not a matter of inventing a new meaning for these terms so as to fit them into some new metaphysical system. Rather, he "lowers" these terms, bringing them back down from their metaphysical heights and closer to their prephilosophical meanings.

Being and Becoming

The *Essays* are principally and fundamentally concerned with the question of being. But if that is true, then it is all the more surprising that Montaigne says extremely little about being and becoming, the most fundamental metaphysical categories, in any explicit way. The first and perhaps only passage that comes immediately to mind occurs at the very end of the "Apology." The larger context is the entire reply to the second objection to Sebond's project, in which Montaigne seems to be concerned chiefly with undermining reason's pretensions to knowledge. The passage begins: "We have no communication with being, because every human being is always midway between birth and death"(VS601; F455). The discussion goes on for several pages, mostly elaborating on the distinction between being, which is permanent and unchanging, and becoming, which is temporal and changing: "What suffers change does not remain one and the same, and if it is not one and the same, it also *is* not. . . . But what then really *is*? That which is eternal. . . . [Therefore], God alone *is* . . . in an eternity immutable and immobile" (VS603; F456–57).

The passage is almost entirely a very close paraphrase of Plutarch, but Montaigne does not mention this borrowing until the end so that the reader could easily assume that this long speech is that of Montaigne himself. There is a rhetorical context that must be taken into account. Toward the end of the "Apology," Montaigne suddenly lets it be seen that he is especially addressing a princess (presumably Margaret of Valois), who must defend the old religion against the Reformers. He urges her not to abandon the accustomed modes of argument. Much of what follows this direct address to the princess is scholastic in tone, even though this section is strongly skeptical. My point is that it is difficult to know what to make of this long, explicitly metaphysical passage, which is unique in the *Essays*, unique not only because it dwells on the question of being and becoming, but also because it carries over into speculative theology.[1]

There are very few explicit statements about being and becoming besides this passage from the "Apology." In "Our feelings reach out beyond us" Montaigne is discussing Aristotle's reference to the saying of Solon that no one can be called happy before he dies. Montaigne responds that, "while we move about, we transport ourselves by anticipation wherever we please; but once out of being, we have no communication with what is [*ce qui est*]" (VS17; F10). The last clause, "we have no communication with what is," is very similar to the beginning of the passage from Plutarch. But in "Our feelings reach out beyond us" being (*l'être*) is associated with movement, with life: there is here no effort to link movement to nonbeing. And in "Of repentance" Montaigne writes: "I do not portray being; I portray passing [*le passage*], or, as the people say, not from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute" (VS805; F611). The third passage is found in "Of the affection of fathers for their children" and is also occasioned by something he has read in Aristotle: "[B]eing consists in movement and action" (VS386; F279). We seem to have traveled from the Parmenidian unchanging and immobile Same to the Heraclitean relentless flux. But there is not necessarily a contradiction in this. Becoming must in some sense be, and this is *our* being. "I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it" (VS805; F610–11).

The fourth passage occurs in "Of the art of conversing." For Montaigne, discussion is the "most fruitful and natural exercise of the mind . . . , and sweeter than any other action of our life" (VS926; F704). The contrast that is suggested here is perhaps the action of solitary contemplation. Montaigne refers to conversation as "setting out in quest of that which is [*ce qui est*]" and adds, "we do no wrong to the subject when we leave it in order to see about the way to treat it. I do not mean a scholastic and artificial way; I mean a natural way, that of a sound understanding" (VS926; F706).

If he were forced to choose, Montaigne would rather lose his sight than his hearing or speech (VS922; F704). Being reveals itself in speech, in "ordinary" speech, not in the jargon of the schools. We can go in search of "that which is" in conversation with the unlearned, or with those unspoiled by learning. It seems to me that this is one reason why there is no explicit discussion of the metaphysical categories of being and becoming: being, which is most common, has become, in the minds of the learned, an abstract metaphysical notion at the farthest remove from what is common. In the *Essays*, being is revealed as the accidental particular, Michel de Montaigne, in flesh and bone.[2] Being is revealed as what is nearest and most familiar.

Nature

If being and becoming are almost never mentioned explicitly, the opposite must be said of the second metaphysical category, nature, for nature is at

least mentioned on almost every page of the *Essays.* And Montaigne is clearly among those philosophers who tell us that man ought to live "according to nature." But what does that mean? "Live according to nature" is an empty rule until one specifies what nature is.

I argue that nature, for Montaigne, is a prephilosophical condition, a condition of freedom from philosophy. In the hands of the deliberate philosophers, nature is a ruler against which our present condition is found wanting. Montaigne lowers the meaning of nature and takes the measuring rod away from deliberate philosophy by blurring the distinction between nature and custom.

We can begin to consider just what nature is for Montaigne by examining his treatment of a way of talking about nature that was familiar in his day, namely, the notion of natural law. One very obvious difficulty here is that Montaigne contradicts himself, or at least appears to do so. In some places he agrees that there are natural laws, and in other places he denies this. The term "natural law" in this context refers not to the laws of physics but to laws that should guide human conduct. The notion of natural law found in Aquinas is a good example of the understanding of natural law that would have been familiar to Montaigne's contemporaries.

In "On the punishment of cowardice" Montaigne writes: "In truth it is right to make a great distinction between the faults that come from our weakness and those that come from our malice." The latter involve our knowingly violating "the rules of reason that nature has imprinted in us," whereas with respect to the former, "we can call on this same nature as our warrantor, for having left us in such imperfection and weakness" (VS70; F48). It is not clear to me whether Montaigne is asserting this as his own view or whether he is simply presenting a view that is reasonable for consideration, as he often does. But in either case, he is pointing to what may be a tension within the Thomistic teaching on natural law. For Aquinas, there is an order of the natural inclinations from the lowest, which we share with all things, to the highest, which are uniquely human. The inclination to self-preservation would be an example of the first, and the inclination to live in society and to know God would be examples of the second. One can see immediately the possibility of conflict here: living in society can ultimately entail my fighting in a war and losing my life, and in that case the inclination to self-preservation must be put aside or overcome. The inclinations that are uniquely human are inseparable from reason, man's rational nature. Montaigne refers to "the rules of reason, that nature has imprinted in us."

The tension is spelled out more fully in "Of the affection of fathers for their children." Here he presents what I take to be the Thomistic response to the difficulty implied in this tension – the difficulty that nature would thus be in contradiction with itself, placing in man two contradictory inclinations. Montaigne is discussing the natural affection that fathers have for their

children: "If there is any truly natural law, that is to say, any instinct that is seen universally and permanently imprinted in both the 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." Here natural law is defined as "instinct," and instinct might be characterized as prereflective, not chosen or deliberate.

Soon after this identification of natural law with instinct, Montaigne presents the familiar Thomistic introduction of reason into the complete picture of natural law: "Since it has pleased God to give us some capacity for reason, so that we should not be, like the animals, slavishly subjected to the common laws, but should apply ourselves to them by judgment and voluntary liberty, we must indeed yield a little to the simple authority of Nature, but not let ourselves be carried away tyrannically by her: reason alone must guide our inclinations" (VS387; F279).

He then goes on to criticize the kind of thoughtless following of instinct in which we are simply moved by the monkey tricks, games, and puerile frivolities of our children as if we loved them for our amusement, as if they were little monkeys. "A true and well-regulated affection should be born and increase with the knowledge children give us of themselves; and then, if they are worthy of it, the natural propensity going along with reason, we should cherish them with a truly paternal love; and we should likewise pass judgment on them if they are otherwise, always submitting to reason, notwithstanding the force of nature" (VS387; F280). This is to treat them as men, not as playthings. It is dangerous to allow mothers to judge, for example, which child should inherit because women do not have sufficient strength of reason to choose according to worth: "They most readily let themselves be carried away where the impressions of nature stand most alone; like the animals." Thus they tend to give themselves more to the weak and defective (VS399; F290). The emphasis in this discussion is on the rule of reason.

After having gone through this long and detailed defense of the subordination of instinct to reason, Montaigne introduces the factor of custom or habit: "Moreover, it is easy to see by experience that this natural affection, to which we give so much authority, has very weak roots." He cites the example of the wet nurse, who, for a small profit, gives over her own child to be fed by a goat. "And we see in most of them a bastard affection soon engendered by habit, more vehement than the natural" (VS399; F290). The goats, in turn, develop a stronger attachment to the wet-nurse's children than to their own. "Animals alter and corrupt their natural affection as easily as we" (VS399; F291). The lowering of the philosophical meaning of "nature" is accomplished in the dialectic of nature and custom.

In "Of experience" he is discussing the futile multiplication of civil laws in an effort to cover all possible cases. "This number bears no proportion

Finally, in "Of the useful and the honorable" Montaigne affirms, but without elaboration, the idea of a "justice in itself, natural and universal," which must be distinguished from and is higher than "that other, special, national justice, constrained to the need of our governments" (VS796; F604). (The formulation "natural justice" is more Aristotelian than the Thomistic "natural law": Aristotle does consider the notion of natural justice in the *Ethics*, a justice that is the same everywhere, but he does not really discuss "natural law" as such.) The idea of a universal justice also comes up in the "Apology" within the context of Montaigne's discussion of the variety and confusion of ancient philosophical opinion. In the end, reason can only tell us to obey the laws of our own country. But Montaigne sees this as a most unsatisfactory state of affairs. Universal justice, justice in its true essence, ought not to be attached to the customs of this or that country. That would mean that our duty is by chance, changing and arbitrary, and justice is constantly at the mercy of the changing opinions of a people or a prince. Montaigne says of himself: "I cannot have my judgment so flexible" (VS579; F437).

Is it possible, then, to find a way out of this variety and contradiction? The philosophers are "funny when, to give some certainty to the laws, they say that there are some which are firm, perpetual, and immutable, which they call natural, which are imprinted on the human race by the condition of their very being. And of those, one man says the number is three, one man four, one more, one less: a sign that the mark of them is as doubtful as the rest." There is not a single law that is not contradicted by many nations. Universal approbation is the only sign by which it is possible to argue that there are natural laws, "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 everyone who tried to impel him to oppose that law." There is not even one such law. There is "nothing in short . . . so extreme that it is not accepted by the usage of some nation" (VS579–80; F437).[4]

We have moved from nature to custom, and that move seems to be complete: "The laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature, are born of custom. Each man, holding in inward veneration the opinions and the behavior [*mœurs*] approved and accepted around him cannot break loose from them without remorse" (VS115; F83). But has Montaigne contradicted himself, sometimes affirming and sometimes denying that there are natural laws? Can his consistent and unambiguous appeal to nature as a standard be reconciled with his apparent rejection of natural laws?

The Thomistic response to Montaigne's argument against the existence of natural laws (i.e., the argument that there is no law that can claim universal acceptance) would proceed along the following lines: in response to the question of "whether the natural law is the same in all men" Aquinas distinguishes between the general principles of the natural law and the conclusions that must be drawn from these principles. He claims that the general

principles are the same for all men "both as to rectitude and as to knowledge." The conclusions drawn from the first principles are the same for all in the majority of cases but in some few cases the proper conclusions will not be reached because of certain obstacles – for example, the perversion of reason by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature. His example is that theft was not considered wrong among the Germans.[5] Aquinas takes the same approach in answering the question of "whether the law of nature can be abolished from the heart of man." The general principles cannot be abolished but the conclusions or secondary precepts can be blotted out by evil persuasions, vicious customs, and corrupt habits.[6]

Whereas Aquinas sees a few exceptions to conclusions that are reached in the majority of cases, Montaigne sees almost nothing but "exceptions." The Germans who approved of theft are not an isolated instance. The Spartans held theft in high regard, and to attribute this to corruption is to begin to undermine seriously the argument for universality: the Spartans simply have to count as a virtuous and noble people. Even cannibalism is not an isolated practice, and it was defended by Chrysippus and Zeno, leaders of the Stoic sect (VS209; F155).

Whereas Aquinas sees the agreement of reason on the most basic principles and the success of reason in arriving at the proper secondary precepts, Montaigne sees reason as the problem: "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." This is how customs arise in all their extreme diversity: "One nation looks at one side of a thing and stops there; another at another" (VS581; F438).

The difficulties that arise with respect to the Thomistic teaching on natural law are due, in part, to the fact that Aquinas holds both "instinct" and reason to be natural, and these often come into conflict. The difficulty is supposed to be overcome by an ordering, a subordination of instinct to reason, of the lower to the higher. The lower is that which man shares with all the animals, the higher is what is unique to the human species, namely, reason. Reason is universal to the species; thus all men would know the same general principles and come to the same conclusions unless led astray by vicious and corrupt habits or the perversion of reason by passion.

Aquinas accepts the hierarchical ordering of nature from Aristotle, and there is, I believe, a very basic tension in Aristotle's notion of nature, or at least in his treatment of man. There seem to be two senses of "nature" in Aristotle: nature defined as "what is almost always the case" and nature defined as what is highest and thus rare. This tension does not really show up or make much difference with respect to other species, but it does make a difference when we talk about the human species.