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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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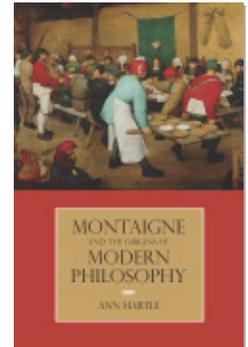
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INTRODUCTION

What is modernity? What is modern philosophy? What is modern society? And what, if anything, does philosophy have to do with the possibility of a free society?

The purpose of this book is to show that Montaigne transforms philosophy itself, bringing it down from the heavens and into the streets, markets, and taverns of ordinary men and ordinary life. Thus, he “invents” or discovers society as a distinctly modern form of association and radically changes the nature of political power. The essay is philosophy made sociable.

My approach to the *Essays*, then, is philosophical rather than literary. True, the essays do not look anything like traditional philosophy, and Montaigne himself calls them “bizarre.” Nevertheless, he does describe himself as a philosopher, “a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher.” My discussion of the language, style, and order of the essays is intended to show the ways in which these features of the essay form reveal Montaigne’s radically new philosophical project. The essay is not simply a literary innovation: it is the expression of an unprecedented philosophical intention.

In *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (2003), I argued that Montaigne should be regarded as an original philosopher, not simply as the inventor of the essay. I was also especially concerned to show that Montaigne is not a skeptic as most of his scholarly readers take him to be. The emphasis in that book, then, is on drawing a contrast between Montaigne and the “deliberate” philosophers of antiquity. In this book, I return to many of the same themes that emerged in *Accidental Philosopher* in order to explore them in greater depth. However, my emphasis here is on Montaigne’s relationship to modern philosophy, and I believe that this relationship brings out his originality in a more radical way.

Thus, I approach Montaigne as a philosopher within the context of modernity rather than Renaissance humanism, although there is much in common between these contexts. Two major works on humanism and the Renaissance are especially compatible with my view of the *Essays*. Montaigne holds a central place in Tzvetan Todorov’s account of the humanist tradition, a tradition that he traces into the eighteenth century.

In his *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, Todorov argues that humanism offers the antidote to our deepest and most pressing moral and political problems: the dissolution of society, the disappearance of morality and the self, and the conflict between liberty and community. The humanists do not fall into the extreme either of the autonomy of the individual or the disappearance of individuality. The “humanist core” that he sees in the tradition of liberal democracy can combat the drift of democracy toward collapse into illiberal and inhuman forms of autonomy and isolation.

Montaigne also figures prominently in William J. Bouwsma’s *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550–1640*. The Renaissance saw three liberations: the liberation of the self in the affirmation of the uniqueness of every human being, the liberation of the cosmos from the constraints of the classical-medieval hierarchy of being, and the liberation of politics in the emergence of the concept of sovereignty. Montaigne’s moral attitude, according to Bouwsma, displays “the re-ordered self” in the absence of natural hierarchy.

These conclusions are, in some ways, similar to my own. However, by approaching Montaigne as a modern philosopher, rather than as a Renaissance thinker, I believe it is possible to bring to light certain epistemological and political aspects of his thought that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Although I do not focus primarily on Montaigne’s relationships to other modern philosophers, I do discuss them at certain points in order to elucidate Montaigne’s thought.

In addition to the influence of Machiavelli, we find in the *Essays* intimations of such widely diverse philosophers as Descartes, Pascal, Bacon, Hobbes, Hume, and Rousseau. Montaigne appears as the incomparably rich source from which both rationalists and empiricists, liberals and conservatives, draw. Yet Montaigne himself is neither a rationalist nor an empiricist, neither a liberal nor a conservative. His “unpremeditated and accidental” philosophy transcends these distinctions. Indeed, both modern epistemology and modern political philosophy take on a somewhat different color when seen through the lens of Montaigne’s philosophical project.

Montaigne’s re-formation of philosophy is his radical break with the classical-medieval Aristotelian tradition. This rejection of Aristotelian philosophy is a fundamental principle of early modern philosophy. Montaigne undermines the foundations of Aristotle’s metaphysics, politics, and ethics, so that the traditional hierarchy of being collapses. In his rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics, Montaigne combats especially the

conceit that the philosopher is most fully human and therefore divine through his participation in the divine activity of contemplation. Modern philosophy understands itself as a human, not a divine, activity and therefore abandons contemplation as the philosophical act.

Montaigne sees the philosophical pretense to divinity as dangerous because it makes the philosopher inhuman, destroys his natural sympathy, and separates him from other men. The Aristotelian view identifies the philosopher with the act of contemplation: the man is essentially the philosopher. Only the philosopher attains the perfection of the human form. Montaigne, however, sets himself forth as a radical and devastating rebuttal to this understanding. He makes himself “a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher.” The essay is the form of this new mode of philosophy which separates the man from the philosopher: the man is not essentially but rather only accidentally a philosopher. The separation of the man from the philosopher is actually, then, the humanization of the philosopher through the recovery of a common humanity. The human good is found, not in the escape to the heavens of philosophical contemplation, but in the experience of everyday life in society with other men. Montaigne turns philosophy on its head.

So also, Montaigne separates the man from the prince. The prince’s identification of himself with his mastery over others makes the prince inhuman. Montaigne overcomes the Aristotelian notion of natural mastery by separating the master from his power, bringing him down from his lofty throne to “essay” himself with other men. The separation of the man from the prince is actually, then, the humanization of the prince through his recovery of his common humanity. It is the basis for the principles of representative government and the freedom of society which are central to modern political philosophy. Montaigne effects both the separation of the man from the philosopher and the separation of the man from the prince through his discovery of the social.

The first part of this book (chapters 1 through 4) focuses on the reformation or refounding of philosophy through the separation of the man from the philosopher and the humanization of the philosopher through the subjection of reason to the experience of everyday life. The second part (chapters 5 through 7) focuses on the refounding or reordering of human life through the separation of the man from the prince and the humanization of the prince through the invention of society.

Why must philosophy be reformed? What is it about the philosophy of Aristotle—the philosophy of the schools—that distorts our being and that must be overcome if human beings are to be free? In chapter 1, I set

out the first step in Montaigne's refounding of philosophy, his reversal of the fundamental principles of Aristotle's metaphysics and political philosophy. Form, end, and potentiality and actuality are all brought together in Aristotle's understanding of perfection: final cause is the perfection of form, the actualization of the potentialities that belong to the individual by virtue of his species. Human perfection must be understood in terms of the hierarchy of being in which the human is located below the divine and above the bestial. Man is perfected by striving for and attaining the divine. For Aristotle, there are two distinct kinds of perfection: intellectual excellence (or contemplation) and moral excellence, which requires the political realm for its complete actualization.

For Montaigne, however, perfection is the enjoyment of "our own" condition: he considers man as he is in himself, "without striving." Montaigne replaces contemplation (the divine activity) with judgment (the human activity that is all "one's own"). He also replaces the primacy of the political with his own "end," the domestic and private. Montaigne changes the meaning of "form" by particularizing form, especially in his notion of the "master-form" which is a form "all one's own." Final cause, or "end," becomes power and the production of effects. Aristotelian potentiality and actuality are replaced by possibility.

Aristotelian philosophy and medieval theology understand human desire as, ultimately, a desire for the divine and eternal. Montaigne's philosophical stance toward the temporal world is not one of escape to the eternal. But neither is it one of immersion in the temporal realm of practice. Montaigne is actually reordering the temporal realm. He rejects and reverses Aristotle, because Aristotle's foundations are weak: they rest on the presumption and pride of the philosopher in his own divinity. That is, the Aristotelian philosopher cannot separate the man from the philosopher.

Despite his rejection of Aristotle, are there intimations within the tradition inherited by Montaigne that might suggest the possibility of a free society? In chapter 2, I discuss Montaigne's relation to sacred tradition. The question of Montaigne's sincerity in matters of religion and religious belief is one that deeply divides his readers. The apparent absence of piety, the lack of concern with the "next world," and his attitude toward death, for example, lead some to hold that his frequent avowals of his Catholicism are merely a cover for atheism. Others consider him a skeptic-fideist who combines philosophical skepticism with unexamined faith. Most readers agree that his adherence to Catholicism is due to his conviction that, within the context of the civil wars of his day, the old religion is a source of political stability. I put aside the question of his personal

sincerity and attempt instead to make sense of both the apparent absence of piety in the *Essays* and his claims of submission to the Church. Montaigne objects to the role of Aristotle's philosophy in medieval theology and in the schools: he separates out what he regards as essential to the tradition and thereby frees it from its dependence on ancient philosophy.

Montaigne attacks the Reformation not only for the threat that it poses to the social bond but also, and more fundamentally, for its understanding of the human being and of man's relationship to God. He sees the reformers as attempting to institute a purely spiritual and intellectual religion, disdaining the role of the senses and images in worship. Montaigne's understanding of the human world can be described as a sacramental and incarnational metaphysics. He finds the miraculous in the lowliest details of ordinary life. Here again, he reverses Aristotle, who locates the divine in the highest and most rare.

What precisely is the philosophical act that frees the philosopher from the traditional hierarchy and makes possible the existence of society? In chapter 3, I first examine the nature of the new philosophical act in which the philosopher is separated from the man. For Montaigne, the philosophical act begins in the world of thought, not in the world of things. Hence, it begins in the condition of error because the mind is not (as Aristotle held) receptive of what is, but rather generates and produces out of itself.

The mind's capacity for "representation," as Montaigne holds, manifests the "unruliness of thought." The mind represents to itself both what is and what is not, the true as well as the false. Invention enables Montaigne to discover the possible: his task is to tell "what can happen" rather than what has happened. Montaigne's descriptions of reason have led many of his readers to conclude that he is a skeptic: reason is weak, self-interested, and biased. However, Montaigne discusses another kind of reason as well: "reason inflexible and impassive." This reason is without self-interest and can, therefore, settle the conflict between mastery and slavery.

The philosophical act is ultimately the act of judgment in which reason, representation, and invention are brought together under the will. Montaigne says that the essays are the tests of his judgment. Judgment here replaces Aristotle's contemplation. Montaigne's judgment does not contemplate "the thing itself"; it subjects the thing itself, making it his own. Freedom of judgment is the mark of the "self-ordered soul" which is "strong in itself." Montaigne does not judge by the standard of what ought to be (Aristotle's final cause): he judges what is, as it is, in its imperfection. His judgment of other men is unique, for he does not judge them

by the standard of himself. Thus, he removes himself, his self-interest and self-esteem, from the act of judgment. That is the separation of the man from the philosopher.

Chapter 4 completes my presentation of the philosophical act and of Montaigne's reformation of philosophy. His unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is the separation of the man from the philosopher. The man is not essentially a philosopher: he does not participate in the divine but is simply a man like all other men. Traditional philosophy, in contrast, dehumanizes the philosopher because it destroys his sympathy with other men.

How, then, does Montaigne "humanize" the philosopher? The essay is the perfect form for unpremeditated and accidental philosophy because it makes philosophy sociable. I examine five features of the essay form in order to show how the essay is sociable. First, Montaigne's practice of quotation brings ancient philosophy into ordinary conversation. Second, he writes the essays in French rather than Latin, the language of the schools. He uses only the language of the streets, markets, and taverns of France. Third, he sometimes goes beyond the limits of propriety in speaking about the body and the sexual, thus overcoming the shame of the private. Fourth, the use of testimony and stories enlarges his experience and allows him to test or essay himself against other men. Fifth, in spite of the apparent disorder of the essays, Montaigne follows the everyday order of shepherds and shopboys who, unlike the learned, never fail to understand each other.

The essays look unphilosophical because there are no syllogisms, arguments, or conclusions. That is because judgment is not a conclusion but an act. Montaigne's judgment reorders the mind to the lowest rather than the highest. The act of judgment reverses the traditional order by submitting philosophy to the everyday, to the social, and thus to experience. That is why the last essay is "Of Experience."

In chapters 5, 6, and 7, I take up the political, social, and moral aspects of Montaigne's reordering of human association. Just as the man must be separated from the philosopher in order to recover his humanity through submission to the social, so the man must be separated from the prince in order to recover his humanity through submission to the social.

Why must the man be separated from the prince? Why is it that the rule of one man over another cannot be based on natural inequality? In chapter 5, I discuss the separation of the man from the prince as the overcoming of natural mastery, the inequality that, for Aristotle, justifies the rule of one man over another. The first essay, "By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End," serves as my example of Montaigne's practice

of essaying and as the structure for presenting an account of his political project. In particular, I explore the unspoken presence of both Homer and Aristotle in the stories about Alexander the Great. In the two stories Montaigne recalls here, Alexander believes himself to be divine and displays extreme cruelty. In contrast, Epaminondas, a figure largely invented by Montaigne, exemplifies the separation of the man from the prince. Montaigne's words about himself, also in this first essay, spoken from the position of the philosopher-prince, point to the fundamental principles of his new political philosophy: forgiveness and promise-keeping. These two principles demand a new foundation for human society.

Montaigne therefore rejects Aristotle's foundation of "the common good," for he sees it as really the pretext for the actions of vicious men. Since the good cannot be pursued in common, he asserts: "let each one seek it in his particularity." If the standard of the common good is abandoned, then the new standard for the exercise of power must be the limitation of evil, violence, and force. Montaigne acknowledges that the prince must sometimes submit to the demands of necessity and that vicious means may be required to preserve the state. The limit on the power of the prince, however, is the freedom and independence of society from the political.

How do the *Essays* actually bring about the invention of society? What is the fundamental reform of mores that must occur, and how do the *Essays* effect that reform? In chapter 6, I discuss Montaigne's "domestic and private" end. Society is the domestic and private brought out into the public realm. That is the action of the *Essays*: Montaigne reveals himself in public without the justification of great deeds, specifically by exposing those aspects of private life that are normally hidden or shameful.

By revealing himself in public, he overcomes the shame of the private. He transforms the meaning of honor by associating courage with truthfulness rather than simply with valor in combat. Open speaking about oneself is, he says, the "cure" for pride. Montaigne criticizes the French legal system for the burdens it imposes on the people in all their domestic affairs; he also suggests that these burdens should be lifted and the trades and negotiations of the people be made "free, gratuitous, and lucrative." Such a reform would free the private sphere from the control of the political. But Montaigne also offers the possibility of a much deeper reform through the project of the *Essays*, that is, the reform of the nobility at the deepest level of mores.

In fact, Montaigne reorders the traditional virtues and vices in accordance with the requirements of social life. Cruelty becomes "the extreme of all vice." Lying and ambition are also among the worst vices, while

those vices associated primarily with the body are ranked as lesser vices. Truth becomes “the first and fundamental part of virtue,” and Montaigne offers himself as the primary example of its practice.

Montaigne’s self-revelation is the generous gesture that lies at the origin of a free society. Not only does this gesture invite the nobility to imitate him, but it also serves as the act of trust and confidence that invites a reciprocal trust and confidence of the people. Montaigne insists that he is nothing more than a common man. He gives a voice to the people and shows that they are not naturally slaves.

What are the conditions for the preservation of a free society? Is the notion of the radical autonomy of the individual sufficient to constitute the social bond? Or is character of a certain kind necessary to make possible both community and individual freedom? In chapter 7, I discuss the character of the free individual as it is displayed in the *Essays*: the “self-ordered soul,” who is neither master nor slave. The free, self-ordered individual is necessary for the existence of a free society.

In “Of the Education of Children” Montaigne says that he has only one new lesson for the young man who is to be brought up as a free man: his new lesson is “the ease of virtue.” Virtue in the traditional sense involves the mastery of reason over the passions, which means struggle within the soul at least until this mastery has become a habit. Montaigne, however, experiences no such struggle. Rather, he enjoys the harmony of soul and body. His two descriptions of his production of virtue within himself—“unlearning evil” and “training the disposition”—show that naturalness can actually be acquired. That is to say, one’s natural disposition or nature can be changed. The new foundation of virtue is the ease of goodness rather than the strength of self-mastery.

Montaigne’s new character can be set out in terms of the virtues of generosity and integrity. Generosity is the virtue which prompts him to reveal himself in public. It can be seen especially in the way he judges other men, and thus it is the virtue associated with the philosophical life itself. Generosity is Montaigne’s replacement for Aristotelian magnanimity. Integrity means “knowing how to belong to oneself.” Thus, it suggests both the independence of the individual from political association and the limits on what can be demanded of him. This virtue is manifested in Montaigne’s description of his own association with princes: he wants nothing from them, serves them freely, and owes them nothing. He does not seek his own good in public affairs for he already possesses it in himself.

In Montaigne’s character we can discern the ways in which the social is the limit on the power of the prince. First, Montaigne is one of the very few modern philosophers who treat friendship as an important topic of

moral and political philosophy. The stories of friendship in the *Essays* are often about opposition to tyranny, a point made very forcefully in his friend La Boétie's *On Voluntary Servitude*. Second, Montaigne's views on education focus on the freedom and independence of the young nobleman from his prince. Liberal education, especially the study of history, forms the judgment and puts before its students examples of noble character. Third, the frankness and openness of Montaigne's speech show how important freedom of speech is to a free society. Montaigne not only tolerates but also even welcomes opinions that are different from his own. Indeed, he claims that he is "perfect in forbearance" of disagreement. Thus, unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is the philosopher's mode of participation in and preservation of a free society. Fourth, the universal Church stands as both Montaigne's model for society and as an independent authority which limits the power of the state over the individual.

In the conclusion, I bring out more explicitly the way in which Montaigne's transformation of philosophy and his invention of society are the same act. Philosophy becomes invisible—unpremeditated and accidental—as the common man emerges into the light of the good. Modern philosophy originates in this single, hidden act.

