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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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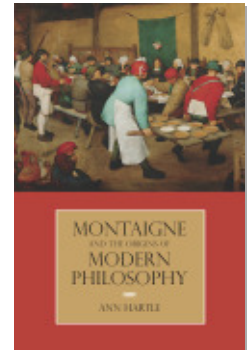
Published by Northwestern University Press

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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy.

1 ed. Northwestern University Press, 2013.

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Chapter One



Reversing Aristotle

In his discussion of Montaigne's ancient sources, Hugo Friedrich says that "traces of readings in Aristotle are weak in the *Essais* . . . It cannot be established to what extent he actually read Aristotle; certainly it was not a thorough study."¹ It is true that the number of explicit references to and discussions of Aristotle in the *Essays* would give that impression. A quick survey of the index for Frame's translation reveals many more references to Cicero, Plato, and Seneca than to Aristotle. When Montaigne decides to tell his ways of being in public, he calls upon the help of ancient philosophy and discovers, to his surprise, that his ways of being conform to many different philosophical discourses and examples. So it is to be expected that philosophers and philosophical schools of all kinds should appear in the pages of the *Essays*: he uses them as fragmented and approximate expressions of what he is, but no single philosophical teaching can capture what he is.

However, Montaigne is "a new figure" of the philosopher, a profoundly original philosopher with a philosophical project that is entirely new and all his own. Therefore, it is necessary to look past the quotations in order to identify that original project. What is new and original in Montaigne can be discovered primarily through his relationship to Aristotle. He uses the Aristotelian vocabulary of form and final cause, perfection and imperfection, but he transforms the meaning of these terms. This transformation pervades the *Essays* even when Aristotle himself is not mentioned.

The philosophy of Aristotle, as appropriated by Scholastic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, was the teaching that dominated the universities.² "The god of scholastic knowledge is Aristotle; it is a religious matter to discuss any of his ordinances, as with those of Lycurgus at Sparta. His doctrine serves us as magisterial law. . . . Nothing in it is discussed in order to be placed in doubt, . . . his authority is the end beyond which it is not permitted to inquire" (VS539, F403). Therefore, accepted philosophical beliefs are never questioned but are discussed only to be supported and

confirmed. Montaigne criticizes the philosophy of the schools because it accepts Aristotle's teaching as truth "with all its structure and apparatus of arguments and proofs, as a firm and solid body, no longer shakable, no longer to be judged." However, Montaigne regards this foundation as weak. "The reason why we doubt hardly anything is that we never test our common impressions. We do not probe the foundation [*le pied*], where the fault and weakness lies; we dispute only about the branches. We do not ask whether this is true, but whether it has been understood this way or that." This presumption is both the constraint on the liberty of our judgments and the tyranny over our beliefs. "It is very easy, upon accepted foundations, to build what you please; . . . By this path we find our reason well founded, and we argue with great ease." Aristotle's first principles have become our presuppositions, and "whoever is believed in his presuppositions, he is our master and our God; he will plant his foundations so broad and easy that by them he will be able to raise us, if he wants, up to the clouds" (VS539–40, F403–4).

The centrality of Aristotle for Montaigne's philosophical project is indicated by the fact that the very first presentation of his intention, in "To the Reader," is framed in terms of Aristotle's four causes: formal, final, material, and efficient (e.g., *Meta.* 1.3, 983a25–32; *De An.* 2.4, 415b). The end Montaigne has proposed for himself is domestic and private, not public service or his own glory. "My powers are not capable of such a design." He will present himself in his simple, natural, ordinary manner, without striving, for he wants to be seen in his natural form, which includes all his defects. He himself, he says, is the matter of his book. Efficient cause is implicit in the immediate inference that he is also the maker of his book and is explicit in his reference to his power. It is important to note that, in each case, Montaigne weakens the meaning of the cause. His end is merely domestic and private, not the lofty goal of public service and glory. His form is not perfect but deficient and defective. Because he himself is the matter of his book, the reader is warned: "It is not reasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject" (VS3, F2).

Montaigne questions the classical foundations of metaphysics and epistemology in the "Apology" within the context of his discussion of whether it is possible to know even what is most near to us, our own selves. We do not know how a "spiritual impression" can penetrate a body and we do not understand the nature of the connection between "these wonderful springs of action," soul and body (VS539, F402). Montaigne here criticizes Aristotle's account of causality. In his *Physics* (1.7, 190b16–191a22), Aristotle says that matter, form, and privation are the

principles of natural things. Montaigne ridicules the idea that privation can be a principle: “And what could be more inane than to make emptiness itself the cause of the production of things? Privation is a negative; by what notion can he have made it the cause and origin of the things that are?” (VS540, F403). Aristotle claims that what makes the body move is “entelechy” or actualization. Montaigne calls this a “frigid invention,” for it refers to “neither the essence, nor the origin, nor the nature of the soul, but merely notes its effect” (VS543, F406).

Both privation and entelechy refer to Aristotle’s teaching concerning final cause. Final cause is the completion or perfection of a being in accordance with its nature or form. Final cause moves the being toward its perfection. In that sense, it is really first, for it initiates movement. Privation implies a lack of something that must be there if the being is to become a complete and perfect member of its species. Therefore, privation entails “striving” for the perfection of form, for the good. Final cause, then, is the good.

Form is “what” a thing is. All of the members of a species have the same form. Thus form is universal. Form is actuality: it is the realization of the being in the activities that are proper to it (e.g., *Meta.* 9.8, 1050b2). So, for example, the form of the eye is sight. Final cause is the completion of form: the final cause of the eye is also sight. Both the “what” and the “why” of the eye are sight. Aristotle says that “if the eye were an animal, the soul would be sight” (*De An.* 2.1, 412b18–20). As sight is the actualization of the eye, so the soul is the actualization of the body. The actualization or realization of form is the movement from potentiality to actuality. The perfection, the completion of the form of any being, is simply to be a perfect member of its species, capable of the activities proper to that species. This understanding of being and becoming entails a grounding in the eternal and the divine as first unmoved mover, as necessary being, and as pure actuality.

Montaigne breaks with Aristotle on every major aspect of his metaphysics: form, final cause, potentiality and actuality, perfection, the good, and the eternal and divine. And he reverses Aristotle’s understanding of philosophy itself: he reverses the philosophical act. Montaigne uses the vocabulary of form and end, perfection and imperfection, because these are the terms available to him: he has no new words in which to express his originality. But he transforms the meaning of these terms in a way that allows him to display just what is new in his thought and to introduce notions of diversity, power, and freedom that amount to an understanding of philosophy, of nature, and of politics radically different from Aristotle’s.³

The Particularization of Form

Montaigne changes the meaning of form entirely by particularizing form. He often refers to the great diversity and variety of forms, especially in reference to men and to human action: “the perpetual variety of forms of our nature” (VS973–74, F744).⁴ Nature, he says, has become variable and particular to each man (VS1049, F803). There is, then, not simply one single human form. The clearest instance of the particularization of form occurs in his introduction of the idea of the “master-form” in “Of Repentance.” “There is no one who, if he listens to himself, does not discover in himself *a form all his own*, a master form” (VS811, F615, emphasis added). The description “all one’s own” emphasizes the *possession* of the form by the particular, in contrast to the notion of the particular “participating” in the universal form of human nature.

At the beginning of his essay on Cato the Younger, Montaigne explains the way in which he regards other men in terms of the particularity of form: “Because I feel myself tied down to one form, I do not oblige everybody to espouse it, as all others do. I believe in and conceive a thousand contrary ways of life; and in contrast with the common run of men, I more easily admit difference than resemblance between us. . . . I consider [each man] simply in himself, without relation to others; I mold him to his own model” (VS229, F169). He does not judge other men by the standard of a common, universal human form or nature. Rather, he sees each man as he is in himself, in his own form.

The way in which Montaigne changes the meaning of “form” calls into question the relationship between the individual and the species and introduces a new notion of particularity. For Montaigne, particularity cannot be grounded simply in the body. He particularizes form itself and claims that there is greater variety among minds than among bodies: “Variety is the most general fashion that nature has followed, and more in minds than bodies, inasmuch as minds are of a substance suppler and susceptible of more forms” (VS786, F598). Whereas for Aristotle, the particular is not the object of knowledge because knowledge is the apprehension of the universal form, the *Essays* are a philosophical attempt to reveal the intelligibility of a particular human being.

This is why there is little talk of essences and universals in the *Essays*. I believe that there is only one place where Montaigne refers to his “essence.” In “Of Practice” he tells us: “What I chiefly portray is my thoughts, a subject unformed, which is not able to manifest itself in action. I am barely able to couch them in this airy body of words. . . . These are not my deeds that I write, this is me, this is my essence” (VS379, F274). They are *his* thoughts,

his own thoughts. And they are “unformed.” He seems to be suggesting a contrast between the universal essence of man as “reason” (man defined as “the rational animal”) and the particularization of essence (each man as his own thoughts). This amounts to the particularization of the mind in contrast to the Aristotelian view of mind as the same in all men: it is the same because it is simply a receptivity to the world. It seems, then, that whereas for Aristotle the mind is public, for Montaigne it is private: one’s own.

Final Cause and Infinite Desire

Francis Slade argues that “the repudiation of end in the sense of *telos*” is “foundational for all modern philosophy.”⁵ In the tradition, final cause or “end” is completion, the completion of form. “End” does not refer to a temporal finish, the last moment in a temporal sequence, but rather to a condition in which nothing is lacking for the perfection of the being in question. For Aristotle, the end of human life, the human good, is happiness, which he describes as both final and self-sufficient. All men by nature desire happiness, and all of their actions, whether they deliberately intend it or not, are directed to that end.

In “Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions” Montaigne presents the traditional philosophical notions of consistency and perfection as the direction of all of one’s actions to a single end. Whoever has not directed his entire life to a certain end (*fin*) cannot order his particular actions. It is necessary to have the “form” of one’s whole life, and a certain “design” of one’s life, in one’s head. Our projects go astray because they have no determinate direction and end (*but*) (VS337, F243). It is, in fact, a very rare achievement to direct all of one’s actions to a single end. Very few men, perhaps a dozen among the ancients, have actually attained such perfection. We see, then, that Aristotle’s account of human action does not capture the lives of most men for it judges by the standard of “what ought to be,” not by what is in its imperfection.

To locate human happiness in a self-sufficient perfection not only misjudges what is, but also fails to account for the nature of human desire. Montaigne says that the sages distinguish between desires that come from nature and desires that come from the unruliness of our imagination: those of which one can envision the end (*bout*) are nature’s, whereas those whose end (*fin*) we cannot reach are our own, that is, produced by the imagination (VS1009, F771). He calls this a “subtle” distinction, suggesting that it is merely verbal. In fact, there is no end to our desires, or at least to those that involve the soul and not only the body. In “On Some Verses of Virgil”

Montaigne advises those men who are astonished at the “unnatural and incredible” sexual appetite of women to look at themselves where they will find the same insatiability. “It would be, perhaps, more strange to see there some stop [*arrest*]; this is not a passion simply corporeal; if one finds no end [*bout*] in avarice and ambition, there is none either in lust. It lives still after satiety, and it is possible to prescribe neither constant satisfaction nor end [*fin*]: it goes always beyond what it possesses” (VS885, F675). Desire without end means that there is no permanent satisfaction and no completion or fulfillment of desire; rather, desire extends through the whole of life and ceases only in death. All satisfaction is temporary and temporal. Montaigne says that death is the end (*bout*) but not the end (*but*) of life; “this is its end [*fin*], its extremity, not its object” (VS1051–52, F805). Death is the finish, the stop, of life. Montaigne here conflates the meanings of *bout*, *but*, and *fin*. When he says that death is the end of life, he uses the term *fin* for “extremity,” meaning the last point in time. The sense of the extreme as the last temporal moment shows the infinite character of desire, because that last moment is not a completion or perfection or actualization.

For Aristotle, the desire of the philosopher, implicit in the beginning of philosophy in wonder, is satisfied in contemplation. But for Montaigne, the desires of the mind are without end. In “Of Experience” he writes: “There is no end [*fin*] to our investigations; our end [*fin*] is in the other world.” The pursuits of the mind are “without end [*terme*], and without form,” and the movement of the mind is “irregular, perpetual, without a model, and without end [*but*]” (VS1068, F817–18). Our end is in the other world and therefore there is no end, in the sense of perfection and completion, in this world.

Montaigne contrasts those Christian ascetics and contemplatives who desire permanent union with the eternal and divine in this life with “that brattish rabble of men that we are,” distracted by our desires and thoughts. These ascetics are “venerable souls, exalted by ardent piety and religion to constant and conscientious meditation on divine things,” who anticipate, “by dint of keen and vehement hope, the enjoyment of eternal food, final end [*but final*] and last stop [*dernier arrest*] of Christian desires, sole constant and incorruptible pleasure” (VS1114, F856). Even the final end of Christian desires is the “last stop.”

Power: Producing Effects

Montaigne replaces Aristotelian ends with effects, transforming the meaning of human action from the actualization of potentiality to the

production of effect. In book 1 of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle explains that final cause is “the counterpart” to efficient cause, for final cause is “the purpose of a thing and its good—for this is the goal of all generation and movement” (1.3, 983a25–32). Efficient cause cannot be understood apart from final cause, because movement is initiated by the end. The end is the beginning; final cause is the naturally given end, the good. The rejection of final cause means that efficient cause is now cut off from its connection with final cause and thus from its role in the attainment of the good. Efficient cause, then, becomes “power.” In Montaigne’s metaphysics, beginnings are not ends. Aristotle’s “entelechy” or actuality is no longer the essence, origin, or nature of the soul but only its “effect.”

Montaigne replaces end with effect in the very first essay, “By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End [*Fin*].” The most common way to soften the heart of the avenging conqueror is through submission, but there are times when defiance has the “same effect [*effect*].” It might plausibly be argued that strong souls are moved by esteem, whereas weak, common souls are moved by compassion; in some cases, however, astonishment brings about a “like effect [*effect*]” (VS7–8, F3–4). By diverse means we produce the same effect.

Montaigne uses the Aristotelian vocabulary of ends and perfection to speak about his own project, but his meaning is very different. In the first sentences of “To the Reader,” he says that his end is domestic and private: it is the end he has “proposed” to himself. In “Of the Power of the Imagination” he says that his end is to tell what can happen, not what has happened (VS105, F75). The end proposed for the *Essays* will be arrived at exactly and fully: in order to “perfect” his work, he must only be faithful to what he is (VS805, F611). Even though his work would have been “better” had he done it elsewhere, it is “perfect” because it is his own (VS875, F667). In each of these cases, he is talking about his own project, the end “proposed” by himself to himself. He transforms the meaning of “end” from the perfection and completion of nature to the projection of the will, that is, to the production of effects.

Montaigne notices that men ordinarily jump to inquire into the causes of things without first inquiring into the truth of things. These thinkers ask why something is the case instead of whether it is the case at all. “Following this custom, we know the foundations and causes of a thousand things that never were” (VS1027, F785). In particular, we look for “powerful and weighty causes and ends,” while the true causes escape us by their littleness. Many famous impressions, accepted as true, spring from “empty beginnings and frivolous causes.” The beginnings of all things, he says, are always “weak” (VS1020, F780). They must be weak because

they are not ends; the end is not inherent in the beginning. In the search for such true causes, “a very prudent, attentive, and subtle inquirer is needed, impartial and unprejudiced” (VS1029, F787). Montaigne is concerned not simply with finding the “true” causes but also with imagining or inventing possible causes. Origins are not ends but merely spontaneous beginnings with no intelligent direction. Therefore, the connection between beginnings and effects is not inevitable: a given action might have been caused by any number of motives or springs. Alexander’s rage at the captain Betis, for example, might have been caused by disdain, by envious spite, or by the natural impetuosity of his anger. In another example, the softening of the heart of the avenging conqueror might be accomplished through submission, but sometimes is brought about by defiance. With respect to Montaigne’s own disposition, he notes that his innocence and goodness could be due to his father, his nurse, his earliest upbringing, or to “some other cause.” His strong propensity to compassion might be due to the circumstances of his baptism, or to pride, or to nature. In all of these cases, and many others, Montaigne seems interested only in setting out possible causes. His invention of possible causes and his apparent indifference to identifying the one true cause show that the origins are not determinative and that one cause can replace another.

This indeterminacy of the origins is the condition for power as the production of effects. Montaigne’s meaning can be seen more clearly in Hobbes’s definition of philosophy. In chapter 11 of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes claims that there is no such thing as the “greatest good” of the ancient philosophers: “I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceases only in death.”⁶ Hobbes defines philosophy in the *Leviathan*, chapter 46: “By philosophy is understood the knowledge acquired by reasoning from the manner of the generation of anything to the properties; or from the properties to some possible way of generation of the same; to the end to be able to produce, as far as matter and human force permit, such effects as human life requireth.”⁷ Desire is satisfied temporarily when we produce and thereby possess the effects that we want.

This understanding of philosophy is the basis for modern science and modern politics: it explains why modern philosophy is a refounding. Causes and origins can be replaced. The goal is not to understand the causes but to produce the desired effect, not to understand the “why” but to produce the “that.” To understand philosophy as simply the search for the true causes of things concedes authority to nature, that is, to natural ends as causal. The search for possible causes, however, liberates the mind from nature and gives the determination of ends to man himself. The

invention of possible causes is the act that frees man from the power of natural causes. For modern philosophy, “thought defines itself as access to indefinite possibilities, thus to what it may be able to cause to be . . . Understanding itself as freedom from the actual, i.e., as not determined by ends, thought comes into view as power, the power to create forms, forms which have no actuality except as thoughts.”⁸

Potentiality and Actuality: Possibility

For Aristotle, fulfillment, completion, and perfection are brought about through the actualization of potentialities. Human action is actualization. Potentialities are given by nature and determined by species, and actualization occurs through the agency of final cause. Form, then, is actuality (*Meta.* 9.8, 1050b2). Therefore, nothing genuinely new can ever emerge in the world. The limits of what can happen are set; differences among members of the same species are simply degrees of actualization of the same form.

For Montaigne, human action is not actualization but the production of effects. Potentiality and actuality are replaced by possibility. The genuinely new can emerge only as the possible, which can be understood in two ways. It can be limited to what has already happened: what has happened *can* happen. Alternatively, the possible can be understood as what has never been seen before. Montaigne says that his “end” is to tell not what has happened but what can happen, what is possible to happen (VS105–6, F75). This suggests that he is not limiting the possible to what has happened, to what has been seen before, but that he is concerned with bringing out the new. The new can only emerge, or appear, against the background of the old, the familiar. This is why Montaigne is an “accidental” philosopher. He is using ancient philosophy, and Aristotle in particular, as the background for what he is bringing into existence. The possible can only be what had been thought to be impossible or, at least, what had never before been thought to be possible.

The central role of possibility in Montaigne’s philosophical project makes sense of the fact that, in the *Essays*, extremes seem to replace essences. For example, cruelty is the “extreme of all vice,” and the extreme of that extreme is the enjoyment of the spectacle of another man’s suffering. We might expect, then, to see the essence of vice in cruelty and the essence of cruelty in extreme cruelty. But Montaigne does not say that. Extremes seem to be the limits of what is possible: extreme cruelty is “the uttermost point that cruelty can attain” (VS432, F316). Montaigne

is especially interested in the limits of the human soul. “It is very hard,” he says, “to assign limits to the achievements of the faculties of the soul” (VS723, F546). Montaigne, then, is open to possibilities of the soul that would have looked impossible from the perspective of Aristotle’s understanding of nature.

Perfection and Hierarchy

Final cause is inseparable from form because final cause is just the perfection or the realization of form. In contrast to this Aristotelian picture, Montaigne emphasizes his deformity and his imperfections. In “To the Reader” he says that he wants to be seen in his simple, natural, and ordinary form, “without striving.” Therefore, his defects will be an important aspect of his self-portrait (VS3, F2). In “Of Cripples” he tells us that he is astonished at his own deformity (VS1029, F787). He is a particular, “very ill-formed” (VS804, F610). The *Essays* do not conceal such imperfections any more than does his portrait which displays, not a perfect face, but his own face (VS148, F108).⁹

The *Essays* begin with Montaigne’s “end,” the end that he has proposed to himself: “I have set myself no end but a domestic and private one. I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory. My powers are inadequate for such a purpose” (VS3, F2). The *Essays* end with his judgment of human perfection: “It is an absolute perfection and God-like to know how to enjoy our own being rightly. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting on our own rump” (VS1115–16, F857).

Human perfection is simply the enjoyment of “our own” condition. Montaigne intends to contrast this perfection with the philosopher’s attainment of the divine condition as well as with the condition of the prince who sits on “the loftiest throne in the world.” The “end” as the domestic and private is the locus of human perfection. This notion of human perfection amounts to a removal of man from the ancient, traditional hierarchy in which he is located between the divine, which is above him, and the bestial, which is below him. In this hierarchical view, man’s perfection must be seen as the attainment of the divine condition. Therefore, Montaigne’s valuation of the human as such might be seen as simply a kind of “lowering” of the standards of thought and action.

His insistence that he shows himself “without striving” lends itself to that interpretation, for he appears to demand less of himself than philosophical and moral perfection would require. There is no struggle within himself between the higher and lower parts of his being.

However, Montaigne’s restoration of the human should not simply be interpreted as a kind of lowering of the standards of human perfection. This estimation fails to recognize the radical newness of Montaigne’s project and persists in the framework of the tradition: it judges man as a being within and entirely determined by his place in the natural hierarchy. From that perspective, Montaigne’s perfection does indeed look like imperfection. In fact, however, Montaigne is introducing a new notion of perfection that cannot be measured by the old standards, even though it must be articulated in the terms of those old standards. This new notion of perfection is the free and entire possession of what is one’s own, “to enjoy our own being rightly.” Philosophy “belongs” to man. To fully possess our “end” is to enjoy our own being: possession means that there is no distance between what is and what ought to be.¹⁰

Montaigne’s description of the perfection of the *Essays* manifests this new notion of human perfection: “For this purpose of mine [*mien dessein*], it is also appropriate for me to write at home, in a backward region, where no one helps me or corrects me, where I usually have no contact with any man who understands the Latin of his Paternoster and of French a little less. I would have done it better elsewhere, but the work would have been less my own; and its principal end and perfection is to be precisely my own” (VS875, F667). He writes the essays at home, and therefore they are his own. They would have been better had he written them elsewhere, but they are perfect because they are precisely his own.

Unlike a perfection “all one’s own,” Aristotelian perfection implies hierarchy. Human beings either attain the perfection of the human form or they fall short in varying degrees. From this perspective, the lower is the imperfection of the higher. Again, this presupposes a common human essence or complete form against which the individual is to be measured. But for Montaigne, the low is not the imperfection of the high. He relates men to one another not in terms of sameness of essence but in terms of accidental similarity. In the first essay, for example, the lowly “common herd” is accidentally similar to the lofty princes, for the astonishment of the people is accidentally similar to the esteem of the princes. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the weakness of the people is accidentally similar to the strength of the princes, because both produce the same effect. Also, Montaigne describes himself as accidentally similar to the ancient philosophers: his weak mores conform “by accident” to many of

the teachings and examples of ancient philosophy. That is why he is “an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher” (VS546, F409).

The Good: Contemplation and Politics

The Aristotelian notions of final cause, perfection, and the good are impossible to separate. Final cause is the good and final cause is perfection. The good for man, or happiness, is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (*NE*. 1.7, 1098a1–16). Since there are two kinds of virtue, intellectual and moral, Aristotle holds that there are two distinct kinds of perfection for man: the theoretical and the practical. The “good life” can be either the life of the philosopher, that is, the life of contemplation, or the life of complete moral virtue, which manifests itself most fully in the ruler who, above all, must exercise practical wisdom. Each of these ways of life is the outcome of man’s uniqueness within the whole of nature, within the natural hierarchy. Man is unique by virtue of his reason.

Montaigne’s view of the uniqueness of man is very different. In the “Apology for Sebond” Montaigne examines an essentially Aristotelian-Thomistic view of nature that is hierarchical.¹¹ God is revealed in the book of nature, and man—on account of his reason—is the part of nature that most clearly reveals God. Whereas this understanding of nature sees human reason as unique and therefore as that which makes man to be in the image of God, Montaigne says that what is unique to man is the “unruliness of thought and freedom of imagination,” which make it impossible for man to remain within the bounds of nature (VS459–60, F336).

The second characteristic that is unique to man among all the animals, according to Montaigne, is shame. Adam and Eve eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is pride that makes them want to be God: their desire is not limited by their place within nature but is rather an infinite desire to become divine through the knowledge of good and evil (which is philosophy). When they realize what they have done, they cover their genitals. They cover the very parts that produce the human and thus they reveal their shame at being merely human. Man is the only animal that hides himself in the act by which he generates another member of his species (VS484, F356–57).

It should be noted here that Montaigne’s picture of man’s uniqueness strongly suggests belief in original sin. The original sin, the sin at the origins, is pride, and this manifests itself in both philosophy and politics, the two ways of life which Aristotle regards as the good for man. Montaigne

does not see either philosophy or politics as innocent. His refounding of both reveals the way in which he comes to terms with pride.

With respect to Aristotle's first and highest mode of the good life, that is, philosophy, Montaigne replaces Aristotelian contemplation with judgment. Contemplation is the receptivity of the mind to being and presupposes a kind of harmony between the mind and the world. The mind receives the forms of things without the matter: the form in the mind and the form in the thing are identical (*De An.* 3.4, 430a). Montaigne's "unruliness of thought and freedom of imagination" presuppose no such harmony. For Montaigne, the mind is not receptive but rather productive and generative. Judgment does not gaze at "the thing itself," but subjects it and makes it "one's own." (These metaphysical and epistemological aspects of Montaigne's reversal of Aristotle will be taken up in chapters 3 and 4.)

With respect to Aristotle's second and lesser notion of happiness, that is, moral virtue or the life of politics, Montaigne reverses Aristotle's ordering of the private and the political. For Aristotle, the good of moral virtue is the final cause or end of politics. Aristotle says that the city comes into existence for the sake of mere life but that it exists for the sake of the good life, the life of moral excellence (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b25–35). The city emerges out of the pre-political forms of association, the family, and the village. These pre-political associations are imperfect: they achieve their perfection only in the city, which is complete and self-sufficient. The city, then, is the final end or completion of the pre-political. Montaigne, on the other hand, begins the *Essays* in "To the Reader" with his statement that his "end" is the domestic and private. His powers are not great enough for the end of public service or glory. That is, he reverses the Aristotelian order: he reorders philosophy to the imperfect and incomplete domestic and private association.

According to Hannah Arendt, the Greek and Roman world, and even the Christian world of the Middle Ages, knew only two realms: the public and the private. Arendt's account of the distinction and the relation between the realms of the public and private is Aristotelian in its major outlines. For Aristotle, the city is the public space for the practice and display of virtue. The private sphere remains hidden, unworthy to appear in public. The private realm is that of the household where biological needs are met through a kind of activity called "labor." Labor is tied to the life-processes of the body, including the labor of childbirth. Thus, the household is the domain in which the human bondage to necessity can be most clearly seen. Because the private realm of the household deals with the biological and the necessary, it remains hidden from public view. From the perspective

of the distinctly human, higher activities, the private is identified with the shameful. The ordinary daily functions of the body are hidden on account of what seems like an instinctual sense of shame. This includes, of course, the very act by means of which the species is continued.

The public realm, on the other hand, is the place of self-disclosure and, thus, of honor and glory. The public realm is also the realm of freedom, which means, first of all, freedom from necessity and labor. It is only within the public sphere that action, as distinguished from labor and work, can take place. Action is the specifically human mode of association, the way in which men are related to each other, not through the medium of material things but directly, through deeds and speech. It is here that men rise above the merely biological to the specifically human practice of virtue or excellence. Therefore, the public sphere is the place where men compete and distinguish themselves, where they display their uniqueness and superiority. The city is the space in which virtue appears in deeds and speech. It is only the political relationship that allows for the full exercise of virtue: prudence, justice, and courage come into their perfection in the greater scope for action that only the political can provide.

Arendt explains that “society” is the new, modern form of human association that comes about when the private realm rises into the public sphere. “The emergence of society . . . from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.”¹²

Montaigne not only reorders philosophy to the domestic and private, he also brings the domestic and private out into the public realm. In so doing, he refuses to hide out of shame for mere life. This emergence of the private into the public is the bringing into being of modern society.

For Aristotle, the good of politics is the “common good,” a good that can only be achieved in common (*Pol.* 3. 6–7). Montaigne says that philosophy has not been able to find a way to the good that is commonly shared. Therefore, “let each one seek it in his particularity” (VS622, F471). Montaigne rejects the notion of the common good as the foundation of politics: his “end” is instead domestic and private. We should, consequently, expect that the good is to be found in the domestic and private, but the domestic and private brought into the public, that is, the social. To that end, he reorders the virtues and vices in accordance with the requirements of social, rather than political, life. (These moral and political aspects of Montaigne’s reversal of Aristotle will be discussed in chapters 5, 6, and 7.)

The Eternal and the Temporal

For ancient philosophy as well as for Christian theology, human desire is ultimately desire for the divine, for eternity and immortality. The human good is the transcendence of the human: the completion and perfection of the human consists in the attainment of the divine condition. For Aristotle, even sexual desire is ultimately the desire for immortality, the desire to share in the eternal. The desires of the philosopher are fulfilled in contemplation, which is a sharing in the activity of the eternal and the divine. Although Aristotle does not consider politics a divine activity, we see in his pupil Alexander (who believed himself descended from the gods) the desire of the prince for immortal glory.

The infinite desires of the philosophers, Christian contemplatives, and princes all appear on the very last pages of the *Essays*. There, Montaigne refers to the philosophers who want to “get out of themselves and escape from the man.” He says of this desire: “That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves.” Of the Christian ascetics who “scorn to give their attention to our beggarly, watery, and ambiguous comforts,” he says: “these are two things that I have always observed to be in singular accord: supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct.” And of Alexander’s pretensions to divinity, he says: “I find nothing so humble and so mortal in the life of Alexander as his fancies about his immortalization.” When the oracle of Jupiter Ammon had placed Alexander among the gods, Philotas wrote to Alexander congratulating him on his elevation: “As far as you are concerned, I am very glad of it; but there is reason to pity the men who will have to live with and obey a man who exceeds and is not content with a man’s proportions” (VS1115, F856–57).

For Montaigne, Alexander’s apotheosis is a delusion and therefore also the very reverse of human perfection: absolute perfection is, rather, to know how to enjoy our own being rightly. “We go out of our condition” only because we do not know what it is like inside ourselves. Human perfection is not the attainment of the divine condition but the enjoyment or complete possession of our own condition. But what does this mean? Would we not necessarily already have taken complete possession of our own condition as created and temporal beings? Montaigne rejects the attempt and even the possibility of becoming divine, of rising above the human condition by our own agency. He does the opposite: he brings the eternal into the temporal. And this amounts to a valuing of the temporal in a new way.

Montaigne’s “stance,” the standpoint from which he looks at the world of human things in the *Essays*, is entirely new. He neither immerses himself

in the busyness of this world nor escapes to the eternal. That is to say, he takes neither a theoretical nor a practical attitude toward the human things. He transcends Aristotle's distinction between the theoretical and the practical. Montaigne's stance, or attitude, comes through especially in "Of Vanity." There he tells us that he really knows very little about the actual workings of his household, even though he has retired there and is devoted to it as his inheritance from his father. He is ashamed, he says, that he doesn't even know the names of some of the most common implements, or how wine is made. He is not immersed in the running of his chateau or in the economic details of his livelihood. On the other hand, he insists that "this is not a philosophical scorn for transitory and mundane things" (VS953, F728). So his attitude toward the everyday is not an attitude either of utility or of action within the practical world. Yet he has no philosophical disdain for these ordinary and common things. The ordinary and common is, in fact, the focus of his attention as a philosopher.

There is, then, a kind of theoretical or contemplative stance that Montaigne takes in the *Essays*. But this is not the attempt to contemplate the divine, the eternal and unchanging. Rather, he looks at the human things, especially human action, examining them from different angles. That examination is the contemplative element in his thought. However, he does not look at the temporal realm from the perspective of eternity for, from that perspective, the temporal appears as nothing. "Of Vanity" expresses his stance so well because he seems to say: yes, the world, the temporal, and the fleeting are all vanity, but this is what we are, and there is value in the temporal world, there is good in what we are.

Montaigne's "contemplative" stance toward the temporal, however, includes an element of action, for he also reorders the temporal. He does not just ponder the world as it is, but transcends the Aristotelian distinction between the theoretical and the practical. He does not act within the flow of time, but stands, as it were, in a middle position between the eternal and the temporal.¹³ In reordering time, he stands above time. Yet he is not directing time to the eternal. Rather, he brings the eternal into the temporal.

I will discuss three aspects of the *Essays* that display Montaigne's new stance toward the eternal and the temporal. First, although he tells many stories, he includes no extended narrative of either his own life or of human history in general. Second, Montaigne refers to himself as "a new figure" of the philosopher: the new appears in time as a "figure." Third, in spite of his insistence on his changeability, he also claims that he is, in some sense, consistent.

The Absence of Narrative in the Essays

The rejection of final cause introduces the possibility of a new kind of freedom with respect to the temporal order, for the temporal is no longer ordered to the eternal. Montaigne's rejection of final cause is reflected in the way in which he presents eternity and time in the *Essays*. Final cause binds thought and action to the eternal, connecting the moments of time by ordering them to the end. The end is the origin: it is there from the beginning, guiding the temporal sequence, making the temporal sequence intelligible. The temporal is subordinated to the eternal and ordered to the eternal. For Montaigne, man cannot attain "the perfection of being" that belongs only to the eternal and divine. On the other hand, Montaigne's stance toward the temporal does manifest a new kind of freedom that follows from the rejection of final cause. Ends are no longer given by nature but are chosen as his purposes. Francis Slade puts this precisely: "It is this reduction of end to purpose that makes possible the argumentative strategy employed against teleological explanation. . . . Nature must be construed as *end-less* for modern freedom. . . . Ends are constituted by our choice. They are our 'projects.'"¹⁴ The difference between ends and purposes is that "ends exist independently of our willing them to be; they do not originate in our willing them to be. Purposes take their origin from our willing them; purposes would not be if agents did not give them being. . . . [Aristotle's] happiness is the end of human life whatever the purposes of human beings may be. Happiness is the end not because I choose happiness and make it my purpose, but because of what I am, the intrinsic character, or nature, of the human being itself."¹⁵

Narrative implies final cause. "Narrative, presenting the interplay between purpose and end, is the classic form that allows us to contemplate human life in its completeness and incompleteness. . . . The narrative arts presuppose the ontological priority of ends to purposes because without that priority, there is nothing to be revealed about the adequacy or inadequacy of human purposes to the completeness of human life, for in action a human being 'purposes' the realization of his life as a whole, complete in itself."¹⁶

Narrative is made coherent in terms of some notion of completion, and that means change that is directed to an end. Montaigne says: "There is nothing so contrary to my style as an extended narrative" (VS106, F76). Men and events are presented in the *Essays* without regard to their place in an unbroken historical process and are given a new non-temporal order by the mind. Thus, although the *Essays* are full of stories, there is no concern for chronological order and no extended narrative either of

Montaigne's own life or of human history. What we are told about Montaigne's life is given to us in fragments scattered throughout the work without regard to their place in any temporal sequence.

Compare the *Essays* to the presentation of Augustine's life in the *Confessions*. The nine narrative books begin with his conception and end with the death of his mother. In his reflections on this beginning and end, he emphasizes the bodily or biological aspect of his relationship to his parents, "the parents of my flesh," by whose bodies he came into this life: "the father from whom, and the mother in whom, You fashioned me in time" (1.6). Thus, the nine narrative books present the natural, biological life cycle of the human species, the way in which one generation gives birth to the next and then goes out of existence. We see, then, the fleeting character of the life of individuals, held by the bonds of necessity to the merely biological and thus to time and mortality. This is the inheritance of original sin and the condition of trial and temptation. In the later books on memory, time, and Genesis he presents the temporal character of all created things, but also the possibility of the transcendence of the temporal flow and the promise of eternal life. Narrative is transcended in the eternal now of God's vision.

In Augustine's narrative, we see the interplay of divine and human action. God, who is eternal and unchanging, acts in time, directing Augustine to his end. That end is completeness, wholeness, found only in the eternal union with God in the next world. While Augustine is seeking happiness in lower things, God is secretly bringing him to the point of his conversion. The action of God looks like a cause, a necessarily superior cause that enters into the natural realm of causality and overrides all other causes. This interplay of divine and human action, which must result in the victory of divine grace, raises the question of human freedom in a new way. Augustine's choices are not ultimate. Therefore, his freedom must be made compatible with divine agency.

In contrast with Augustine's *Confessions*, Montaigne is not appealing to the action of God within his life in order to explain who he is. When the factor of freedom is introduced into the picture of Montaigne's life, any idea of an extended narrative must be abandoned. His freedom must be displayed in the discrete moments of time rather than in a story that holds the moments together in a temporal order of change directed to an end. The intelligibility of a particular human being therefore cannot be revealed in the story of his life. The absence of an extended narrative of Montaigne's life points to his freedom from final cause.

Narrative is the attempt to tell what has happened in chronological order. Montaigne's end is to tell not what has happened but what can

happen (VS105–6, F75). He is not concerned with the actual but with the possible. Therefore, his relation to time cannot be expressed in narrative. There is no ordered movement in time, for there is no final cause of human action. His “transpositions of chronology” mean that his stories have their place in the *Essays* “according to their opportunity, not always according to their age” (VS964, F736). Their timeliness is dependent on his purposes. Montaigne is imposing his own order on the temporal.

The presence of Montaigne’s father in the *Essays*, like the presence of Augustine’s mother in the *Confessions*, points to the origins and the biological dimension of human life, the way in which the generations of men come into being and go out of being. Perhaps the strangest of the “transpositions of chronology” involving his father appears at the beginning of the “Apology” in Montaigne’s account of how he came to translate Sebond’s book. The way in which he presents the chronology of his translation does not follow the natural temporal order. Montaigne’s father was given Sebond’s book as a gift by one of his learned houseguests and, “a few days before his death,” he asked his son to translate it into French. Montaigne did the translation with which his father was very pleased and so ordered it to be printed. “And this was done after his death” (VS440, F320). Since the *Theologia Naturalis* is a work of nearly a thousand pages, how could he have translated it within a few days? In the dedicatory epistle to the translation, he lets it be known that he had been working on the translation some months before his father’s death (a fact that he does not mention in the *Essays*). M. A. Screech estimates that the translation would have taken at least a year. Stranger still, the dedication to his father wishes him a long life, yet it is dated on the very day of his father’s death, June 18, 1568.¹⁷ Now, perhaps this is all just a mistake on Montaigne’s part and nothing should be made of it. But if it is not a mistake, then we are faced with a deliberately incomprehensible chronology. The temporal order is thrown off so that the chronology does not match the natural order of things. He is imposing his own order on these events, a non-natural order which concerns the life and death of his father, his own origin. There is a strange sense here in which his father is “reborn,” a sense in which he is reversing the beginning and the end.

Montaigne is subjecting the temporal to himself, taking power over the temporal order. Human agency is not captured in narrative, because action is not actualization. Action is a new beginning and has the power to wipe out the past. So there is no story behind his actions. The absence of narrative shows that Montaigne is complete at every moment, and at every moment has the power to make a new beginning.

A New Figure

Montaigne describes himself as “a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher.” His choice of “figure” to express what is new about him brings to mind both medieval and ancient meanings of that term. In his essay “Figura,” Erich Auerbach goes through the history of “figure” beginning with ancient poetry where the term first arises as an expression for “form” and conveys the meaning of “new form.”¹⁸ The term has a rich and varied history among the ancients, but “the meaning which the Church Fathers gave the word . . . was of the greatest historical importance.”¹⁹ The figural involves concrete historical persons or events that are related to each other but that do not simply represent anything in any abstract way. “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.” So, for example, the persons and events of the Old Testament prefigure the Incarnation and the Gospels, which in turn are a promise of the kingdom of God at the end of time.²⁰

Figural interpretation “removes the concrete event, completely preserved as it is, from time and transposes it into a perspective of eternity.” The figures, then, have an eternal character and must be understood from the eternal divine perspective. “The future is represented figurally by past events” but for God there is no “difference of time.”²¹ Figure entails an “immediate vertical connection with a divine order.”²²

That the two events or persons are not simply related horizontally, in a temporal relationship of before and after, is due to the fact that “every future model, though incomplete as history, is already fulfilled in God and has existed from all eternity in His providence.” The figures are “the tentative form of something eternal and timeless; they point not only to the concrete future, but also to something that has always been and will always be. . . . which is at all times present, fulfilled in God’s providence, which knows no difference of time” because all of the moments of time are present to God at once. The figure is both a fragmentary temporal reality and a veiled eternal reality.²³

Auerbach contrasts this understanding of time with the modern view in which “the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process.” From the perspective of the figural system, “the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each

in relation to something other that is promised and not yet present.”²⁴ As Peter Burke explains in *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, “this kind of interpretation clearly worked against the sense of the past, for it depends on taking men and events out of their historical context, and putting them into a spiritual one.”²⁵

In describing himself as a new figure, Montaigne is both preserving and transforming the ancient and medieval meanings of “figure.” Figure replaces Aristotelian form. Whereas form is eternal and universal, a figure is a concrete particular that is related to other particulars not through sameness of essence but through the accidental similarity of discrete and fragmentary stories: Montaigne finds that he is accidentally similar to the examples of many different philosophers. Whereas figure in the medieval sense is directly related to the divine, Montaigne is a new figure and exemplar, not of God, but of the philosopher.

Montaigne takes from the medieval notion of figure the possibility of the transcendence of the temporal by a particular, a kind of transcendence that would not have been thinkable or possible for the ancients. He is a new possibility, the new type of the philosopher, an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher. He brings together and uses the fragments of the philosophers of the past in order to reveal himself. All of ancient philosophy is ordered to him: he transcends the temporal by bringing the fragments of ancient philosophy under his own judgment and directing them to his own purposes. It is as if the new had been there all along. Ancient philosophy had always expressed, in a fragmentary way, what he is.

Change and Consistency

Montaigne’s stance toward the temporal and the significance of the absence of narrative can also be seen in what he says about his changeability and his consistency. On the one hand, he claims that he is constantly changing: “I do not portray being; I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute” (VS805, F611). In “Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions” he says that only about a dozen men among the ancients managed to achieve perfect consistency. Striving for perfection means directing all of one’s actions to a single end. Following Aristotle’s account of final cause, the perfection or complete actualization of form requires the rule of reason in the soul: this rule of reason brings about consistency of action because reason is such that it directs all action to a single end. Montaigne, however, presents himself

“without striving.” He includes himself among the common herd of men who are constantly moved and changed both from without and within: “Not only does the wind of accident move me at will, but, besides, I am moved and disturbed as a result merely of my own unstable posture; and anyone who observes carefully can hardly find himself twice in the same state” (VS335, F242). The rejection of final cause would mean that change has no natural direction and therefore may or may not be consistent with previous or subsequent events. There is constant change, but it does not go anywhere. Each moment is discrete and unconnected to any other moment.

On the other hand, in spite of this picture of radical change, Montaigne says that he is consistent. In “Of the Useful and the Honorable” he gives an account of his actions as negotiator between princes: “If anyone follows and watches me closely, I will concede him the victory if he does not confess that there is no rule in their school that could imitate this natural movement and maintain an appearance of liberty and license so constant and inflexible on such tortuous and varied paths, and that all their attention and ingenuity could not bring them to it” (VS795, F603). Montaigne’s consistency cannot be captured in the rules of any philosophical school because it has gone beyond the limits of ancient philosophy and cannot be judged by its standards. His consistency is just his liberty and license: it is not due to final cause. But because it is without striving, his conduct appears natural.

Montaigne is, in some way, holding all of his actions together. His liberty and license are, paradoxically, “constant and inflexible.” All of his actions are free, undetermined by an end. He produces these actions out of himself. Each action is a new beginning, yet his actions are not random but consistent. In some sense, he is always the same since the “springs of action” are always the same. He concludes “Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions” with a discussion of the fact that vicious motives sometimes underlie virtuous-looking actions. “In view of this, a sound intellect will refuse to judge men simply by their outward actions; we must probe the inside and discover what springs set men in motion. But since this is an arduous and hazardous undertaking, I wish fewer people would meddle with it” (VS338, F244). Montaigne’s actions are consistent from the inside, from the consistency of his free will. This is a consistency of beginnings, of “springs” rather than ends, a kind of consistency that is possible on account of the rejection of final cause. Why does Montaigne say that the discovery of the springs of action is a hazardous undertaking? Perhaps he means that the rejection of final cause is desirable but dangerous because it implies a new understanding of human agency and

a new kind of freedom: the human will is now free from the causality of naturally given ends.

The New as What Was Always There: Replacing the Foundations

What are we to make of the absence of narrative, the strange transpositions of chronology, the claim that he is a new figure, and his puzzling treatment of his own consistency? What is the meaning of his stance toward the temporal? The movement of the essay form is not to ascend to the eternal but rather to go back to the beginning and change the foundation. Montaigne is ordering the temporal, subjecting it to his own purposes, so as to accomplish his refounding. That is, he is going back to the origins and replacing them. The new is really what was there all along. Replacing the old foundations would have to be this kind of act if everything is, somehow, to remain the same and yet be radically different.

Montaigne adopts this stance toward eternity and time because the production of the genuinely new requires freedom from both the past and the eternal. If change is grounded in the eternal, as it is for Aristotle, then the coming into being of the new is impossible. The new order that Montaigne imposes on time is the order of the possible: time is ordered not to the eternal but to the possible, which escapes the categories of potentiality and actuality. He can impose his own order on time because beginnings are not ends.

For Aristotle, the necessary condition for philosophy is leisure. It is only when all of the needs of life have been provided for that the theoretical life can occur (*Meta.* 1.2, 982b20–25). Leisure is the setting aside of time, removing it from the workaday world, and taking the theoretical attitude toward the world. The philosopher sets himself apart from the everyday. He is engaged in an activity that is higher than the activities of everyday life. For Montaigne, however, leisure must be understood in terms of his stance: neither immersed in busyness nor escaping to the eternal. Montaigne brings philosophy back down into the temporal realm. “Unpremeditated and accidental” philosophy brings philosophy into the immediacy of the moment.

The essay that Montaigne places last is “Of Experience.” He ends, then, not in the eternity of contemplation but in the temporality of experience. He reverses Aristotle’s order, the order of philosophy itself. Montaigne reverses Aristotle, because Aristotle’s foundation is weak. Montaigne replaces the weak foundation with his own good foundation. This is the

act of philosophy, the act of refounding. Aristotle's foundation is weak because it is the presumption of the philosopher and the pride of the philosopher. Assuming the Aristotelian notion of perfection as the completion of the human form, only the philosopher is fully human or, to put it differently, only the philosopher bears the entire form of human nature. For Montaigne, on the contrary, "*each man* bears the entire form of the human condition" (VS805, F611).

Aristotle does not separate the philosopher from the man. The man who philosophizes is essentially a philosopher, and therefore he is divine. In contrast, Montaigne's unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is the separation of the man from the philosopher: the philosopher is only accidentally a philosopher.