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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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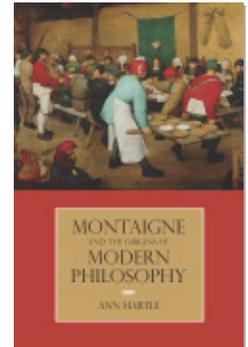
Published by Northwestern University Press

Hartle, Ann.

Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013.

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Chapter Two



Sticking to the Old Ways: Montaigne and Sacred Tradition

How is it possible for the philosopher to see himself as just a man? To what can he turn in order to ground his recovery of a common humanity? What is it that allows Montaigne to see the possibility of society? I argue that, in spite of his radical break with the philosophical and theological tradition, Montaigne finds in the core of sacred tradition—the tradition freed from Aristotle—the intimations of a new form of human association.

The Presence of Sacred Tradition in the *Essays*

Readers of Montaigne are sharply divided over the question of whether or not he was a sincere Catholic. Those who claim that he was indeed sincere generally defend their view on the basis of evidence external to the *Essays*. Although there are allusions to various Christian beliefs in the *Essays*, the work clearly lacks what might be called a pious tone, so defenders of his sincerity must point to his religious practices that he mentions in his *Travel Journal*. Many of his readers, then, see him as a “skeptico-fideist,” that is, as someone who believes what faith teaches but who also denies that we can have knowledge of these truths of the kind that theology seeks to attain.¹

Those who claim that Montaigne is really an atheist, or at least an unbeliever, dismiss his professions of faith and his allusions to Christian belief as mere window-dressing intended to conceal his true opinions. Many, if not most, readers of Montaigne interpret his adherence to Catholicism as a purely prudential and practical position stemming from his conviction that Catholicism could provide social and political stability. Thus, according to this view, he holds to the Catholic side in the civil wars of his

day simply because it is the tradition of his country, not because he sees any inherent value in the content of that tradition.²

The problem with this approach is that it requires the reader to simply dismiss a great deal of what Montaigne actually says and about which he claims to be truthful. In effect, it amounts to saying that he doesn't really mean what he says. In some cases, this judgment is based on what appear to be contradictions in his writings. The interpreter then simply dismisses one of the apparently contradictory claims. But on what grounds? The effort to make a philosopher consistent by dismissing a significant portion of what he says is ultimately arbitrary. If there are contradictory claims in his writings, then the first task of the interpreter is to attempt to understand how they might be reconciled.

I propose to set aside the question of Montaigne's sincerity and to consider the *Essays* themselves, with their apparent contradictions and lack of piety, in an effort to understand Montaigne's position on religion in general and on Catholicism in particular.³ I will argue that Montaigne is bringing philosophy and faith together in a new way. The medieval theologian begins with the articles of faith as the first principles of his science. He then seeks to understand what he already believes: theology is "faith seeking understanding." Thus, philosophy serves as the "handmaiden" of theology. In "Of Prayers" Montaigne says that he has heard certain writings reproached for being "purely human and philosophical, with no admixture of theology." Nevertheless, a purely human consideration is precisely his project: "I set forth notions that are human and my own, simply as human notions considered in themselves, not as determined and decreed by heavenly ordinance and permitting neither doubt nor dispute; matter of opinion, not matter of faith; what I reason out according to me, not what I believe according to God" (VS323, F234).⁴

On the other hand, in a remarkable statement of submission from a philosopher who prizes his freedom of judgment, Montaigne says that he submits his essays "to the judgment of those whose concern it is to regulate not only my actions and my writings, but even my thoughts. Equally acceptable and useful to me will be condemnation or approval, since I hold it as execrable if anything is found which was said by me, ignorantly or inadvertently, against the holy prescriptions of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church, in which I die and in which I was born. And therefore, always submitting to the authority of their censure, which has absolute power over me, I meddle rashly with every sort of subject, as I do here" (VS317–18, F229).⁵

Montaigne, then, liberates philosophy from its status as the servant of theology. However, it is his submission to the Church (in which he

was born and in which he will die) that gives him the freedom to think and write as he does in the *Essays*: in the context of his submission to the Church, philosophy becomes “unpremeditated and accidental.” And in this unpremeditated and accidental way, certain aspects of religion in general and of Catholicism in particular are woven into the fabric of the *Essays*: the sacraments, the Mass, the angelus bell, and many allusions to the New Testament appear, unobtrusively, throughout the work. So, while Montaigne does not engage in arguments concerning the nature of the Trinity or the Incarnation, he does treat Catholicism as an integral part of everyday life in ways that might remind us of a Brueghel painting. Of course, this does not prove that he was a sincere believer, but it does indicate that he is, in some way, bringing the content of faith into his own practice of philosophy. The beliefs and practices of the Church are present as the familiar, as what was always there, the unpremeditated source of his emergence into the public as a philosopher.

Montaigne’s adherence to Catholic tradition is more than formal, that is, it is based not only on the conviction that tradition as such is a force for stability, but also on the goodness and truth of the content of that tradition. Montaigne’s innovations incorporate the possibilities or intimations that are available to him in Christian faith. Divine revelation means that certain things that were unthinkable, and that were therefore impossible, for ancient philosophy can now be possibilities for thought. The way in which Montaigne avails himself of the possibilities offered by Christian belief is to transform this world, to open up possibilities for human thought and action in this life.

Montaigne’s project of displaying the possible as the object of philosophical thought is precisely the description of the role of reason in relation to faith as set out by Thomas Aquinas. Reason, Thomas says, cannot demonstrate the truths of faith. If the truths of faith could be demonstrated by reason, the intellect would be compelled, whereas faith must be free and must, therefore, include an act of the will. The task of reason with respect to faith is to remove the obstacles to belief by showing that “what faith proposes is not impossible.”⁶ Thus, the phenomenon of faith offers to philosophy the possibility of a kind of thought that is free and open to the possible. Faith opens the way for the transformation of the activity of philosophy. In contrast to the Aristotelian account of knowledge as the mind’s reception of forms, faith is a new kind of intellectual assent that requires an act of the will. Montaigne’s philosophical act transforms this possibility of the role of the will in thought into the fundamental act of the mind in bringing society into being.⁷

Sacred Tradition and the Permanent Things

Throughout the *Essays*, Montaigne insists on his changeability, instability, and inconsistency. However, there is one way in which he remains constant from the very beginning: “Now from the knowledge of this mobility of mine I have accidentally engendered in myself a certain constancy of opinions, and have scarcely altered my original ones. . . . Thus I have, by the grace of God, kept myself intact [*entier*], without agitation or disturbance of conscience, in the ancient beliefs of our religion, in the midst of so many sects and divisions that our century has produced” (VS569, F428). His religion (“in which I die and in which I was born”) is the basis of the unity of his life.

In “Of Vain Subtleties” Montaigne distinguishes between two kinds of good Christians. Simple people, who are less curious and learned, believe simply through reverence and obedience. Great minds, on the other hand, have reached a deep level of understanding of the Scriptures and the Church through long study and investigation. Both of these types, the lowly and the learned, are good Christians. But “in the middle range of mental vigor and ability, error in opinion is engendered; those in this range follow the first plausible meaning, and have some claim to regard our sticking to the old ways—those of us who are not versed in these matters by study—as simplicity and stupidity.” Montaigne then places himself among those who stick to the old ways, but neither from simplicity nor through study and learning. These believers have reached “the extreme limit of Christian intelligence” for they stick to the old ways, but in a manner different from both the great minds and the simple. This captures the essence of Montaigne’s adherence to sacred tradition.

In *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, Josef Pieper discusses the concept of tradition in terms of the distinction between sacred tradition and tradition in the broader sense of what is in any way handed down, that is, the distinction between “The Tradition” and “traditions.” Pieper argues that “there is in the last analysis only *one* traditional good that it is absolutely necessary to preserve unchanged, namely the gift that is received and handed on in the *sacred* tradition.”⁸ This is because what is believed in sacred tradition concerns “the center of the world” and the core of human existence.⁹ Sacred tradition, as Pieper presents it, is not primarily about unreflective modes of behavior or ways of doing things. It primarily concerns belief—belief about what might be called the metaphysical and, in particular, about the relation of the human to the divine.

The character of sacred tradition is such that it becomes intertwined with all aspects of life so that what is truly essential to it can be difficult

to discern. On the one hand, it requires great caution to undertake the smallest changes even in customs that do not appear to be directly related to the essence. Pieper explains, "It is common for the essence of what must be preserved to become overgrown and entangled with the concrete forms of historical life, and a change in the outer may very well threaten the pure preservation of the essence, so that anyone who carelessly discards or makes light of the 'outer' traditions commits a dangerous act." On the other hand, it is this distinction between the essence of sacred tradition and its nonessential accretions that sometimes make possible even significant changes in custom. Pieper explains that "the explicit respect for the unimpeachable character of the sacred tradition presupposes the possibility of relativizing other traditions and in fact makes it possible and reasonable." Thus, a true appreciation of sacred tradition is not to be confused with any form of ideological conservatism. "Genuine consciousness of tradition makes one positively free and independent in the face of conservatisms, which worry obsessively about the cultivation of the 'traditions.' Certainly, a 'cultivation of tradition' that attaches itself to a historically accidental external image of what has been handed down becomes a positive hindrance to a real transmission of what is truly worth conserving, which perhaps can occur only under changed historical forms. It is possible to imagine a real transmission of what is in the last analysis worth handing down, which a dogmatic conservatism could not even recognize."¹⁰

Montaigne acknowledges this distinction between the changeable and the permanent things. In his essay "Of Custom" he cautions those who would introduce changes in the civil laws, but he also defends both the public status of the Church and its immunity from innovation: "It seems to me very iniquitous to want to subject *public and immutable institutions* and observances to the instability of a private fancy (private reason has only a private jurisdiction), and to attempt against divine laws what no government would endure against civil laws" (VS121, F88, emphasis added). He criticizes the English who, in his own lifetime, have changed several times "not only in political matters, in which people want to dispense with constancy, but in the most important subject that can be, [that is], religion" (VS579, F436).

Montaigne's radical reform of both philosophy and politics must be seen in light of the distinction between sacred tradition and non-sacred traditions. Not only does he introduce a new order within the philosophical and political spheres, but also his understanding of the essence of sacred tradition demands that new order.

The Errors of Reformation

Montaigne's adherence to sacred tradition often becomes explicit in response to the threat that the Reformation poses to Catholicism: in his lifetime, the reformers' attack on the Catholic Church had brought about the condition of civil war in France. Montaigne opposes the Reformation for many reasons, but above all because he sees it as the dissolution of the social bond.¹¹ Beneath this, however, lies a deeper opposition to the Protestant understanding of the human being and of the relationship of the human to the divine.

The Church is a "public and immutable" institution. The "innovations of Luther" were already shaking "our ancient belief," and the teaching concerning "personal consent" would inevitably lead to atheism (VS439, F320). The teaching concerning personal consent goes precisely against the authority of sacred tradition. So also does the practice of private interpretation of the Bible. The Protestant principle of personal consent, including private interpretation of Scripture, also means the privatization of religion. As Francis Slade writes: "Christianity cannot live in the privacy of the heart. It is the religion of publicness. To cease to profess it publicly is 'to lose the Faith.' This is because Christianity is the religion of truth."¹² Tradition has an inherently public status and claim to authority. "Private reason" can have only a private status.

Montaigne regards the Protestant attempt to reform morals as superficial, and even dangerous, because it is based on new opinions: "Those who in my time have tried to correct the world's morals by new opinions, reform the superficial vices; the essential ones they leave as they were, if they do not increase them" (VS811, F615). Yet, Montaigne suggests that he himself is engaged in a project of reform: "Oh what an easy and applauded route those superficial men take, compared with ours!" (VS888, F677). His reform, however, is not by new opinions but by old opinions. New opinions cannot reach to the essential level at which mores begin.

The most fundamental level of Montaigne's criticism, then, concerns the way in which the Reformation understands the human being himself. "As for those who, in recent years, tried to construct for us a system of religious practice that is all contemplative and spiritual, they should not be astounded if there are some who think that religion would have melted away and slipped through their fingers if it did not hold fast among us as a mark, title, and instrument of division and faction rather than by itself" (VS930, F710). His comments on Numa, the Roman king and legislator who tried to attach the piety of his people to a purely intellectual religion,

actually pertain to the Reformation: “The human spirit cannot keep on floating in this infinity of formless ideas; they must be compiled for it into a definite picture after its own pattern. The divine majesty has thus let itself be somewhat circumscribed within corporeal limits on our behalf; his supernatural and heavenly sacraments show signs of our earthly condition; his worship is expressed by perceptible rituals and words; for it is a man that believes and prays” (VS513, F381).¹³

The reformers’ attempt to institute a purely spiritual and intellectual religion is manifested clearly in the attack on images. In *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, historian Eamon Duffy demonstrates that “iconoclasm was the central sacrament of reform.” The eradication of sacred images is “the sacrament of forgetfulness” and thus one of the most important instruments for the destruction of the traditional religion.¹⁴ Against the iconoclasts, Montaigne defends the use of images, especially the crucifix: “I leave aside the other arguments that are employed on this subject. But I could hardly be made to believe that the sight of our crucifixes and the pictures of that piteous agony, the ornaments and ceremonious movements in our churches, the voices attuned to the piety of our thoughts, and that stirring of the senses, do not warm the souls of the people with religious emotion very beneficial in effect” (VS513–14, F381). Montaigne says of the sign of the cross: “it is a sign that I revere and continually use” (VS319, F231). For Catholics at the time of the Reformation, “the Crucifix was the icon of Christ’s abiding solidarity with suffering humanity.”¹⁵

The stance of the Reformation toward the human being might be considered a form of rationalism. The Reformation’s entirely spiritual and intellectual form of religion, with its disdain for the senses and for images as idolatry, betrays a misunderstanding both of what it means to be human and of who God is. Montaigne recognizes that his adherence to the Catholic faith in contemporary religious conflicts might appear unreflective and irrational simply because the faith is inherited. But he rejects explicitly what he regards as a presumptuous prejudice: “How fantastic seemed to me the imagination of those who in recent years had the habit of reproaching each and every man in whom there gleamed some light of intelligence and who professed the Catholic religion, with dissimulation; and who even maintained, thinking to do him honor, that whatever he said for appearance, he could not help having his belief within reformed according to their measure. . . . They may take my word for it: if anything were to have tempted my youth, ambition for the risk and difficulties that attended this recent enterprise would have played a good part in it” (VS320, F231–32). In admitting that ambition for the risk and difficulties

of the Reformation might have tempted him, Montaigne suggests that he himself is engaged in a project of reform. At the same time, however, he implies that, whatever innovations he himself intends, they will not be based on the rejection of the old ways, but rather on the foundation of the sacred tradition.

In “It Is Folly to Measure the True and the False by Our Own Capacity” Montaigne makes Pieper’s point about the way in which sacred tradition holds together: even what appear to be trivial and therefore dispensable matters are actually very important. “Now, what seems to me to bring as much disorder into our consciences as anything, in these religious troubles that we are in, is this partial surrender of their beliefs by Catholics. It seems to them that they are being very moderate and understanding when they yield to their opponents some of the articles in dispute. But, besides the fact that they do not see what an advantage it is to a man charging you for you to begin to give ground and withdraw, and how much that encourages him to pursue his point, those articles which they select as the most trivial are sometimes very important. We must either submit completely to the authority of our ecclesiastical government, or do without it completely. It is not for us to decide what portion of obedience we owe it. Moreover, I can say this for having tried it. In other days I exercised this freedom of personal choice and selection.” But now he accepts fully the authority of “our ecclesiastical polity.” The observances of the Church have “a massive and very solid foundation” (VS182, F134–35).

Separating the Essential from the Nonessential

Montaigne’s opposition to the Reformation is crucial to understanding his stance toward sacred tradition. However, he also breaks with the Catholic tradition insofar as he sees it to be dependent upon classical philosophy, especially Aristotle, and classical values. This break comes through especially in his relationship with his father, from whom he inherited his Catholicism, his goodness, and his fortunate disposition. Throughout the essays he praises his father as “the best father that ever was” (VS440, F320); yet, Montaigne points to two important ways in which he himself differs from his father.

At the beginning of the “Apology for Sebond” he recounts that he had translated Sebond’s book on natural theology into French at his father’s request. His father had been given the book by Pierre Bunel, a very learned man, who had been a guest in his house. Montaigne’s father was “inflamed with that new ardor” for letters and “sought with great

diligence and expense the acquaintance of learned men, receiving them at his house like holy persons having some particular inspiration of divine wisdom, collecting their sayings and discourses like oracles, and with all the more reverence and religion as he was less qualified to judge them; for he had no knowledge of letters, any more than his predecessors.” The son says: “Myself, I like them well enough, but I do not worship them” (VS439, F319). By saying that he does not worship learning Montaigne points to and rejects the Aristotelian teaching concerning the divinity of the intellect, a teaching that, strictly speaking, medieval theology also rejects (since nothing within the created world is divine), but which is nevertheless preserved in the theological claim that man is in the image of God by virtue of his intellect. Montaigne distances himself from his father’s almost religious reverence, which also reflects the tradition’s view, for human knowledge.

The second way in which Montaigne breaks with his father concerns the status of public service. In “Of Husbanding Your Will” Montaigne tells us that he warned the magistrates of Bordeaux, who had elected him mayor, that he does not have the same attitude toward public service as his father had. His father had grown old and sick because the weight of public affairs had lain so heavily upon him. “He was like that; and this disposition in him sprang from a great goodness of nature: there never was a more charitable and public-spirited soul.” However, “this course, which I commend in others, I do not love to follow, and I am not without excuse. He had heard it said that we must forget ourselves for our neighbor, that the particular was not to be considered at all in comparison with the general” (VS1006, F769). Montaigne suggests that his father had identified his activities as mayor with the theological virtue of charity. Further, he implies that this is what his father had been taught, perhaps in connection with the admonition of Christ to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

The two ways in which Montaigne breaks with his father seem to be about philosophical contemplation and political life, the two kinds of human perfection put forward by Aristotle and adopted, albeit in a transformed way, by medieval Christian thought. For Aristotle, human perfection is twofold: the philosophical act of contemplation in which the human being participates in the divine, and the life of moral virtue displayed in the activity of politics. Medieval theology had adopted the classical view of the world, especially the Aristotelian hierarchical account of being, and classical philosophy had become thoroughly intertwined with Christianity. The contemplative life of the philosopher was preserved in the ascetic and contemplative life of the monastery. The

classical moral virtues persist while the theological virtues are added on to make a complete picture of the moral life. And the Aristotelian standard of “the common good” is preserved as the end of politics, so that the political realm remains the locus of the human good in this world.

Montaigne’s separation of the core of sacred tradition from the philosophy of Aristotle shows itself with respect to both forms of human perfection. Philosophy becomes unpremeditated and accidental, a merely human, not a divine, activity. The pride of the philosopher is thus overcome. The philosopher is just a man, like any other. This “lowering” of philosophy and the philosopher makes the invention of society possible, for society requires the overcoming of the Aristotelian hierarchy. The social, rather than the political, becomes the locus of the human good.

Repentance of the Intellect

Montaigne’s overcoming of the pride of the philosopher entails what might be called a “repentance of the intellect,” a kind of repentance that is understood in relation to the God who reveals himself in the Bible. In *Mystery and Philosophy*, Michael B. Foster contrasts the God of the Bible with the idea of the divine in Greek philosophy. God in the Bible is hidden, in contrast to the unhiddenness of being for Greek philosophy. The God of the Bible makes himself known, but only by an act of will or grace: “It is not his nature to be unhidden.”¹⁶ Foster claims that “belief in a divine Revelation seems to involve something like a repentance in the sphere of the intellect.”¹⁷ The philosopher, such as Aristotle, who thinks that the mind can not only know the divine but is itself also divine in the act of contemplation, is guilty of pride; it is this pride of the philosopher that Montaigne repents of. The requirement of repentance of the intellect is “alien to our main philosophical tradition which has inherited from Greek philosophy the belief in the divinity of the intellect.”¹⁸

Montaigne’s essay “Of Repentance” is often cited to prove that his adherence to Catholicism is superficial at best, for he seems to deny that he has any need to repent. It is true that he says “I rarely repent” (VS806, F612), and “if I had to live over again, I would live as I have lived” (VS816, F620). But he also says: “I know no superficial, halfway, and perfunctory repentance. It must affect me in every part before I will call it so, and must grip me by the vitals and afflict them as deeply and as completely as God sees into me” (VS813, F617). He does repent, then, but only deeply and completely.

There are two places in the *Essays* in which Montaigne suggests such repentance, and both have to do with a “descent” to the simple and lowly. Montaigne sticks to the old ways: he has come through error and has arrived at “the extreme limit of Christian intelligence.” Of those who have come through error, some have become violent and immoderate in the defense of the Catholic side in the civil wars. Others, however, have returned to the old ways “with marvelous profit and confirmation, as at the extreme limit of Christian intelligence, and . . . enjoy their victory with consolation, active gratitude, reformed conduct, and great modesty” (VS312–13, F227). Sticking to the old ways means being one with the simple and thus giving the appearance of stupidity. Repentance of the intellect necessarily entails moral reformation—a real outward, as well as inner, conversion—because the pride of the philosopher is only overcome in recognition of his common humanity and his oneness with the most lowly human beings.

In “It Is Folly to Judge the True and the False by Our Own Capacity” Montaigne tells of his youthful attempt to exercise his “personal choice” with respect to the beliefs of the faith. However, he came through that error and acknowledged the authority of the Church. Looking back on that time of his life, he writes: “It is foolish presumption to go around disdaining and condemning as false whatever does not seem likely to us; which is an ordinary vice in those who think they have more than common ability. I used to do so once; and if I heard of returning spirits, prognostications of future events, enchantments, sorcery, or some other story that I could not swallow, . . . I felt compassion for the poor people who were taken in by these follies. And now I think that I was at least as much to be pitied myself” (VS178–79, F132). His openness to the testimony of the simple and his submission to the simplicity of the old ways manifest his complete and deep repentance.

The Dialectic of Faith and Reason in the “Apology for Sebond”

The “Apology for Sebond” is the strongest evidence for those who hold that Montaigne is a skeptic-fideist, i.e., that he is a skeptic on the philosophical level and a believer who believes “simply,” without any support from reason. Montaigne wrote this apology as a response to two criticisms commonly made to the theologian Sebond’s *Natural Theology*, or *The Book of Creatures* and other such works in natural theology. (Montaigne reports that someone told him that Sebond’s book was actually a kind of distillation of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas.)¹⁹

In the “Prologue” to his work, Sebond claims that God has revealed himself both in the Bible and in nature and that it is possible to prove the truths of faith by reason. The first objection to Sebond’s theology is put forward in the name of piety by those who think of themselves as believers. They say that “Christians do themselves harm in trying to support their belief by human reasons, since it is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace” (VS440, F321). The second objection is put forward by unbelievers and atheists. Sebond’s arguments, they say, are “weak and unfit to prove what he proposes,” and these unbelievers set out to shatter Sebond’s arguments with ease (VS448, F327). Those who see Montaigne as an atheist place him on the side of the second objection. Those who see him as a skeptic-fideist place him on the side of the first objection. Montaigne, however, refutes both objections and he also finds something true in each objection, so that any interpretation of the “Apology” that places him simply on either side must be inadequate.

The two objections, as formulated by Montaigne, are usually regarded as opposites, as the opposing and contradictory voices of belief and unbelief. Frédéric Brahami, for example, says that “the second objection is diametrically opposed to the first” and that “these two radical positions, that of belief and that of unbelief undermine the synthesis of Sebond.”²⁰ But when these objections are exposed more fully, they show themselves to be related to each other and even dependent on each other at a deeper level. The first objection defines faith in terms of its origin: faith is “belief that is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace.” God inspires those whom it pleases him to inspire: that is why they believe, and others do not. There is a direct communication by God to the mind of the believer. Faith, then, is taken to be private, inarticulate, and incommunicable. The second objection is a reaction against the possibility of faith but it also accepts this understanding of what faith is. Unbelief must see faith as a private experience, an experience that it ultimately regards as illusory because it is publicly indefensible.

Rationality prides itself in being both public and common. In the first place, it is completely transparent and communicable: when the demonstrations of Euclidean geometry are displayed, for example, they can be understood by any rational human being and they receive universal assent. The truths of faith, of course, do not receive universal assent. Secondly, rationality is universal, the defining characteristic of the human species, whereas particular inspiration is not universal. Therefore, on this view of reason, faith (understood as particular inspiration) cannot give a public account of itself. It is defenseless before the court of reason. The first and second objections, then, share the same understanding of the

meaning of faith. It is this shared understanding that gives rise to the dialectic of the two objections, and it is this shared understanding that Montaigne is most deeply concerned to refute.

Montaigne's defense of the mind's place in the life of faith leads him directly into the second objection. In the process of responding to the understanding of faith in the first objection, he just suddenly finds himself speaking in the voice of unbelief. He says: "I have already, without thinking about it, half involved myself in the second objection" (VS448, F327). The way in which Montaigne falls into the second objection and the way he characterizes reason from the very beginning of his response suggests that, once reason is invited in, it claims for itself an authority that ultimately admits no other authority. Now it must be said that this presumption of reason is very similar to the position taken by Sebond's natural theology: man is said to be in the image of God by virtue of his reason. This, of course, is why Montaigne's "defense" of Sebond seems ambiguous and even ironic: an attack on reason is an attack on the second objection but, at the same time, it is an attack on Sebond's entire project of natural theology. In attacking the arrogance of reason, Montaigne is acknowledging what is true in the first objection, namely, that Christians do themselves harm by seeking to support their faith by reason, if reason is presumed to be the autonomous reason of the second objection. So also, in refuting the first objection and thus demanding public evidence of faith, he acknowledges what is true in the second objection, namely, the indefensibility of claims to private inspiration.

Montaigne's skeptical response to the second objection leads to the conclusion that reason, to which we had turned for a common ground, is so highly particularized that it cannot serve as the common, public ground we were seeking. The logic of his response to the first objection drove Montaigne to the common, public, universal ground of reason. But autonomous reason, instead of being the solid rock on which to build anything common, turns out to be a mere dream or, worse, a nightmare that dissolves into chaos.

Where, then, does Montaigne himself stand on the question of the relation of faith and reason, at least insofar as his stand is revealed in the dialectic of the two objections? Is he, in fact, a skeptic-fideist? We can begin to answer this by returning to the issue of his sincerity in calling this essay a "defense" of Sebond. The tendency has been to see Montaigne's apology for Sebond as either completely ironic or as unselfconsciously ambiguous and self-contradictory because, if he is either an atheist or a skeptic-fideist, then he must deny any harmony or compatibility between faith and reason, and compatibility is Sebond's most fundamental assumption.

If we see the two objections in their relation to each other and follow the movement of Montaigne's thought as he works his way through the objections and their shared understandings of reason and faith, we find that he is in fact defending a transformed version of Sebond's assumption. Montaigne calls this essay an apology for Sebond because he does affirm the harmony of faith and reason—but not faith as defined in the first objection and not reason as assumed in the second objection. Faith as defined in the first objection is incomplete, imperfect, and even presumptuous: it is unexamined belief and it must be completed and in some way transformed in its dialectic with reason. The autonomous reason of the second objection is proud and presumptuous: it must be reformed in its dialectic with faith.

In "Of Vain Subtleties," as we have seen, Montaigne refers to the error of those who regard his "sticking to the old ways" as due to simplicity and stupidity. It turns out that his sticking to the old ways is "the extreme limit of Christian intelligence." In "It Is Folly to Measure the True and the False by Our Own Capacity" he comes to see that his skepticism concerning the testimony of the simple was pitiable because it was due to the presumption of the learned that what they have never experienced themselves must be impossible. Now Montaigne is subject neither to the unthinking credulity of the simple nor to the arrogant presumption of the learned.

That same movement of thought is just what occurs in the dialectic of the two objections in the "Apology." From simple inarticulate belief, he ascends through doubt to autonomous rationality and then descends through doubt to the truth of faith. Of course he cannot simply return to or deliberately adopt the stance of unthinking belief as if he had never ascended from it. He ends up in a kind of middle position that transcends both simple credulity and learned skepticism, and that, in philosophical terms, would be called "learned ignorance."

Perhaps this is what T. S. Eliot has in mind when he says that "what makes Montaigne a very great figure is that he succeeded . . . in giving expression to the skepticism of *every* human being. For every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own skepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it."²¹ Montaigne's skepticism is integrated into the faith which transcends it. The faith that has transcended and transformed doubt is not an unthinking and inarticulate faith but Montaigne's way of living the examined life as a Christian.

At the beginning of his reply to the second objection, Montaigne says that the means he will take to beat down the pride and presumption of

those who advance the second objection is “to make them feel the inanity, the vanity, and the nothingness of man” (VS448, F327). How will he do this? “St. Augustine, arguing against these people, has good cause to reproach them for their injustice in that they hold those parts of our belief to be false which our reason fails to establish. And to show that there can have been plenty of things whose nature and causes our reason cannot possibly establish, he puts before his adversaries certain known and indubitable experiences into which man confesses he has no insight.” Presumably, Montaigne is referring to the *City of God* (especially book 21, chapter 5), where Augustine makes this argument and gives examples, mostly from Pliny, of natural marvels. But Montaigne does not propose to follow Augustine’s procedure. Rather, he says, “we must do more, and teach them that to convict our reason of weakness, there is no need to go sifting out rare examples” (VS449, F328). “Doing more than St. Augustine” might plausibly be understood to imply a defense of a thoroughgoing skepticism. But seen within the dialectic of faith and reason, “doing more than St. Augustine” means showing the ordinary to be extraordinary. Montaigne’s movement of thought reveals the strange in the familiar, the extraordinary in the ordinary. The world is restored through true faith to its astonishing strangeness. A world created out of nothing, a world in which the Word was made flesh, is revealed as such in the philosophical activity that ends in wonder at the most familiar.²²

Sacramental and Incarnational Metaphysics

The way in which Montaigne holds fast to sacred tradition amounts to nothing less than a reordering of the mind and of being itself. He sticks to the old ways because his understanding of the world is what might be called a sacramental and incarnational metaphysics: the reversal of the Aristotelian order and the relocation of the divine in the lowest rather than the highest. The Catholic tradition brings into everyday life its sacramental and incarnational metaphysics: the everyday world is thoroughly intertwined and imbued with the sacred.

Montaigne says: “In my opinion, from the most ordinary, common, and familiar things, if we could put them in their proper light, can be formed the greatest miracles of nature and the most marvelous examples, especially on the subject of human actions” (VS1081, F829). The “proper light,” the way in which the most ordinary, common, and familiar things can be seen as marvelous and miraculous, is that they embody the sacred. Indeed, this is what happens in the *Essays*: the familiar becomes

astonishing. The everyday is not astonishing because of something extraneous being brought into it. The everyday shows the presence of God not through reason, not in the highest, but in the lowest and most hidden human actions. Sacred tradition gets down into the lowest aspects of “mere” life. The everyday is the incarnation of the sacred.

In his “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,” T. S. Eliot describes the conditions for the kind of common culture that Montaigne presupposes: “While we believe that the same religion may inform a variety of cultures, we may ask whether any culture could come into being, or maintain itself, without a religious basis. We may go further and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people.”²³ The situation that Eliot describes is one in which “the culture of an artist or a philosopher is distinct from that of a mine worker or a field labourer; the culture of a poet will be somewhat different from that of a politician; but in a healthy society these are all parts of the same culture.”²⁴ Specifically, the mode of being of Europe cannot be understood apart from its Christian culture: “It is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have—until recently—been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance.”²⁵ Eliot’s account of the way in which culture is the incarnation of religious belief, the embodiment, as it were, of religion in everyday life, articulates how culture can be the source of unity through the metaphysical beliefs of religion that penetrate to the deepest levels of everyday life.

What I have called Montaigne’s sacramental and incarnational metaphysics can be seen especially in the way the sacraments are present in the *Essays*. The sacraments are related to incarnational metaphysics because they gather the everyday materials of life itself (water, bread, and wine) and make these elements sacred. Montaigne brings baptism, penance, extreme unction, and the Eucharist into the flow of his thought and expression in a way that is so “natural” that it is easy to miss their significance. His father had him held over the baptismal font by villagers of the lowest condition in order to attach him and oblige him to them (VS1100, F844). In the sacrament of extreme unction (the last rites), the priest anoints all of the five senses in the sign of the cross. Montaigne says that, when he becomes very ill, “I reconcile myself with God by the last Christian offices, and find myself thereby more free and unburdened” (VS982, F751). He mentions that the Mass is still celebrated in the chapel in his house, while all of the churches around his house have been emptied and ruined by the reformers (VS966, F738). The *Essays* have the

sense of confession, and Montaigne refers to his work as a public confession (VS846, F643). His repentance is both deep and complete for it is a repentance of the intellect and of the will.

The apparent absence of piety in the *Essays* leads most readers to conclude that Montaigne is insincere in his professions of faith. I would argue, on the contrary, that this absence is in fact meant to make the sacred fit into the flow of everyday life. When he says, for example, that “we are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans” (VS445, F325), he does not intend to reduce Catholicism to the status of custom but rather to acknowledge the way in which the divine, as sacred tradition, is embedded in the accidents of human life.

The clearest expression of the presence of the sacred in the everyday concerns the Eucharist. As Eamon Duffy says of the Mass on the eve of the Reformation: the body on the communion cloth is “the emblem and the instrument of all truly human embodiment.”²⁶ Our own being is neither divine nor angelic, but embodied. The domestic and private are the anchor of that embodiment and the locus of the human good.

In “To the Reader” Montaigne elaborates on what he means by his domestic and private end. His essays are the means by which his friends and relatives will “nourish” more completely and vividly their knowledge of him after he dies.²⁷ This allusion to food is then taken up again at the very end of the *Essays*, where Montaigne mentions food in a very unusual way. Speaking of those Christian ascetics and contemplatives who despise the bodily pleasures, Montaigne says that they anticipate, “by dint of keen and vehement hope, the enjoyment of eternal food, final end and last stop of Christian desires, sole constant and incorruptible pleasure” (VS1114, F856). These are the ascetics whose “transcendental humors” frighten him. Here, he brings them down to the everyday, to this world, in this extraordinary reference to the Beatific Vision—the supposed purely spiritual and intellectual pleasure of the contemplation of God—as eternal food. Montaigne describes even this purely spiritual and intellectual joy of the vision of God in terms of the everyday enjoyment of the pleasures of eating.

According to Eamon Duffy, “the rhythms of the liturgy on the eve of the Reformation remained the rhythms of life itself.”²⁸ The sacramental and incarnational character of the *Essays* accounts for the way in which Montaigne’s Catholicism is almost invisible in this work. The sacred and the mundane are linked in such a way that the everyday is permeated with the divine, which is therefore not easily distinguished from the lowliest actions. Pascal’s thought also moves within this hiddenness of the divine: “Just as Jesus remained unknown among men, so the truth remains

among popular opinions with no outward difference. Thus the Eucharist and ordinary bread.”²⁹ The sacred is just “in there” with the everyday, but this does not destroy its character as sacred and divine. As C. S. Lewis puts it: “Common bread, miraculous bread, sacramental bread—these three are distinct, but not to be separated.”³⁰ What is revered in the sacrament is what is already present in common matter. Sacred tradition is hidden first in everyday life (bread and wine) and is made visible, that is, public, in the sacramental life of the Church.

Oakeshott’s view of religion might well serve as a description of Montaigne’s own stance toward sacred tradition: “Religion, then, is not . . . an interest attached to life, a subsidiary activity; nor is it a power which governs life from the outside with a, no doubt divine, but certainly incomprehensible, sanction for its authority. It is simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present, not merely in the past or future, that if we lose ourselves, we lose all.”³¹ To say that religion is life itself is to say that we do not need to transport ourselves into the “other world” or to the “supernatural” realm in order to experience the divine in our lives. Rather, the divine is present in our lives in this world.

Refounding Society

Montaigne insists that the Church is a public institution that constitutes the social bond: it is the Church that makes society possible. The nature of the society that Montaigne regards as possible is a union of men that is determined not by territory, but by the universal bonds of truth and of goodness. Montaigne’s adherence to the old ways is not merely formal: the truth and goodness required for the social bond are the essential content of sacred tradition. It is this essential core that Montaigne preserves and brings to light in his invention of modern society.

Montaigne says that, whereas the ancient philosophers taught that religion is merely a human contrivance to bind society together, our sovereign creator has “freed our belief” and “based it on the eternal foundation of his holy word” (VS579, F437). The basis of the classical forms of human association is a lie, albeit a “noble lie.” The foundation of Montaigne’s new form of society is truth. Not only does Christianity claim to be true, but it also holds that truth to be accessible to all men, to the most simple peasant woman as to the most learned theologian. Thus, the pride of the philosopher (that he is among the few who possess the truth) is overcome in the submission of the philosopher to the old ways of the simple.

Although Montaigne claims that the *Essays* are entirely human, with “no admixture of theology,” there is one instance in which he does, in fact, call upon the help of theology. In “Of Cruelty” he defends his sympathy with the animals, a sympathy that makes him appear weak. “And so that people will not laugh at this sympathy that I have with them, Theology herself orders us to show some favor in their regard; and considering that one and the same master has lodged us in this place for his service, and that they, like ourselves, are of his family, she is right to enjoin upon us some respect and affection toward them” (VS433, F316). Montaigne is here elaborating on the principal theme of this essay: cruelty is the extreme of all vice. Although cruelty had always been regarded as a vice in both classical and Christian morality, Montaigne is the first to claim that it is the extreme of all vice. His reordering of the virtues and vices is intended to foster the social virtues by overcoming the distance—of which cruelty is the outward expression—between weak and strong through sympathy and compassion.

In the “Apology for Sebond,” especially in his reply to the first objection, Montaigne is highly critical of the cruel conduct of those who call themselves Christians on both sides in the civil wars of his day. They use religion as a pretext for giving vent to their vicious passions, their cruelty, ambition, hatred, and avarice. So also, in “Of Coaches,” he describes the extreme cruelty of the Spanish conquerors toward the people of the New World. “Would it be as a testimonial to their justice or their zeal for religion? Truly, those are ways too contrary and hostile to so holy an end. If they had proposed to extend our faith, they would have reflected that faith is not spread by possession of territory but by possession of men” (VS913, F697).

In “Of Cruelty” it is sympathy that ultimately shows itself to be the goodness that he inherits from his father. And it is sympathy rather than the strength of virtue that serves as the new basis for morality. Sympathy looks weak—and that is why he must call in the help of theology to defend himself from the derision of the strong—but it is actually divine. In “The Nature and Meaning of Sociality” Oakeshott argues that “God is the only principle of sociability which will explain the facts of life. Society becomes possible [only] by religion.” Thus, Oakeshott interprets “God is Love” to mean “God is the only principle of sociality.”³²

For Montaigne, the spiritual power of the Church is inextricably linked to the transformation of the relation between the nobility and the people. It is, after all, his baptism that unites him to the poorest of the poor. Montaigne’s father had sent him to the poorest village in his neighborhood to be nursed and had him held over the baptismal font by villagers

of the lowest condition in order to attach and oblige him to them. “His plan,” Montaigne says, “succeeded not at all badly. I give myself willingly to the little people, whether because there is more glory in it, or through natural compassion, which has infinite power over me” (VS1100, F844). Glory, natural compassion, and the grace of baptism are indistinguishable in him, and therefore he shares in the life of both the lowest and the highest in society. Eamon Duffy insists on “the social homogeneity of late medieval religion.”³³ As he demonstrates: “Rich and poor, simple and sophisticate could kneel side by side, using the same prayers and sharing the same hopes.” In spite of the differences of sophistication about the faith, “they did not have a different religion.”³⁴

The Church offers the possibility of a union among men that transcends natural and social inequality and is based on a foundation of truth. In both “It Is Folly to Measure the True and the False by Our Own Capacity” and “Of Vain Subtleties,” Montaigne’s turn to the lowly and common is identified or associated with his return to the Church and a renewed grasp of the meaning of the Church. In both of these accounts of his submission to sacred tradition, Montaigne descends, as it were, to the simple and identifies himself with their beliefs. The Church is “that great common way” (VS520, F387). The distinction between the learned and the common herd does not obtain within the Church for there “we are all the vulgar” (VS570, F429). As Roger Scruton observes: “When religious faith declines it becomes difficult for intellectuals to believe that they really belong to the same community as ordinary people.”³⁵

Montaigne is, I believe, the only modern political philosopher who defends the Catholic Church in its universality, the only one who does not recommend that it be subordinated to the state, or that it merely be tolerated as one among many religions within the state. By his allegiance to the Church as the universal bond, Montaigne does indeed weaken the national bond. From the point of view of the universal bond, the national bond is secondary and appears arbitrary. The Church transcends the limits of the political and stands as an independent authority and, therefore, as a limit on the power of the state.

The universal and common bond has its source in a universal and common city. Rome is “the only common and universal city. The sovereign magistrate who commands there is acknowledged equally elsewhere. It is the metropolitan city of all Christian nations; the Spaniard and the Frenchman, every man is at home there. To be one of the princes of that state one need only be of Christendom, wherever it may be” (VS997, F763). In his *Travel Journal*, Montaigne makes a similar claim: Rome

is “the most universal city in the world, a place where strangeness and differences of nationality are considered least; for by its nature it is a city pieced together out of foreigners; everyone is as if at home. Its ruler embraces Christendom with his authority; his princely jurisdiction is binding on foreigners in their own homes just as here. At his own election and that of all the princes and grandees of his court the consideration of their origin has no weight.”³⁶ The Church is the society in which the origins do not matter.

The Church is the proof of the possibility of society and is also the only possibility for multicultural society. This means, however, that society cannot be understood in terms of the boundaries of territory and language. The society of men is a union that is not limited by space and time. “We embrace both those who have been and those who are not yet” (VS976, F746). As Pieper maintains: “We should not forget that the common possession of the sacred tradition creates a fundamental *unity* of all mankind, really a unity in relation to that foundation of spiritual life that—hidden but very real—first makes communication among human beings possible and worth attempting.”³⁷

In his essay “Where Is Christendom?” Etienne Gilson reflects upon his travels in the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union. Recalling the moment when he entered a church in Chicago, he asks “Where was I? Neither in America nor in France, nor at any geographical point on earth. Yet I had surely reached a journey’s end, since I was at home: I was in Christendom.” Wherever there is a parish church, there is Christendom.³⁸ Gilson explains the basis for this sentiment: “The same Mass, the same priests, the same communion in the same God given by the same priests to the faithful of the same faith—all this creates, at every moment and in every place, an immense spiritual society which knows neither geographic barriers nor political boundaries and in which the Christian always feels that he is at home.”³⁹

This universal society of Christendom is not to be identified simply with the Church itself. “As subject to the State, we Christians are all members of a society of which the State is seeking the common temporal end; as subject to the Church, we are all members of a society of which the Church is seeking the common spiritual end, and the very temporal part of the Church is integrally directed to this end; as members of Christendom, we are part of a third social group, one that is neither quite the State nor quite the Church, but one that is formed by the various members of the various states in so far as they are aware of belonging to the same Church and of being all disciples of Christ.”⁴⁰ This third level of society might be described as the common culture of Christendom.

Montaigne expresses this sentiment when he writes: “If I were afraid to die in any other place than that of my birth, if I thought I would die less comfortably away from my family, I should scarcely go out of France; I should not go out of my parish without terror” (VS978, F747). He is, however, careless about where he will die because he is “at home” everywhere and “at home” in this world. In fact, Montaigne (who did not want his death to say anything that his life had not already said) died in his home at Mass at the elevation of the Host.

Montaigne refounds philosophy and human society by bringing out the core of sacred tradition, by discovering and bringing to light what was always there but hidden. The new is really the old. In this way, he changes the relationship between the eternal and the temporal as it was understood by ancient philosophy and as it was inherited by medieval theology. The temporal is not subsumed under the eternal. Rather, in Montaigne’s incarnational metaphysics, the eternal is brought into time.