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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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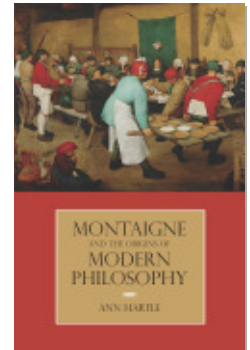
Published by Northwestern University Press

Hartle, Ann.

Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013.

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Chapter Three



The Philosophical Act (I): Judgment

For Montaigne, the philosophical act is neither contemplation nor practical wisdom, neither escape to the eternal nor immersion in the immediacy of practice. Rather, the philosophical act is judgment, purged of the self of the philosopher. Judgment subjects reason to the good. The philosophical act overcomes the traditional hierarchy and brings the new out of the old. In redefining this act, Montaigne surmounts the presumption of Aristotle, the pride of the philosopher, and separates the man from the philosopher.

To claim that the philosophical act is judgment is also to deny that Montaigne is a skeptic. The outcome of skepticism is not true judgment but the suspension of judgment. Although in some ways Montaigne's practice of essaying resembles the skeptical practice of weighing opposing perspectives on a given topic, his goal is neither suspension of judgment nor the imperturbability that results from it. And although Montaigne is cautious in giving assent, he does make judgments throughout the essays. Further, his judgment is not passively receptive: it effects a reordering of the human world.¹

In chapter 2 I offer a reading of the "Apology for Sebond," the essay which provides the strongest evidence for the claim that Montaigne is a skeptic. In spite of his high praise of skepticism and the skeptics in that essay, Montaigne goes beyond traditional skepticism to be open to the possible and the astonishing character of the familiar. This aspect of his thought will be brought out more fully in chapter 4. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, I discuss the moral and political judgments that are central to Montaigne's philosophical project. Here again, in spite of his remarkable tolerance for differences of opinion, the freedom and autonomy that he introduces are not grounded in moral skepticism.

Beginning in Thought

The *Essays* present a man immersed in the world of thought, a man who must achieve his own mind within the world of inherited opinion.

Montaigne brings forth something new against the background of that inherited world. He brings forth the possible out of what would have seemed impossible.

The world of inherited opinion is a confused world in which true and false are mixed together with no obvious way to distinguish them. Montaigne shows us three conditions of error and falsehood which the philosophical act must overcome. The contexts in which he presents these conditions reveal the nature of the philosophical act in its overcoming of error and falsehood.

First, true opinions are mixed in with false opinions. Montaigne says that he is able to sift the true from the false. In "Of Presumption" he writes: "This capacity for sifting truth, whatever it may amount to in me, and this free humor not to subject my belief easily, I owe it principally to myself: for the most firm imaginations that I have, and the most general, are those which, in a manner of speaking, were born with me. They are natural and all mine. I produced them crude and simple, of a production bold and strong, but a little troubled and imperfect. Since then I have established and fortified them by the authority of others, and by the sound discourse of the ancients, with whom I found my judgment conformed: these have assured me a firmer grip on them and have given me the enjoyment of them and a more entire possession" (VS658, F499). He can distinguish the true from the false because his most firm and general "imaginings" were produced by himself, or generated by his own mind. They are his first beliefs. What he has always believed is true because he has always believed it. His study of the ancient philosophers has only confirmed these first opinions and made them more "his own." This, in fact, just looks like presumption: what is his own is true and ancient philosophy simply confirms him in this presumption. The philosophical act, then, must overcome, in some way, this most basic form of presumption. In returning to his first opinions, Montaigne actually introduces something new.

The mind's activity of generation is central to Montaigne's understanding of the philosophical act. "I let fly my caprices all the more freely in public, inasmuch as, although they are born with me and without a model, I know that they will find their relation to some ancient humor; and someone will not fail to say: 'That is where he got it' " (VS546, F409). His caprices are original. That is, they are born with him, generated by his mind, and not copied from anyone else: they are "without a model." But they resemble the sayings of ancient philosophy, and that is why he is "an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher." His caprices are new, but he does not want them to appear to be new. Rather, he is content to let them appear to be old for he is bringing the new out of the old.

Montaigne provides the second formulation of the condition of error in “Of Vain Subtleties.” He always presents himself as a nameless type that must be articulated in the terms of the ancient hierarchy but that cannot really be accounted for within that hierarchy. There are, he says, two kinds of good Christians: the simple who accept without question the beliefs of the Church, and the learned who have made a profound study of the Church and Scripture and have penetrated into the meaning of what is believed. Then there is a third type: those who “stick to the old ways” but not on account of simplicity and stupidity and not on account of study. Unlike the reformers who reject the tradition, this third type does stick to the old ways, but in a way that is different from both the simple and the learned. This third type has reached “the extreme limit of Christian intelligence.” This, we assume, is Montaigne himself. However, in this “middle region” of men, the region between the simple and the learned, error is “engendered.” Those who “stop at the appearance of the first sense” assume that men like Montaigne, who stick to the old ways, do so out of simplicity and stupidity. They mistake the cause because they cannot get beyond first appearances. This means that first appearances are, or can be, misleading. The error here pertains to causes. They assume that the same effect must be produced by the same cause. The “middle region,” then, offers two opposing possibilities: error and the extreme limit of Christian intelligence.

In this essay, Montaigne offers several other presentations of his status as a nameless third type.² First, there are two kinds of good men: the simple peasants and the philosophers who are strong and enriched by learning. Then there are the “half-breeds” who have disdained ignorance of letters but are unable to reach the status of the philosophers: “their rear-end between two stools, like me, and so many others.” These half-breeds are “dangerous” and “trouble the world.” Montaigne, however, has pulled himself back as far as possible to the first condition of ignorance. Second, Montaigne considers an “abecedarian ignorance” that precedes knowledge and a “doctoral ignorance” that comes after knowledge, “an ignorance that knowledge generates and engenders, just as it undoes and destroys the first” (VS312–13, F226–27). Third, Montaigne concludes this essay with the claim that his mind has “opened up a passage,” and that it is easy to discover “an infinite number of examples” in which high and low are similar. The third, middle way, however, offers two different possibilities: error or the limit of Christian intelligence. The *Essays*, he says, would not appeal either to common, vulgar minds or to singular, excellent minds, but “they might get by in the middle region.”

Of the two possibilities offered to the middle region of men (among whom Montaigne counts himself), one is associated with violence and danger, the other with “descending,” as it were, to the lowest condition. Simple souls are “good Christians,” and great minds who have studied the Scriptures are “good Christians.” Of those in the middle region, some who have renounced the error of the Reformation have become extreme and violent in the defense of their side in the civil wars. Others, like Montaigne, stick to the old ways and “enjoy their victory with consolation, active gratitude, reformed conduct, and great modesty.” They have come to a deeper understanding of Scripture and of “the mysterious and divine secret of our ecclesiastical polity.” So also, both the simple peasants and the philosophers of his day are “good men.” The half-breeds, those in the middle region, are dangerous and trouble the world. Montaigne pulls back, as far as possible, to the condition of ignorance.

If error is “stopping at the appearance of the first sense” (or in Frame’s translation: “following the first plausible meaning”), then Montaigne is presenting the discovery of truth as getting beyond the appearance of the first sense to the true meaning. Going beyond the appearance of the first sense means testing our common impressions. Montaigne criticizes the philosophy of the schools for its unquestioned acceptance of the teachings of Aristotle; his criticism makes much of the fact that we never question our “common impressions.” Our imagination is prone to receive “impressions of falsehood by frivolous appearances” (VS1034, F791).

Montaigne discusses one of the most important instances of “stopping at the appearance of the first sense” in “Of Cruelty.” He here describes himself as merely innocent and good, rather than as virtuous. He is, therefore, lower in rank within the moral order than both the perfectly virtuous man, whose rule over the passions is absolute, and the imperfectly virtuous man, who must struggle with the passions. Montaigne’s own, third condition of goodness and innocence is, he says, “so close to imperfection and weakness that I do not very well know how to separate their confines and distinguish them. The very names of innocence and goodness are for this reason to some extent terms of contempt” (VS426, F310). Stopping at the appearance of the first sense means misunderstanding the nature of goodness, mistaking it for weakness, and assuming that it is caused by weakness. This confusion of goodness with weakness and imperfection is based on the Aristotelian hierarchy of strong over weak. Montaigne’s refounding replaces the weak with the good, thus overcoming error by establishing the strength of goodness.

The third condition of error and falsehood is brought about through what Montaigne calls “the violent prejudice of custom.” He begins “Of

Custom” with an account of the “power” of custom. Habit or custom “is a violent and treacherous schoolmistress.” She gains her power and authority over us stealthily, little by little. After a mild and humble beginning, “she soon uncovers to us a furious and tyrannical face against which we no longer have the liberty of even raising our eyes” (VS109, F77). Montaigne tells us that, at one time, he was charged with the responsibility of defending a certain custom, the content of which he does not specify. His approach was to uncover the origin of this custom, presumably because the origin would show him the reason and the justification for it. To his great surprise, he found the origin so weak that he became almost disgusted.

There are, he continues, two kinds of reaction to the discovery of the weakness of the origins of custom: “Our masters”—presumably the philosophers and theologians who are “directors of conscience”—make no attempt to defend custom on the basis of reason; they simply take refuge in the ancientness of usage. The Cynics, on the other hand, simply abandon custom and return to nature as the standard of reason. Montaigne, however, is a third type: “Whoever wants to [essay himself in the same way and] get rid of this violent prejudice of custom will find many things accepted with undoubting resolution, which have no support but in the hoary beard and the wrinkles of the usage that goes with them; but when this mask is torn off, and he refers things to truth and reason, he will feel his judgment as it were all upset, and nevertheless restored to a much surer status” (VS117, F84–85).³ Unlike our masters, he does not simply defer to the authority of custom on account of its hoary beard. Unlike the Cynics, he does not simply abandon custom by returning to some version of original nature. His judgment is “restored” to a much surer status. 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. To “restore” means to lead things back “to their true end” (VS118, F85).

The very meaning of “*essaying*,” then, is the overcoming of the violent prejudice of custom. *Essaying* is exposing the weakness of the beginnings and the disproportion of those beginnings to the power of custom. Custom is the violence that is exerted over the mind, the violence that the philosopher must first recognize and then combat. But Montaigne also says that the opinions of the Cynics, who reject the authority of custom, are “barbarous.” Therefore, Montaigne breaks with custom in an unusual way. He refounds custom, not by violently overturning everything, but by replacing its foundation: he replaces the weak with the strength of the good. Thus is his judgment restored to a much surer status.

Thought begins in conditions of error and falsehood because the mind is not receptive of “what is.” For Aristotle, thought is measured by being: the mind is like a blank writing tablet, ready to receive the forms of things. In contrast, Montaigne does not claim that his mind receives the forms of things. Rather, he says, his mind “generates” and “produces” out of itself. The origin of thought is the mind itself.

In the Aristotelian tradition, the highest activity of the mind is contemplation because contemplation is a participation in the activity of the divine (*Meta.* 12.7, 1072b13; *NE.* 10.7, 1177a13–1177b8). It is the divine that establishes the hierarchy, and the divine is the highest in the order of things. Despite his great admiration, Montaigne cannot stomach the ecstasies of contemplation reported of Socrates (VS1115, F856), that he stood in a trance for an entire day and night in the midst of the army, “overtaken and enraptured by some deep thought” (VS1109, F852).

The contrast between the traditional notions of knowing and contemplation as essentially receptive activities and Montaigne’s presentation of the mind as generating and producing comes through clearly in “Of Idleness.” He intends by this title to bring to mind the traditional idea of leisure as the condition for contemplation. Idleness, in the tradition, is the opposite of leisure, which is time devoted to the divine in worship and contemplation. Leisure is not idleness because it involves activity, the highest activity; it is “useless” in the best sense, that is, it is not directed to an end outside itself but is an end in itself. Idleness, on the other hand, is useless in the worst sense: it is not good in itself but good for nothing.

In this essay, Montaigne tells of his withdrawal from the affairs of politics into the solitude of his study. He intends to let his mind “entertain itself in full idleness and stay and settle in itself, which I hoped it might do more easily now, having become weightier and riper with time.” But that is not what happens. He finds instead that his mind “gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose [*propos*].” He decides that “in order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness” at his pleasure, he will put these chimeras and monsters in writing, “hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself” (VS33, F21). Montaigne is playing on the traditional notions of leisure and contemplation, conflating leisure with idleness. Contemplation is not the beholding of form but the generation of chimeras and fantastic monsters, “unformed” productions of his own mind. The activity of the mind in idleness is not the measuring of the mind by eternal being but the mind entertaining itself in time. By emphasizing the role of time, he distances himself from the philosopher’s escape to the eternal.

Because he says that he puts these fabrications in writing, it would seem that the *Essays* are just these productions of his own mind. But why should his mind be ashamed of itself? Shame suggests a moral and social dimension of his thought. The mind alone with itself is the mind withdrawn from the affairs of the world and from other men. Montaigne wants to make his mind ashamed of its chimeras, which have no order or purpose because they have no “definite subject” and “no fixed end” (VS32, F21). By putting the mind’s fantastic productions into writing, he exposes them to public view and therefore exposes himself to the possibility of shame. Perhaps he is suggesting that the proper place of the mind’s activity is the world of human affairs and that he must order his thought to that world.

Representation

The generative power of the mind, and thus the source of error and falsehood, is manifested in the capacity for representation. This capacity is one of the very few things that is said to be unique to man in the long comparison of man with the other animals in the “Apology.” The ability to have the images of things in the mind without the matter, that privilege in which our soul glories, is not peculiar to man but is shared by the beasts (VS481, F354). Representation, however, shows that man is not constrained within the natural hierarchy. “If it is true that man alone, of all the animals, has this freedom of imagination and this unruliness of thought, that represents to him that which is, that which is not, and that which he wants, the false and the true, this is an advantage that is sold him very dear and in which he has very little to glorify himself, for from it springs the principal source of the evils that press him” (VS459–60, F336).

Representation is the source of evils because it gives us both the true and the false, both what is and what is not. Representation is not the mind’s reception of the intelligible forms of things. A form can only be what is and what is true, whereas a representation is produced by the mind itself. If the capacity to receive the intelligible forms of things were distinctively human, then man would remain within the order and limits of nature. His capacity for thought would be located in a continuous ascent from sensation, which he shares with all animals, to contemplation, which he shares with the divine. But the human mind does not docilely receive the forms of things as they are; it also actively represents its own productions to itself and the world, and the capacity for representation means freedom

and unruliness. “We have emancipated ourselves from [nature’s] rules to abandon ourselves to the vagabond freedom of our fancies” (VS58, F39).

Montaigne writes: “Others form man; I tell of him, and *represent* a particular one, very ill-formed” (VS804, F610).⁴ A form is an essence, a universal, fully achieved in a single end or notion of perfection. Montaigne, in contrast, represents a particular. Whereas forms must be articulated only in their perfection, representation allows for the expression of imperfection: this particular is “very ill-formed.” Since form is perfect, it is what the thing ought to be. Montaigne’s representation of himself is true because it is not in terms of what ought to be but of what is: “what is” is particular and imperfect. Yet the power of representation replaces the power of the universal; for Montaigne, the imperfect particular stands for all men: “each man bears the entire form of the human condition” (VS805, F611).

Imagination and Invention

Montaigne’s essay on the imagination is entitled “Of the Power of the Imagination.” In his view, “that faculty is all important, at least more important than any other” (VS1087, F833).⁵ While the imagination is all-important and powerful for him, Montaigne’s memory is “monstrously deficient.” There is almost no trace of memory in him, and in this he is unique. “I do not think there is another one in the world so monstrously deficient. All my other faculties are low and common; but in this one I think I am singular and very rare, and thereby worthy of gaining a name and reputation” (VS34, F21). This apparently ironic assertion about himself is usually not taken seriously but is attributed to his penchant for self-deprecation. After all, his book is filled with hundreds of quotations and borrowed stories, all from the storehouse of his memory. But if we take him at his word, then this monstrous deficiency must tell us something about the mind itself.

Montaigne’s lack of memory frees him from the past, from the inherited, from learning, and from custom. Therefore, he stands in a relation of distance from ancient philosophy and history. His mind is not held under the unexamined authority of the tradition. As Tzvetan Todorov says of Montaigne: “The activity of the mind itself must be freed from the grip of tradition in order to rely solely on its own forces.”⁶ That is why Montaigne is free to invent with respect to the stories taken from the histories. Absence of memory is freedom from the actual, from what has happened.

Montaigne's mind, then, is not memory. Most people, he says, make no distinction between memory and mind and therefore assume that deficiency of memory is deficiency of understanding (VS34, F22). The identification of mind with memory would seem to refer to the Socratic formula, "knowledge is recollection," and to the Augustinian formula, "memory itself is mind." These formulations attempt to capture the experience of discovery in the process of learning something new. It is as if we are discovering something that was already there, already present in the mind. What seems new is not really new. The new is in fact eternal. Knowledge is, in the tradition, ultimately recollection of the eternal unchanging forms.

Kierkegaard gives us an especially clear description of the alternatives in his *Philosophical Fragments*: either all learning is recollection, as Socrates had concluded, or the moment of learning, in time, must have "decisive significance."⁷ For "viewed Socratically, any point of departure in time is *eo ipso* something accidental, a vanishing point, an occasion."⁸ The moment in time is merely the occasion for remembering. From the Socratic viewpoint, "the temporal point of departure is nothing, because in the same moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it, in the same instant that moment is hidden in the eternal, assimilated into it."⁹

Montaigne's "monstrously deficient" memory means that his mind is not subsumed under the eternal: the action of his thought is a true beginning and not merely an occasion for remembering. That is the only way in which the new can emerge in his thought. Discovery is not remembering but inventing. In compensation for the imperfection of his memory, Montaigne has been given invention (VS35, F22).

The *Essays* are at the center of Grahame Castor's analysis of the meaning of "invention" in his *Pleiade Poetics: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Thought and Terminology*. The principal conclusions of this analysis are that invention is most closely associated with the faculty of the imagination, and that invention is not the creation of something entirely new but a discovery of something that was already present but hidden. Castor says that "the sixteenth century made no absolute distinction between the process of imagining and that of inventing."¹⁰ "Invention" and "imagination" are more or less interchangeable terms for Montaigne.¹¹ Castor describes invention as, in some ways, a pre-rational activity, because invention seeks out particulars that are appropriate to a general topic. The function of the imagination is to assemble images and present them to reason. "Imagination and invention were thus the servants of reason; but this was a rather ambiguous relationship, for the reason was to a very large extent

dependent upon them in its dealings with things outside itself. They were the powers which reason employed in order to move outwards, beyond itself, the means whereby it was able to act upon external things, and to enter into a relationship of knowledge with them.”¹² Montaigne says that “we hold [not only the past but] even present things by the imagination” (VS996, F763). Thus, imagination and invention replace memory in the activity of knowing. And it is through the imagination that reason is able to exercise power.

Although invention later came to mean something like creation, “in the sixteenth century . . . invention was still quite definitely a finding, a discovery, or a finding out, rather than a creating.”¹³ This means that “the concept behind *invention* is not so much that of producing something entirely new, *ex nihilo*, as it were, but rather that of coming into and revealing for the first time something which already exists.”¹⁴ To invent was “to come into something which already existed and to make it manifest for the first time.”¹⁵ This understanding of invention is also found in Ullrich Langer’s *Invention, Death and Self-Definitions in the Poetry of Pierre De Ronsard*. According to Langer, in the Renaissance “any discovery is only a discovery of that which is already there, both in the universe and in the mind. Therefore it would simply make no sense to say that the mind may construct anything essentially different from all that precedes or surrounds it.” Langer maintains that “the only certain statement about *invention* in the Renaissance is that it does not designate the creation *ex nihilo*, by a transcendent and separate subject, of an essentially distinct object. The rhetorical sense must be located anywhere between an ‘accidental coming-upon’ and a ‘discovery through research’ of something already there. . . . Any analysis of ‘newness’ will be relativized by this conservative meaning of invention in a full universe.”¹⁶

Castor says that “in talking of invention Montaigne is quite obviously dealing with a group of ideas which he considers to be familiar to his readers, and which requires no special elaboration on his part. Therefore Montaigne never deliberately sets out to explain what he means by *invention*; there was no need for him to do so.”¹⁷ It is true that Montaigne does not usually define his terms, and to that extent he does rely upon the accepted meaning of terms. But he also bends and turns language out of its ordinary course: his invention gives unaccustomed significance to words (VS873, F665). The “new” has a stronger sense for Montaigne than it does for Castor, the sense of the possible, and so we must take Castor’s analysis of invention in the *Essays* a step further.

Invention cannot be distinguished from discovery, because the imagination is generative. It does not receive images from “external things”

to present them to reason but generates images or representations. To say that invention is discovery is not to say that it finds what is already there actually or potentially, but rather that it discovers the possible and the new in thought itself. To discover possibilities is to bring them forth from the mind. In other words, Montaigne does not *remember* what was always already there. He *invents* it, and that is how he introduces the new.

Castor rightly points out that the change in thought represented by the prominence of invention must be understood in contrast to Aristotle's understanding of thought. But he sees this as a kind of falling off: "The weakening, or coarsening, of Aristotle's ideas can be seen in the movement of thought from 'potentiality' to 'possibility,' where the idea of an existent (unexercised) power, which is expressed in the Latin *potential* . . . is watered down to that of mere accidental perhaps-ness."¹⁸ "Possibility" is "a falling-away from Aristotelian 'potentiality.'"¹⁹

Possibility would have the sense of a weakening of Aristotelian potentiality only if one accepts the truth of form and final cause. Potentiality is relative to final cause: potentiality is a mode of being such that, when it is actualized, the completion and perfection of the thing in question comes closer to fulfillment. Potentialities are given by nature; they are given with form. Possibility means the absence of form. In other words, potentialities are discovered in things, whereas possibilities are invented by the mind. Truth is no longer the conformity of the intellect to the object of knowledge, such that the form in the object is the same as the form in the intellect. Truth becomes a matter of judgment.

In a world without forms, in a world of accidental similarities, imagination and invention are essential to seeing things as they are and to judging men and their actions. One of the most important functions of invention in the *Essays* is the discovery of the possible causes and accidental similarities of human actions. Invention allows him to get beyond the appearance of the first sense. For example, in "By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End" Montaigne goes beyond "the appearance of the first sense" by calling into question the first plausible explanation of why the princes are moved only by esteem and not by compassion. The first credible meaning is that the princes are strong souls who revere only virtue and strength, whereas the common people are weak and are therefore moved not by esteem but by compassion. Montaigne finds two stories that show that the common people can be moved by astonishment at heroic virtue. Esteem and astonishment produce the same effect of mercy. In those two particular instances, the entire natural hierarchy of strong and weak is called into question. Montaigne concludes "Of Vain Subtleties" with the claim that, once "a passage is opened to the mind," our invention can find infinite

examples of the similarity of high and low and of the appearance of the nameless middle region of men to which he himself belongs. This nameless middle region is the space in which the new can appear.

Reason

Montaigne's descriptions of reason, especially in the "Apology," have led most commentators to the conclusion that he is a skeptic. Reason appears to be weak and powerless, unable to know anything or to find the causes of anything. This would amount to a return to the position of the ancient skeptics, who called for the suspension of judgment as the only legitimate response to the weakness of reason. But Montaigne does make judgments all the time, and so it is necessary to distinguish among the different senses of reason that emerge in the *Essays* in order to determine what allows him to make these judgments.

Montaigne says: "I always call reason that appearance of intellect that each man forges in himself. That reason, of which, by its condition, there can be a hundred contradictory ones about one and the same subject, is an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable, and adaptable to all biases and measures; all that is needed is the ability to mold it" (VS565, F425). Each man forges reason in himself: reason is produced, generated, within each individual man. Therefore, reason has "many forms" (VS1065, F815). In contrast with the Aristotelian-Thomistic view of reason as universal and the same in all men, Montaigne presents reason as inherently biased and contradictory. It is not the case that any rational human being would arrive at the same conclusions on the basis of reason. Reason is, in its very origins, self-interested. Reason is an instrument for measuring, but it is not a fixed, unchanging measure or rule because it is private and particular, adaptable to all measures.

There is, however, another description of reason that is very much at odds with this notion of biased reason. In "Of the Disadvantage of Greatness" Montaigne says: "There are few things on which we can give a sincere judgment, because there are few in which we have not in some way a private interest. Superiority and inferiority, mastery and subjection, are forced into a natural envy and contention; they must pillage one another perpetually. I do not believe either one about the rights of the other; let us leave it to reason, which is inflexible and impassive, when we are able to end it" (VS918, F701). Reason can become "inflexible and impassive" and can also make sincere and unbiased judgments when we are able to bring it to an end.

But what does it mean to end reason? First, it seems that reason has no natural end in the Aristotelian sense, for the conflicts of self-interested and biased reason are perpetual. Therefore, reason must be brought to an end, directed to an end, by the will. Ends have become effects. The effect with which Montaigne is here concerned, the impetus for his raising the possibility of an inflexible and impassive reason, is the resolution of the conflict between mastery and subjection.

Second, if reason is to be brought to an end, or made to produce a certain effect, its origin in the private individual must be overcome and self-interest must be transcended. Reason inflexible and impassive, then, has a public status. The possibility of the transcendence of private interest is associated here with “sincere judgment.”

Third, bringing reason to an end means freeing it from the limitations of experience. In a discussion of the uncertainty of judgment with respect to political matters, Montaigne writes: “Machiavelli’s arguments, for example, were solid enough for the subject, yet it was very easy to combat them; and those who did so left it no less easy to combat theirs. In such an argument there would always be matter for answers, rejoinders, replications, triplications, quadruplications, and that infinite web of disputes that our pettifoggers have spun out as far as they could in favor of lawsuits . . . For the reasons have little other foundation than experience, and the diversity of human events offers us infinite examples of all sorts of forms” (VS655, F497). Therefore, proofs and reasons that are founded on experience and fact have no end (VS1032, F790).

But how can reason be independent of experience? What else is there on which to ground our conclusions? At the beginning of his reply to the second objection to Sebond’s natural theology, Montaigne refers to the way in which Saint Augustine argues against those who reject Christian belief because it cannot withstand reason’s scrutiny. Augustine’s approach is to try to demonstrate the weakness of reason by pointing to the many “known and indubitable experiences” into which we have no insight and of which we do not know the causes. Montaigne finds this mode of argument insufficient. “We must do more” than Augustine. Rare examples are not necessary to convict reason of weakness: Montaigne will show that even the most familiar is impenetrable to reason. Montaigne rejects Augustine’s mode of argument because it is based on experience (VS449, F328). This rejection is what makes the “Apology” appear so skeptical. But that, I would argue, is not Montaigne’s ultimate intention. Rather, in making the causes of the familiar suddenly unknown, he opens the question of possible causes.

Reason inflexible and impassive is not based on experience, because experience is merely what has been; it is the actual, not in the Aristotelian

sense of actuality but in the sense of simply what has happened in the past. Reason inflexible and impassive, however, is based not on experience but on possibility, not on what has happened but on what might happen. “So in the study that I am making of our behavior and motives, fabulous testimonies, provided they are possible, serve like true ones. Whether they have happened or no, in Paris or Rome, to John or Peter, they exemplify, at all events, some human capacity. . . . There are authors whose end it is to tell what has happened. Mine, if I could attain it, would be to talk about what can happen.” Hence, his attitude toward testimony, even fabulous testimony, is not rejection, as is the practice of the philosophers and theologians of “exquisite and exact conscience,” and not acceptance, as is typical of the simple, but a kind of openness to the possible. “I refer the stories that I borrow to the conscience of those from whom I take them. The reflections are my own, and depend on *the proofs of reason, not of experience*” (VS105–6, F75, emphasis added).

This openness to the possible accounts in some measure for the fact that Montaigne stays closer to the simple than to the learned. The learned tend to reject as impossible anything that is not familiar to them. This is the presumption of the learned. They tend to identify the possible with the probable, whereas the simple, who do not presume to know the causes of things, are more open to the strange and unfamiliar. In one of the very rare places in the *Essays* in which Montaigne points to a radical change within himself, he cites the beliefs of the simple in such things as enchantments, prognostications, and returning spirits: “I used to feel 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. *Not that experience has since shown me anything surpassing my first beliefs, and that through no fault of my curiosity; but reason has taught me that to condemn a thing thus, dogmatically, as false and impossible, is to assume the advantage of knowing the bounds and limits of God’s will and of the power of our mother nature*” (VS179, F132, emphasis added). Reason inflexible and impassive is not limited by experience: “How many things of slight probability there are, testified to by trustworthy people, which, if we cannot be convinced of them, we should at least leave in suspense! For to condemn them as impossible is to pretend, with rash presumption, to know the limits of possibility” (VS180, F133). It is not experience but reason that teaches him to be open to the possible.²⁰ Reason surpasses his first beliefs and thus becomes inflexible and impassive. This, then, is the first moment of the philosophical act: the ascent of reason from first beliefs and the freedom of reason from the limitations of experience.

Judgment

The second moment of the philosophical act is the act of judgment, in which reason is subjected to the good and the good becomes his own: judgment is what is all one's own. The *Essays* are quite literally the *essais*, the tests, of Montaigne's own judgment (VS301, F219; VS653, F495).²¹

In his essay on the education of children, he works out the distinction between mere learning and true education in terms of the difference between simply borrowing from the ancients, which is only an exercise of memory, and forming one's own judgment. The student should be taught what to do with the pieces borrowed from others: "he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment. His education, work, and study aim only at forming this" (VS152, F111).

Within the tradition, contemplation is regarded as the highest human activity because, in contemplation, the mind escapes the temporal and is united with the divine, eternal, and unchanging: the human becomes divine. The *Essays*, however, are not directed to the divine, eternal, and unchanging, but to the human, temporal, and changing. Montaigne cannot stomach the contemplative ecstasies of Socrates. But he admires the Socrates "who brought human wisdom back down from heaven, where she was wasting her time, and restored her to man, with whom lies her most proper and laborious and useful business" (VS1038, F793).

Unlike contemplation, judgment is human, a purely human activity concerned only with the human. The *Essays* are about human beings and human action: in them, Montaigne encounters the human itself and as such. He considers it "purely," judging it as it is in itself, without relation to anything else. To judge within the traditional hierarchy, by contrast, is to judge by the standard of what is above. Man is between the divine and the bestial and judges himself by the standard of the divine. To judge man as he is in himself and to identify judgment as the defining human activity is to change everything about what it means to be human.

Contemplation is the ecstatic beholding of the thing itself, but judgment is the subjecting of the thing itself, thus making it one's own. Montaigne's praise of Socrates for bringing philosophy back down from the heavens reveals the way in which contemplation has been transformed. "It is only for first-class men to dwell purely on the thing itself, consider it, and judge it. It belongs to the one and only Socrates to become acquainted with death with an ordinary countenance, to become familiar with it and play with it. He seeks no consolation outside the thing itself; dying seems to him a natural and indifferent accident. He fixes his gaze precisely on it, and makes up his mind to it, without looking elsewhere" (VS833, F632).

In contrast, the disciples of Hegesias, who were inflamed by fine arguments for immortality, “do not consider death in itself; they do not judge it. It is not there that they fix their thoughts; the goal to which they run is a new existence” (VS833, F632). To dwell on “the thing itself,” to fix one’s gaze on it, is not to contemplate it but to judge it, subject it, make up one’s mind to it. Socrates was “always one and the same, and raised himself, not by sallies but by disposition, to the utmost point of vigor. Or, to speak more exactly, he raised nothing, but rather brought vigor, hardships, and difficulties down and back to his own natural and original level, and subjected them to it” (VS1037, F793).

The Socrates of Montaigne’s invention does not contemplate the thing itself; he judges it, subjects it to himself, by bringing it down and back to what is his own. He makes the thing itself his own, and what is his own is natural to him. He *makes* it natural. That is what it means to restore philosophy to man.

Georges Poulet explains what judgment is for Montaigne in just this way: “Judgment is the act by which the mind makes something its own. It is an act of the mind . . . the motion of the mind by which it envelops and unites the self and the object. . . . Far from being an adhesion of the mind to things, judgment is an integration of things within the mind by the mind. . . . This freedom of judgment is of value only when it is transformed into a choice and into an act.”²²

Freedom of Judgment: The Self-Ordered Soul

Montaigne asks himself: “And then, for whom do you write?” The learned, who pass judgment on books, recognize only erudition and art and value only learning. Common and popular souls, on the other hand, cannot recognize the grace and the weight of lofty and elevated discourse. These two human types almost exhaust the possibilities; nevertheless, there is a third. “The third type into whose hands you fall, that of souls ordered and strong in themselves, is so rare that for this very reason it has neither name nor rank among us: it is time half lost to aspire and strive to please them” (VS657, F498). The third type has no name *because* it has no rank. In pointing to the fact that this type has no rank among us, Montaigne implies that his project involves a transcendence of the traditional hierarchy, the traditional order of high and low, strong and weak. The strength of the self-ordered soul is not measured by its perfection within the hierarchy but by its freedom of judgment: “Indeed there are few souls so regulated, so strong and well-born, that they can be trusted to their own conduct, and who are able, with moderation and without temerity, to sail in the liberty

of their judgments beyond the common opinions” (VS559, F419–20). Freedom of judgment must be distinguished from unruliness of thought. Although the self-ordered soul is free and not bound by the common opinions, he acts with moderation. “Our mind is an erratic, dangerous, and heedless tool; it is difficult to impose order and moderation [*mesure*] upon it. And in my time those who have some rare excellence beyond the others, and some extraordinary quickness, are nearly all, we see, incontinent in the license of their opinions and conduct [*mœurs*]. It is a miracle if you find a sedate and sociable one” (VS559, F419). To judge is to order. Order is not given by nature: the origin of order is the mind itself.²³ The self-ordered soul imposes order and measure upon itself. This is Montaigne’s new kind of strength. The self-ordered soul is strong in itself because it has subjected reason to the good and made the good its own.

Subjecting Reason to the Good

Montaigne begins “Of Cruelty” with the distinction between goodness and virtue: “It seems to me that virtue is something other and nobler than the inclinations toward goodness that are born in us. Souls naturally regulated and wellborn follow the same path, and show the same countenance in their actions, as virtuous ones. But virtue means something greater and more active than letting oneself, by a happy disposition, be led gently and peacefully in the footsteps of reason” (VS422, F306). Goodness looks weaker than virtue: it seems to be nothing more than a “natural mildness and easygoingness” in contrast with the strength of virtue that requires struggle and self-mastery. Yet, goodness shows “the same countenance” as virtue.

Montaigne explains the origins of his goodness and why he holds most vices in horror. “I hold them in horror, I say, from an attitude so natural and so much my own that the same instinct and impression that I brought away from my nurse I have still retained. Nothing has been able to make me alter it, not even my own reasonings, which, having in some things broken away from the common road, would easily give me license for actions which this natural inclination makes me hate” (VS428, F312). Montaigne goes further: “It is a monstrous thing that I will say, but I will say it all the same: I find in that area, in many things, more restraint and order in my morals than in my opinions, and my lust less depraved than my reason” (VS428, F312). In “Of Cruelty” goodness is identified with sympathy, a natural inclination.

Montaigne’s reason gives him license for vicious actions that his inclinations make him hate. His judgment, however, affirms his inclinations.

He hates cruelty and judges it the extreme of all vice: “Among other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, *both by nature and by judgment*, as the extreme of all vices” (VS429, F313, emphasis added). Reason is brought to an “end” by judgment, which rejects reason’s justifications of cruelty.²⁴ Reason must instead be directed to the good, subjected to the good by judgment. Montaigne’s judgment affirms his earliest impressions and natural inclinations to goodness or sympathy. Now, through judgment, he has a “more secure possession” of them than he did as a young child.

This is Montaigne’s new strength, the strength of the self-ordered soul. It is not the mastery of reason over the passions but rather the harmony of judgment and natural inclination. However, not all natural inclinations are good. Montaigne hates cruelty by nature, yet there are others—“bloodthirsty” souls—who seem to have an inclination to cruelty. “Nature herself, I fear, attaches to man some instinct for inhumanity” (VS433, F316). Cruelty, “so unnatural a vice,” nevertheless seems to dwell in us by nature (VS790, F599). Natural inclinations themselves must be judged.²⁵ This act of choosing well among natural inclinations is the freedom of the self-ordered soul. Through judgment Montaigne chooses his natural disposition, his “nature.” His disposition is no longer simply “given.” Whatever Montaigne’s “original” nature or natural disposition, he presents it as good solely because he has made it good.

After confessing the monstrous fact that his reason would give him license for actions that his inclinations make him hate, Montaigne asks: “Could it possibly be true that to be wholly good we must be so by some hidden, natural, and universal property, without law, without reason, without example?” (VS428, F312). Goodness, he says, is hidden. Therefore, we must get beyond the appearance of the first sense in order to see it. Goodness is also natural because it is a natural inclination chosen and affirmed by judgment: it has been made his own in a new way. Third, goodness is universal because it includes the entire man: it is his integrity and consistency. Finally, goodness is a property, a possession of the individual, not an end for which the individual must strive. It is not caused by law, reason, or example. Rather, through judgment a man makes the good his own, his possession, his property. In his possession of the good, the self-ordered soul becomes sociable, as is reflected in the way he judges other men.

Judging “What Is”: Imperfection

Judging is, in the tradition, held to be the subsuming of a particular under a universal, determining that a particular is an instance of a certain kind,

and that it is the same as other particulars in an essential way. A particular man, then, is judged by the standard of the universal “man,” by the standard of the perfection of the human form. In the first essay, Montaigne concludes: “Truly man is a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating subject. It is hard to found any constant and uniform judgment on him” (VS9, F5). When his friends ask for his judgment of their actions, he avoids generalizations: “So I reveal to my friends, by their outward manifestations [*productions*], their inward inclinations. I do not attempt to arrange this infinite variety of actions, so diverse and so disconnected, into certain types and categories, and distribute my lots and divisions distinctly into recognized classes and sections” (VS1076, F824). On the whole, he finds universal judgments to be useless. “These universal judgments that I find so common signify nothing. They are like men who salute a whole people in a crowd and in a body. Those who have a real acquaintance with them salute them and notice them by name and individually. But that is a risky undertaking” (VS936, F715). Montaigne refers to this as “risky” perhaps because it undermines the standard of the perfection of form in judging men and their actions.

In fact, we “strengthen and enlighten our judgment by reflecting on this continual variation of human things” (VS297, F216). In the formation of judgment, the study of history is of the greatest importance. History, he says, is “the skeleton of philosophy, in which the most abstruse parts of our nature are penetrated.” The student should be taught “not so much the histories as how to judge them. That in my opinion, is of all matters the one to which we apply our minds in the most varying degree” (VS156, F115). Learning how to judge the histories means something more than learning the “facts” given by the historians: it means probing the inside to the springs of human action.

The way in which judgment acts in the *Essays* has to do first with determining “what is,” whether something is actually the case. This is usually assumed in the rush to universal judgments about why something is the way it is. In determining whether something is, in fact, the case, judgment is a very different kind of act from the act of ascertaining why a thing is the way it is. Judgment must first overcome the presumption of custom. It must resist the attraction to the universal—a very difficult resistance, indeed—because human beings believe, following Aristotle, that they know particulars only through the universal. How is it even possible to see something as a particular?

For Montaigne, judgment as the determination of “what is” includes two related aspects. First, to see “what is” as it is means to see it without the measure of what it ought to be, to judge without the standard of final

cause. Aristotle's account of human action is in terms of final cause or happiness: all men, whether they know it or not, always act for the sake of happiness, which is the final and self-sufficient good. If all of one's actions are directed to the same end, then human actions should be consistent. But consistency is an extremely rare achievement. Thus, Aristotle's account of human action in terms of final cause or happiness cannot really explain the actions of most men who are merely tossed about by desires, circumstances, passions, and so forth. Montaigne says: "I do not recognize in Aristotle most of my ordinary actions: they have been covered and dressed up in another robe for the use of the school" (VS874, F666). Montaigne concludes "Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions" with the admonition that we must not judge men simply by their outward actions but must probe the inside to find the springs of action (VS338, F244). To see and understand human action as it is, not as it ought to be, means to judge it in its beginnings and implies, therefore, an acceptance of imperfection and incompleteness.

This understanding of judgment is thus, at the same time, the overcoming of the traditional hierarchy. Action is not the actualization of a potentiality. Instead, Montaigne replaces potentiality by possibility, and that is why invention is indispensable for judgment. Judging "what is" requires openness to the possible: "We must not judge what is possible and what is not, according to what is credible and incredible to our sense" (VS725, F548). This is especially true of human actions: while it is easy to judge the limits of what the body can do, it is very difficult to know the limits of the soul (VS723, F546). Judging as determining "what is" means judging by the standard, or the limits, of the possible.

The mind "represents" to itself both what is and what is not, the true and the false, as well as what it wants to possess. Since representation gives us no way of separating the true from the false, judgment is the only way to determine what is, or what is true. Whereas for Aristotle we can know the truth about what something is only in the light of what it ought to be, for Montaigne determining what is true is inseparable from inventing the possible. Montaigne's conscience allows him to accept or to borrow testimony and stories: "I refer the stories that I borrow to the conscience of those from whom I take them." And he is free to alter the details of the stories he borrows, to omit and replace the explanations offered by the historians, and to fill in details that are not given in the histories because the historians are themselves inventing. "My conscience does not falsify one iota; my knowledge, I don't know." This sets him apart from the philosophers and theologians who are closed to testimony. The philosophers and theologians are people of "exquisite and

exact conscience” who would not be willing to testify concerning even what happens right before their eyes or to accept the testimony of others because they would not stake their fidelity on the fidelity of a common man (VS105–6, F75–76).

Montaigne does not judge others by the standard of the perfection of final cause; but neither does he judge others by the standard of himself, as most men do. He judges each man as he is in himself. “Of Cato the Younger” begins with a statement of Montaigne’s practice of judgment: “I do not share that common error of judging another by myself. I easily believe that another man may have qualities different from mine. 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 am as ready as you please to acquit another man from sharing my conditions and principles. I consider him simply in himself, without relation to others; I mold him to his own model. I do not fail, just because I am not continent, to acknowledge sincerely the continence of the Feuillants and the Capuchins, and to admire the manner of their life. I can very well insinuate myself by imagination into their place, and I love and honor them all the more because they are different from me. I have a singular desire that we should each be judged in ourselves apart, and that I may not be measured in conformity with the common examples” (VS229, F169).

Montaigne’s judgment is unique. Most men judge others according to the measure of themselves: “It seems to each man that the ruling pattern of nature is in him; to this he refers all other forms as to a touchstone. The ways that do not square with his are counterfeit and artificial. What brutish stupidity!” (VS725, F548). Montaigne does not share that “common error” for, “in contrast with the common run of men,” he judges by a standard that is not biased. “My weakness in no way alters my necessarily high regard for the strength and vigor of those who deserve it. ‘There are men who praise nothing except what they are confident they can imitate’ [Cicero]. Crawling in the slime of the earth, I do not fail to observe, even in the clouds, the inimitable loftiness of certain heroic souls” (VS229, F169).

In the case of Cato, for example, he indicates his disgust with those who insist on attributing base motives to great men: these detractors “play at ingenuity” clumsily and crudely. “The same pains that they take to detract from these great names, and the same license, I would willingly take to lend them a shoulder to raise them higher. These rare figures, whom the consensus of the wise has selected as examples to the world, I

shall not hesitate to restore to their places of honor, as far as my ingenuity [*invention*] allows me to interpret them in a favorable light" (VS231, F170). Montaigne says that "to judge of great and lofty things we need a soul of the same caliber; otherwise we attribute to them the vice that is our own" (VS67, F46). Although Montaigne's deeds are lowly, his soul is of the same caliber as Cato's because his judgment is true and good. Since he does not judge others in relation to himself, his esteem is not based on his own lowliness and weakness but on his strong and free judgment.

How is it possible for an individual to judge each man as he is in himself, "without relation to others"? Judgment would seem to require a universal standard against which individuals can be measured and compared with each other. Yet, Montaigne says: "I mold him to his own model." It appears, then, that he judges each man according to that man's own standard, according to that man's own conscience or judgment. At the same time, however, Montaigne is not a moral relativist nor does he claim that the good is simply what it appears to be for each man. He does condemn vices and vicious actions, but he condemns the action, not the man; he hates the vice, not the man. He weighs both the good and the bad in order to arrive at an assessment of the individual. Judgment is "weighing" or "assaying." Weighing or assaying implies a standard against which the action or the man is measured, and that standard must be the good. Because he does not judge according to the standard of the perfection of form, he accepts imperfection and is able to see the good in the imperfect. He sees how men *are*. That is, indeed, our experience of other men. In fact, the social requires the acceptance of imperfection.

Montaigne uses imagination and invention to enter into the conscience of the other and to judge that other from his own perspective. Montaigne insinuates himself by his imagination into the place of those whose way of life is entirely different from his own: "Thinking about the poor beggar at my door . . . I put myself in his place, I try to fit my mind to his bias" (VS243, F179). Montaigne's judgment of other men can be described as generous, for the tendency of his judgments is toward esteem for others. "I find it a rough task to judge a man in whom the bad qualities exceed the good" (VS1077, F825). He loves and admires Cato the Stoic, the Epicureans, the Skeptics, Plato, Socrates, the Capuchins, and countless others who pursue the good in very different ways.

Montaigne judges each man as he is in himself, without relation to others, and yet he also ranks men. These two actions seem mutually exclusive: the first kind of judgment rejects a universal standard, while the act of ranking appears to require it. How is it possible for Montaigne to escape the charge that he is contradicting himself? The answer lies in the locus of

his standards: he judges not by outward actions—by the standard of final cause—but by the internal springs of action. Montaigne judges each man according to that man's own conscience, and he ranks men according to the purity of their consciences. That is how it is possible for Montaigne to rank incommensurables.

Montaigne's ranking can be seen especially clearly in "Of the Most Outstanding Men." Epaminondas is ranked as the most outstanding man, surpassing Alexander the Great, Caesar, and even Socrates because his conscience is innocent. The valor of Epaminondas is as great as that of Alexander and Caesar, "but as for his character and conscience, he very far surpassed all those who have undertaken to manage affairs. For in this respect, *which must principally be considered, which alone truly marks what we are, and which I weigh alone against all the others together*, he yields to no philosopher, not even to Socrates. In this man, innocence is a key quality, sovereign, constant, uniform, incorruptible" (VS756, F573, emphasis added). The standard by which Montaigne judges is the standard of innocence or goodness: the "extreme goodness" of Epaminondas (VS757, F573). Innocence and goodness are "so close to weakness and imperfection" that it is difficult to distinguish them: judgment must get beyond the appearance of the first sense.

In his act of judging "what is" in its imperfection, we can understand the way in which Montaigne's judgment accomplishes the many "reversals" that occur throughout the *Essays*, including the reversals of high and low, strong and weak. The weak is stronger than the strong, the low is higher than the high. When the traditional hierarchy is undermined, these oppositions collapse. Yet, Montaigne must use the language of the hierarchy in order to undermine it. Truth is in these reversals.

Montaigne's judgment overcomes the three conditions of error and falsehood from which thought begins. He is able to sift the true from the false by returning to his first opinions, to the truth that was always there, and by subjecting reason to the good. He goes beyond the appearance of the first sense through the overcoming of the traditional hierarchy. And he gets rid of the violent prejudice of custom by bringing the new out of the old and replacing the weak with the good.

Judgment Reformed

Montaigne criticizes those who seek to reform morals through new opinions. "Oh what an easy and applauded route those superficial men take, compared with ours!" (VS888, F677). Montaigne's own reform is the deepest possible, because he seeks to effect the purification of judgment,

the reform of conscience itself, the reform of the will. Judgment is conscience, and conscience is determined by the will.²⁶ Neither contemplation nor prudence admits an act of the will.

In his description of the act of judgment, Montaigne points to the role of the will in judgment and to the possibility of the uncorrupted will: "It is a great deal for me to have my judgment regulated, if my actions [*les effects*] cannot be, and to maintain this sovereign part free from corruption. It is something to have my will good when my legs fail me" (VS229–30, F169). The will can be "good" and uncorrupted, even if one's actions are weak and unregulated.

In "Of Prognostications" Montaigne says that his task is "to give some authority" to "the prompt, vehement, and accidental" opinions that sometimes come to us. These are impulses of the will or "inclinations," and in a purified soul, such as Socrates's, they are important and worthy of being followed. Montaigne himself has experienced such stirrings, which were "as weak in reason as violent in persuasiveness" and "by which I let myself be carried away so usefully and fortunately that they might be judged to have in them something of divine inspiration" (VS44, F30). Such is perhaps the desire that "seized" him to tell his ways of being in public, the desire that is the beginning of the *Essays*. These impulses of the will are "weak in reason"; the good is irrational, and it is the will, not reason, that gives rise to these accidental opinions. The *Essays*, then, must be seen as Montaigne's attempt to "give some authority" to the impulses of the pure will.

Montaigne produces his thoughts out of himself, and that is why they are his own. But the decisive act, the act that makes them entirely and precisely his own, is the removal of the self. Reason, representation, and judgment are all purified of his self. It seems that the more the *Essays* are his own, the less of himself is present in them. The act of judgment does include the will, but purity of judgment means eliminating the self-assertion of the particular will. The self, then, appears as pride, self-assertion, and the desire to dominate. The self-ordered soul can be left to go its own way, beyond the common opinions, in the freedom of its judgments, because its will is purified of self.

In the "Apology" Montaigne says that "our first and original malady" is presumption (VS452, F330) and that presumption is the first tyranny of the evil spirit (VS449, F328), implying that presumption is original sin. Presumption, then, must be essential to that "unruliness of thought" that is said to distinguish man from the other animals. When Montaigne describes himself as "innocent" he is pointing to the way in which he escapes our first and original malady.

In “Of Presumption” Montaigne says that the only thing he esteems himself for is just what every man esteems himself for: “My recommendation is vulgar, common, and popular, for who ever thought he lacked sense?” We recognize the superiority of others in courage, strength, and beauty, “but an advantage in judgment we yield to no one” (VS656, F498). This is the presumption that is universal. Montaigne, then, is just like every other man. But here he does offer a way in which he can justify the uniqueness and the soundness of his opinions: “I think my opinions are good and sound; but who does not think as much of his? One of the best proofs I have of mine is the little esteem I have for myself; for if these opinions had not been very firm, they would easily have let themselves be fooled by the singular affection I have for myself” (VS657, F499). His lack of self-esteem is the best proof of the truth of his opinions. This is a new sense of proof: not the proof of demonstration, but proof based on the removal of the bias of self-esteem, the proof of reason.

But the *Essays* are all about himself. How, then, can his self be eliminated? Montaigne represents a particular, “very ill-formed.” By the standard of the traditional hierarchy, he is imperfect. His representation of himself is without self-esteem. The removal of self-esteem from Montaigne’s representation, reason, and judgment is the condition for his transcendence of the traditional hierarchy, the hierarchy that establishes the superiority of the philosopher to all men, of masters over slaves and strong over weak. In removing his self-esteem, he eliminates the identification of himself with the philosopher’s perfection of the human form. At the same time, he affirms his imperfection: he is “ill-formed.” In other words, the new type that emerges against the background of the traditional hierarchy transcends that hierarchy but also incorporates within itself the imperfection that it has in relation to that hierarchy.

Montaigne does not judge others by the measure of himself, pulling others down to the level of his own lowly deeds. His judgment is uncorrupted. “Judgment holds in me a magisterial seat, at least it carefully tries to. It lets my feelings go their way, both hatred and friendship, even the friendship I bear myself, without being changed and corrupted by them. If it cannot reform the other parts according to itself, at least it does not let itself be deformed to match them; it plays its game apart” (VS1074, F823).

From the perspective of the purified judgment, then, ancient philosophy never sees itself for what it is. It never purifies itself of the self of the philosopher in spite of the fact that it goes beyond the self to the eternal and divine. That is why it sees being as hierarchical. The reason that justifies the traditional hierarchy of master and subject is merely private

reason, biased and self-interested. Reason becomes inflexible, impassive, and able to transcend the hierarchy when it is purified of “private interest.” It becomes public when it is purified of the self of the philosopher. Purging the will of self-interest and self-esteem eliminates the pride of the philosopher and the desire for mastery. Montaigne’s own judgment is superior, but his elimination of self-esteem from his judgment is the renunciation of any claim to superiority and mastery: the purified judgment subjects pride and mastery itself. Montaigne thus achieves a public reason and a public will.

Reason inflexible and impassive requires the self-effacement of the philosopher in an act of extreme generosity. The requirement of the self-effacement of the philosopher helps us to make sense of what has to be one of the strangest statements in the *Essays*. In his discussion of the motives for suicide, Montaigne mentions first the desire to escape the evils of this world. But, as usual, he offers another possible cause: “men also sometimes desire death in the hope of a greater good.” Then, as he frequently does, he points to a Christian and a pagan example: “I desire,” says Saint Paul, “to be dissolved, to be with Jesus Christ.” And Cleombrotus of Ambracia threw himself into the sea because his reading of Plato’s *Phaedo* had given him such a strong desire for the life to come. Montaigne, again, is a third type: “Whence it appears how improperly we call ‘despair’ that voluntary dissolution to which we are often borne by the ardor of hope, and often by a tranquil and settled inclination of our judgment” (VS360, F260). This is an inclination of *judgment*, no longer a mere natural inclination of sympathy: it is an act of the will made constant and consistent. Voluntary dissolution means that the will is purified of the self; the will is good. This third type of voluntary dissolution of the self, this tranquil and deliberate inclination of judgment, refers, I believe, to Montaigne’s own self-effacement, the self-effacement of the philosopher for a greater good.

The philosopher must become a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher. He subjects ancient philosophy to himself, disappearing behind the face of the tradition while doing something radically new. In the same act through which he effaces himself, he refounds philosophy. He refounds *because* he effaces himself. This is the separation of the man from the philosopher.