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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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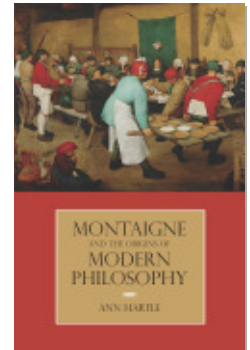
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Chapter Four



The Philosophical Act (II): Ending in Experience

Montaigne's unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is the reformation of philosophy because it separates the man from the philosopher and thus humanizes him. The philosopher, in the tradition, believes that he alone bears "the entire form of the human condition." In accordance with the traditional hierarchy, the philosopher alone is the complete actualization of the human form because he participates in the divine activity of contemplation. This identification of the philosopher with the human as such, that is, the human at its highest, in fact dehumanizes the philosopher because it separates him from all other men. Montaigne, however, is only accidentally a philosopher. His thoughts are born with him and "without a model," but when he brings them out into the public, he finds that they resemble the teachings of ancient philosophy. His mores are natural and weak, for he has not called in the help of any discipline to build them. Yet, he discovers, to his astonishment, that his thoughts and mores are conformed by accident to many different philosophical teachings. Because ancient philosophy has not formed him, however, there is only an accidental similarity—not a sameness of essence—between his thoughts and mores and the teachings of ancient philosophy.

Philosophy, as understood by Aristotle, dehumanizes the philosopher also because it destroys sympathy. The philosopher sees himself as divine and loses the sense of his common humanity. In "Of Cruelty" Montaigne identifies sympathy with the good. If the philosopher loses the capacity for sympathy, he does not possess the good. He may *contemplate* the good, but he does not *possess* it. The good, according to Montaigne, is a property, a possession, not an object of contemplation.

A third way in which the tradition dehumanizes the philosopher (and the theologian) is in the attempt to separate the soul from the body in

order to attain the divine and the eternal; this is a kind of violence to the man. Montaigne repeatedly shows that any attempt to rise above our humanity, to attain the divine or the angelic, makes us inhuman, not more fully human. Reflecting on those who despise the bodily pleasures of “that brattish rabble of men that we are,” Montaigne says: “These are two things that I have always observed to be in singular accord: supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct. . . . They want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves. These transcendental humors frighten me” (VS1115, F856).

The unpremeditated and accidental philosopher, in contrast, is the self-ordered soul who is free in his judgments to go beyond common—or traditional—opinions. It is, however, very difficult to impose order and measure on the unruly mind. Most of those who possess some rare excellence of mind are “incontinent in the license of their opinions and conduct [*mœurs*].” Therefore, “it is a miracle if you find a sedate and sociable one” (VS559, F419). Excellent minds, then, are inclined to be solitary, unsociable, immoderate, and dangerous. The miracle is the self-ordered soul that is sociable. That is why philosophy itself must be refounded and reformed, why Montaigne becomes the new figure of the philosopher. To paraphrase Hume: Montaigne is a philosopher but, in the midst of all his philosophy, he is still a man.¹

Inventing the Essay, Inventing Society

Montaigne invents society as a new form of human association and he invents the essay as a new form of philosophy. It might be said that he invents society by inventing the essay. David Hume, in his essay “Of Essay-Writing,” argues that this form brings together what he calls the learned and the conversible worlds: “The separation of the learned from the conversible world,” he says, “seems to have been the great defect of the last age, and must have had a very bad influence both on books and company.” The social world suffers because, without the influence of philosophy, conversation is reduced to stories and gossip. But philosophy itself also suffers from this separation. Cut off from the world, philosophy becomes barbarous because it lacks “that liberty and facility of thought and expression which can only be acquired by conversation.” Philosophy, Hume says, “went to wrack by this moaping recluse method of study, and became as chimerical in her conclusions as she was unintelligible in her

stile and manner of delivery.” In becoming social, in “descending” into the social, philosophy is freed from philosophical presumption and self-esteem. Further, philosophy suffers when practiced in isolation, because experience, upon which philosophy rests, is to be found only “in common life and conversation.”²

Thus, Pascal describes Montaigne’s style as “totally composed of thoughts born out of the ordinary conversations of life.”³ That is why the Socrates of Montaigne’s invention is not the Socrates who ascends to the Forms but rather the Socrates who descends to the most lowly opinions of the most ordinary men. At the same time, as Auerbach claims, Montaigne was the first author who wrote for the non-specialized but educated reader: “By the success of the *Essays* the educated public first revealed its existence.”⁴ That is, Montaigne actually brings this public into existence by revealing it. The *Essays*, then, include all men—the learned and the simple—in the conversation that they initiate.

Michael Oakeshott sees the *Essays* as the clearest example of what he calls “the conversation of mankind.” This conversation, he says, “is not only the greatest but also the most hardly sustained of all the accomplishments of mankind. Men have never been wanting who have had this understanding of human activity and intercourse, but few have embraced it without reserve and without misgiving, and on this account it is proper to mention the most notable of those who have done so: Michel de Montaigne.”⁵ That Montaigne embraced this activity “without reserve and without misgiving” is a manifestation of his generous sociability.

The Essay Form

T. S. Eliot describes the *Essays* as “apparently formless and disconnected, but subtly unified.”⁶ The appearance of formlessness is the perfect form of unpremeditated and accidental philosophy because the essay form is the submission of reason to experience. I will consider five features of the essay form in order to bring out the ways in which it produces this effect.

Quotation

Montaigne’s learning is present in the *Essays* as direct quotations, usually in the original Latin (or rarely, Greek) of the author. The practice of quotation allows him to distance himself from the philosopher in question by showing that he is using him as the occasion allows. Ancient philosophy has not made him what he is, has not formed him. He tells us that he has

studied the opinions of others “not at all to form my opinions, but certainly to assist, second, and serve those which I formed long ago” (VS666, F505). In “Of Presumption” he says that ancient philosophy has given him only a more secure and complete possession of his own original opinions and has helped him to make his judgments more his own (VS658, F499). He uses ancient philosophy, in fragments, to say what he himself wants to say. “I do not speak the minds of others except to express myself better” (VS148, F108).

Robert Sokolowski’s analysis of the phenomenon of quotation helps us to account for Montaigne’s stance toward ancient philosophy: “I can be . . . related to things either on my own cognitive authority or refractedly, through the authority of another speaker. When I quote someone, I have the quoted state of affairs as proposed by someone else; but in principle it is always possible for me to go on to possess the state of affairs by myself without an intermediary, to register the situation on my own. . . . When, after having quoted, I thus see for myself, I do not just register the situation; I register it as confirming or disconfirming what someone else has said. . . . The immediacy of my own cognitive possession of a situation becomes itself a qualified immediacy because I now know that I can be cognitively related to it not only by myself but also through another. *By myself* takes on a deeper hue.”⁷ In this way, Montaigne brings the philosophers into conversation through his expression of himself: he makes ancient philosophy his own.

In “Of the Education of Children” Montaigne says of the young man who is to be educated: “Truth and reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later. It is no more according to Plato than according to me, since he and I understand and see it in the same way. The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram.” The student will do the same 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” (VS152, F111).

By his practice of quotation, in fragments and as the occasion allows, Montaigne is forcing the philosophers into ordinary conversation, submitting them to the practice of everyday life. At the same time, he also brings common opinions out into the open through the “they say,” or *on dit*, one of the most frequently used expressions in the *Essays*. The *on dit* is the way in which he takes the stance of quotation toward common opinion. Thus, he brings the learned and the common into conversation with each other.

Sokolowski says that there are two types of people who do not understand the stance of quotation. First, the gullible person simply takes over what others say, repeating it without making it his own. Second, the obstinate person is so convinced of his own opinion that he can only see what others say as either confirming his own views or as foolish fancies not to be taken seriously.⁸ Montaigne presents these same two types in terms of the learned and the simple. He escapes both the presumption of the learned, who cannot accept what they have not themselves experienced, and the presumption of the simple, who are under the power of common opinion.

The Language of the Streets, Markets, and Taverns

Like Socrates, who brought philosophy down from the heavens and into the cities of men, Montaigne brings philosophy down from the heavens and into the streets and markets and taverns of France. The *Essays* are written in French, rather than Latin (the language of the learned). Montaigne's first language was Latin. His father, who had formed certain unusual ideas about education, hired a tutor who spoke nothing but Latin with the young boy. In fact, the entire household joined in this project, so that Montaigne heard and spoke only Latin until he was six years old. As a young man, he was sent to the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux where he excelled in the study of Latin literature. Yet, Montaigne chose to write the *Essays* in French, giving only his quotations from the ancient philosophers and poets in their original Latin. French, he says, is a "weaker idiom" than Latin (VS440, F320).⁹

Not only does he choose the weaker idiom, but Montaigne also insists that he simply follows common usage in his writing (VS796, F604). He makes no attempt to dress up his thoughts in the manner of those who want to seek the world's favor. "In language," he says, "the search for novel phrases and little-known words comes from a childish and pedantic disposition. Would that I might use only those that are used in the markets of Paris!" (VS172, F127). He tells us that he does not avoid any of those words that are used in the streets of France (VS875, F667). And he asks: "Do we witness more of a jumble in the chatter of fishwives than in the public disputations of the professional logicians? I would rather have my son learn to speak in the taverns than in the schools of talk" (VS926–27, F707). The *Essays* are written in the language of the markets, the streets, and the taverns of France, not in the language of the schools or the courts. Montaigne writes in the ordinary everyday language of the people, *the language which forms the social bond*.

Impropriety

Montaigne sometimes goes beyond the bounds of propriety in speaking about the parts and functions of the body and about sexual matters. And he defends what he calls his “excessive license” and his “immoderation” in speaking about the sexual (VS845, F642). He asks: “What has the sexual act, so natural, so necessary, and so just, done to mankind, for us not to dare to talk about it without shame and for us to exclude it from serious and decent conversations?” (VS847, F644). He disdains “those petty, feigned, customary, provincial rules” of propriety and ceremony that would keep him from presenting a complete portrait of himself to the public. And so, he concludes that “whoever would wean man of the folly of such a scrupulous verbal superstition would do the world no great harm” (VS888, F677).

Montaigne’s violation of the norms of propriety with respect to speaking about the body is intended to bring the philosopher down from the heights of disembodied contemplation to the lowest, most common bodily functions which he shares with all men.¹⁰ So he imagines the philosopher in the sexual act: “The most contemplative and wisest of men, when I imagine him in that position [of making love] seems to me an impostor to put on wise and contemplative airs; here are the peacock’s feet that humble his pride: ‘Against truth said in laughing/Is there a law?’” [Horace] (VS877, F669). He makes the philosopher look ridiculous and shameful: “Kings and philosophers shit, and so do ladies” (VS1085, F831). Philosophers and kings need to be reminded that they are just human beings: “I love to see these leading souls unable to shake off our common lot. Perfect men as they are, still they are men, and most heavily so” (VS835, F634). It is “thanks to our sickly, kill-joy mind” that we are disgusted with the ordinary pleasures of life. Montaigne says “I, who operate only close to the ground, hate that inhuman wisdom that would make us disdainful enemies of the cultivation of the body” (VS1106, F849).

Montaigne also therefore rejects any philosophical understanding of the human that would separate soul from body: “Plato fears our hard bondage to pain and pleasure, since it obligates and attaches the soul too much to the body; I, on the contrary, because it detaches and unbinds it” (VS58, F39). This is the basis for his moderation of pleasure, to keep the soul attached to the body, not to master the appetites. His body and soul are one: “my two ruling parts, of their own volition, live in peace and good accord” (VS1059, F811).

Therefore, Montaigne rejects both Stoic imperturbability and Epicurean apathy. He feels the passions and suffers the evils and accidents of

human life. Unlike the Epicureans, he wants to feel even the evils of life: “Crantor was quite right to combat the apathy of Epicurus, if it was built so deep that even the approach and birth of evils were lacking. I have no praise for the insensibility that is neither possible nor desirable. I am glad not to be sick; but if I am, I want to know I am; and if they cauterize or incise me, I want to feel it. In truth, he who would eradicate the knowledge of good and evil would at the same time extirpate the knowledge of pleasure, and in fine would annihilate man” (VS493, F364).

Montaigne says: “I am no philosopher. Evils crush me according to their weight” (VS950, F725). Yet, he also says that he is a new figure of the philosopher. This apparent contradiction—that he is not a philosopher and that he is a philosopher—helps us to see that his reformation of philosophy involves the humanization of the philosopher. The unpremeditated and accidental philosopher does not escape the human condition.

In the tradition, it is the body that the philosopher regards as most shameful. Nevertheless, the body is what makes us present to each other. Montaigne is overcoming the shame of the body by bringing its lowliest actions into the light of the public. He makes philosophy look ridiculous and shameful by exposing the pride and pretensions of the philosopher. Thus, he makes the philosophical mind ashamed, not of the body, but of itself.

Testimony and Stories

The sociability of the essay form can be seen in the stance that Montaigne takes toward testimony and also in the central role he gives to stories and examples in the expression of his thought. In “It Is Folly to Judge the True and the False by Our Own Capacity” Montaigne confesses that he used to pity the simple who claimed to have witnessed all kinds of supernatural events. He had been guilty of the presumption of the learned, who cannot accept anything as true which they themselves have not experienced. Now, however, he is open to the testimony of the simple because he has recognized that the limits of the possible are not determined by his own limited experience.

In “Of the Power of the Imagination” he tells us that fabulous testimony is just as useful to him as true testimony, for his task is to tell not what has happened but what can happen. Throughout the *Essays*, Montaigne displays this openness to the testimony of others, an attitude that reflects his openness to the possible. He takes neither the attitude of the learned, who refuse to testify concerning actions that have happened right before their eyes and who will not stake their belief on the belief of

a common man, nor the attitude of the simple, who think they see what is not there (VS106, F76).

David Hume, accounting for the fact that men are so unequal in the degree of understanding they achieve, says that: "After we have acquired a confidence in human testimony, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another."¹¹ By not rejecting out of hand the testimony of others, Montaigne enlarges his own experience; his experience is no longer limited to what has happened to him, but now expands to include a kind of philosophical attitude toward his own experience. That is, he does not experience what happens to him in a presumptuous way: he overcomes both the presumption of the learned and the presumption of the simple. Experience itself is changed for him.

Montaigne's openness to testimony is especially evident in the stories that fill the pages of the *Essays*. Although he says the work is to be only about himself, the stories that he recounts are in fact almost exclusively about other men. In "Of the Disadvantage of Greatness" Montaigne says that the disadvantage of greatness is the inability of the great to "essay" themselves against other men, causing them to miss one of the most important of all human pleasures, the playful testing of one's strength in struggle with others (VS918, F701). In order to experience this essaying of himself, the great man must "step down" from the heights of power (VS916, F699).

Montaigne essays himself against philosophers, poets, historians, princes, and common people. The stories of other men are forms of experience, of what is possible, and of the limits of the human soul. Montaigne is not testing himself against the standard of the universal, but measuring himself against other individuals. Thus, to essay himself is essentially a social act.

The Order of Shepherds and Shopboys

It must be acknowledged that the *Essays* look unphilosophical. There are no arguments, no syllogisms, and no conclusions. Neither does Montaigne seem concerned to arrive at universals or essences. As the title *essais* suggests, he weighs opinions, looking at many sides of a given topic. His topics themselves are generally unphilosophical—thumbs, smells, coaches, drunkenness—and appear trivial; they are not the weighty and essential topics of philosophy. His topics present themselves in an accidental way: "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me" (VS302, F219). These are the topics of everyday life which come into conversation in a haphazard way.

Montaigne's mind seems to move in a world of accidental similarities rather than a world of forms and essences. Thus, the *Essays* seem to be without any rational order: they move from accident to accident. Yet, he says that there is an order, albeit a very strange one: "it is the only book in the world of its kind, a book with a wild and eccentric plan" (VS385, F278). Indeed, it is order that he most concerned with: "the order that we see everyday in the altercations of shepherds and shopboys, never among us [the learned]. . . . at least they understand one another" (VS925, F706). Because the *Essays* descend below and behind the most common opinions to the level at which everyone can understand them, they do not follow the order of philosophical argument. Rather, the order of the *Essays* is the order of shepherds and shopboys, the order of everyday life.

Once again, the Socrates of Montaigne's invention can help us to see what Montaigne himself is doing. Montaigne re-forms Socrates, affirming and elevating him, yet at the same time lowering him, transforming him, and subjecting him to Montaigne's own purposes. The Socrates of the *Essays* does not ascend to the knowledge of the Forms; instead, he descends to the most lowly opinions of the most common men. Socrates "makes his soul move with a natural and common motion. So says a peasant, so says a woman. His mouth is full of nothing but carters, joiners, cobblers and masons. His are inductions and similes drawn from the commonest and best-known actions of men; everyone understands him. . . . By these vulgar and natural motives, by these ordinary and common ideas, without excitement or fuss, he constructed not only the best regulated but the loftiest and most vigorous beliefs, actions, and morals that ever were. It is he who brought human wisdom back down from heaven" (VS1038, F793). To those who think that the discourse of Socrates is far above common opinions, Montaigne responds: "I judge otherwise, and hold that it is a speech which in its naturalness ranks far behind and below common opinions. In an unstudied and artless boldness and a childlike assurance it represents the pure and primary impression and ignorance of Nature" (VS1054, F807). Indeed, it is possible to see in the *Essays* themselves much of what Montaigne describes as the lowliness of Socrates. The strength of the philosopher is in descending, not in ascending. This is the new kind of strength of the self-ordered soul, which is strong "in itself." The self-ordered soul orders his thought to the lowest and most common. The order of the *Essays*, then, is not the order of the syllogism. Rather, it is the order of a new logic of possibility which looks very much like the haphazard order of the conversations of ordinary human beings.¹²

Although Montaigne is not concerned with universals or essences, he does point to a capacity that belongs to all human beings: the capacity for

communication, for making oneself understood. In the course of setting out the context for his claim that he is an unpremeditated philosopher, Montaigne tells us: "In Italy I advised a man who was at pains to speak Italian, that provided he sought only to make himself understood, without wishing to excel at it otherwise, he should simply use the first words that came to his mouth, Latin, French, Spanish, or Gascon; and that by adding the Italian ending, he would never fail to hit some dialect of the country. . . . I say the same thing about philosophy; it has so many faces and so much variety, and has said so much, that all our dreams or reveries are found in it" (VS546, F408). Using "the first words that come to his mouth" points to the spontaneity of everyday communication and the way in which philosophy can make him understood, accommodating itself to the immediacy of the occasion.

One of the first characteristics of men and animals that Montaigne discusses in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" is the ability to communicate and, in particular, the ability of men to communicate not simply by words but also by gestures.¹³ "Our mutes dispute, argue, and tell stories by signs. I have seen some as supple and versed in this, that in truth they lacked nothing of perfection in being able to make themselves understood." He then goes through a long list of gestures of the hands, head, eyebrows, and shoulders by which we communicate our desires and passions. "There is no movement that does not speak both a language intelligible without instruction, and a public language; which means, seeing the variety and particular use of other languages, that this one must rather be judged the one proper to human nature" (VS454, F332). The ability to communicate, whether by words or gestures, belongs to all men regardless of their differences and inequalities of intellect. The universal ability to communicate is the basis of society. The *Essays* are the perfect instantiation of that ability to communicate.¹⁴

Montaigne's Generous Gesture and Great Deed

There are, however, two instances in the *Essays* where neither philosophical nor everyday language can express precisely what Montaigne wants to convey. The first instance concerns his intended audience, "souls regulated and strong in themselves," which is an audience so sparse that it has "neither name nor rank among us" (VS657, F498). It has no name because it has no rank. In pointing to this lack of rank, Montaigne implies that his project involves a transcendence of the traditional hierarchy, the traditional order of high and low, strong and weak.

The second instance in which Montaigne finds both philosophical and everyday language insufficient concerns the confusion in both types of language, the confusion of goodness and innocence with imperfection and weakness. These conditions look so much alike that it is difficult to distinguish them. That is why “the very names of innocence and goodness are for this reason to some extent terms of contempt” (VS426, F310). Montaigne, then, must overcome this confusion and articulate his overcoming of the traditional hierarchy while using only the everyday language that is thoroughly imbued with that hierarchy. He continues to use the language of perfection and imperfection, high and low, strong and weak; he must also, however, find a way to convey the radical changes in the meaning of those terms effected by his own philosophical project. Since language fails him in these two decisive instances, he cannot communicate by words alone but only by a gesture or great deed.

Still, Montaigne insists that he has no great deeds to tell, so that he must come into the public with only words. That is what makes his emergence into the public potentially shameful and it is why his self-revelation is always enacted against the background of the accusation of weakness and the possibility of ridicule. He is bringing the private and common into the public where, until now, only great deeds justified such acts of self-revelation. It seems, then, that his self-communication could only be idle, frivolous, and ineffective.

The central action, the great deed, of the *Essays*, however, is the invention of society. We look through the various essays for arguments and conclusions in vain, because judgment is not an argument but an act. Montaigne’s judgment is not expressed in propositions but in the very act of bringing the private into the public, the act of reordering the mind to the common and lowly, of reversing the traditional hierarchy, and finally of subordinating the high to the low. This is the generous gesture of the philosopher in and through which he reveals and communicates himself; it is the action by which he reveals the meaning of the self-ordered soul and the strength of goodness. Montaigne’s generous gesture is the great deed which does justify his emergence into the public.

Reordering and Reversing

When the desire to tell his weak mores seizes him, Montaigne calls upon the help of philosophy to express them so that he might go out a bit more decently in public. He is a common, private man who claims no great learning or great deeds but who nevertheless emerges into the public

wearing the fig leaf of ancient philosophy. This emergence of the private man into the public is the defining action of the *Essays* for it is the bringing into existence of the new realm of the social.

In the tradition, the private is the hidden and shameful, hidden because it is shameful. The actions of private life are the actions that are merely necessary, that is, unfree or servile, for they are associated with mere life.¹⁵ The deeds of great men, on the contrary, are great because they show contempt for mere life, a contempt that manifests itself most clearly in risking life in the face of imminent and violent death. The great philosophers, too, show contempt for mere life. This philosophical contempt manifests itself in several ways: in the view that philosophy is the separation of the soul from the body; in the contempt that the philosopher has for the pleasures of the body; in the claim that philosophy is the highest activity of leisure which is freed from the servility of labor and work; in the philosopher's escape from the temporal and from this world to the eternal and celestial realm.

But here is Montaigne, a common, private, and weak man, presuming to bring out into public view everything that the philosophers and the great actors of history despise. By bringing the private out into the public, into visibility, Montaigne is overcoming its shame. He makes his mind ashamed of itself for its attempt to be divine, and by bringing the body and its everyday needs into the public, he overcomes the shame of the human. Thus, he initiates a reform of the great and of the philosophers.

Without great deeds or learning, the particular is anonymous, and yet Montaigne emerges into the public as a particular. The *Essays* are *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*. He emerges out of the anonymity of the common in his concrete particularity. Thus, he overcomes the anonymity and invisibility of the individual who is merely an undifferentiated part of the common herd. He presents himself, the particular, as weak: his mores have not been formed by philosophy. It is the accidental conformity of his weak mores to the teachings and examples of philosophy that astonishes him. Philosophy allows him to see the weak, the private, and the shameful in a new light. Unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is the subordination of ancient philosophy to his desire for self-revelation, and the subordination of philosophy itself to the social.

The very first words of the *Essays* assert the primary significance of this emergence of the private into the public: Montaigne's end is merely domestic and private. This is the reversal of the Aristotelian order. Once again, he presents himself as too weak for the lofty goals of glory or public service. He simply wants to present himself in his "simple, natural, ordinary form, without striving." Thus, he concludes his address to the reader: "you

would not be rational to spend your leisure on such a frivolous and vain subject” (VS3, F2). He is presenting his particularity, his weak and defective particularity, as it is in the realm of the domestic and private, not in the studied posture of the learned or of one seeking the favor of the world. To say that his end is domestic and private is to say that his end is the social, for the social is the domestic and private brought into the public. The reader would not be “rational” to study Montaigne’s self-revelations, because the traditional notion of reason makes his reversal of the hierarchy look irrational. Thus, the generous gesture that brings the private into the public, which is a free act of the will, looks like a mere caprice.

Montaigne describes his decision to study only himself as a lowering of his mind: “Other men study themselves in order to elevate their minds and hoist them up tight; I to lower it and lay it to rest” (VS821, F623). He supports this claim with a quotation from Horace’s *Odes* that illustrates the turn from the glorious enterprise of war to merely domestic concerns: “You sing of Aeacus’ line and the wars beneath the sacred walls of Ilium: but you do not say how much I must pay for a jar of Chian wine, or who will heat my water on his fire, where I shall find shelter and when I shall escape from the cold of the Pelnian mountains” (Horace, *Odes*, 3.19, 3–8). But this lowering to the domestic and private actually turns out to be a new kind of perfection, for the bringing into existence of the social—his end—is the good.

Montaigne reorders philosophy to the human, rather than to the divine; to the lowest, rather than the highest; to the weak, rather than the strong; to the imperfect, rather than the perfect; to what is, rather than what ought to be; to the particular, rather than the universal; to the domestic and private, rather than the political; to the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary. In the terms of the traditional hierarchy, this reordering looks like a mere “lowering” of the mind. However, Montaigne’s overcoming of the hierarchy is in fact a new kind of freedom, the freedom of the mind to order itself and to order the world. The order of the great and the everyday, the extraordinary and the ordinary is reversed: the lowest is higher than the highest. This reversal is very difficult to express, because ordinary language is imbued with the traditional hierarchy, confusing goodness and innocence with weakness and imperfection. Montaigne’s subordination of the great to the everyday shows that we already possess the good, in the domestic and private. Enjoyment is possession. The good is not an end that we must strive for. It is already our own, “without striving,” in the everyday. Thus, Montaigne’s project is not simply the lowering of the high but rather the reversal of high and low and finally the subordination of the high to the low.

In pursuit of this project, Montaigne reorders the mind, and thus philosophy itself, to the familiar and the everyday, thereby overcoming the natural tendency of the mind to prefer the strange and extraordinary. Through the movement of Montaigne's thought in the *Essays*, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the familiar becomes astonishing. From the most ordinary, common, and familiar things, if we could put them in their proper light, the greatest miracles of nature and the most marvelous examples would appear, especially on the subject of human actions (VS1081, F829).

Considering "the things that are right in our hands, it is rather familiarity than knowledge that takes away their strangeness." If these now familiar things were presented to us for the first time, we would be surprised by them and find them incredible (VS179, F132–33). The everyday is marvelous and miraculous because it subjects the extraordinary, rare, and strange to itself. Philosophy allows him to see the everyday—to put the everyday—in a new light. This is Montaigne's transformation of experience. The experience in which he ends is not the same as the experience in which he began, that is, experience formed by inherited philosophical opinion, for it is now freed from philosophical presumption.

Ending in Experience

"Of Experience" is the last of the essays. Montaigne literally, then, ends in experience. Experience, he says, is "weaker" than reason (VS1065, F815), yet reason must submit to experience. The first sentence of "Of Experience"—"There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge"—echoes the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—"All men by nature desire to have knowledge."¹⁶ Aristotle begins in experience and ends in knowledge. In the first book of the *Metaphysics*, he sets out the ascent of the mind to the first causes of all things, the subject matter of "first philosophy." From sensation the mind ascends to memory. Memory is higher than sensation because it does not require the actual presence of the object: memory recalls the object to mind. Experience is "many memories of the same thing" (*Meta.* 1.1, 980b25–981a1). Thus, experience is the first level at which the mind unifies, bringing together many memories into one experience. Experience, however, knows only "that" something is the case but not "why" it is the way it is. From experience, then, the mind ascends to art, which is higher than experience because it involves the knowledge of causes. Finally, the mind ascends to knowledge and to the first science, which is most comprehensive because it deals

with being as such and the first causes of all things. Thus, metaphysics is the highest of the sciences. In “Of Experience” Montaigne says: “I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics” (VS1072, F821). At the conclusion of that essay, he writes: “Of our sciences, those seem to me most terrestrial and low which have risen the highest” (VS1115, F856).

Aristotle’s description of experience—many memories of the *same* thing—reveals the way in which the mind draws the particulars into a unity: the particular is seen from the start as an instance of form. Montaigne’s understanding of experience, on the other hand, might be described in terms of the invention or imagination of the accidental similarities of particulars. Thus he is able to articulate the weak through accidental similarity to the strong, the lowest through accidental similarity to the highest. Whereas Aristotle’s experience leads to form, Montaigne’s experience leads to astonishing new particulars which, by virtue of their particularity, are “deformed.”¹⁷

Montaigne reverses the Aristotelian order: he begins in knowledge and ends in experience. The knowledge in which he begins is the knowledge that comes from familiarity. Montaigne ends in experience, but this is not Aristotle’s notion of experience, that is, many memories of the same thing, for Montaigne’s memory is “monstrously deficient” (VS34, F21). Indeed, experience for Montaigne requires “the science of forgetfulness” (VS494, F365). The experience in which he ends is what I would call “astonished familiarity.” He begins in familiarity and ends in astonished familiarity: unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is just this movement of thought. When he wants to tell his thoughts and mores in public, to tell what is most familiar to him and thus what he already knows, he calls on the help of philosophy to express himself and then is astonished to find that his mere caprices and his weak mores conform, by accident, to so many of the teachings and examples of ancient philosophy.

In “Of Cripples” he writes: “I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself” (VS1029, F787). He has not experienced the miracles that the simple have seen. Rather, the most familiar, himself, is astonishing to him. The more he is familiar with himself the more he knows himself. But this knowledge, this familiarity, has not accustomed him to his own strangeness. And the more he knows himself, the less he understands himself: he does not know why he is the way he is. This is a kind of Socratic ignorance, “a certain strong and generous ignorance that concedes nothing to knowledge

in honor and courage, an ignorance that requires no less knowledge to conceive it than does knowledge" (VS1030, F788).¹⁸ This strong and generous ignorance destroys knowledge and replaces knowledge with wonder. Montaigne's "master-form" is ignorance (VS302, F219) because he remains in this condition of astonished familiarity.¹⁹

The knowledge that is unastonished familiarity might be described as presumptuous knowledge or custom. Thus it could be said that Montaigne begins in presumptuous knowledge or custom and ends in philosophical experience or astonished familiarity. Custom, he says, is the tyrant, the master of thought. "The violent prejudice of custom" is the traditional hierarchy of high and low, strong and weak, in which the familiar and common are despised. Philosophy, understood as astonished familiarity, overcomes the violent prejudice of custom which dulls the mind and makes it so difficult to recognize the possible and the new. The new is just the most familiar seen in its proper light. The familiar itself, then, is transformed. That is how Montaigne both brings out the familiar into the light and, at the same time, introduces the new: the familiar is new. Philosophy, then, is just experience, but it is experience without presumption.²⁰ Experience, stripped of all presumption and arrogance, becomes philosophical. Philosophy, then, does not begin in wonder. Rather, the philosopher effects wonder.

But why is the most familiar astonishing? How are the most common human actions miracles of nature? What is the "proper light" in which they appear as astonishing miracles? The domestic and private realm is the place of the most common human actions, which are undifferentiated from man to man. It would be only in great deeds that men distinguish themselves and appear as individuals, while the most common human actions display what the individual has in common with all other men, that is, subjection to the necessities of life and the possession of "life itself." The individual disappears into the common, and the common therefore seems to lack any possibility of provoking astonishment.

For Aristotle, then, freedom is freedom from work and labor, from the need to labor and work for the necessities of life, in order to devote oneself to the "higher" activities of politics and philosophy, activities which are free because they are not instrumental but are "ends in themselves." Therefore, the life of the polis, to which leisure is essential, is made possible by the institution of slavery.

Once again, Montaigne reverses Aristotle: the most common human actions are not servile but free. How is this possible? The Aristotelian lives of politics and of philosophy are the striving for immortality. Thus, what at first appears to be contempt for death is really the attempt to escape

death: the prince by achieving immortal glory and the philosopher by attaining the eternal causes of all things. The prince and the philosopher both want to escape our mortality and our temporality. The unpremeditated and accidental philosopher is content to live “in the moment.” One way to describe what is presented in the *Essays*, then, is as the picture of human life when the striving for immortality—insofar as it is attainable by human power—has been given up.

In their “proper light” the most common and familiar human actions show themselves to be non-instrumental. Society is “for its own sake.” Society is the practice of everyday life freed from the shame of servility. In effect, then, Montaigne frees the slaves.

Further, the most familiar and common human actions are astonishing because in them the violence of great deeds is subordinated to the domestic and private. “When I see both Caesar and Alexander, in the thick of their great tasks, so fully enjoying natural and therefore necessary and just pleasures, I do not say that that is relaxing their souls, I say that it is toughening them, subordinating these violent occupations and laborious thoughts, by the vigor of their spirits, to the practice of everyday life: wise men, had they believed that this [the violent] was their ordinary occupation, the other [the everyday] the extraordinary” (VS1108, F850). In their submission to the body’s constant demands for food, digestion, sleep, and sexual pleasure, Alexander and Caesar are “toughening” their souls: the good is not weak but strong because it subjects the strong and violent to itself.

If the “proper light” is Montaigne’s view of the human condition—in which the violent becomes ordinary and the everyday extraordinary—then the human condition must be the condition of war, of violence, and of the natural conflict between masters and slaves. The most common human actions are astonishing miracles because they overcome that natural condition of war. When the violent prejudice of custom is stripped away, when our most common impressions of weakness and strength are called into question, the weak reveals itself as stronger than the strong.

For Montaigne, the philosophical attitude or stance is neither contemplative nor practical for it is the stance of judgment, the attitude of possession and enjoyment. Judgment makes the object of contemplation—“the thing-itself”—one’s own. The subjection of the thing itself to judgment is, at the same time, an ordering to the lowest. Thus, Socrates “brings down” the thing itself to his own “original level.” In “Of Experience” Montaigne says that pleasure and pain, love and hate are the “first things” that a child feels (VS1111, F853). Judgment subjects the thing itself to these first things: for example, Montaigne “cruelly *hates* cruelty.”

For Aristotle, these first things—pleasure and pain—originate at the lowest level of animal life, the level at which animals are distinguished from plants. It is to this lowest level that Montaigne returns in the philosophical act of judgment.

In the single philosophical act of making the familiar astonishing, Montaigne both reforms philosophy and frees the servile realm of the domestic and private from its bondage to the violent. By that single action, philosophy transcends the Aristotelian distinction between the theoretical and the practical. That is, the philosophical act itself refounds human association.

Unlike the ecstatic beholding of the thing itself, which the Aristotelian philosopher experiences in those few moments of his life when he escapes to the eternal and participates in the divine activity of contemplation, experience is simply the here and now, fully present to the unpremeditated and accidental philosopher. When the familiar is seen in its proper light, the light of the purified judgment of the philosopher, the divine reveals itself as the good of the everyday. That is why the ordinary is miraculous. The new is just the most familiar, what was there all along, but hidden. The act of reversing the most familiar and the most extraordinary, then, is a kind of revelation, bringing the divine out of its hiddenness. Truth is just this astonishing revelation.²¹

Thus, philosophical experience is not Aristotelian contemplation, but neither is it immersion in the temporal realm of practice or dissipation in the immediacy of the moment; that is, philosophy is neither theoretical nor practical. The astonishment of “astonished familiarity” suggests a kind of contemplative attitude directed toward the temporal realm of human life and action, but it is not a contemplative attitude that disdains the fleeting temporal as nothing. It is not a subjection of the temporal to the eternal but rather a subjection of the philosopher’s stance toward the eternal to the merely temporal. In this way, Montaigne’s philosophical attitude brings the eternal into the temporal and makes the eternal his own in time. Tzvetan Todorov captures this sense of Montaigne’s stance toward the everyday in his explication of Montaigne’s admonition that “the practice of everyday life should be an aim unto itself” (VS1051–52, F805). Todorov writes: “The sage will try to achieve this intransitive state, *the rejection of instrumentalization*, in each of his actions.”²² The actions of “mere life” become the philosophical experience of life “for its own sake.”

Thus, leisure for Montaigne is not the condition for the philosopher’s escape to the eternal and divine. His sense of leisure appears especially clearly in “Of Experience.” Here, he disapproves of Socrates’s

contemplative ecstasies, of the theologian's "transcendental humors," and of the philosopher's attempt to escape from the man. But he approves wholeheartedly of the Socrates "who never refused to play cobnut with children or to ride a hobbyhorse with them" (VS1110, F852), as well as of the legendary "theological drinking and feasting" at the Sorbonne (VS1108, F851). Montaigne clearly hates to be told that we must keep our minds in the clouds while our bodies are at table. He is, he says, "intellectually sensual, sensually intellectual" (VS1107, F850).

Experience, understood as astonished familiarity, is the source of the philosopher's constant joy, for experience is ever present to the whole man, body and soul. "The surest sign of wisdom is constant joy" (VS161, F119). Philosophy is constantly joyful because the philosopher actually possesses the good in this world and in this life. The philosopher is not transported to the "other world," but rather experiences "this world" in a new way.

"Of Experience" begins with Aristotle's claim that all men desire knowledge and it ends with Montaigne's claim that the absolute perfection of knowing how to enjoy our own being rightly is "gay and *sociable* wisdom" (VS1116, F857). In "Of Experience" leisure is philosophical drinking and feasting, the bringing together of philosophy and society. Philosophy thereby becomes merely unpremeditated and accidental, and the philosopher is separated from the man. This joining with his fellow human beings in their astonishing particularity is the free act, the generous gesture, of the philosopher in which he rediscovers his own humanity. Montaigne himself is the miracle of the self-ordered soul that is sociable.

