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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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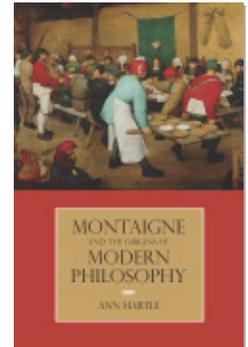
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Chapter Five



Overcoming Natural Mastery

Unpremeditated and accidental philosophy is both the separation of the man from the philosopher and also the humanization of the philosopher through the submission of philosophy to the social. In the same way, the overcoming of natural mastery is both the separation of the man from the prince and also the humanization of the prince through the submission of the political to the social. Montaigne refounds human association by introducing a new kind of rule, one which eliminates the master-slave relationship. The new foundation replaces the old foundation of “the common good,” which Montaigne sees as the pretext for the mastery of the strong over the weak.¹

Montaigne’s Project of Refounding

In “Of Vanity” Montaigne makes what is perhaps his strongest statement against innovation in human association: “Nothing presses a state hard except innovation; change alone gives form to injustice and tyranny. When some part is dislocated, we can prop it up; we can fight against letting the alteration and corruption natural to all things carry us too far from our beginnings and principles. But to undertake to refound so great a mass, to change the foundations of so great a structure, that is a job for those who wipe out a picture in order to clean it, who want to reform defects of detail by universal confusion and cure illnesses by death, ‘who desire not so much to change as to overthrow everything’ [Cicero]” (VS958, F731).

This opposition to innovation entails rejecting the classical notion of perfection, that is, “the best cities” of Plato and Aristotle. Even the worst forms of political association “have nevertheless maintained their bodily health and long life as well as those of Plato and Aristotle could do. And indeed all those descriptions of a government imagined by art prove ridiculous and unfit to put into practice. These great, lengthy altercations

about the best form of society and the rules most suitable to bind us, are altercations fit only for the exercise of our minds. . . . Such a description of a government would be applicable in a new world, but we take men already bound and formed to certain customs; we do not create them, like Pyrrha or Cadmus. By whatever means we may have the power to correct and reform them, we can hardly twist them out of their accustomed bent without breaking up everything” (VS956–57, F730). However, this opponent of innovation makes the surprising statement that “it is always a gain to change a bad state to an uncertain one” (VS972, F743). But the man who seeks to introduce change “must be very sure that he sees the weakness of what he is casting out and the goodness of what he is bringing in” (VS121, F88).

Montaigne reforms without destroying because he replaces the weak with the good. The weak foundation in the politics of the tradition is the presumed strength of natural mastery. The good foundation, in Montaigne’s re-formed politics, is the presumed weakness of submission.

If the prince believes himself to be the natural master, he justifiably identifies himself with his unlimited power; thus, his power is in the service of his interest and his passions. He sees himself as superior to all other men and perhaps even as a god among men. Montaigne, however, separates the man from the prince, an act effected by the attainment of reason inflexible and impassive. Only reason inflexible and impassive can settle the conflict between masters and slaves. This separation seems to bring about the dehumanization of the prince, taking his very self out of his exercise of rule; Montaigne, however, effects this separation through the submission of the prince to the social. Thus, he in fact humanizes the prince.

Montaigne begins the *Essays* in “To the Reader” with the statement of his purpose: his book was written in good faith. He warns us from the outset that he has set himself merely a domestic and private end (VS3, F2). This, as we have seen, is the reversal of the Aristotelian order: for Aristotle, the domestic and private is not the end but the beginning. The domestic and private finds its completion in the city, the political association, and the end of political association is the common good. The standard of the common good is Aristotle’s answer to the claim that all rule is really the rule of masters over slaves. In other words, for Aristotle, genuine political rule is not the rule of masters over slaves: whereas the master rules in his own interest, the ruler who acts for the common good rules for the good of the ruled (*Pol.* 3. 6–7). In the tradition, Aristotle’s principle of the common good is the standard of moral virtue, especially justice. It is a very high standard and it is rarely, if ever, achieved in practice.

Montaigne, however, rejects the standard of the common good for he sees it as the justification for natural mastery. Given the fact of natural inequality, the pursuit of a common good requires the rule of the superior, wiser men. Hobbes characterizes this Aristotelian view that natural inequality justifies the rule of one man over another: “I know that Aristotle in the first booke of his Politiques, for a foundation of his doctrine, maketh men by Nature, some more worthy to Command, meaning the wiser sort (such as he thought himselfe to be for his Philosophy;) others to Serve, (meaning those that had strong bodies, but were not Philosophers as he;) as if Master and Servant were not introduced by consent of men, but by difference of Wit.”² Hobbes, then, like Montaigne, sees natural superiority as the foundation of Aristotle’s political philosophy.

Montaigne’s rejection of the common good is ultimately grounded in his rejection of the idea of a single, common human form. Since philosophy has not been able to find a way to the good that is common, “let each one seek it in his particularity” (VS622, F471). The individual must be free to pursue the good in his own way. Therefore, any attempt to enforce a standard of the common good would require an illegitimate use of force. The common good justifies coercion and force.

For Montaigne, the idea of the common good is simply the “pretext of reason” for the actions of vicious men (VS802, F609–10). The political realm is not rule for the sake of the common good but the rule of masters over slaves. Virtue itself betrays this origin of political association: “It is probable that the first virtue that manifested itself among men and gave some advantage over others was this one, by which the strongest and most courageous made themselves masters of the weaker” (VS384, F277). If rule is to overcome the distinction between masters and slaves, then natural inequality cannot justify the domination of one man over another.

Montaigne’s project of refounding is the resolution of the conflict between masters and subjects through the introduction of a new kind of rule and a new kind of freedom based on the overcoming of natural mastery. In “Of Custom” he writes: “Peoples brought up to liberty and to ruling themselves consider any other form of government monstrous and contrary to nature. Those who are accustomed to monarchy do the same. And whatever easy chance fortune offers them to change, even when with great difficulties they have rid themselves of the importunity of one master, they run to supplant him with a new one, with similar difficulties, because they cannot make up their minds to hate mastery itself” (VS116, F83–84).

Peoples must hate mastery *itself*, not simply this or that master. The admonition to “hate mastery itself” suggests that all of the old forms of

rule are essentially the same: they are all forms of domination or mastery.³ This is a radical break with the Aristotelian tradition for which regimes are judged to be either good or bad, just or unjust, depending upon the criterion of the common good: regimes that pursue the common good are just; those that pursue only the interests of the rulers are unjust. Regimes that do not pursue the common good are all versions of the master-slave relationship.⁴

Rousseau says in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality*: “It is very difficult to reduce to obedience one who does not seek command.”⁵ In order to be free, in order not to be a slave, one must first renounce the desire to be a master. The desire to rule and the willingness to serve are two sides of the same coin. The master-slave is within each man. Freedom just is the condition of being “neither master nor slave.” Montaigne’s love of freedom expresses itself in his hatred of “every sort of tyranny, both in words and acts” (VS931, F711). When he says: “I am disgusted with mastery both active and passive,” he explains what he means through a story. Otanes, who had the right to pretend to the throne of Persia, abandoned that right to his companions provided that he and his family be allowed to live in the empire “outside of all subjection and mastery” except to that of the ancient laws. He could not support either commanding or being commanded. Montaigne says that Otanes took the course of action that Montaigne himself would willingly have taken (VS917, F700).

But how can the condition of “neither master nor slave” become the principle of political association, since the political is necessarily the relation of ruler and ruled, of masters and subjects? Montaigne answers with a distinction that brings out the nature of princely power: he separates private will and public power. “The souls of emperors and cobblers are cast in the same mold. Considering the importance of the actions of princes and their weightiness, we persuade ourselves that they are produced by some causes equally weighty and important. We are wrong: they are led to and fro in their movements by the same springs as we are in ours. . . . Their will is as frivolous as ours, but their power is greater” (VS476, F350). If the souls of emperors and cobblers are cast in the same mold, then there are no natural princes, no natural masters: the emperor is essentially a private man. If the only difference between the will of the emperor and the will of the cobbler is the power of the emperor, then the will of the emperor is only a private will and therefore merely as frivolous as that of the cobbler.

Montaigne says that “the judgment of an emperor should be above his imperial power, and see and consider it as an extraneous accident;

and he should know how to find pleasure in himself apart, and to reveal himself like any Jack or Peter, at least to himself” (VS1012, F774). Judgment reveals that princely power is only an extraneous accident: the man is not essentially a prince. This is the separation of the man from the prince. Whereas for Aristotle, rule is justified by the natural superiority of the prince, for Montaigne there is no natural prince. All men are equally and essentially private men. If there is no natural prince, then overcoming natural mastery requires separating the man from the prince so that the power of the prince is no longer in the service of the man.

Speaking of his own exercise of rule, Montaigne says that “the Mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a very clear separation” (VS1012, F774). Montaigne here introduces something like a public will, or rule that is not merely private will; it is rule as will or power without the self. The rejection of the common good rests on the claim that rule by the standard of the common good is really and simply the imposition of a private will on other men.

Montaigne’s refounding replaces force—the domination of the strong over the weak—with consent. “As I do not like to take a hand in legitimate actions against people who resent them, so, to tell the truth, I am not scrupulous enough [*je ne fais pas assez de conscience*] to refrain from taking a hand in illegitimate actions against people who consent to them” (VS1063, F814). Consent, not superior wit, legitimizes rule.

Montaigne’s refounding thus institutes a new kind of freedom. He praises the Theban general Epaminondas because he fought for “the inestimable good of restoring liberty to his country” (VS801, F609). This reference to “the inestimable good” is, I believe, the only instance in the *Essays* where Montaigne points to something like a highest or greatest good. The language that he uses is the language of restoration, of regaining or returning to something that had been lost. He uses this language because he is going back to the origins of political association and replacing them. The freedom that he institutes cannot be precisely the natural freedom of pre-civilized peoples who live under the “sweet freedom of nature’s first laws” (VS3, F2). But it is also not simply a return to the ancient understanding of freedom, for there are two notions of freedom that are thematic in the *Essays*: the freedom of self-determination of a political entity and the freedom of the individual.

In his essay “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns,” Benjamin Constant maintains that the liberty of the ancients consisted “in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty.” This included deliberating in the public square, forming alliances with foreign governments, voting, judging, and so on.

“But if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community.”⁶ Constant refers to this ancient liberty as “political” liberty. Modern liberty, on the contrary, is “personal” liberty, expressed in terms of certain rights of the individual. Personal freedom is the rejection of the Aristotelian notion of the common good. In “Of Glory” Montaigne writes: “All the glory that I aspire to in my life is to have lived it tranquilly: tranquilly not according to Metrodorus, or Arcesilas, or Aristippus, but according to me. Since philosophy has not been able to find any way to tranquility which is good in common, let each one seek it in his particularity!” (VS622, F471).

Montaigne’s “restoration” is the reconciliation of these two notions of liberty. He expresses the first, ancient notion of liberty in his hatred of domination itself and the second, modern notion in his “end” which is “domestic and private.” Bringing the domestic and private into the public means freeing the domestic and private from the domination of the political, and thus inventing society as a free mode of human association.

Reconciling these two kinds of freedom amounts to nothing less than a radically new understanding of rule itself. If rule is to be compatible with freedom, and if freedom is the condition of “neither master nor slave,” then rule must become representation. Constant says that the bringing together of these two kinds of freedom is a modern invention. Representative government is a “discovery of the moderns”⁷ that allows the individual to participate in sovereignty by electing representatives and, at the same time, allows him the freedom to pursue his own personal goals, to seek the good in his particularity.

According to Francis Slade, “rule detached from its natural embodiment is the core of modern political philosophy.”⁸ Thus, “the principle of ancient constitutions is the regime; that of modern, representation.”⁹ Whereas “a regime is rule embodied in those who rule,”¹⁰ representation is “the separation of rule from human beings.”¹¹ Representation is the separation of the man from the prince, for the representative is not a natural prince.

We see this notion of representation in Hobbes: “A person is he whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether Truly or by Fiction. When they are considered as his owne, then he is called a Naturall Person: And when they are considered as representing the words and actions of an other, then he is a Feigned or Artificiall person.” Rule is, then, representation of the will of every man: “A Multitude of men, are made One Person, when they are by one man,

or one Person, Represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that Multitude in particular.”¹²

Although Montaigne does not discuss the idea of representative government, his epistemological notion of representation provides the basis for this possibility. The mind represents not only what is and what is not but also “what we want.” Therefore, the will can be represented.¹³ Representation is not the apprehension of form, of a universal essence. Rather, Montaigne represents “a particular, very ill-formed.” Representation is of particulars, particular and diverse wills. As Hobbes says, the consent of each is united in the words and actions of the one person who represents the multitude.

Montaigne says that “mastery, of itself, breeds contempt of what we hold and rule” (VS634, F480). If natural inequality is not justification for mastery, then those who believe themselves superior must be brought into unity with the common herd which they naturally hold in contempt. Only the magnanimous act of the proud can make possible the resolution of the conflict between master and slaves. The proud must renounce the right to rule. This is an act of the will which looks irrational—like a mere whim or caprice—because it is uncalculated. And, because it is uncalculated, it is entirely free. Yet, the will is in accord with reason inflexible and impassive, because this public reason is the renunciation of self-interest and self-esteem.¹⁴

We find in Montaigne, then, a kind of “moralization of pride” similar to what Oakeshott sees in Hobbes’s political philosophy. Hobbes relies on the fact that the greatest fear that most men experience is the fear of death. This fear drives them out of the state of nature and into the contract that is the commonwealth. But Hobbes recognizes that not all men can be ruled by the fear of death. The proud man would rather die than submit, would rather die than be forced to accept equality with the common men who do submit out of fear. In fact, according to Oakeshott, Hobbes actually needs such proud men because they are more likely to make the first gesture toward peace. They are the ones who must be counted on to risk their lives by laying down their arms while the others retain theirs. This gesture comes not from fear but from a certain kind of generosity that can belong only to the proud. The proud achieve through courage what others achieve through rational calculation inspired by fear.

Oakeshott’s depiction of the generous man’s character is worth quoting in full because it describes so precisely Montaigne’s character. The man whose pride has been moralized is “a man whose disposition is to overcome fear not by reason (that is, by seeking a secure condition of external human circumstances) but by his own courage; a man not at all

without imperfections and not deceived about himself, but who is proud enough to be spared the sorrow of his imperfections and the illusions of his achievements; not exactly a hero, too negligent for that, but perhaps with a touch of careless heroism about him; a man, in short, who (in Montaigne's phrase) 'knows how to belong to himself,' and who, if fortune turned out so, would feel no shame in the epitaph: '*Par délicatesse J'ai perdu ma vie.*'"¹⁵

Montaigne's essay "Of the Disadvantage of Greatness" actually begins with a discussion of the *advantage* of greatness: "In general greatness has this evident advantage, that it can step down whenever it pleases, and that it almost has the choice of both conditions" (VS916, F699). Greatness "almost" has the choice of both conditions only because, when it steps down to the condition of lowliness, greatness still differs from lowliness in that its lowliness is freely chosen. To choose lowliness means the disappearance of the great into the anonymity of the common. Illustrious, shining deeds are swallowed up in the darkness of privacy. The noble man who chooses this condition does not assert his superiority, does not claim what is his by right, but acts on an "inclination" of his judgment to disappear into the anonymity of the common.

In order to effect the condition of "neither master nor slave," the institution of true freedom, the noble man must step down. Greatness must lower itself; pride must become generosity; and the desire to rule must become the gift of equality and freedom. "Giving belongs to rule and mastery" (VS1026, F785). In his *Travel Journal*, Montaigne records that in a house in Pisa he saw a representation of King Charles VIII on his knees before the Madonna who appears to be giving him counsel. "The inscription says that when the said king was supping in this house it came into his mind to give the Pisans their ancient freedom, whereby he surpassed the greatness of Alexander. . . . The words concerning that matter of the granting of freedom have been purposely disfigured and half effaced."¹⁶

The condition of "neither master nor slave" is the condition of "voluntary servitude," to use the expression of Montaigne's friend La Boétie. The old foundation of political association rests on the justification of the mastery of the naturally strong over the weak. In contrast, voluntary servitude is the transformation of the natural relationship of masters and slaves into the free, non-natural association of equals. Voluntary servitude does not assume the superiority or perfection of the master. On the contrary, it is voluntary because the master's rule cannot be justified by his superiority. Montaigne says: "Let us make this concession to the political order: to suffer [princes] patiently if they are unworthy. . . . But,

our dealings over, it is not right to deny to justice and to our liberty the expression of our true feelings, and especially to deny good subjects the glory of having reverently and faithfully served a master whose imperfections were so well known to them” (VS16, F9).

So also, the motives for entering into the condition of voluntary servitude do not matter. In a passage that anticipates Hobbes, Montaigne writes of false and lax rules in philosophy: “Robbers have seized you; they have set you free again after extracting from you an oath to pay a certain sum. People are wrong to say that an honest man will be quit of his word without paying, once he is out of their hands. Nothing of the sort. What fear has once made me will, I am bound still to will when without fear. . . . Otherwise we shall come by degrees to overthrow all the rights that a third person obtains from our promises and oaths. *As if force can be brought to bear on a brave man* [Cicero]. In this alone does private interest have the right to excuse us for failing our promise, if we have promised something wicked and unjust in itself; for the rights of virtue must prevail over the rights of our obligation” (VS801, F608). For Montaigne, the promise as the expression of and the binding of the will is the social bond. “Since mutual understanding is brought about solely by way of the word, he who falsifies it betrays human society. It is the only instrument by means of which our wills and thoughts communicate, it is the interpreter of our soul. If it fails us, we have no more hold on each other, no more knowledge of each other. If it deceives us, it breaks up all our relations and dissolves all the bonds of our society” (VS666, F505). Lying is such a destructive vice because “we are men and hold together only by our word” (VS36, F23).

Although, as Oakeshott maintains, Hobbes must presume upon the generosity of the proud, he constructs his commonwealth on the foundation of the fear of death that is characteristic of the weak. That is, the proud or spirited, who play such an important role in the state of nature, disappear from his commonwealth, apparently dismissed by the ninth law of nature. “If Nature therefore have made men equall, that equalitie is to be acknowledged: or if Nature have made men unequall; yet because men that think themselves equall, will not enter into conditions of Peace, but upon Equall termes, such equalitie must be admitted. And therefore for the ninth law of Nature, I put this, *That every man acknowledge [every] other for his Equall by Nature.* The breach of this Precept is *Pride.*”¹⁷

In Montaigne, however, the moralization of pride, which is presumed but not accounted for by Hobbes, is made explicit, for, unlike Hobbes, Montaigne wants to preserve the spiritedness of the proud in the form of resistance to mastery. Freedom is central for Montaigne in a way that it is

not for Hobbes. Montaigne wants to overcome mastery but, at the same time, preserve spiritedness. In other words, he wants to remove the desire for mastery from the proud without destroying the love of freedom. The moralization of pride is just this combination of the renunciation of the desire for mastery with the love of freedom. Being the first to lay down one's arms looks like surrender and submission. The hero, however, does not care that he might look weak and cowardly. He knows that his willingness to take the risk is his freedom, for he risks his life and is ready to lay down his life, not for the sake of his honor, but rather for the sake of a good greater than either life or honor. The good worthy of his risk is twofold: the freedom he exhibits in his choice to lower himself and the freedom he thereby wins for his fellow citizens.

How, then, does Montaigne effect his refunding? How does the philosopher, who effaces himself and has no great deeds to tell, exercise power over the minds and hearts of men?

Essaying: Producing the Marvelous

The invisible power of the *Essays* is exercised through the production of the marvelous. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke reports on an observation made by Rousseau to Hume: "Mr. Hume told me that he had from Rousseau himself the secret of his principles of composition. That acute though eccentric observer had perceived, that to strike and interest the public, the marvelous must be produced; that the marvelous of the heathen mythology had long since lost its effect; that giants, magicians, fairies, and heroes of romance which succeeded, had exhausted the portion of credulity which belonged to their age; that now nothing was left to the writer but that species of the marvelous which might still be produced, and with as great effect as ever, though in another way; that is, the marvelous in life, in manners, in characters, and in extraordinary situations, giving rise to new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals."¹⁸

In Baconian terms, the essay is a new logic, a logic of discovery, which replaces the old logic of the syllogism. Through particulars and accidental similarities, rather than universals and essences, the new logic discovers or invents new particulars, new possibilities. In "Of the Disadvantage of Greatness" Montaigne's thought moves from the *advantage* of greatness—the ability to step down and thus to have the choice of both conditions—to the disadvantage of greatness: "There is perhaps nothing more pleasant in association with men than the trials [*essais*] of strength

we have with one another, in rivalry of honor and worth, whether in exercises of the body or of the mind; and in these sovereigns have no real share” (VS918, F701). The prince can only essay himself if he steps down. There is a sense of essaying, then, that means trying oneself out against other men, and this conveys the sense of spiritedness, struggle, and striving to assert and display one’s superior strength. Essaying can only occur in a condition in which the master gives up his conventional and customary power in order to depend upon only his natural abilities. The activity of essaying, then, combines “stepping down,” that is, renouncing mastery, and the spiritedness of trying out one’s strength in rivalry with other men. Montaigne invents this form and essays himself against princes, philosophers, historians, and poets. He emerges from his rivalry as an astonishing new possibility.

By Diverse Means

The very first essay, “By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End,” will serve as my example of Montaigne’s activity of essaying as the production of the marvelous and as a structure for presenting a more complete account of his project. I will first give a brief summary of this essay and then offer a thematic interpretation.

Montaigne begins with the distinction between the common and the extraordinary: “The most common way of softening the hearts of those we have offended, when, vengeance in hand, they hold us at their mercy, is by submission to move them to commiseration and pity. However, audacity and steadfastness—entirely contrary means—have sometimes served to produce the same effect.” This observation is illustrated with three stories of avenging princes who were not moved to compassion by the submission of the common people but who were moved by esteem for the valiant defiance of a few. Immediately after the first stories of these three princes, Montaigne writes: “Either one of these two ways would easily move me. For I am marvelously weak in the direction of mercy and gentleness. As a matter of fact, I believe I should be more likely to surrender more naturally to compassion than to esteem. Yet to the Stoics, pity is a vicious passion; they want us to succor the afflicted, but not to unbend and sympathize with them” (VS8, F4).

On the basis of the examples of the three princes, a possible explanation is offered of why some men are moved by compassion and others by esteem: “It might be said that to subdue your heart to commiseration is the act of easygoing indulgence and softness, which is why the weaker

natures, such as those of women, children, and the common herd, are the most subject to it; but that, having disdained tears and prayers, to surrender simply to reverence for the sacred image of virtue is the act of a strong and inflexible soul which holds in affection and honor a masculine and obstinate vigor" (VS8, F4). This first plausible explanation is given in the terms of the hierarchy of strong and weak, a hierarchy said to be according to nature: virtue is associated with strength and identified with the divine ("the sacred image of virtue"). But this explanation does not hold up, for Montaigne brings in other examples to show that "in less generous souls, astonishment and admiration can engender a like effect" (VS8, F4). Two stories of "the people," the common herd, illustrate the way in which an entire assembly and an entire army can be so astonished at the spectacle of extraordinary valor that it turns from its pursuit of vengeance to admiration and mercy. Epaminondas, for example, addresses the Theban assembly in a haughty and arrogant manner, refusing to ask for mercy, and the people are so astonished that they walk out without casting their ballots against him. In the second story, the tyrant Dionysius decides to make the captain Phyto an example of his extreme vengeance, but when Phyto is dragged through the town to be led to execution, he keeps calling out the honorable and glorious cause of his death, that he refused to surrender his country to the tyrant. The rank and file of the army are so astonished that they turn against the tyrant and are on the verge of mutiny.

At this point in the essay, Montaigne makes his first assertion about the diversity—the marvelous diversity—of human beings: "Truly man is a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating object. It is hard to found any constant and uniform judgment on him" (VS9, F5). The examples of Pompey and Sulla, in their very different responses to heroic self-sacrifice, illustrate this diversity of character. Pompey pardoned the entire city of the Mamertines on account of the valor and magnanimity of one citizen, Stheno, who took upon himself the fault of the people and asked to bear their punishment; Sulla, however, refused to pardon the city of Praeneste when his host asked to take on himself the punishment of the city.

Now Montaigne turns to Alexander as his example of another prince who was not moved to mercy at the spectacle of valor. Alexander is "directly contrary" to the first three princes whom Montaigne has cited. Montaigne does say that Alexander was "the bravest of men and one very gracious to the vanquished" (VS9, F5), thus implying that these two instances of cruelty are unusual and out of character. He then goes on to tell two stories of Alexander's cruelty: his encounter with and monstrous treatment of the Persian governor Betis after the siege of Gaza;

and the story of the desolation of Thebes in which 6,000 Theban soldiers were slaughtered and the old men, women, and children were taken as slaves.

“Neither Master nor Slave”: Princes and People

Montaigne’s first essay thus presents us with the fundamental situation of mastery and subjection in its most extreme form: the defeated are entirely at the mercy of the avenging conqueror. That, in fact, is the defining situation, the setting, of the *Essays*. “By diverse means we arrive at the same end” becomes “by diverse means we produce the same effect.” The most obvious sense of “the same effect” is the softening of the heart of the avenging conqueror, that is, the humanization of the prince. The effect that is being manifested in this first essay is the transformation of the master-slave relationship: rule as mastery is replaced with a new form of rule that transcends mastery and subjection and is, therefore, humanized.

The first plausible explanation of the fact that the princes are moved to mercy by esteem but not by compassion is that strong natures can revere only “the sacred image of virtue,” whereas weak natures sympathize with those who are like themselves. Montaigne here goes beyond the appearance of the first sense, the explanations offered by the tradition. This first explanation is based on the classical hierarchy of weak and strong, but it does not entirely hold up: the two stories of “the people,” the common herd, show that, in “less generous souls,” astonishment can have the same effect as esteem.

The three stories of the princes and the two stories of the people have in common the element of surprise. The princes are bent on vengeance, relentlessly pursuing conquest and revenge, indifferent to the cries of women and children. Suddenly, they are brought up short by the spectacle of heroic action. A possibility is offered to the prince so suddenly that he has the chance of not acting according to habit. The man separates himself from his power. In these three cases, the prince goes beyond habit, recognizes the equality or even superiority of the defiant, his esteem softens his heart and, in the cases of two of these princes, mercy expands to the entire city. The stories of the people present a similar phenomenon. In both cases, the people are moved by astonishment at heroic virtue and are deterred from their course of revenge. The first words of the essay are “the most common”: submission is the most common way to soften the heart of the avenging prince. The last word of the essay is “slaves”: after the slaughter of 6,000 Theban soldiers, Alexander takes 30,000 Thebans—old men, women, and children—as slaves. But the stories Montaigne tells

of the people display the desire to escape such slavery and gain freedom. The Thebans regained their freedom from Sparta under the leadership of Epaminondas. When he is charged with the crime of having held onto the position of leader beyond the legal limit, he reminds them of the fact that they are free on account of him, that it was he who led them to defeat the invincible Spartans. In the story of the rank and file of the army of Dionysius, we are shown the possibility of rebellion. At the same time that the crowd is astonished at the heroic virtue of Phyto, they reach the point of mutiny against the tyrant. This account challenges the view that the common herd is weak and submits on account of fear. Even though Dionysius is making an example of Phyto, using him to demonstrate the extreme to which his vengeance will take him, the crowd is ready to rebel. The people are not *naturally* slaves.

How is it possible that an entire people, an entire assembly or army, can be astonished? How is this response communicated? In both the story of Phyto and the story of Epaminondas, the people are moved by words. Phyto not only acts with incredible fortitude while being whipped through the streets on his way to execution, he keeps calling out in a loud voice the reason for his condemnation: he resisted the tyrant. Epaminondas likewise reminds the Thebans in a proud and haughty manner of what he had done for them. Whereas the three princes are not moved by speech, the people are moved and are united by speech. The explanation that might be offered is that the people show their desire for freedom because they realize that there is strength in numbers, while individually they are weak and cowardly. But this reasoning neglects the fact that their reaction is spontaneous, not calculated. Further, as we see in the last story of this essay, the Theban soldiers are in fact extremely brave as individuals.

When the princes are taken by surprise, they are moved beyond mastery by esteem, and that transcendence of mastery has the effect of mercy. Esteem is the way in which the “natural envy” of masters is overcome, for esteem is the recognition of the equality or even superiority of the defiant. When the people are taken by surprise, they are moved beyond subjection to both mercy and freedom: like the princes, they recognize something of themselves in the defiant. The similarity of the people to the princes is Montaigne’s rejection of the idea of natural mastery and natural slavery.

Stheno and the Anonymous Man: Representing the People

The contrasting stories of Pompey and Sulla are taken from Plutarch’s “Precepts of Statecraft,” in which Plutarch discusses the characteristics of the true statesman who “even though he had no part in the wrongdoing

of the people, [takes] dangers upon himself in their behalf. For this is noble; and besides being noble, one man's excellence and wisdom by arousing admiration has often mitigated anger which has been aroused against the whole people and has dissipated the threatened terror and bitterness" (815e). When Pompey was going to punish the Mamertines for revolting, "Sthenno [*sic*] told him that he would be doing wrong if he should destroy many innocent men for the fault of one; for, he said, it was he himself who had caused the city to revolt by persuading his friends and compelling his enemies. This so affected Pompey that he let the city go unpunished and also treated Sthenno kindly." But when Sulla was going to slaughter the citizens of Praeneste, his guest-friend, an unnamed man to whom he had a private duty, could not produce the same effect. Sulla offered to let this anonymous man go on account of his guest-friendship. But that noble man "declared that he would not be indebted for his life to the slayer of his fatherland, and then mingled with his fellow-citizens and was cut down with them" (815f–816a).¹⁹

Both Stheno and the anonymous man unite their cities in themselves by taking on the guilt of the entire city and by standing in the stead of all the citizens. It could be said that they represent the people before the conquering prince. In these stories we are presented with an instance in which the same means produces diverse effects. Pompey accepts the single individual as standing in for the entire city and his response is forgiveness, whereas Sulla does not accept the single individual as standing in for the city. The magnanimous gesture is a risk taken in desperate circumstances. Sulla would have spared his guest-friend, but that man disappears into the anonymity of the crowd in an act of unity with the people and voluntary dissolution of the self.

*The Power of Homer and the
Weakness of Aristotle: Alexander and Betis*

Betis was the governor of the city of Gaza at the time of Alexander's invasion. He fought valiantly, but when the siege was near its end, was abandoned by his men and fought on alone although badly wounded. Alexander had also been wounded twice in the course of the battle. When Betis was finally captured, Alexander confronted him with threats of torment, but Betis remained silent: his look was "not only confident but insolent and haughty." At that point, Montaigne says, Alexander turned his anger into rage. "He ordered Betis' heels to be pierced through and had him thus dragged alive, torn, and dismembered, behind a cart" until dead (VS9, F5).

Montaigne's source for this story is the *History of Alexander* by Quintus Curtius. When his recounting of this story is compared with this source, his invention becomes evident.²⁰ He both omits crucial elements of Curtius's account and changes one of the details of Betis's death.²¹ Concerning the manner of Betis's execution, Curtius claims that Alexander "boasted that in taking vengeance on an enemy he had imitated Achilles, from whom he derived his race."²² Montaigne omits this entirely, a striking omission since he himself provides three possible motives for Alexander's action, none of them involving the deliberate imitation of Achilles. The detail that Montaigne changes has to do with the way Betis was fastened to the chariot. Quintus Curtius says that "thongs were passed round his ankles" and "he was bound to the king's chariot."²³ Montaigne says that Alexander "commanded that his heels be pierced." This change of detail is important, because in Homer's description of the way Achilles bound the body of Hector to his chariot, it is specified that Achilles pierced the feet of Hector (*Iliad*, bk.22, 468–70). By altering this detail from Curtius's version, Montaigne shows quite clearly that he is thinking of Homer, of Achilles's treatment of Hector's body, and thus of Alexander's boasting that he was imitating Achilles, just as Curtius reports. Thus, Montaigne's omission concerning Alexander's own statement of his motive is both deliberate and meant to be noticed.

Montaigne is silent concerning the role of Homer and Alexander's desire for immortality through his family origins. Instead, he offers three other possible motives or "springs" for Alexander's action: "Could it be that hardihood was so common to Alexander that, not marveling at it, he respected it the less? Or did he consider it so peculiarly his own that he could not bear to see it at this height in another without passionately envious spite? Or was the natural impetuosity of his anger incapable of brooking opposition?"

These three possible motives display the contempt and envy that mastery has for subjection. The first—that bravery was so common to him that he could not admire it—manifests the contempt that the ruler has for what he holds and rules. The second—that he could not stand to see bravery at such a height in another man—manifests the "natural envy" between masters and subjects, the envy that the master feels in the presence of an equal or superior. The third—the natural impetuosity of Alexander's anger—is not assigned a possible cause by Montaigne, but Quintus Curtius attributes his anger to the fact that in the battle for Gaza, Alexander was wounded twice.²⁴ Montaigne may, in fact, favor this third spring of action since he goes on to say: "In truth, if [his anger] could have been bridled, it is probable that it would have been in the capture and desolation of the city of Thebes" (VS9–10, F5).

Could it be that he, who was descended from the gods, suddenly, in being wounded, faced the possibility of his mortality and that this caused his uncharacteristic rage and cruelty? Montaigne does not mention this possibility. Could it be, then, that Alexander deliberately produced the spectacle of Betis's punishment in order to display his divinity and his immortality, as Dionysius deliberately produced the spectacle of extreme vengeance? Indeed, Alexander goes beyond Achilles's treatment of the body of Hector, for Betis is alive when he is fastened to the chariot. In "Cowardice, Mother of Cruelty" Montaigne says that anything beyond simple death in the executions of justice is "pure cruelty" (VS700, F530).

Alexander's anger turns to rage and cruelty because Betis will not submit. Betis was "alone, abandoned by his men," wounded and covered with blood. He is silent before Alexander and will not beg for mercy. His look is insolent and haughty. It is clear that Alexander wants him to speak, to acknowledge his submission by words or gestures. Alexander calls out: "Has he bent a knee? Has any suppliant cry escaped him? I'll conquer your muteness yet; and if I cannot wring a word from it, at least I'll wring a groan." Montaigne does not mention a possible cause for Betis's silence: Quintus Curtius tells us that silence was one of the most important traits instilled into the Persian captains.²⁵ Betis, then, was the subject of a despot and remains fiercely obedient to him even in the most dire circumstances when he is alone and cannot be protected and saved by his prince. Quintus Curtius describes Betis as "a man of exceptional loyalty to his king."²⁶ Indeed, he is not only loyal to his prince, but he also displays defiance, haughtiness, and insolence to Alexander who has him entirely in his power. He refuses to submit. Betis may be one of those men who, even though he is brought up under tyranny, has the desire for freedom.²⁷

Alexander's encounter with Betis, as invented by Montaigne, displays two fundamental features of mastery: domination which of itself breeds contempt for what is dominated, and the natural envy between masters and subjects. It also, silently, points to the enchantment of the origins: Alexander is bound to Achilles, his divine and immortal ancestor, for he is held by the power of Homer. The divinity of Alexander, which silently marks his first appearance in the *Essays*, is mentioned explicitly in his last appearance at the very end of the last essay. "I find nothing so humble and so mortal in the life of Alexander as his fancies about his immortalization" (VS1115, F856–57).

Montaigne is entirely silent about the role of Homer in Alexander's actions toward Betis. He is breaking the enchantment of Homer and thus breaking the power of Alexander's belief in his divine origins. Montaigne

reduces Alexander's action from participation in the divine (through his ancestor Achilles) to the infinite desire to be and to appear superior to and stronger than all other men. By replacing the divine with the human he shows that the desire to participate in the divine is the vain desire to be and to appear superior to all other men.

Montaigne breaks the enchantment of Homer because he is replacing Homer. As Homer is the poet of Alexander—Alexander carried his *Iliad* everywhere in his drive to conquer the world—Montaigne is the poet of Epaminondas, who fought for the inestimable good of restoring freedom to his country. In his essay "Of the Most Outstanding Men" Montaigne discusses Homer, Alexander, and Epaminondas. Epaminondas is the most outstanding of all.

Although Montaigne does not mention Aristotle in this first essay, Aristotle is nevertheless present as the teacher of Alexander. It would seem that the two stories of Alexander's cruelty are intended to manifest, in particular, the failure of Aristotle's teachings to moderate the infinite desires and passions of Alexander and, in general, the ineffectiveness of Aristotle's restraints on the power of the natural master. For Aristotle, philosophy, not rule, is man's participation in the divine. Philosophy, then, ought to have a moderating effect on the prince's aspirations to divinity. But the power of Homer is greater: Montaigne is the poet of Epaminondas, but he is also replacing the impotent Aristotle with his own invisible power to moderate the prince.

*Separating the Man from the Prince:
Epaminondas and Thebes*

Epaminondas, who, as we have already seen, figures prominently in the *Essays*, was the commander who led the Thebans to victory over the Spartans and freed Thebes from the domination of Sparta at the battle of Leuctra in 371 BC. Plutarch's life of Epaminondas has not survived and even though Cicero refers to him as "the first man of Greece," very little remains of the writings about him.²⁸

Given the sparseness of the ancient sources available to us, Victor Davis Hanson, in *The Soul of Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present Day, How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny*, provides an unusually detailed portrait. Epaminondas was a Pythagorean, a philosopher, and "may have been the best educated man of action in the ancient world."²⁹ Two features of the character of Epaminondas stand out in Hanson's portrait. First, "the entire Epaminondan laudatory tradition is rooted in contemporary observations of his zeal . . . to free the unfree."³⁰ He felt

great repugnance for Spartan helotage, and his goal was to liberate both serfs and free men from the autocracy of Sparta.³¹ His disdain for tyrants caused him to fight in order to give democracy to his fellow Boeotians, autonomy to the cities of the Peloponnese, and freedom to the helots of Messenia.³²

Second, Hanson notes, the character of Epaminondas was “selfless.”³³ The liberation of Thebes, of the cities of the Peloponnese, and of the helots of Messenia was accomplished “all without gratuitous killing, personal lucre for himself, or political exploitation by his Boeotians.”³⁴ According to Plutarch, Epaminondas never executed any person of a captured city, nor ever sold any Greek captive into slavery.³⁵ Remarkably, in spite of his great military victories, Epaminondas was himself indifferent to domination. He fought to bring freedom, not to conquer and rule.³⁶

In Montaigne’s first essay, Epaminondas appears before the Theban assembly on trial for having kept his command of the troops for four months longer than the people had directed. Cornelius Nepos explains that Epaminondas did this because he was convinced that the new commanders appointed by the people were inexperienced and would bring about the destruction of the army: “Epaminondas did all of this under the shadow of the Theban law which punished with death all who kept their command longer than the prescribed period. Since he recognized that this law was enacted to preserve the state, and since he did not want the same law to ruin the state,” he held onto the command, violating the letter of the law.³⁷ Montaigne presents him as defiant in his speech before the assembly. Epaminondas reminds the people of the fact that under his leadership, they had been set free from the yoke of Spartan domination, and they are so astonished that they cannot proceed against him. He is the only prince profiled in the first essay who speaks to the people.

The last story Montaigne includes in “By Diverse Means” also concerns Thebes: here, he recounts Alexander’s destruction of the city. Alexander has all of the soldiers slaughtered and then takes the rest of the inhabitants as slaves. The 6,000 Theban soldiers are described by Montaigne as “lost and without any further means of common defense.” It is clear from his account of the battle that the soldiers were dispersed, silent, alone, each on his own, seeking out the enemy. Not one of them attempted to flee and not one asked for mercy. What we see here is the same Theban army that, under the leadership of Epaminondas, had defeated the Spartans thirty years earlier.³⁸ The essay ends, then, with the display of the valor of the individual, anonymous Theban soldiers. As David Quint says: “In this case, valor really has become ‘common,’ since it is displayed in the entire

adult male population of the doomed city. These are, ironically, the same Thebans who . . . had shown themselves capable of reverencing—and sparing—their valorous fellow citizen Epaminondas.”³⁹

The individuals who make up the “rank and file,” the common herd, display as much valor as any of the noblemen of the first stories, even as much as Alexander himself. However, without Epaminondas, they are defeated, and their country is enslaved. Without Epaminondas, they are not united. Montaigne concludes his portrait of Epaminondas in “Of the Most Outstanding Men” with the observation that “the prosperity of his country died, as it was born, with him” (VS757, F574).

That the freedom and prosperity of Thebes depended entirely on the character and ability of Epaminondas is a fact noted by the ancient historians as well. As Epaminondas lay dying, he ordered the Thebans to make peace because they had no one left to lead them.⁴⁰ Cornelius Nepos concludes his life of Epaminondas with a “comment about his character and life, a comment no one can dispute. Before Epaminondas was born and after he died Thebes was the satellite of a foreign power. But while he directed the state, Thebes was the leader of the most powerful city in Greece. From this fact anyone can see that Epaminondas as an individual was mightier than the whole state.”⁴¹

What had happened to Thebes in the thirty years between the death of Epaminondas and its destruction by Alexander? In the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli tells us that “after the death of Epaminondas, Philip of Macedon was made captain of their troops by the Thebans; and after his victory he took their liberty from them.”⁴² In other words, the Thebans submitted themselves to a master—to Alexander’s father—when they no longer had Epaminondas to unite them.

Montaigne’s portrait of Epaminondas is consistent with the ancient sources, but he also “probes the inside” and invents the “springs of action” in his interpretation of the histories. Epaminondas, Montaigne says, was a great and fearless warrior. He has not nearly as much glory as Alexander or Caesar, but “of resolution and valor, not that which is sharpened by ambition, but that which wisdom and reason may implant in a well-ordered soul, he had all that can be imagined. As for proof of this virtue of his, he has given as much, in my opinion, as Alexander himself and as Caesar.” In spite of the fact that Epaminondas has not nearly as much glory as Alexander or Caesar, Montaigne regards him as a more outstanding man than either. What is it, then, that makes the Theban commander superior in Montaigne’s eyes? The resolution and valor of Epaminondas are not, according to Montaigne’s judgment, due to ambition, the vice that ruined Caesar. The resolution and valor of Epaminondas are due to

wisdom and reason: his was a “well-ordered” soul. His soul is ordered to freedom, not to mastery.

The resolution and valor, the “virtue,” of Epaminondas is equal to that of Alexander and Caesar, but his character (*mœurs*) and conscience far surpassed all those who have ever undertaken to manage affairs. “For in this respect, which must be principally 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.” The character and conscience of Epaminondas are marked especially by goodness and innocence. Innocence is, in him, “a key quality, sovereign, constant, uniform, incorruptible,” whereas in Alexander it appears as “subordinate, uncertain, streaky, soft, and accidental.”

Montaigne gives several examples of the “exceeding goodness” of Epaminondas. Epaminondas said that the sweetest contentment he had in all his life was the pleasure he gave his mother and father by his victory over the Spartans at Leuctra. “It says a lot that he preferred their pleasure to his own.” Here Montaigne is pointing to the primacy that Epaminondas accords to his private duty to his parents. Also, Epaminondas “did not think it was permissible, even to recover the freedom of his country, to kill a man without full knowledge of the case. . . . He also held that in battle a man should avoid encountering a friend who was on the opposite side, and spare him.” He showed humanity even toward enemy forces. (VS756–57, F571–74). Montaigne invents the innocence of Epaminondas. That is, he interprets his actions in a way that distinguishes between his virtue and his innocence or goodness.

The goodness and innocence of Epaminondas, which make him superior to Alexander, are seen most clearly in his refusal to put aside his “private duty” even at the risk of failing in his greatest enterprises: “To what a height did he raise consideration for his private duty, he who never killed a man he had vanquished, who even for the inestimable good of restoring liberty to his country scrupled to kill a tyrant or his accomplices without due form of justice, and who judged anyone a wicked man, however good a citizen he was, who among his enemies and in battle did not spare his friend and his host. . . . Terrible with blood and iron, he goes breaking and shattering a nation invincible against anyone but himself, and turns aside in the middle of such a melee on meeting his host and his friend. Truly that man was in command of war itself, who made it endure the curb of benignity at the point of its greatest heat, all inflamed as it was and foaming with frenzy and slaughter. It is a miracle to be able to mingle some semblance of justice with such actions; but it belongs only to the strength of Epaminondas to be able to mingle with them the sweetness

and ease of the gentlest ways, and pure innocence” (VS801–2, F608–9). The goodness and innocence of Epaminondas are manifested in the fact that he did not seek his own good in power. He preferred his private duty to the pursuit of glory. His strength is exercised in declining mastery.⁴³

In this choice to decline mastery, Epaminondas separated the man from the prince. Therefore, he was able to combine the ferocity of the prince in battle with the gentleness of the man. Montaigne’s emphasis on Epaminondas’s preference for his private duty is his way of humanizing the prince: Epaminondas submits his ferocity to the social. “There is a soul of rich composition. To the roughest and most violent of human actions he wedded goodness and humanity, indeed the most delicate that can be found in the school of philosophy” (VS801–2, F608–9).

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli provides his own account of Epaminondas’s virtue in turning the Theban peasants into a fierce army and of the reason for the decline of Thebes after the death of Epaminondas: “After the Thebans Pelopidas and Epaminondas had freed Thebes and had brought it out of the servitude of the Spartan empire, though they found themselves in a city used to serving and in the midst of effeminate peoples, they did not hesitate—so much was their virtue—to put them under arms, and to go with them to meet the Spartan armies in the field, and to conquer them.”⁴⁴ In Machiavelli’s terms, the “matter” was corrupt, for the city was accustomed to servitude, and the people were effeminate, probably because of the idleness of the oligarchs. Therefore, Thebes could not maintain itself as a republic without the virtue of Epaminondas: “Where the matter is not corrupt, tumults and other scandals do not hurt; where it is corrupt, well-ordered laws do not help unless indeed they have been put in motion by one individual who with an extreme force ensures their observance so that the matter becomes good. I do not know whether this has ever occurred or whether it is possible.” A corrupt city can only rise through the virtue of one man, but “as soon as such a one is dead, it returns to its early habit, as occurred in Thebes, which could hold the forms of a republic and its empire through the virtue of Epaminondas while he lived, but returned to its first disorders when he was dead.” This is because the virtuous man cannot live long enough to transform a city from bad to good. His city “is ruined, unless indeed he makes it to be reborn with many dangers and much blood. For such corruption and slight aptitude for free life arise from an inequality that is in that city; and if one wishes to make it equal, it is necessary to use the greatest extraordinary means, which few know how or wish to use.”⁴⁵

The extraordinary means to which Machiavelli refers is the elimination of the idle and rich oligarchs. “Those are called gentlemen who live

idly in abundance from the returns of their possessions without having any care either for cultivation or for other necessary trouble in living. Such as these are pernicious in every republic and in every province . . . in these provinces no republic or political way of life has ever emerged for such kinds of men are altogether hostile to every civilization.” Machiavelli draws this conclusion: “that he who wishes to make a republic where there are very many gentlemen cannot do it unless he first eliminates all of them.”⁴⁶ Given the gentleness of Epaminondas, and especially his manifest unwillingness to kill or do any harm to his fellow Thebans, it can be inferred that he would have refused to use the extraordinary means necessary to make the city’s citizens equal. Epaminondas could not “learn to be able not to be good.”

Montaigne concludes his portrait of Epaminondas in “Of the Useful and the Honorable” with the claim that Epaminondas is a “great preceptor” who teaches us that some things are illicit even against an enemy and that the common interest ought not to demand all things of all men against the private interest. “If it is greatness of heart and the effect of a rare and singular virtue to despise friendship, private obligations, our word, and kinship, for the common good [*le bien commun*] and obedience to the magistrate, truly it is enough to excuse us from this that it is a greatness that cannot lodge in the greatness of Epaminondas’s heart” (VS802, F609–10). Montaigne wants to strip the pretext of reason from the actions of wicked men: “Let us take away from wicked, bloody, and treacherous natures this pretext of reason. Let us abandon this monstrous and deranged justice and stick to more human imitations” (VS802, F609–10).

Montaigne’s praise of Epaminondas as the great preceptor who teaches us that the common good cannot require all things of all men has the most fundamental significance, for it presents the notion of “the common good”—the defining principle of classical and medieval political philosophy—as a pretext for cruelty. Appeals to the common good for justification of mastery, then, are in bad faith. Perhaps that is why the very first words of “To the Reader” are: “This book was written in good faith, reader,” for they warn us that his end is merely domestic and private (VS3, F2).⁴⁷

The separation of the man from the prince makes the prince inhuman, but in the example of Epaminondas, who never abandons his private duty, we are offered a “more human” imitation of rule. Montaigne’s account of Epaminondas insists that, even for the sake of the inestimable good, and even in the midst of battle, Epaminondas would not put aside his private duty. His judgment as a man remains above his power as a prince: he does

not see himself as a prince by nature, but accidentally. The priority of the domestic and private is the humanization of the prince and sets limits on the power of the prince.

Making Epaminondas Permanent

In those instances in which he prefers his private duty to glorious action, the goodness and innocence of Epaminondas appear to be at odds with his ferocity as the warrior who fights for “the inestimable good” of the freedom of his country. Consistency requires that this conflict be allowed to stand, for the innocence of Epaminondas is the very spring that pushes him to fight for the inestimable good of the freedom of his country. His innocence means that he does not want to dominate. Here we see the deep level at which the freedom of the individual and the freedom of one’s country—Constant’s “personal liberty” and “political liberty”—can come into conflict. Montaigne judges Epaminondas to be the most outstanding man, for the innocence of his conscience is unsurpassed. Montaigne must leave the conscience of the man uncorrupted in order to restore humanity to the prince.

The role of private duty in the humanization of the prince gives added significance to the stories of Pompey and Sulla in “By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End.” Both are confronted with a friend who takes upon himself the guilt of an entire people. The “end” in this essay is to soften the heart of the avenging conqueror. In the case of Pompey, his forgiveness extends to the entire city. In the case of Sulla, his heart is not softened by his private duty.

In spite of Alexander’s extreme cruelty toward Betis and his extreme vengeance in the destruction of Thebes, Montaigne includes Alexander among the three most outstanding men. The nature of Alexander was “excellently formed for goodness; and it was said of him, ingeniously, that he had his virtues from nature, his vices from fortune.” He judges the character of Alexander to be almost above reproach for he weighs his outstanding virtues against certain individual actions which do merit criticism. “But it is impossible to conduct such great movements according to the rules of justice; such men require to be judged in gross, by the master end of their actions.” Here he mentions the desolation of Thebes, the murder of Menander, and several other vicious actions that are “rather hard to excuse.” He does not mention Alexander’s cruelty toward Betis, perhaps implying that it is in fact entirely inexcusable. Alexander’s “master-end” is glory. By using this expression, Montaigne points to Alexander’s relationship to his teacher, Aristotle.

Two aspects of Montaigne's judgment of Alexander qualify the Macedonian commander to rank among men second only to Epaminondas. First, whereas the prosperity of Thebes ended with the death of Epaminondas, the conquests of Alexander remained under the control of even "ordinary captains" after the death of Alexander. Alexander "caused so many royal lines to spring from his soldiers, leaving the world divided after his death among four successors, ordinary captains of the army, whose descendants remained for so long in control of those great possessions" (VS754, F571). Second, Montaigne prefers Alexander to Caesar, whom he had also considered for this place among the most outstanding men. Caesar had many qualities equal to and even greater than Alexander's. But, although Caesar's ambition was more moderate in itself than Alexander's, "it is so unfortunate in having for its abominable object the ruin of his country" (VS755, F572). Montaigne's ultimate judgment of Caesar is that "this single vice . . . ruined in him the finest and richest nature that ever was, and has made his memory abominable to all good men, because he willed to seek his glory in the ruin of his country and the subversion of the most powerful and flourishing republic that the world will ever see" (VS733, F554).

These two aspects reveal what weighs so heavily in Montaigne's judgments of princes: the stability and the freedom of one's country. In Montaigne's judgment, the innocence of Epaminondas surpasses the virtue of Alexander. "I know no form or fortune of man that I regard with so much honor and love" (VS756, F573). Epaminondas is the better man but nevertheless he did not succeed in establishing the foundations for a permanent free society. The Theban general lacked ambition, which, for Montaigne, is a great vice. The valor of Epaminondas is "not sharpened by ambition," whereas the ambition of Alexander is unlimited. But the comparison of Alexander and Caesar allows us to see that even ambition is excusable if it does not have for its object the ruin of one's country and the destruction of its freedom, and if it does result in the permanence of one's foundations. Montaigne's own refounding, then, might be seen as surpassing both Epaminondas and Alexander by combining the innocence of Epaminondas—his indifference to mastery—with the permanence of Alexander's rule. Thus, Montaigne surpasses and replaces both the power of Homer and the weakness of Aristotle.

Montaigne: The Magnanimous Gesture

Montaigne appears in this first essay between the princes and the philosophers. "Either one of these two ways [submission and defiance]

would easily win me, for I am marvelously weak in the direction of mercy and gentleness.” Like the first three princes, he is moved by esteem, but, unlike them, he is also moved by compassion. “Yet to the Stoics pity is a vicious passion; they want us to succor the afflicted, but not to unbend and sympathize with them” (VS8, F4). Like the Stoics, he is merciful, but unlike them, he feels the passion of pity. Esteem unites him to the great, compassion unites him to the weak: he would always be merciful to all men. Unlike the princes who are surprised into mercy, Montaigne, like the Stoics, is consistently merciful. Surprise has been replaced by a settled inclination of judgment: both esteem and compassion would easily move him *because* he is already and always inclined to mercy and gentleness. Montaigne’s mercy is beyond esteem and compassion, which are hierarchical dispositions.

Thus, Montaigne stands between the Stoics and the princes, neither of whom will bend with compassion. This is the submission of reason inflexible and impassive to sympathy, to the good. It is an irrational act for it is not the subjection of passion to reason, but rather the subjection of reason to passion. “Natural compassion,” he says, has “infinite power” over him (VS1100, F844). Natural compassion has become in him a settled inclination of judgment, thus going beyond the natural. Reason inflexible and impassive cannot move without the will. This is why the *Essays* are not arguments: arguments do not move us. The generous gesture is the marvelous, and the marvelous is what moves men.

The opposite of esteem is not compassion but rather contempt. In the natural condition, displayed in the first three princes, esteem and contempt belong together in the same man: those who feel esteem do so toward those who are like themselves. Therefore, they at the same time feel contempt for those who are weak. Montaigne, however, shows no contempt for anyone, neither princes nor people. Through his esteem and compassion, he unites princes and people within himself. Since he does not judge others in relation to himself, his position with respect to the strong and the weak is not a position within the natural hierarchy. His esteem and compassion are instead due to his judgment, from which his own private will has been removed.

The overcoming of natural mastery is thus the transcendence of nature. The first plausible explanation for the fact that the first three princes are moved by esteem but not by compassion is based on nature: the princes are naturally strong and therefore can revere only “the sacred image of virtue” whereas the common people are weak; they are naturally slaves and therefore respond more readily to compassion. Montaigne, however, goes against that prejudice by showing that, when they are given a voice,

the common people do recognize the loftiness of heroic virtue. In fact, they are moved to rebel against the tyrant for they are not simply moved by fear.

Montaigne here appears before us for the first time in terms of possibility: *if I were* the prince, *I would be* easily moved. Thus, he is the private man who deliberately emerges into the public as the prince and thereby transcends his origins as a private man. Montaigne is bringing the common man into the public, making him visible and giving him a voice. He unites the princes and the people in an act of forgiveness, and his marvelous weakness in the direction of mercy is the promise that his forgiveness is not an isolated act of caprice but rather demonstrates his constant will to forgive. Forgiveness is the act of refounding because it is the only way, apart from violence and force, to settle the natural contention between masters and subjects. Forgiveness is the only way to make a new beginning, to replace the origins. "Reason inflexible and impassive" requires the magnanimous gesture of forgiveness. Forgiveness allows us to erase the past and to start over again on a different footing. The promise makes the act of forgiveness permanent so that it is not simply a random and fleeting act. Surprise, which takes both princes and the people out of themselves, becomes a settled inclination of the will. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt discusses forgiveness and promise-keeping within the context of her account of human action. "The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose 'sins' hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which is the future by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relations between men."⁴⁸ Forgiveness makes it possible to refound, for refounding, in Montaigne's sense of restoring, conveys the sense of reversing the order of time.

Forgiving is a kind of action that, because it is spontaneous, reveals the character of action in an especially clear way, that is, as a beginning, not as actualization. Arendt says that "the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action."⁴⁹ Montaigne takes that spontaneous act, which in the first essay

is always associated with surprise, and makes it permanent. Refounding means making forgiveness permanent, the firm ground for the possibility of action that is free. The promise is the representation of the will, and Montaigne's marvelous weakness "in the direction" of mercy is the constant inclination of his will to forgiveness.

Forgiveness as the foundation of society is necessary precisely on account of the presupposition of both human imperfection and human freedom. Indeed, the nature of freedom makes imperfection inevitable and, in a certain sense, acceptable. The freedom of particularity, to be a particular very ill-formed, is freedom from the perfection of form and final cause. Therefore, the unity through forgiveness that Montaigne effects between strong and weak is not the unity of the common good: forgiveness as the necessary condition for free society means that the unity of men in society is a unity of individuals who do not share a common form.

Montaigne says that one of the principal consolations that he has for his deficient memory is that he does not even remember injuries received (VS35, F23). Forgiveness—the constant will to forgiveness—is necessary because human freedom is such that men "trespass" against each other every day. "Trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new."⁵⁰

The introduction of forgiveness and promise-keeping as the new foundations of society brings with it a radical transformation of morality. Arendt argues that this new moral code is very different from the standards of domination and mastery of oneself and others. "Since these faculties correspond so closely to the human condition of plurality, their role in politics establishes a diametrically different set of guiding principles from the 'moral' standards inherent in the Platonic notion of rule," that is, domination of the self.⁵¹ Montaigne's reformation of mores involves precisely this transformation of virtue from self-mastery and self-perfection to the virtues required for free society. The character necessary for forgiveness is the character necessary for unity in the absence of common form. If Machiavelli is correct—that Thebes could not remain a republic after the death of Epaminondas because Epaminondas would not or could not institute equality—then making Epaminondas permanent would have to

involve the institution of equality. The Machiavellian reformation that Epaminondas could not or would not effect—the institution of equality by doing away with the idle and rich oligarchs—Montaigne seeks to effect by means of a radical transformation of mores.

By his silence about the role of Homer in the story of Alexander and Betis, Montaigne is silent about Alexander's desire for immortality, a desire that Alexander pursues by imitating his ancestor Achilles through whom he believed he was divine. Montaigne is silent about Homer because he himself replaces Homer and thus the notion of the divine and of heroic virtue that has its origins in Homer. The substitution of forgiveness for mastery points to the divinity of Christ. The silent presence that overshadows this first essay is the image of Christ before Pilate.

As Arendt says, "the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth."⁵² Forgiveness is "the exact opposite of vengeance," and "the freedom contained in Jesus' teaching of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance."⁵³ It is Jesus who teaches that the power to forgive is not only divine but also human. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Indeed, Jesus performs miracles to prove that he has the power to forgive. When the scribes accuse Jesus of blasphemy for telling the paralytic that his sins are forgiven, he says: "Now, which of these is easier: to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—get up, and pick up your bed and go home" (Matthew 9:5–7). Arendt says, "It is his insistence on the 'power to forgive,' even more than his performance of miracles, that shocks the people."⁵⁴ Montaigne produces his effect through the production of the marvelous. The marvelous is the miracle of forgiveness.

"By Diverse Means" displays the fundamental philosophical movement of Montaigne's thought, the movement that begins in the most familiar and ends in astonishment at the most familiar. The essay begins with submission as the most common way to soften the heart of the avenging conqueror and ends with the submission of 30,000 common people to enslavement. What has happened in the development of this essay to cause our astonishment at submission?

Submission, which at first appears to be weakness and therefore worthy of contempt, is now seen in its "proper light." Montaigne's "marvelous weakness" is the surrender of his arms in the midst of violence and the submission of himself to the risk of death. Montaigne's generous gesture reveals the new possibility of the combination of the renunciation of mastery and the love of freedom, which is the effect he seeks to produce. The

risk of his life in laying down his arms is both his freedom from fear of death and also his invention of a new form of society. This new society is freed from the power of the political and instead subjects the political to itself. Natural mastery is overcome, and the inestimable good is brought into being by this gesture that overcomes nature itself. Thus, while the most obvious effect produced “by diverse means” is the softening of the heart of the conquering prince, that is, the humanization of the prince, the deeper sense is Montaigne’s own conquest of the temporal realm in his refounding and reordering of human life.

Limiting Violence

It must be acknowledged that the rejection of the common good as the standard of rule is dangerous for it seems to be the rejection of any moral foundation and of any restraint upon the power of the prince. Montaigne seeks to replace that foundation and to impose restraints through the separation of the man from the prince and through the invention of society as the limitation on the power of government. In another striking reversal of Aristotle, politics becomes the realm of necessity while the pre-political (society) becomes the realm of freedom.⁵⁵

Only reason inflexible and impassive can settle the conflict between masters and slaves. The ascent to reason inflexible and impassive therefore requires the transcendence of experience, because experience cannot show us the possibility of a world without masters and slaves. It is a possibility that must be invented and brought into being by the philosophical act. But reason inflexible and impassive is inhuman. Reason must submit to experience. That is, we must take men as we find them with all of their passions and interests. Reason must submit to the imperfect.

To put it differently, if the standard of the common good is really the pretext for the prince’s unlimited exercise of power in the attainment of that end, if it is really the pretext for his vicious actions, then the perfection of the common good must be abandoned as the goal of political life. Therefore, the new standard for the exercise of power must be the limitation of evil, rather than the pursuit of a good in common. Since consent is the basis for the legitimacy of rule, the limitation of evil is, for the most part, the limitation of force and violence.

In her reflections on liberty and the necessity of force, Simone Weil concludes that the formula of “the least evil” is the only one applicable in the political realm, provided it is applied with “the coldest lucidity.” The struggle between those who command and those who obey is inevitable

and even desirable, but it can only be suppressed by constraint. Therefore, the limitation of violence is the best that can be done by those who love liberty.⁵⁶

In describing his role in the civil wars of his day and his loyalty to the Catholic side, Montaigne expresses his abhorrence of violence and force: "I do not know how to involve myself so deeply and so entirely. When my will gives me over to one party, it is not with so violent an obligation that my understanding is infected by it. . . . People adore everything that is on their side; as for me, I do not even excuse most of the things that I see on mine" (VS1012, F774). And in "Of Vain Subtleties," he distinguishes himself from those who are "extreme, injudicious, and unjust in the conduct of our cause, and stain it with infinite reproaches of violence" (VS313, F227).

Because the power of the prince is unmeasured and because the limitation of power depends upon the conscience of the prince, Montaigne recognizes the difficulty of judging the prince's actions. The conscience of the prince must be given the benefit of the doubt, and his actions must be excused or forgiven whenever possible. There is no one who would not be worse than the king if he were as continually spoiled by flatterers as the king is (VS1077-78, F825). "The toughest and most difficult occupation in the world, in my opinion, is to play the part of king worthily. I excuse more of their faults than people commonly do, in consideration of the dreadful weight of their burden, which dazes me. It is difficult for a power so immoderate to observe moderation" (VS917, F700).

Based on this understanding of the prince's predicament, Montaigne draws a distinction between vicious actions or effects and vicious means. "The weakness of our condition often pushes us to the necessity of using evil means to a good end. Lycurgus, the most perfect and virtuous lawmaker that ever was, hit upon this very unjust method of teaching his people temperance: to make the Helots, who were their slaves, forcibly drunk, so that the Spartans, seeing them thus lost and buried in wine, should hold the excess of this vice in horror" (VS684, F518). Even the most perfect and virtuous lawgiver judges that he must use force to produce his effect.

Montaigne recognizes the limitations that necessity places on the ruler's action: "The virtue assigned to the affairs of the world is a virtue with many bends, angles, and elbows, so as to join and adapt itself to human weakness; mixed and artificial, not straight, clean, constant, or purely innocent. . . 'Let him who would be pure from courts retire' [Lucan]." Montaigne says that he once tried to use in public dealings the pure and innocent opinions and rules that he uses in private matters, but, he says,

“I found them inept and dangerous” when applied to political matters (VS991, F758).

The imperfection of our condition is such that vices are actually necessary and useful in the public domain. “Whoever would remove the seeds of these qualities from man would destroy the fundamental conditions of our life.” In every government there are necessary offices that are abject and vicious. Vices actually have a role in holding society together. “If they become excusable, inasmuch as we need them and the common necessity effaces their true quality, we still must let this part be played by the more vigorous and less fearful citizens, who sacrifice their honor and their conscience, as those ancients sacrificed their life, for the good of their country. We who are weaker, let us take parts that are both easier and less hazardous. The public welfare requires that a man betray and lie and massacre; let us resign this commission to more obedient and suppler people” (VS791, F600).

Individuals may escape the necessity of vice, but the prince cannot excuse himself from public affairs. “The prince, when some urgent circumstance or sudden and unexpected accident of state necessity makes him deviate from his word and his faith or otherwise forces him from his ordinary duty, should attribute this necessity to a blow from the divine rod. Vice it is not, for he has abandoned his own reason to a more universal and powerful reason; but it is certainly misfortune. So that to someone who asked me ‘What remedy?’ I replied: ‘No remedy. If he was really racked between these two extremes . . . it had to be done. But if he did it without regret, if it did not grieve him to do it, it is a sign that his conscience is in a bad way.’” Montaigne will not call this “vice,” because the prince has abandoned his own reason to a more universal and powerful reason. This is the difference between excusing the prince and giving him the pretext for wicked, self-interested, vicious actions. The prince whose conscience is troubled does not act in his own interest, according to his private reason, but on account of a more universal, public reason, that is, reason that becomes public through the elimination of self-interest.

Montaigne wants the conscience of the prince to be preserved in its purity even though his actions cannot be called honorable. The judgment of the prince should be above his own power. In other words, Montaigne wants the prince always to preserve the conscience of the man, judging the actions that he must perform as prince from a perspective outside of his position of power. “If there should be a prince with so tender a conscience that no cure seemed to him worth so onerous a remedy, I would not esteem him the less. He could not ruin himself more excusably or

becomingly. . . . What is less possible for him to do than what he cannot do except at the expense of his faith and his honor, things which perhaps should be dearer to him than his own safety, yes, and even than the safety of his people?" (VS799, F607).

The conscience of the prince, then, should set the limits on his immeasurable power. He should be racked between his two choices: "We offer a good bargain to a man of conscience when we propose to him some difficulty as a counterpoise to vice. But when we shut him up between two vices, we put him to a rough choice" (VS846, F642–43). The use of vicious means such as breaking one's word should be the prince's last resort. "These are dangerous examples, rare and sickly exceptions to our natural rules. We must yield to them, but with great moderation and circumspection. No private utility is worthy of our doing this violence to our conscience; the public utility yes, when it is very apparent and very important" (VS800, F607).

The rejection of the common good on the grounds that it can serve as justification for vicious actions implies that the prince must not pursue his own private interests in public affairs. But the more difficult cases are those in which private duty (as distinguished from private interest) conflicts with public duty. The example of Timoleon brings this conflict into sharp relief. Timoleon killed the tyrant, but the tyrant was his own brother. He freed the Corinthians from slavery, and Montaigne says that "his end is excusable if any could be." Yet his conscience was troubled that "it had been necessary to purchase the public advantage at such a price in honorable conduct" (VS800, F607–8). There is no rule that can determine what is best in each case. This must be left to the judgment of the individual. The separation of the man from the prince allows the prince to bow to necessity while, at the same time, allowing his conscience as a man to limit the violence he must do.

Montaigne's Bold Stroke and Noble Risk

This brings us to the question of Montaigne's own effects and the manner in which they are produced. Montaigne's warnings against innovation are based on the risk of the greater harm and even destruction that usually results from attempts to change the foundations of the political structure. But "nothing noble is done without risk" (VS129, F94). Montaigne's refounding carries the greatest risk because it entails the overturning of the most fundamental moral basis of society: the standard of the common good and thus of classical virtue.

Montaigne's refounding is a bold and risky enterprise and his "new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals" require extraordinary means. As soon as he moves from his thoughts to the production of effects, as soon as he acts, it becomes impossible to avoid vicious means. These trouble his conscience, so he confesses them and makes them public. In these actions, we can trace the reformation of conscience that he is seeking to effect. I will consider four instances in which Montaigne confesses to the use of vicious means and the role that each plays in his refounding. Each of these instances of Montaigne's use of vicious means shows us something about the way he seeks to limit evil. In each case, he is willing to sacrifice a traditional or conventional virtue in order to produce his own effect.

First, in "By Diverse Means" Montaigne replaces the enchantment of Homer with his own production of the marvelous. The very notion of replacing one enchantment with another involves him in a kind of deception that troubles his conscience. In "Of the Power of Imagination" he tells the story of how he helped his friend on his friend's wedding night. His friend was fearful that the bride's former suitor had placed an enchantment on him that would cause him to be impotent. Belief in enchantments was widespread at the time, but Montaigne himself does not believe in such invisible powers. Nevertheless, he gives his friend a gold piece engraved with celestial figures sewn to a ribbon and tells him to put this ribbon on around his waist if he experiences any problems. The counter-enchantment works, and his friend's impotence is overcome. Montaigne introduces this as a story of how a "counterbattery of enchantments" was able to save someone from impotence. In conclusion, he says: "It was a sudden and curious whim that led me to such an action [*effect*], which was alien to my nature. I am an enemy of subtle and dissimulated acts and hate trickery in myself, not only for sport but also for someone's profit. If the action is not vicious, the road to it is" (VS101, F71). This sudden and curious whim is a "caprice" (VS103, F74). Montaigne's caprice is therefore an enchantment to take away the original enchantment of the invisible power of one man over another.

Second, in "By Diverse Means" Montaigne says that he would be moved by either esteem or compassion, but that compassion is more natural to him than esteem. He is the only prince who is moved by compassion for the people. Montaigne's compassion is extreme. He is not merely moved by compassion, but compassion also has "infinite power" over him (VS1100, F844) and makes him appear weak. According to the Stoics, compassion is a form of weakness and is therefore a vicious means to mercy.

Third, in "Of Diversion," Montaigne says that, in one actual case, in order to lead a young prince away from vengeance, "I did not tell him

that we must turn our cheek to the man who has just struck the other one, for charity's sake, nor did I represent to him the tragic results that poetry attributes to this passion. I let the passion alone and applied myself to making him relish the beauty of a contrary image, the honor, favor, and good will he would acquire by clemency and kindness. I diverted him to ambition" (VS835, F634). Montaigne does regard ambition as a great vice, but it is a lesser vice than vengeance and the cruelty that accompanies revenge. He attempts to prevent the evil and the violence of vengeance by the lesser evil of ambition. He does what is possible, given the character of the prince, to direct the prince to forgiveness.

Fourth, in "On Some Verses of Virgil" he discusses the erotic and the sexual in a way that he admits goes beyond the limits of propriety. Then he clarifies the purpose of his open speaking: "God grant that this excessive license of mine may encourage our men to attain freedom, rising above these cowardly and hypocritical virtues born of our imperfections; that at the expense of my immoderation I may draw them on to the point of reason!" (VS845, F642). Immoderation is a vicious means but it is necessary in order to rise above cowardice and hypocrisy and to attain freedom.

The practice of making the private public goes beyond the sexual and extends to the *Essays* as a whole. Montaigne frankly and openly discusses a diversity of private matters in public, a practice that violates the very deep-seated prohibition against bringing the private into the public. Montaigne insists repeatedly that his project is the revelation of himself; it is, therefore, a new, strange, and even bizarre enterprise. Custom, however, has made speaking of oneself a vice because it assumes that speaking of oneself will always entail boasting, a vice opposed to the virtue of truth. But Montaigne finds more harm than good in this supposed cure for pride. "The supreme remedy to cure it is to do just the opposite of what those people prescribe who, by prohibiting talking about oneself, even more strongly prohibit thinking about oneself. The pride lies in the thought; the tongue can have only a very slight share in it" (VS379, F274). At the deepest level, then, he directs the *Essays* against the vice of pride, the remedy for which is another vice: speaking of oneself. This is the most fundamental sense in which he exploits vicious means, using one vice to limit another, worse vice, and it describes Montaigne's project as a whole.

Throughout Montaigne's discussions of the inescapability of evil and vicious means, the terms that are used most frequently are terms of confessing, compensating, limiting, and excusing. "If my heart is not great enough, it is compensatingly open, and it orders me boldly to publish its weakness" (VS917, F700). In his frank admission that his immoderate

speech about the erotic is scandalous, he says: "I do not commend it, any more than I do any forms that are contrary to accepted practice; but I excuse it, and by particular and general circumstances I make the accusation lighter" (VS889, F678). Public confession, in particular, compensates and limits: "The worst of my actions and conditions does not seem to me so ugly as the cowardice of not daring to avow it. Everyone is discreet in confession; people should be so in action. Boldness in sinning is somewhat compensated and limited by boldness in confessing" (VS845, F642).

Open speech about oneself, the confession of one's imperfections and weakness, preserves purity of judgment: it makes it possible to keep one's judgment uncorrupted without justifying one's own actions. That is why Montaigne says that the judgment of the prince must be above his power and also that the prince must know how to communicate himself like any other man. Open judgment allows the man of conscience to participate in politics. As an advisor to princes, Montaigne always communicates his frank judgment to the prince, without fear and without self-interest. The role of the philosopher as advisor is to keep the judgment of the prince above the prince's power, that is, to separate the man from the prince. Thus, the philosopher will humanize the prince.

Public confession also assumes that forgiveness is the necessary condition for the kind of society in which open speaking and the expression of judgment are essential. By boldly publishing his own weakness, Montaigne makes that first, generous gesture that might possibly bring that kind of society into existence. This is his bold stroke and his noble risk.