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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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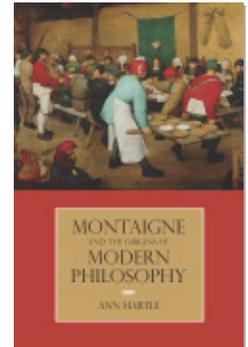
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Chapter Six



The Primacy of the Private and the Origins of a Free Society

Society is a new, modern form of association. As Francis Slade demonstrates, the distinction of having first invented society belongs to Machiavelli. Machiavelli “generates the distinction between State and Civil Society. The term itself, *civil principality*, is Machiavelli’s invention.”¹ According to Slade, “civil society is society from which what is political has been removed. . . . Depoliticized society and decontextualized rule are the great innovations effected by modern political philosophy.”² This is precisely what we see in Montaigne, that is, the separation of the man from the prince and the separation of the social from the political.

While Machiavelli is the first modern philosopher to invent society, Montaigne is the first to give a full account of this new form of association and to actually bring it into existence through the publication of the *Essays*. The social is the domestic and private brought into the public. The separation of the man from the prince is the separation of society from politics, that is, it is the freedom of the social. Montaigne identifies the “social bond” as the free communication of our thoughts and wills. This is the bond that unites while at the same time allowing each human being to seek the good in his particularity.

The Emergence of the Private into the Public

Montaigne reorders the public and the private: his end is domestic and private. In “Of Repentance” he writes: “I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the entire form of the human condition” (VS805, F611). A life of richer stuff is the life of politics. Whereas for Aristotle, human

nature finds its ultimate fulfillment in the political community through the practice of moral virtue, Montaigne sees nothing superior in the public role of the prince. The traditional notion of human nature has been replaced by “the human condition,” and in this condition each man is complete. The human condition is a private condition, and human perfection is now located in the private realm. “It is an absolute perfection and God-like to know how to enjoy our own being rightly.” The sentences that follow tell us something about what our own being is. “We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting on our own rump” (VS115–16, F857). The prince is merely and essentially a private man, like every other man. As the *Essays* begin with his domestic and private end, so they end with the prince now become a private man.

Thus, “human condition” reduces all human beings to a private status, erasing the hierarchical distinctions implicit in the perfection of form, the perfection that is final cause. Each man bears the entire form of the human condition, not on account of a common end but on account of the “springs of action,” that is, on account of beginnings that are not ends. “The souls of emperors and cobblers are cast in the same mold. . . . they are led to and fro in their movements by the same springs [*ressors*] as we are in ours” (VS476, F350). The will of the cobbler is equal to the will of the emperor. Equality is equality of the will.

Montaigne identifies three aspects under which a man might be judged: the way he appears in public, the way he is in the interior of his soul, and the way he behaves in the private, domestic setting. Any man can put on a good face in public, “but to be disciplined within, in his own bosom, where all is permissible, where all is concealed—that’s the point. The next step to that is to be so in our own house, in our ordinary actions, for which we need render an account to no one, where nothing is studied or artificial” (VS808, F613). In “To the Reader” he presents the same three possibilities. Had he intended to seek the favor of “the world,” he would have appeared in a studied posture. Had he been born in those nations that are said to still live under “the sweet freedom of nature’s first laws,” he would have shown himself wholly naked. Instead, since his end is domestic and private, he wants to be seen in his simple and “natural” form, without striving. The domestic and private, then, is still “natural.” The private realm is where we act without being seen by others, where we are what we truly are. This is “our own being.”

Montaigne wants to produce his effects on the hidden springs of action, to reform the will. When he studies the histories, therefore, he is more interested in the private actions and lives of the great: “Every movement reveals us. That same mind of Caesar’s which shows itself in ordering and directing the battle of Pharsalia, shows itself also in arranging idle and amorous affairs” (VS302, F219). Montaigne would rather know the conversation that Brutus had with his friends in his tent than the speech Brutus made to his army; he would rather expose what Brutus was doing in his study and his chamber than what he did in the public square and the Senate. That is why biographies are so interesting to him: they focus more on “what comes from within than on what happens without” (VS415–16, F302–3). “It takes a keen and select judgment to perceive the order in these humble, private actions” (VS809, F614). Judging the men of his day, he finds that “the real condemnation” is that even their private lives are corrupted (VS811, F615–16).

Montaigne shines the light of publicity on the private and thereby brings it into the public. To make it appear is to make it public. The private can now emerge into the public view without shame, and this emergence radically changes the public realm.

Judgment Restored

How, then, does Montaigne bring about this reordering of public and private and this radical reformation of the public sphere? In “Of Custom” he tells us that, at one time, he had found himself in the position of having to justify an authoritative customary observance. He wanted to establish this custom, not simply by the force of the laws and examples, but by tracing it back to its origin. But in doing so, he discovered that its “foundation” was “so weak” that he, who was supposed to justify it to others, instead became “almost disgusted” by this practice (VS116–17, F84).

Where, then, does he stand with respect to the authority, the foundational status, of custom? When the mask of custom is torn off, it exposes an authority based on nothing but time and usage; and when Montaigne subsequently measures custom by the standard of truth and reason, his judgment is “all upset” but “nevertheless restored to a much surer status” (VS117, F84–85). How can his judgment be “restored” once he has seen the weak origin of custom?

The examples he uses to show what happens to him in his attempt to rid himself of the prejudice of custom illustrate the strangeness and even barbarity of French laws: they illustrate the way that judgment is upset

when one refers custom to truth and reason. What could be more strange, he asks, than to see a people governed by laws it does not understand, that is, laws written and published in Latin, which therefore require paid interpreters? It is “monstrous” that reason, law, and justice must be bought and sold. What could be more barbarous than the simultaneous existence of two codes of conduct: the code of arms, which binds the nobility by the standard of honor, and the civil code, which forbids the avenging of insults? “There are two sets of laws, those of honor and those of justice, in many matters quite opposed. The former condemn rigorously a man’s enduring being given the lie as the latter condemn his avenging it.” He asks, “what could be more barbarous” than the condition in which a man is degraded from honor and nobility if he endures an insult without avenging himself and incurs capital punishment if he does avenge himself? (VS117–18, F85)

Immediately after the discussion of these strange and barbarous customs, he turns to consider more “indifferent things,” such as clothing. Just as there are monstrous laws, so also there are monstrous fashions in clothing, monstrous because they do not serve the needs and comfort of the body “on which depend their original grace and fitness.” It is possible, then, that someone would “want to restore them to their true end” (VS118, F85). By turning to indifferent things, Montaigne suggests that in a similar way custom and the laws might also be restored to their true end.

Further, within the discussion of strange and monstrous laws, there are suggestions of other possibilities. With respect to the burdens imposed by the Latin laws, which bind the people in all of their domestic affairs and which must be interpreted by paid lawyers, Montaigne mentions the “ingenious opinion” of Isocrates who advised the king “to make the trades and negotiations of his subjects free, gratuitous, and lucrative, and their disputes and quarrels onerous.” Montaigne also points to a time in their own history when the French were not governed under Latin laws: “I am grateful to fortune that, so our historians say, it was a Gascon gentleman, and from my part of the country, who first opposed Charlemagne when he wanted to give us Latin and imperial laws.” By specifying that this unnamed man was from his part of the country, Montaigne associates himself with this Gascon gentleman who opposed Charlemagne’s innovation.³ In addition to the burdens forced on private life by the Latin laws, the result of their imposition is the barbarous but lawful custom of having to purchase justice and being denied justice if one cannot pay. Thus, Montaigne says, to the three “ancient” estates of Church, Nobility, and People, a fourth has been added, the estate of lawyers that has sovereign authority over life and property. Once again, Montaigne is recalling

a time before the emergence of this fourth estate, the time of the three ancient estates.

In *Montaigne's Politics: Authority and Governance in the Essais*, Biancamaria Fontana describes the legal situation to which Montaigne refers: "An unfortunate combination of Roman law and feudal custom had produced in France an aberrant result, a judicial monstrosity, which subsequent interventions on the part of the crown had only succeeded in making more incoherent and unmanageable. . . . France had far too many laws. . . . Moreover, many of these laws were obsolete or redundant, some contradicted one another, and all were expressed in a characteristically cryptic jargon." French law "was distinguished by its remarkable obscurity: people were governed by codes that were not even written in their own language, and that they could neither read nor understand without the costly assistance of specialists." This resulted in what Montaigne calls the barbarous custom of having to pay for justice. Fontana says that "Montaigne was strongly opposed to the venality that characterized the French judicial system. To begin with, he disapproved of the fact that magistrates generally expected to be remunerated for their services by the parties involved in trials: payments ranged from simple fees, in themselves rather modest, to far more substantial benefits, such as pensions, appointments, or gratuities."⁴ In 1584, Montaigne drafted comments on a project of judicial reform intended for Henry of Navarre in which he expressed "his belief that there should be 'one single justice,' and that consequently legal services should be free of charge and equally accessible to all, regardless of wealth and social position."⁵

Fontana's description explains the situation of the nobility that Montaigne finds monstrous as well as the existence of a fourth estate, which was so oppressive to the poor. "In France the magistracy represented a powerful caste, a 'Fourth Estate'; yet in practice only the lowest ranks of the population were subjected to their authority and to the prescriptions of the law. The nobility followed a code of honor of its own, which often clashed with ordinary legislation and was deemed superior to it; among the members of the Third Estate, the rich could pay to secure a favorable treatment from judges and tribunals, so that only the poor were exposed to the full rigor of the law."⁶

Montaigne says that "our French laws, by their irregularity and lack of form, rather lend a hand to the disorder and corruption that is seen in their administration and execution. Their commands are so confused and inconsistent that they are some excuse for both disobedience and faulty interpretation, administration, and observance" (VS1072, F821). As Fontana shows, Montaigne was involved in contemporary efforts to

reform the French judicial system; but his reform also goes much deeper. By pointing back to an ancient condition, a time before the imposition of burdensome Latin laws, Montaigne is suggesting change that is really a “restoration” of a condition within the history of the French people, a possibility that he discovers within that history. Through introducing the “ingenious opinion” of Isocrates, he points to the desirability of freeing the private sphere from the control of the laws as much as possible: the trade and negotiations of the people should be free, gratuitous, and lucrative.⁷ His restoration is not precisely a return to the past but the introduction of a new freedom.

The discussion of the barbarous situation of the nobility also points to a reform that is fundamental. In showing the contradictions between the laws of honor and the laws of justice, Montaigne refers to the dishonor incurred by enduring insult, specifically the insult of “being given the lie,” that is, to be accused of lying. Montaigne devotes an entire essay to this subject, “Du démentir,” or “Of Giving the Lie.” He begins by describing his own project in writing the *Essays*, how he has taken himself as the subject of his book. So the question arises of how we can believe that a man would actually tell the truth about himself. At this point, the discussion turns to the custom concerning the gravity of the insult of being given the lie: why do the French regard this as the extreme of insult? “Our nation,” he says, “has long been reproached for this vice” of lying. Salvianus of Massilia, who lived at the time of the Emperor Valentinian, says that “to the French lying and perjury are not a vice but a manner of speaking.” Montaigne goes further: “If a man wanted to go this testimony one better, he could say that [lying] is now a virtue to them. Men form and fashion themselves for it as for an honorable practice; for dissimulation is among the most notable qualities of this century” (VS666, F505).

Given the French penchant for lying and also the honorable status of lying, Montaigne wonders “what could be the source of that custom, which we observe so religiously, of feeling more bitterly offended when reproached with this vice, which is so common among us, than with any other; and that it should be the worst insult that can be given us in words, to reproach us with lying.” One possible cause is that it is natural to defend oneself most for the defects of which we are most guilty. Perhaps we try to unburden ourselves of guilt by becoming resentful of the accusation. We condemn it in appearance although we have it in fact. Once again, he makes the association between lying and cowardice: the reproach of lying is the accusation of cowardice and lack of courage. Indeed, there is no more obvious cowardice than to deny our own word and to deny what we know.

It is here that Montaigne sets out his understanding of the social bond and thus lays the new foundation of human association. Our word, he says, is the only instrument we have to communicate our thoughts and wills. "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 society" (VS666–67, F505). In "Of Liars" he says, "Lying is an accursed vice. We are men, and hold together only by our word" (VS36, F23).

Montaigne concludes "Of Giving the Lie" with the observation that, among the ancient Greeks and Romans, giving the lie was not considered so great an insult and did not result in violence and revenge. This indifference of the ancients looks "novel and strange" to us. So he wonders how it came to pass that giving the lie has become the extreme insult: "As for the varied etiquette of giving the lie, and our laws of honor in that matter, and the changes they have undergone, I shall put off to another time telling what I know about that, and shall meanwhile learn, if I can, at what time the custom began of weighing and measuring words so exactly, and attaching our honor to them" (VS667, F506). In fact, he does not discuss this explicitly again in the *Essays*.

Montaigne's refounding consists in his discovery, his invention, of truth as the foundation of society. He does this by taking the custom concerning giving the lie and directing it to its true end. This entails the reformation of the nobility through a transformed notion of honor and courage. That is why he so strongly associates lying with cowardice. He turns the desire for honor, expressed in revenge for the insult of giving the lie, into the notion of honor as keeping one's word, telling the truth, and communicating one's thoughts and will.

While the philosophers either hide under the authority of custom or reject custom entirely on account of the weakness of its origins, Montaigne discovers or invents the possibilities already present in the tradition. There are two senses of the possible that must be addressed with respect to Montaigne's invention. The first is the sense of the possible as that which is "realistic," what can reasonably be expected to be accomplished. This meaning amounts to a rejection of the notion of perfection as unrealizable in practice and therefore involves a concomitant lowering of expectations based on the idea that to aim at perfection is futile and dangerous. Perfection, the attainment of the highest and the best state of affairs, is really impossible. It is this notion of the possible that seems to be Machiavelli's point in chapter 15 of *The Prince*: we must, he argues, turn to the "effectual truth" and away from the imagination of republics that have never actually existed. What has never actually existed is

impossible. That Montaigne interprets Machiavelli in that way is suggested by his claim that Machiavelli's arguments are based on experience: since the imagined best has never actually occurred, it is not possible.

The second sense of the possible is that of what has never been seen before. According to this sense, the possible is distinguished both from the probable and from the actual. The fact that something has never existed in the past does not mean that it cannot ever exist, that it is impossible in principle. This is the openness to the possible that Montaigne has in mind when he says that his end is to tell not what has happened but what can happen.

Montaigne says that we must take men as we find them, already bound and formed to certain customs (VS957, F730). This attitude toward the givenness of the human condition is what makes the difference between change and overthrowing everything, between refounding and destroying. Both senses of the possible, then, are present here: the rejection of the hierarchical notion of perfection implied in his "taking men as we find them," and the introduction of a foundation of association that had never been seen before.

Michael Oakeshott describes this discovery of possibilities as the pursuit of "intimations." The amendment of traditional modes of behavior and of existing social arrangements is accomplished not by a process of making them conform to an ideology but "by exploring and pursuing what is intimated" in these traditional modes.⁸ This is what preserves the continuity of a tradition: "authority is diffused between past, present and future; between the old, and new and what is to come."⁹ This view of change and reform gives some assurance that "our mistakes of understanding will be less frequent and less disastrous."¹⁰ Reform as the pursuit of intimations is in accord with Montaigne's criticism of reform undertaken by means of new opinions. That is why he can be disgusted with innovation and, at the same time, be the initiator of innovation. Montaigne's reform is reform through old opinions: his refounding is also a restoring. As Biancamaria Fontana puts it, recovery must come "from the hidden resources of French society itself, from the community's potential for self-regeneration."¹¹

The Three Ancient Estates and the Origin of Society

The Reform of the Nobility: Pride and Shame

In *The Quality of Mercy*, David Quint argues that the *Essays* can be read as an extended commentary on "By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End," for this first essay reveals "Montaigne's shifting attitude

toward a model of heroic selfhood.”¹² The *Essays* are directed to his noble contemporaries, especially at the vice of cruelty which is so deeply associated with valor in combat. An ethical reform of his class is at the heart of his political project: “To be truly noble . . . is to forswear cruelty.”¹³ Quint argues persuasively that “by making clemency a form, indeed the supreme expression, of true valor, Montaigne here reveals the logic behind an argument that the *Essais* make elsewhere to *substitute* clemency for valor as the distinguishing sign of aristocratic identity.”¹⁴ Indeed, “the choice of pardon over revenge is the moral and political touchstone of the *Essais*.”¹⁵ In his chapter entitled “An Ethics of Yielding,” Quint describes Montaigne’s moral teaching as “an ethics of submission” that shows the nobility how to yield while retaining honor and integrity.¹⁶ This is “an honorable kind of submission that is the result of free individual choice.”¹⁷

As Hannah Arendt argues, the public sphere is radically changed by the emergence of the private into the public. Montaigne offers the possibility of the reform of the nobility through a new understanding of honor as the generous gesture of submitting their private selves to public scrutiny; thus, the nobility holds in itself the possibility of transforming the political through honorable submission. At the expense of his own immoderation, he wants to draw “our men” to freedom and reason. He is attempting to bring into being the character that is “neither master nor slave,” the character that is necessary for the origin and the preservation of a free society. The nobility, who are born to rule, must learn to hate mastery. But spiritedness must not be crushed: it must be separated from the desire for domination. In other words, the noble man must be educated to hate both mastery and slavery.

For the proud, spirited man, shame has to do with the way he appears in public, before other men. Hence, the laws of honor that require him to risk his life rather than suffer the humiliation of enduring an insult. Shame is one of the few things that Montaigne says is unique to man. For the nobility, pride in one’s family is pride in one’s noble origins. The noble man sees himself as suited to rule by nature on account of his superior origins. Montaigne’s open speaking about the sexual is intended to emphasize the point that all men share the same origins. It is in order “to make us all equal” that nature has made us this way (VS877, F668–69). Early in the *Essays*, Montaigne tells us that he is very susceptible to shame concerning the members and acts that custom orders us to cover up: “I, who am so bold-mouthed, am nevertheless by complexion affected by this shame” (VS18–19, F11). His speech, however, is excessively free with respect to the erotic and sexual. In “On Some Verses of Virgil” he

discusses the erotic in a way that he admits goes beyond the limits of propriety. Then the purpose of his open speaking becomes clear: he intends his excessive license to encourage the nobility to attain freedom, by rising above the cowardly and hypocritical virtues born of their human imperfections; he writes as though he had no shame so that he might lead them on to the point of reason even at the expense of his immoderation (VS845, F642). Here he is addressing “our men,” the nobility who are driven by the shame that belongs to spiritedness. Thus, his license in discussing the sexual is intended to effect a transformed sense of shame and of honor. By going against the instinctual shame associated with sex as the private and hidden, Montaigne is weakening the power of the shame associated with the private, overcoming one of the most deeply ingrained of all customs, or perhaps even of nature itself. He directs his license to the encouragement of freedom, the freedom of self-revelation.

Montaigne also intends his open speech about the sexual and about himself to bring words and deeds into harmony. We are not ashamed to do shameful things but we scruple to speak about them. “The words that men fear most are those that uncover them. We must tuck up this stupid rag that covers our conduct. They send their conscience to the brothel and keep their countenance in good order” (VS846, F643). Bringing words and deeds closer together, therefore, has the effect of limiting evil. Confession to some extent limits and compensates for sin. “Whoever would oblige himself to tell all, would oblige himself not to do anything about which we are constrained to keep silent” (VS845, F642).

Custom has made speaking about oneself a vice, but Montaigne sees this prohibition as one of those hypocritical and cowardly virtues that are obstacles to freedom. The vice of speaking about oneself is actually the cure for the greater vice of pride (VS379, F274). Self-revelation both overcomes pride and compensates for pride because it is a new way of showing oneself in public.

Dissimulation, on the other hand, or hiding oneself under a mask, testifies to cowardice and baseness of heart: “In that way our men train for perfidy; being accustomed to speak false words, they have no scruples about breaking their word. A generous heart should not belie its thoughts; it wants to reveal itself even to its inmost depths. There everything is good, or at least everything is human” (VS647, F491).

The new character of the noble man that Montaigne seeks to bring about combines the renunciation of mastery with spiritedness and courage; this is a character that is neither master nor slave. Therefore, Epaminondas is the new, “more human,” figure of the prince. He was able to combine the ferocity of the prince in battle with the gentleness of the

man. His was “a soul of rich composition,” for he brought goodness and humanity to the roughest and most violent of human actions. Montaigne points to the possibility that the character of Epaminondas was not natural and could therefore be produced by education: “That heart, so great, full and obstinate against pain, death, and poverty—was it nature or art that had made it tender to the point of such an extreme gentleness and goodness in disposition?” (VS801–2, F608–9). It is possible, then, that the disposition of a man, the temperament that he is born with, his “nature,” can actually be changed by art. Epaminondas achieved “the perfect reformation of mores” (VS1109, F851).¹⁸

“Of the Education of Children” is addressed to the widowed mother of a young nobleman. Montaigne advises her on how she should choose a tutor for her son and what the tutor should seek to effect. Above all, Montaigne says, the tutor must make it possible for the boy to form his judgment, which is a work that is “all his own.” With respect to the boy’s future role as a member of the prince’s court, Montaigne writes: “If his tutor is of my disposition, he will form his will to be a very loyal, very affectionate, and very courageous servant of his prince; but he will cool in him any desire to attach himself to that prince otherwise than by a sense of public duty. Besides several other disadvantages which impair our freedom by these private obligations, the judgment of a man who is hired and bought is either less whole and less free, or tainted with imprudence and ingratitude. A courtier can have neither the right nor the will to speak and think otherwise than favorably of a master who among so many thousands of other subjects has chosen him to train and raise up with his own hand. This favor and advantage corrupt his freedom, not without some reason, and dazzle him” (VS155, F114). Therefore, the nobleman must resist the seduction of the court and maintain his freedom and independence at home: “In truth, our laws are free enough, and the weight of sovereignty scarcely touches a French nobleman twice in his life. The real and essential subjection is only for those among us who go seeking it and who like to gain honors and riches by his service; for anyone who wants to ensconce himself by his hearth, and who can manage his house without quarrels and lawsuits, is as free as the Doge of Venice: ‘Slavery holds but few; many hold fast to slavery’ [Seneca]” (F195, VS266). Slavery, then, is seeking one’s own private good in the public realm. Freedom, in contrast, means a contentment with the domestic and private and a resultant detachment from any personal gain from political power or rule.

The reform that Montaigne wants to effect occurs, then, at the deepest level of action; it is a reform of the beginnings, the springs of action. “Those who in my time have tried to correct the world’s mores by new

opinions, reform the superficial vices; the essential ones they leave as they were.” These “external, arbitrary reforms” cost little and bring public acclaim, leaving “the other natural, consubstantial, and internal vices” unaffected (VS811, F615). He criticizes those who concern themselves with the correction of trivial faults and “the vices of appearance” rather than the vices of reality. “Oh what an easy and applauded route those superficial men take, compared with ours!” (VS888, F677). Montaigne is not attempting to reform through new opinions. Rather he is attempting to reform judgment itself, and the reform of judgment entails a reordering of the will toward overcoming the desire for mastery.

Montaigne’s project, then, is nothing less than a transformation of the moral life. The pride of the nobleman must no longer find its object in domination. Therefore, shame must be redirected, and honor understood, in a new way.

Reordering Virtues and Vices

“The Romans took the general term ‘virtue’ from their word for ‘strength.’ The proper, the only, the essential form of nobility in France is the military profession. 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 and acquired particular rank and reputation; whence it has retained this linguistic honor and dignity. Or else that these nations, being very warlike, gave the prize and the worthiest title to the one virtue which was most familiar to them” (VS384, F277). As he frequently does, Montaigne goes beyond the most common and familiar form of virtue, strength in war. He intends his new lesson to replace that familiar foundation of human strength with the foundation of goodness or innocence, a foundation that in the natural hierarchy appears weak.

This new foundation, however, gives rise to an entirely new ranking of the traditional virtues and vices. “Confusion about the order and measurement of sins is dangerous. . . . Even our teachers often rank sins badly, in my opinion” (VS340, F244–45). Montaigne’s goodness leads him to the judgment that cruelty is the extreme of viciousness: “Among other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and by judgment, as the extreme of all vices” (VS429, F313). His hatred of cruelty verges on extreme “softness” and is therefore easily mistaken for weakness. Cruelty is the vice that would be most closely associated with the ferocity necessary for courage in war and with the willingness to fight for the freedom of one’s country. Thus, the spirited would be most inclined to this vice.

Cruelty is, of course, regarded as a vice in the classical-Christian tradition, but it is not regarded as the extreme. By establishing cruelty as the worst of the vices, Montaigne changes the meaning of vice itself. Rather than ranking the virtues and vices according to the classical standard of self-perfection, he ranks them according to the requirements of the social. This reordering, announced in "Of Drunkenness," leads him to conclude: "I find [drunkenness] a loose and stupid vice, but less malicious and harmful than the others, which almost all clash more directly with society in general" (VS342, F247). The drunkard's lack of self-control does not threaten the social so deeply as the cruelty of a spirited ruler.

Together with cruelty, Montaigne ranks ambition as one of the worst vices. The valor of Epaminondas is "not sharpened by ambition": his was a "well-ordered soul" (VS756, F572–73). Montaigne himself had been tempted toward this vice, even seeing opportunities for satisfying ambition in the Reformation (VS320, F232). But he holds firm against these temptations (VS992, F759). As mayor of Bordeaux, he avoided all innovation that might have given him a glorious reputation but would at the same time have been harmful to the city (e.g., VS1021, F781). As we have seen, his most severe condemnation of ambition is reserved for his judgment of Caesar, because Caesar sought his glory in the ruin of his country and the subversion of the republic. However, ambition is still a lesser vice than revenge and cruelty. In fact, it is Caesar who shows that the vice of ambition is not necessarily accompanied by cruelty: Montaigne admires Caesar for his great clemency and sees in him many rare seeds of virtue (VS430, F314 and VS731, F552).

Ambition ranks so high on the list of vices because it entails the pursuit of glory and the desire to rule. The desire to rule, then, is not the legitimate and just assertion of one's superiority but rather the vice of wanting to assert one's right to mastery. Montaigne takes the honor out of ambition. He diverts the ambitious man to a different image of honor: "Since we will not do so out of conscience, at least out of ambition let us reject ambition. Let us disdain this base and beggarly hunger for renown and honor which makes us grovel for it before all sorts of people . . . abjectly and at no matter how vile a price" (VS1023, F783). Ambition is to seek one's own good in politics and is therefore a form of dependence upon one's master for one's own good. In this, it is servile and shameful.

Montaigne's treatment of ambition also brings out the way in which he understands and deals with the passions. In "Of Diversion," he tells how he led a young prince away from the passion of vengeance: "I let the passion alone" (VS835, F634). He does not try to persuade the prince to directly confront the passion of vengeance. Rather, Montaigne diverts

him to ambition because ambition is a lesser vice than vengeance. Thus, the role of the passions is different for Montaigne than it is for Aristotle: Montaigne uses one passion to counter another more harmful one. He avoids the struggle between reason and passion, thereby minimizing the role of mastery in the practice of virtue. Further, he diverts the prince by means of an image of the honor and goodwill to be gained by mercy and kindness, thus affecting the prince's judgment of the true meaning of honor and leading him away from the customary view that honor is primarily a matter of avenging insults.

After cruelty and ambition, the vice that Montaigne hates most is lying. Truth is the "first and fundamental part of virtue" (VS647, F491). Indeed, "the first stage in the corruption of morals is the banishment of truth" (VS666, F505). Again, we see the connection of his ranking of vice and virtue with the social, for truth is the foundation of society. That is, truth is the first and fundamental part of virtue because it is the social bond.

Referring to the practices of the nobles at court (and apparently also to Machiavelli), Montaigne writes: "As for this new virtue of hypocrisy and dissimulation, which is so highly honored at present, I mortally hate it: and of all vices, I know none that testifies to so much cowardice and baseness of heart" (VS647, F491). Through his openness he wants to encourage the nobility to attain freedom by rising above cowardice and hypocrisy (VS845, F642). It requires courage to speak of oneself (VS664, F503), while "not to speak roundly of oneself shows some lack of heart" (VS942, F920). It is craven and servile to disguise and hide ourselves, and not to dare to show ourselves as we are. That is how "our men" train themselves for breaking their word. A "generous heart" does not belie its thoughts but rather wants to reveal itself entirely (VS647, F491). Montaigne is redirecting the virtue of courage to truthfulness rather than valor.¹⁹

But what action could initiate this reform of the nobility? What could make it possible for men of honor to lay down their arms and seek the conditions of society? Pride is transformed into generosity by open speech. Montaigne says: "My essential form is suited to communication and revelation. I am all in the open and in full view, born for society and friendship" (VS823, F625).

The *Essays* show us both a new notion of honor and a new notion of strength. Alexander and Caesar are not relaxing their souls, but "toughening" them by submitting their violent tasks to the practice of everyday life (VS1108, F850). Strength is not a matter of mastery over others but of "stepping down" and essaying oneself against other men using only what is all one's own in the freedom of social life.²⁰

The emergence of the private into the public must entail an overcoming of the primitive instinct of shame that causes us to hide and cover up the private. Looked at in this way, the entire project of the *Essays* is the overcoming of shame. Montaigne uncovers himself, revealing the most private aspects of his life. This is the act of generosity that lies at the origin of society. Montaigne has made the first generous gesture.

The People

Like Hobbes, Montaigne insists on the legitimacy of fear as the motive for giving one's word. Whereas the noble man acts not out of fear but only out of a certain kind of pride, the common people are presumed to be reliably motivated by the fear of death. One of the most persistent themes of the *Essays*, however, is the way in which the common people, the weak, are accidentally similar to the strong. For example, in "By Diverse Means We Arrive at the Same End," the common people are moved to mercy through astonishment: astonishment produces the same effect in them as esteem produces in the princes. The story of the rank and file of Dionysius's army shows that the display of heroic virtue can elicit the response of rebellion against the tyrant. Astonishment brings out into the open what is hidden, what is present without our knowing that it is present, the hatred of mastery and the desire for freedom in the common people.

Furthermore, there are several stories in the *Essays* that illustrate the possibility of eliciting the trust of the common people: the confidence and trust of the great call forth trust in the many. That is what happens in the two stories that Montaigne tells in "Of Physiognomy." During the civil wars, a group of men arrived at his house, clearly with the intention of taking him and his house by surprise. It was Montaigne's practice always to keep his house open and undefended. The openness and trust that he demonstrated on this occasion caused the leader of the invaders to simply abandon his plan. Later, he often told Montaigne that his face and his frankness had disarmed the invaders. On another occasion, Montaigne was captured by a group of 15 or 20 armed men who demanded a large ransom. Montaigne refused to promise any ransom, and his captors began disputing over his life. Suddenly, a change came over them. Their leader returned to him all of his belongings and let him go free. One of these men took off his mask, told Montaigne his name, and explained to him that he owed his deliverance to his face and to the freedom and firmness of his speech. Montaigne tells these stories in order to illustrate his claim that his openness and trust often call forth a like trust (VS1060, F811–12). A similar incident occurs when there are rumors that some of

the men on his side in the civil war are planning mutiny at a review of the troops. The other officers advise caution and scaling back the planned ceremonies, but Montaigne advises that they go out among the troops, heads held high, encouraging them to display their arms. This strategy succeeded because trust elicited trust (VS131, F96).

In “Of Various Outcomes of the Same Plan” Montaigne tells the story of a military governor of a great city who, in order to quell an incipient riot, went out into the mob and was brutally killed. Fontana cites this story as evidence of the importance of trust in Montaigne’s political philosophy: “The current view—Montaigne explained—was that he was killed because he took a foolish risk; yet this was not quite true: his real mistake was not the choice of confronting the people in person, but the attitude he adopted in doing so, first surrounding himself with armed soldiers—showing his mistrust and his will to intimidate—then revealing his fear and his anxiety to win over the angry crowd. What was required instead to confront ‘the frenzied populace’ was an attitude of ‘gracious severity . . . security and confidence,’ which alone might have gained their respect.”²¹ Fontana notes the element of surprise—the surprise that can take us out of our accustomed modes of action—in this and other stories: “What interested [Montaigne] . . . was the precise nature of the feeling that led human beings, sometimes impulsively, to replace an instinctive response of fear and distrust with one of acceptance and cooperation. Thus his concern shifted from the conventional definition of an ideal moral posture to that decisive interaction between real people that so often determined the twists and turns of historical events. In the *Essais* this positive response to another human agent was identified as *fidelité*, *confiance*, and *fiance* (in English: fidelity, confidence, and trust) and gradually came to occupy a prominent place in Montaigne’s analysis.”²²

“Of Various Outcomes of the Same Plan” begins with stories of princes who dealt with conspiracies by forgiveness, clemency, and trust rather than by revenge and suspicion. Montaigne’s conclusion is that “those who preach to princes such an attentive distrust, under the guise of preaching them security, preach them their ruin and their shame. Nothing noble is done without risk” (VS129, F94). The strong assurance required for the show of trust “cannot be displayed truly entire and natural except by those who do not take fright at the imagination of death” (VS130, F95).²³

Witness to his own strong assurance, Montaigne confidently places himself among “the dregs of the people” (VS1040, F795). He is unafraid to proclaim himself “only a man of the lowest form” (VS988, F755). Like the simple Christians, he sticks to the old ways, and in order to be like the peasants, he pulls back from learning as far as possible to the seat of

ignorance. That is, he identifies himself with the people; he “steps down” by choice. The characteristic of Montaigne that comes through most forcefully on account of this moralization of pride is compassion. The first words that he says about himself in the first essay—“I am marvelously weak in the direction of mercy and gentleness. . . . I believe I should be likely to surrender more naturally to compassion than to esteem” (VS8, F4)—find an echo in the very last essay where he says that compassion has “infinite power” over him. Here he recalls the fact that his father had sent the infant Montaigne to the poorest village in his neighborhood to be nursed and had asked the lowliest villagers to hold his son over the baptismal font in order to attach and oblige the child to them. “His plan,” Montaigne says, “succeeded not at all badly. I give myself willingly to the little people, whether because there is more glory in it, or through natural compassion, which has infinite power over me” (VS1100, F844). As is usual for him, he presents possibilities without concerning himself to identify one, true cause of his character: glory, natural compassion, and the grace of baptism are indistinguishable in him.

Montaigne acknowledges the need for the conventional distinctions made among men, distinctions of honor that are so coveted among the French nobility. But, he says, “I should be more at home in a country where these orders of precedence were either regulated or despised” (VS980, F749). With respect to the distinction between master and servant, he says: “It is inhuman and unjust to make so much of this accidental privilege of fortune. And the governments which admit the least disparity between servants and masters seem to me the most equitable” (VS821, F623).

In his *Travel Journal*, Montaigne writes: “Free nations do not have the same distinction between people’s ranks as do the others; and even those of the lowest class have something lordly in their manner.”²⁴ The elimination of such distinctions of rank, then, brings out the nobility of the common people. He also comments on the lost liberty of certain Italian cities and of the traces of the desire for freedom that he saw in their people. Of Pistoia he writes: “This poor town compensates for its lost liberty by a vain image of its ancient constitution.” The citizens elect ceremonial functionaries who have no real power. Montaigne says: “I felt pity to see them feed on this monkey business; and meanwhile the grand duke has increased the taxes by ten times over what they formerly were.”²⁵ He recounts that during his visit to Florence, the grand duke had opened the palace to the country people, who filled the place with dancing. “To these people I believe this is a kind of symbol of their lost liberty, which is refreshed at this main festival of the city.”²⁶

The greatest act of generosity to the people and trust in the people is the restoration of their freedom. In “Of Presumption” Montaigne says that every man presumes that his judgment is as good as anyone else’s, that the simple productions of the understanding are within his power. That is why Montaigne’s recommendation of himself is “vulgar, common, and popular” (VS656, F498). Founding on the lowly means founding on the presumption of the many. As a philosopher, he stands back and acknowledges the authority of the presumption of the common people. If you accept the presumption of every man, then you allow him to judge for himself. That is freedom, and that is how his refounding takes men as they are.

The Church

The role of the Church in Montaigne’s invention of society was discussed at greater length in chapter 2. The spiritual power of the Church provides the basis for the social bond. In the custom of honor concerning “giving the lie,” Montaigne invents a new intimation: truth as the social bond. He expresses the desire to find out what caused the shift from ancient notions of duty (which made little of accusations of dishonesty) to the central place that this insult to one’s honor occupies in his own day. But he never explicitly returns to the search for the origin of that shift. I suggest that its origin is the foundational status of truth in the Christian religion. The ancient philosophers taught that religion is merely a human contrivance to bind society together; in contrast, Montaigne holds that “our sovereign creator” has “freed our belief” and “based it on the eternal foundation of his holy word” (VS579, F437). Christianity holds that its truth is accessible to all men, to the most simple peasant woman as to the most learned theologian.

In his *Montaigne and Religious Freedom: The Dawn of Pluralism*, Malcolm Smith argues that Montaigne’s opposition to the Reformation and his views on religious toleration were similar, if not identical, to those of his friend Etienne de La Boétie and that the essay “It Is Folly to Measure the True and False by Our Own Capacity” (where Montaigne asserts the authority of the Church) was first written as an “introduction” to La Boétie’s “Memorandum on Pacifying the Troubles.”²⁷ La Boétie rejects persecution on the principle of freedom of conscience, but he also believes that tolerance will lead to a divided state. He rejects toleration on both political and theological grounds, arguing that “truth is one.”²⁸

Smith interprets Montaigne’s remarks concerning the Church as a public and immutable institution to imply that society could not survive

the very dangerous introduction of a variant form of Christianity.²⁹ The liturgy, Montaigne holds, is essentially public.³⁰ Smith argues that Montaigne rejects the idea of national religions³¹ and may have been involved in attempts to reconvert Henry of Navarre to Catholicism.³² Montaigne worried that, under the Reformers, the liberties of Catholics would be in jeopardy.³³

But Montaigne also opposes the execution of heretics, a position that was very unusual in his day.³⁴ In the end, he bows to necessity and accepts the limits imposed by what is possible.³⁵ “Of Freedom of Conscience” concludes with reflections on the emperor Julian and their relevance for the situation in France. The emperor Julian used “to kindle the trouble of civil dissension, that same recipe of freedom of conscience that our kings have just been employing to extinguish it.” On the one hand, it could be said that to give factions their freedom is to foster division. On the other hand, it could be said that civil unrest softens and relaxes the factions by taking away rarity, novelty, and difficulty. “And yet I prefer to think, for the reputation of our kings’ piety, that having been unable to do what they would, they have pretended to will what they could” (VS671, F509).

Montaigne denounces the use of force and violence in religion.³⁶ In the “Apology for Sebond,” especially in his reply to the first objection, Montaigne is highly critical of the conduct of those who call themselves Christians on both sides of the civil wars of his day. They use religion as a pretext for giving vent to their vicious passions, their ambition, hatred, and avarice. So also, in “Of Coaches” he describes the extreme cruelty of the Spanish conquerors toward the people of the New World and insists that cruelty and violence are means entirely contrary to the spread of Christian faith. Faith, he says, is not spread by conquest of territory but by “possession of men” (VS913, F697). Through his use of the spiritual power of the Church, Montaigne takes that possession and makes all men his own.

