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Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy

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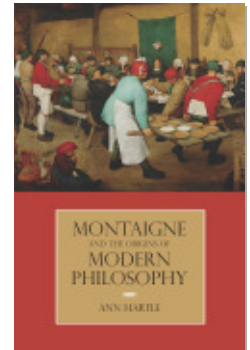
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Conclusion



The Invisibility of Philosophy and the Light of the Good

Montaigne's philosophical project, I have argued, is nothing less than the invention of society, a new mode of association of free individuals. Yet, how can he produce such an astonishing effect when he himself warns us that he is nothing more than an accidental philosopher? Montaigne's transformation of philosophy and his invention of society are the same act: his epistemology and his political philosophy originate in the same act. The unity of the *Essays* is the oneness of this single act.

It must be admitted that the *Essays of Michel de Montaigne* do not look like philosophy: there are no first principles, no arguments, no conclusions, no evident philosophical teaching. True, there are hundreds of quotations from the ancients, but Montaigne's "own" philosophy, his own philosophical teaching, is nowhere to be seen. On the other hand, Michel de Montaigne himself is always visible: the *Essays*, as he often tells us, are all about him and only about him.

Yet Montaigne does describe himself as a philosopher, although only once, in the *Essays*. In fact, he is astonished to discover that he is "a *new* figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher" (VS546, F409). Even in this passage—especially in this passage—where he describes himself as a new figure of the philosopher, his own philosophy is invisible. He simply uses the fragments of ancient philosophy to express what he is: a common, private man who claims no great learning or great deeds but who emerges into the public wearing only the fig leaf of ancient philosophy. Unpremeditated and accidental philosophy looks like nothing more than the articulation of the most familiar, the expression of pre-philosophical presumption.

Montaigne's thought moves from the familiar, the knowledge of familiarity, and then back to the familiar, in astonishment at the familiar. The

difference between his beginning and his end is simply the act of bringing the private into the public, bringing the familiar to light. In one sense this act is hidden: philosophy itself is invisible. Yet, in another sense, it is most public: the truth of the familiar is made visible. Philosophy is unpremeditated and accidental: the spontaneity of the familiar, the truth of what was already always there, is brought to light, accidentally, in the fragments of ancient philosophy.

The action of the *Essays*, then, might be described as bringing the private out into the public. Montaigne—a common, private, and weak man—presumes to bring out into public view everything that the philosophers and the great despise. By bringing the private out into the public, into visibility, he overcomes the shame of the private. Through this simple act of reordering, Montaigne transforms the human world by bringing into existence a new form of human association. In the telling of his thoughts and mores in public, philosophy becomes social. Montaigne subordinates philosophy to the everyday and thus invents society. This act of the subordination of philosophy to the everyday is the free act, the generous gesture, of the philosopher.

But what happens to philosophy itself when it descends, so to speak, into the everyday, the pre-philosophical? It seems to disappear. In becoming merely unpremeditated and accidental, philosophy has reimmersed itself in the pre-philosophical and now looks just like presumption, the pre-philosophical condition from which anything that can call itself “philosophy” must surely have to escape. What could be more unphilosophical than contentment with the pre-philosophical, with what is simply “one’s own”? Unpremeditated and accidental philosophy does not look like philosophy but it does look like presumption. That is why it is invisible.

However, the pre-philosophical to which the philosopher returns, in which the philosopher reimmersed himself, is not exactly the same as the pre-philosophical from which he began, for it is now astonishing, the pre-philosophical without presumption. In the dialectic with presumption, philosophy itself is brought down to the most familiar. In the dialectic with philosophy, the most familiar is purified of presumption. What was simply and presumptuously one’s own is now one’s own in a new way. Judgment, which is “all one’s own” and which makes the thing itself “one’s own,” introduces a new order. The act of judgment in which the philosopher subjects the thing itself and makes it his own is the same act in which he submits to the most common and lowly. That is how he makes the thing itself his own, bringing it back down to the original level of what was always already there, the most familiar. The philosopher can

only come to know what he already knows. Judgment makes his own what was always already his own in the knowledge that is familiarity. In one sense, then, everything remains the same, but in another sense, everything is changed. Philosophy is the invisible power that brings the new out of the old, the possible out of the impossible.

The most familiar in which Montaigne begins is “the practice of everyday life.” The practice of everyday life is the knowledge that is familiarity. Thus, the philosopher begins “at home” in the domestic and private. Philosophical presumption despises this beginning because it sees it as servile. Montaigne overcomes this philosophical presumption by subjecting the thing itself, that is, mastery itself, to the practice of everyday life, to his end, the domestic and private. In this way, he frees the most common human actions from servility and shame. He frees the slaves. That is, he refounds by replacing the old foundation of mastery with the new foundation of freedom. This is effected by the philosophical act: submission to the practice of everyday life is the subjection of mastery itself.

What happens to philosophy in the submission of the philosopher to the practice of everyday life? Philosophy becomes unpremeditated and accidental. What happens to the practice of everyday life in the submission of the philosopher? The practice of everyday life becomes the social, the space of the free self-revelation of free individuals. The philosopher is astonished at this transformation of the servile: actions that were instrumental are now good in themselves. Yet, the philosopher is astonished only at what he himself has produced.

In the single philosophical act of making the familiar astonishing, Montaigne both reforms philosophy by bringing it down from the heavens and refounds human association by freeing the realm of the domestic and private from its bondage to the servile. On the one hand, by descending into the pre-philosophical, philosophy itself is freed from philosophical presumption. On the other hand, the coming into existence of society requires the invisibility of philosophy because the social demands that the philosopher overcome his pride. As the philosopher disappears, the common man emerges into the light of the good. The philosopher must be the first to “step down” because it is the philosopher who orders the human world.

The spring of Montaigne’s action is the desire for self-disclosure. At the same time, his settled inclination of judgment is the desire for the voluntary dissolution of his self. Montaigne is content to appear in public as weak. Yet this willingness actually shows his strength because he makes himself vulnerable and thus demonstrates that he does not fear death, that is, he is free. But because he looks weak, that strength is hidden.

The spring of the philosophical act is “the good,” Montaigne’s sympathy with all men, which looks weak because it is so different from Aristotle’s striving for perfection. For Aristotle, the philosopher includes all men within himself because he is the perfection of the human form. Montaigne, the particular, the “new figure” of the philosopher, includes all men because, in the very act of self-disclosure, he willingly effaces himself for the good of all mankind.

Montaigne is the new figure of the philosopher: a merely unpremeditated and accidental philosopher. In this recovery of his common humanity, the philosopher gives up his claim to divinity and disappears into the anonymity of the crowd. At the same time, he emerges into the public as “the common man,” as every man, in his concrete particularity. The *Essays of Michel de Montaigne* display, in this single act, the essence of unpremeditated and accidental philosophy as the selflessness of the philosopher and, therefore, as the transparency of philosophy to itself.