

Introduction

This book is intended to show that Michel de Montaigne is a philosopher – that is, that he takes up the most fundamental philosophical questions in a profoundly original, comprehensive, and coherent way. Although his *Essays* have always been acknowledged as the origin of a new literary genre, they have never been recognized as philosophical in the deepest sense. Montaigne invented the essay because his thought could not be expressed in the traditional philosophical forms.

Those who have written on the philosophical aspects of the *Essays* have generally placed Montaigne in one or more of three categories. They have seen him as a skeptic of some kind, as a humanist, or as having evolved in his thought through Stoic, Skeptical, and Epicurean stages. Each of these views does capture something of the tone and substance of the *Essays*, but all are partial and none is as radical as Montaigne's own thought.

The interpretation I present here is based on the moment of self-discovery that occurs in the "Apology for Sebond." Montaigne is "a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!" I take him at his word: what he is doing in the *Essays* has never been done before.

Montaigne, then, breaks with both ancient philosophy and medieval theology. Is he, therefore, the first modern? If modernity is essentially the progress of autonomous reason that culminates in the Enlightenment, then Montaigne is not a modern philosopher. His philosophical position and the essay form in which it is embodied constitute a rejection of the claim to authority of autonomous reason, a claim that he recognized in its earliest stirrings.

Because Montaigne is a critic of modernity, can we then say that he is, as Lyotard has it, a postmodern thinker?¹ There are indeed several aspects of Montaigne's critique of modernity that postmodernists would find attractive and sympathetic. But Montaigne is deeply at odds with the most fundamental claims of postmodernism. His rejection of the authority of autonomous reason does not imply a rejection of the possibility of truth.

His affirmation of human diversity does not entail a denial of a common bond of truth.

It would not, then, be appropriate to characterize Montaigne as either modern or postmodern. It would be more accurate to locate him within the premodern tradition of classical thought and Christianity.² That is, his break with ancient philosophy and medieval theology is the kind of break that actually carries the tradition forward by deepening it.

George Steiner's critique of modern and postmodern hermeneutics can be taken, in reverse, as a description of Montaigne's relation to the premodern tradition: "What we have done since the masked scepticism of Spinoza, since the critiques of the rationalist Enlightenment and since the positivism of the nineteenth century, is to borrow vital currency, vital investments and contracts of trust from the bank or treasure-house of theology. It is from there that we have borrowed our theories of the symbol, our use of the iconic, our idiom of poetic creation and aura. It is loans of terminology and reference from the reserves of theology which provide the master readers in our time (such as Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger) with their license to practice. We have borrowed, traded upon, made small change of the reserves of transcendent authority. At its key points of discourse and inference, hermeneutics and aesthetics in our secular, agnostic civilization are a more or less conscious, a more or less embarrassed act of larceny."³ The *Essays* are unintelligible apart from the context of transcendent authority.

Steiner's account of "true reading," on the other hand, captures precisely the ontological condition for the *Essays*: "To be 'indwelt' by music, art, literature, to be made responsible, answerable to such habitation as a host is to a guest – perhaps unknown, unexpected – at evening, is to experience the *commonplace mystery of a real presence*. . . . Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text . . . *incarnates* (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) *a real presence of significant being*. This real presence, as in an icon, as in the enacted metaphor of the sacramental bread and wine, is, finally, irreducible to any other formal articulation, to any analytic deconstruction or paraphrase. It is a singularity in which concept and form constitute a tautology, coincide point to point, energy to energy, in that excess of significance over all discrete elements and codes of meaning which we call the symbol or the agency of transference. These are not occult notions. They are of the immensity of the commonplace."⁴

At the end of the preface to his historical study of Montaigne, Hugo Friedrich invites philosophers to provide a philosophical interpretation of Montaigne's thought. That is what I attempt to do here. My account of Montaigne locates him in relation to the philosophical tradition, especially because he himself defines his originality in relation to that tradition. But this book is not a historical study or a work in the history of ideas. I do not attempt to understand Montaigne within the historical context of the Renaissance and, in particular, I do not claim to treat his views on faith and

religion within the full context of Renaissance and medieval theology. My interpretation is conceptual rather than historical.

Part I takes up the ways in which Montaigne breaks with the philosophical-theological tradition and presents himself as a “new figure.” In Chapter 1 I discuss the differences between Montaigne and the ancient skeptics, and I show that there is indeed a skeptical moment in Montaigne’s mode of thought but that this is a moment of openness to the possible rather than a suspension of judgment. In particular, I argue that Montaigne’s apparent credulity, especially with respect to the stories he borrows from Plutarch, is compatible with this skepticism. Montaigne incorporates the skeptical moment into the dialectical movement of his thought: the moment of openness to the possible allows him to find the strange in the familiar.

The mode of philosophy from which Montaigne distinguishes himself most explicitly is what I refer to as “deliberate philosophy” (in contrast with his own accidental philosophy). Deliberate philosophy is the exercise of reason as rule within the soul, a place and function that reason claims for itself on the basis of its superiority within the hierarchy of nature. Indeed, reason asserts its own divinity insofar as it sees itself at one with the divine ruling principle within the whole. Montaigne criticizes and ridicules the deliberate philosophers’ pretensions to divinity by reminding them in vivid and often comic terms of their bodies, of the most base and shameful bodily functions, of their vulnerability to all of the accidents of human life, and thus of the human condition that they share in common with the lowliest and most ignorant.

I conclude Chapter 1 with a preliminary account of what accidental philosophy is. First, in contrast with deliberate philosophy, accidental philosophy is nonauthoritative and purely human. Accidental philosophy implies that truth is prephilosophical and prereflective: the truth that is discovered is just the truth that was already there. Second, accidental philosophy is circular dialectic: thought moves from the common and familiar to the rare and strange, then returns to find the rare in the common and the strange in the familiar. Third, accidental philosophy involves getting beyond what Montaigne calls “the appearance of the first sense.” Those who stop at the first sense remain in error. The essay uncovers, through circular dialectic, a deeper, second sense. The struggle with error that is implicit in the dialectic suggests that the meaning of Montaigne’s title, *essai*, is “temptation”: the essays are Montaigne’s way of living the life of the intellect, the examined life, within the inescapable condition of the temptations of the intellect. Finally, what must be if philosophy is accidental? Accidental philosophy implies that the world is a radically contingent, created world.

Chapter 2 deals with Montaigne’s treatment of the traditional metaphysical categories: being and becoming, nature, causality, the particular and the universal. In each case, he transforms the meaning of the terms, not by stipulating or inventing new definitions, but by “lowering” them, that is,

bringing them back to their prephilosophical meanings. In the minds of the learned, being is an abstract notion, far removed from what is common and familiar. In the *Essays*, being is revealed as the accidental particular. Nature has become the ideal of perfection from which we have fallen and the measure against which we must be judged. Montaigne blurs the distinction between nature and custom, including habit in the meaning of nature. The primary distinction for him is not between nature and custom but between nature and learning, especially philosophy. Nature is just how we are here and now. “Human nature” becomes “the human condition.” With respect to the metaphysical category of causality, Montaigne contrasts himself with Aristotle from the very beginning of the *Essays*. In “To the reader” he takes up Aristotle’s four causes – final, formal, efficient, and material – and presents himself as deficient and defective in each case. He cannot reveal himself apart from his imperfections. His own accidental philosophy is not the search for causes: he distinguishes the search for causes from the discovery of truth. Finally, Montaigne resists the philosophical tendency to ascend to universals. The essays stay at the level of particulars, and Montaigne uses the language of images more than the philosophical language of universals. And yet, “each man bears the entire form of the human condition.” Montaigne’s presentation of his own particular – and very imperfect – self communicates the universal human condition. Why does Montaigne lower or weaken each of the traditional metaphysical categories? His way of inquiring into “that which is” presupposes that truth is present in the imprecision and richness of common language and opinion, not in the abstract metaphysical jargon of the schools.

The third chapter deals with the form of the essay as the proper mode for Montaigne’s accidental philosophy. The meaning of *essai* as “trial” or “test” is explored in relation to the essay’s circular mode of thought, and to the way in which the essay articulates “that which is.” Montaigne presents several formulations of his purpose throughout the *Essays*: to tell his *mœurs*, to communicate himself, to encourage others to liberty, to give authority to accidental opinion, and to make his mind ashamed of itself. All of these formulations reveal a unity of intention, namely, an attack on a certain kind of rationalism.

Montaigne’s audience, then, is that “middle region” of men who are prone to error but who are able to come through error and the presumption of the learned and to think for themselves. In this regard, Montaigne is the best example of an educated man who engages fully in what Oakeshott calls “the conversation of mankind.” The metaphor of conversation raises the issue of Montaigne’s practice of quotation. I identify three levels of quotation in the *Essays* and I argue that Montaigne’s stance of quotation, as he moves among the three levels, reveals what it means to think for oneself. So also, the dialectic of history and poetry that runs through the essays implies a necessary relationship between “borrowed” truth and the ability to witness

what is before one's own eyes. The apparent disorder of the essays manifests an oracular origin in opinion; it is a daemonic-poetic order that allows to the accidental its role of discovery, in contrast to the premeditated outcome of the syllogism and the treatise.

Part II takes up the question of the meaning of accidental philosophy and the way in which Montaigne deepens the tradition. In Chapter 4 I set out the circular dialectic of accidental philosophy and show how it is circular, dialectical, accidental, and philosophical. I begin by discussing five essays and the first essay of each of the three books in order to trace out Montaigne's circular movement of thought. That circular movement might be described as a movement from low to high to low, from familiar to strange to familiar, from common to rare to common. Thought returns to its starting points and possesses those beginnings in a new way. Circular dialectic does not ascend from opinion to new knowledge. Rather, it brings to light the truth that was already there in opinion. Here I contrast Montaigne's circular dialectic with the skeptical mode of thought of Sextus Empiricus and Hume.

Montaigne refers to presumption as "our first and original malady" and as the greatest obstacle to wisdom. He recognizes two kinds of presumption, the presumption of the ignorant and the presumption of the learned. Circular dialectic overcomes both kinds of presumption and incorporates each of those moments of overcoming into its circular form. In order to see how Montaigne comes to terms with presumption, we must consider the ways in which he deals with the errors of presumption and the role of memory and imagination in overcoming presumption. His "monstrously deficient" memory is actually his freedom from the unexamined authority of both prephilosophical and philosophical opinion. His rich imagination allows him to be open to the unfamiliar and thus not subject to the presumption of the learned who dismiss as false whatever seems impossible to them. The imagination, when properly disciplined, is also essential for the proper formation of the judgment. Essay I.27, "It is folly to measure the true and the false by our own capacity," is one of the very few places where Montaigne reveals a decisive change in himself. That change is presented in terms of the two forms of presumption and it allows us to see that the circular dialectic is always a return to Montaigne himself: circular dialectic is the dialectic of self-knowledge.

The question about Montaigne over which there has been the deepest disagreement concerns his sincerity in religious matters. Some have argued that he is really an atheist who veils his atheism for rhetorical and political purposes. Others have seen him as a devout, orthodox (although perhaps weak) Christian. Between these extremes are the views of Montaigne as an unorthodox Christian, an indifferent Christian, and an agnostic. In Chapter 5 I begin to examine "what it means to believe" for Montaigne. The first section deals with the way in which Montaigne blurs the traditional theological distinction between nature and grace. Montaigne's attitude toward

“the world,” death, and repentance and his criticisms of the Reformation reveal not an indifference to religion but his own way of understanding the life of faith. Montaigne’s faith is present in the *Essays* at a level deeper than the level of learning: it is present as the pretheoretical background in terms of which the *Essays* are intelligible. Montaigne blurs the distinction between nature and grace not because he denies the presence of the sacred in human life but because he sees the presence of grace everywhere. Or, to put the matter in skeptical terms, human reason cannot make the distinction between nature and grace. In this sense, Montaigne’s skepticism is his faith: faith cannot presume to know and does not need to know whether the cause of any given action is nature or grace.

In the second section I discuss the “Apology for Sebond,” the essay that addresses most explicitly the question of faith. I argue that, in the “Apology,” Montaigne works through the dialectic of faith and reason, a dialectic that is expressed in terms of the two objections to Sebond’s natural theology and Montaigne’s replies to those objections. The first objection is usually seen as the objection that faith makes to the project of natural theology: reason is a threat to faith. The second is usually seen as the objection that reason makes to faith: faith cannot command universal assent and, therefore, cannot defend itself before the court of reason. The tendency has been to see Montaigne as either an atheist (placing him on the side of the second objection) or as a fideist (placing him on the side of the first objection) or as a skeptic-fideist (placing him on the side of the first objection and interpreting his response to the second objection as a skeptical response to the claims of reason). Montaigne, however, responds to both objections, so that any attempt to place him simply on one side would be an inadequate account of his position. In interpreting the “Apology” as a dialectic, we can see how the understanding of faith expressed in the first objection (faith is belief held by particular divine inspiration) is transformed through the dialectic with the second objection, and how the understanding of reason expressed in the second objection is reformed through its dialectic with the first objection. Faith is not particular inspiration, and reason is not autonomous. The dialectical understanding of the “Apology” leads to the conclusion that the essay is indeed a defense of Sebond, but a defense of a transformed version of Sebond’s most fundamental premise concerning the harmony of faith and reason.

In Chapter 6 I discuss the ontological dimension of Montaigne’s thought by working out what is implied in the beginning and end of the circular dialectic of accidental philosophy. Circular dialectic begins in opinion and testimony. This implies a prereflective harmony of thought and being, the location of the mind in the human world of opinion, and a notion of experience as participation in custom. Beginning in testimony also suggests an openness to mystery, to truth that cannot be fully articulated because it cannot be fully comprehended by the witness. Heidegger’s discussion of

“true humanism” is helpful in bringing out the ontological aspects of the *Essays*: for Heidegger, true humanism means that “the essence of man is essential for the truth of being.” In its beginnings in opinion and testimony, we can identify an oracular and daemonic quality in thought itself in its openness to the essential mystery of being.

Circular dialectic ends in wonder at the most familiar. This implies an absolutely contingent, created world, a world created out of nothing and, at the same time, a world in which the divine is somehow present. Contingency is the fundamental condition for being and for thought. Montaigne’s reconciliation to nothingness shows itself especially in the way he embraces our temporal condition. Creation out of nothing implies the ontological primacy of contingency and possibility. Therefore, being must be such as to allow for the most radical transformation, the “divine and miraculous metamorphosis” that Montaigne refers to at the end of the “Apology.” Creation out of nothing also entails the complete absence of the divine from nature – that is, the divine is not a part of nature. This, in turn, means that the ancient hierarchy within nature, the ordering of nature in relation to the divine principle that is highest, can no longer be maintained. Accidental philosophy is the mode of philosophy in a world where the divine is present in the world in an astonishing way; that is, it implies a created and “incarnational” world. Distinctions can be made within this world but they are not the same kinds of distinctions that are made within a hierarchically ordered world: distinctions are made and the divine is made manifest only in the encounter with the particular and with the most familiar.

Part III deals with the character of the accidental philosopher, a character that is different in several important ways from the character of the deliberate philosopher. Chapter 7 argues that Montaigne presents himself in the *Essays* as a new possibility, the great-souled man without pride. A character such as that could not be expressed in terms of the ancient categories: for Aristotle, the great-souled man is necessarily proud. Montaigne’s character is his graceful response to contingency, the harmonization of classical magnanimity and Christian humility. This harmonization is possible because Montaigne separates self-love from self-esteem and thus relocates the great-souled man from the public arena to the private realm.

Montaigne wrote his *Essays* because he was seized by the desire to tell his *mœurs*.⁵ Those ways of being, he says, are “a bit new and unusual.” In Chapter 8, I take up the subject of Montaigne’s moral philosophy and focus on what is new in his character. Although Montaigne’s admiration of classical heroic virtue is sincere, he does regard certain aspects of the self-mastery required by deliberate philosophy as excessive. In particular, he seems to associate the extremes of self-discipline with cruelty. He distinguishes between virtue, which involves inner conflict, and natural goodness or innocence, which does not involve inner struggle and which is, therefore, unworthy of honor. But it turns out that the heights of virtue, where struggle has

been transcended, look remarkably like natural goodness. Montaigne locates himself among the innocent rather than the virtuous. His character is what it is not on account of any philosophical discipline but on account of his nurse's milk. What is new in Montaigne's *mœurs* is his reordering of the vices. He hates especially both lying and cruelty. The vices associated with the weaknesses of the flesh, such as drunkenness, are ranked as lesser vices than those that are all in the soul, such as ambition. Montaigne's reform is not reform by "new opinions" but is rather a return to what he learned in the nursery.

In Chapter 9 I draw out the political implications of Montaigne's presentation of his *mœurs*. I do this against the background of modern political philosophy, especially as articulated by Rousseau in his account of the conflict between Christianity and politics. Three principles of modern political philosophy emerge from that account: the subordination of religion to politics, the privacy of religion, and the rule of autonomous reason. Montaigne is at odds with each of these principles. The nonauthoritative character of the *Essays* implies Montaigne's denial of the claims of autonomous reason over tradition. Montaigne's defense of the private life is not a preference for "bourgeois individualism" but is rather his resistance to the tendency of the state to crush all intermediary sources of institutional authority.

Montaigne belongs to two worlds – this world and the other world – but both occupy the same space of appearances. Christianity and politics are in conflict because politics is the realm of mastery and subjection whereas Christianity is the realm of sociability. For Montaigne, Christianity provides in a preeminent way the conditions of sociality – that is, truth, goodness, and beauty. Christianity is the religion of public truth. Montaigne's criticisms of the Reformation are directed at what he sees as the dangers it poses to the conditions of sociality. Although Montaigne's skepticism concerning the ability of politics to secure the human good makes him conservative in some respects, if we follow out what is implicit in the conditions of truth and goodness, we arrive at a political possibility – a Christian republic – that Rousseau regards as impossible.

Cambridge University Press
0521821681 - Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher
Ann Hartle
Excerpt
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PART I

A NEW FIGURE

1

“That Is Where He Got It!”

Montaigne’s Caprices and the Humors of Ancient Philosophy

Montaigne is surprised by himself. While making his collection of the “asinine stupidities,” the absurdities and whims of the ancient philosophers, he comes upon himself quite by accident. “So I let fly my caprices all the more freely in public, inasmuch as, although they are born with me and without a model, I know that they will find their relation to some ancient humor; and someone will not fail to say: ‘That is where he got it!’” (VS₅₄₆; F₄₀₉). He will appear to others as the mere collector of the opinions of the ancients, the consummate borrower, dragging out the most obscure quotations from the storehouse of his prodigious memory. But here is the moment of self-knowledge: “A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!”

Montaigne, of course, was entirely correct. He invented the form of the essay, and his literary genius has never been in question. But, from the point of view of philosophy, the tendency has been to place him within one or another or some combination of the ancient schools. The essay form itself, as Montaigne anticipated, does make it difficult to identify his distinct philosophical voice.

Readers of Montaigne are familiar with Pierre Villey’s view that Montaigne’s thought developed through three stages, roughly corresponding to the three books of essays: an early “Stoical” period, a skeptical crisis, and a final period in which Montaigne’s design is to portray himself. Villey’s thesis may capture something of the changing tone of the three books, but it cannot stand as an accurate account of Montaigne’s thought, even if one believes him to be simply a philosophical follower, for he quotes dozens of philosophers with apparent approval throughout all three books.

Among some of those who recognize the limitations of Villey’s reading (and those limitations are now widely recognized), there is still a tendency to look for a development or change in Montaigne’s thought.¹ Donald Frame, for example, speaks of a new sense of human unity emerging in Book III of the *Essays*.² Again, this may capture something of the tone of Book III as