

Michel de Montaigne

*Accidental Philosopher*

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“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.<sup>1</sup> Donald Frame, for example, speaks of a new sense of human unity emerging in Book III of the *Essays*.<sup>2</sup> Again, this may capture something of the tone of Book III as

distinguished from the earlier books. But to say that there is a change of tone is not necessarily to say that Montaigne's thought "developed." If he had changed his mind about such things as his own purpose by the time he wrote Book III, he could have expressed this development in his revisions of Books I and II, thus changing their tone as well.<sup>3</sup>

The current tendency is to see Montaigne as ultimately a kind of skeptic. Once again, this description captures what would seem to be the underlying skeptical tone of the *Essays* taken as a whole, and it finds support in Montaigne's highly favorable accounts of the ancient Skeptics and the absence of any explicit criticisms of the skeptical position.<sup>4</sup> One of the difficulties that this view faces is the fact that there are clearly nonskeptical aspects of Montaigne's thought. For example, he does make assertions and definitive moral judgments that, from the skeptical standpoint, appear to be dogmatic. He does not seem to pursue the skeptical version of the highest good, *ataraxia* or the calm that comes from true suspension of judgment, whereas he does pursue the nonskeptical goal of self-knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to do justice to this underlying skeptical tone while recognizing these difficulties, interpreters such as Conche have sought to attribute to Montaigne a skeptical "method" that amounts to a refusal to "absolutize" his own beliefs or to presuppose any stable truth and fixed essences of things. Consistency requires that this refusal be extended to Montaigne's Christian belief, and here this view of his thought as a moderated skepticism shows its limits most clearly, because Montaigne does seem to hold that there is indeed truth and that it resides in God, who has revealed it in part to man.

Some have tried to reconcile Montaigne's skepticism with his apparent faith by attributing to him a kind of Christian skepticism. Human reason, on its own, can do nothing. The recognition of this impotence prepares the heart and mind to receive the truths of faith. This view of Montaigne finds support especially in the "Apology," where the tone is strongly skeptical concerning the powers of human reason and where Montaigne's purpose seems to be a defense of Christian belief. But this interpretation leaves us with a faith that is a kind of irrational clinging to beliefs just to have something to believe, a faith for which we can find no grounds and for which we can seek no understanding. In other words, this would seem to be simply a skepticism that has not the courage to go all the way. Thus, some interpreters have held that Montaigne is really a skeptic and an atheist who hides his atheism behind a facade of perfunctory declarations of religious belief and submission.

Each of these ways of describing and classifying Montaigne finds evidence and support in the text of the *Essays*. My purpose here is not to give an exhaustive account of the full range of such descriptions. Nor do I claim to have so easily refuted any of them. My point is that either Montaigne is a philosophically inconsistent and even incoherent thinker – that is, he is not a philosopher at all – or a way must be found to go somehow beneath

the philosophical chaos of the *Essays* and to locate Montaigne's distinct philosophical voice. That distinct philosophical voice is best expressed in Montaigne's own self-discovery: "A *new* figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!" Montaigne invented the essay because he needed this new form to express not a "teaching" or a "system of thought," but a way of being. Montaigne is a philosopher, but a philosopher of a certain kind. He cannot be located in any of the sects or schools of ancient philosophy: his "caprices" are "without a model."

In this chapter I begin to examine Montaigne's relationship to ancient philosophy. The first section will take up the question of his skepticism. I show that there is a kind of skeptical moment in Montaigne's mode of thought but that this skeptical moment is a transformation of ancient Skepticism: Montaigne incorporates the transformed skeptical moment into the dialectical movement of accidental philosophy. The second section deals with that aspect of ancient philosophy that Montaigne contrasts most explicitly with his own accidental philosophy: ancient philosophy is "deliberate philosophy." That is, ancient philosophy understands itself as the rule of reason within the soul of the philosopher, a rule that is achieved through the harmony of the philosopher's mind with the divine ordering principle within the whole. Deliberate philosophy directs the thoughts and actions of the philosopher to a single end, divine impassibility. In the third section, I provide a preliminary account of what Montaigne means when he calls himself an accidental philosopher.

### Skepticism Transformed

Of all the attempts to locate Montaigne within the sects of ancient philosophy, the view that he is a skeptic would seem to find the greatest and most consistent support in the text. First, the repeated display of the diversity of opinion and of the disputes among the ancient sects contributes to the impression of the skeptical tone of the *Essays*. Second, Montaigne's own voice could plausibly be described as at least that of a "common sense" skepticism, the healthy dose of self-doubt that keeps one from being opinionated and stubborn and, more important, that moderates one's response to those who disagree. Third, Montaigne repeatedly and consistently speaks favorably of the skeptics. So it would seem that both the tone and the content of the *Essays* are skeptical.

As might be expected, the sheer diversity of philosophical opinion is made most manifest in the "Apology" and, in fact, constitutes one aspect of the response to the second objection against Sebond. Montaigne speaks of "the liberty and wantonness of those ancient minds which produced in philosophy and the knowledge of man many schools of different opinions, each undertaking to judge and to choose" (VS559; F420). In one section of the "Apology" he proposes to examine whether human reason has achieved

any clarity about natural and human things (VS<sub>536</sub>; F<sub>400</sub>). Here he makes his collection of philosophical opinions concerning the soul, some of them “moderate” and some of them “dreams and fantastic follies.” He provides numerous examples of arguments that are not only false but inept “in the reproaches that the philosophers make to each other in the dissensions of their opinions and of their schools” (VS<sub>545</sub>; F<sub>408</sub>). On the question of divine things, the situation is the same. After running through a long list of philosophical opinions on the divine, Montaigne concludes in an exasperated tone: “Now trust to your philosophy; boast that you have found the bean in the cake, when you consider the clatter of so many philosophical brains!” (VS<sub>516</sub>; F<sub>383</sub>). Philosophical disagreement extends even to the most important question of all: “There is no combat so violent among philosophers, and so bitter, as that which arises over the question of the sovereign good of man, out of which, by Varro’s reckoning, two hundred and eighty-eight sects were born.” And as Cicero tells us, if we disagree on the sovereign good, we disagree on all philosophy (VS<sub>577</sub>; F<sub>435</sub>).

Even if Montaigne does not see himself as a skeptic in the strict sense, there is an undeniably skeptical tone, a “commonsense” skepticism, sometimes made explicit in the *Essays*. When Montaigne considers the question of the movement of the heavens, he notes that for three thousand years it was believed that the stars moved; then Cleanthes or Nicetas maintained that it is the earth that moves. In his own time, Copernicus had so well defended this latter view that it served to account for all astronomical effects. “What are we to get out of that, unless that we should not bother which of the two is so? And who knows whether a third opinion, a thousand years from now, will not overthrow the preceding two?” The consequence to be drawn extends well beyond the matter of astronomy: “Thus when some new doctrine is offered to us, we have great occasion to distrust it, and to consider that before it was produced its opposite was in vogue; and, as it was overthrown by this one, there may arise in the future a third invention that will likewise smash the second” (VS<sub>570</sub>; F<sub>429</sub>).

This kind of healthy commonsense skepticism also has important practical consequences, especially evident in Montaigne’s attitude toward sorcerers and witches. “To kill men, we should have sharp and luminous evidence; and our life is too real and essential to vouch for these supernatural and fantastic accidents” (VS<sub>1031</sub>; F<sub>789</sub>). There are numerous places in the *Essays* where Montaigne recommends moderation based on past experience of one’s mistaken beliefs. This skepticism is a version of the recognition of one’s ignorance and it extends even to one’s speech: “I like these words which soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions: ‘perhaps,’ ‘to some extent,’ ‘some,’ ‘they say,’ ‘I think,’ and the like.” If he had children to educate, he would teach them to speak this way, preferring that they keep “the manner of learners at sixty than to represent learned doctors at ten” (VS<sub>1030</sub>; F<sub>788</sub>).



Besides the skeptical tone of the *Essays*, there is the even stronger and more compelling evidence of Montaigne's very sympathetic accounts of ancient Skepticism and of his admiration for the Skeptics themselves, especially Pyrrho. Of the three kinds of philosophy that Montaigne distinguishes in the "Apology," he takes the trouble to spell out quite fully just what the position of the Skeptics is because, he says, many people find it difficult to understand, and even the Skeptical authors are somewhat obscure and diverse (VS505; F374). The skeptical manner of speaking is especially attractive to him. His own personal emblem, a scale with the motto "What do I know?" is meant to capture the desirability of this mode of speech, best expressed by the interrogative rather than the affirmative (VS527; F393). But the most compelling evidence for seeing Montaigne as a skeptic and, further, as a Christian skeptic is the way he concludes his full and sympathetic account of skepticism in the "Apology": "There is nothing of man's invention that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness [as Pyrrhonism]. It presents man naked and empty, acknowledging his natural weakness, fit to receive from above some outside power; stripped of human knowledge, and all the more apt to lodge divine knowledge in himself, annihilating his judgment to make more room for faith; neither disbelieving nor setting up any doctrine against the common observances; humble, obedient, teachable, zealous; a sworn enemy of heresy, and consequently free from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by the false sects. He is a blank tablet prepared to take from the finger of God such forms as he shall be pleased to engrave on it" (VS506; F375). It does seem quite clear that, of all the sects of ancient philosophy, Montaigne prefers the Skeptics. It is also clear that, in his uncharacteristically long response to the second objection to Sebond's natural theology, he does speak in a decidedly skeptical voice. But is Montaigne himself a skeptic? Does skepticism provide us with a complete and adequate understanding of Montaigne's philosophical activity?

Montaigne is not a skeptic. First, he does not conform to the most important teachings of skepticism. Second, his own mode of thought is not skeptical but dialectical. Third, his reply to the second objection in the "Apology" cannot stand on its own as a statement of Montaigne's position.

Ancient Skepticism took two forms, one that looks to Pyrrho of Elis as its founder and one that emerges out of the Academy of Plato. There are differences between these forms that center around such issues as the practice of argument to achieve suspension of judgment and the role of probability in the conduct of life. Nevertheless, the three fundamental teachings of Pyrrho define the Skeptical school: we can know nothing of the nature of things; hence, the right attitude toward them is to withhold judgment; the necessary result of suspending judgment is imperturbability.<sup>6</sup>

Montaigne does not conform to these skeptical teachings. The first teaching refers primarily to our inability to know whether anything is good or evil by nature. That inability leads to the suspension of judgment. Montaigne

throughout the essays is always making judgments about good and evil. The essays are, he says, the essays of his judgment (VS653; F495). With respect to the third teaching, Montaigne's end or goal is not imperturbability or indifference. He insists on his changeability, and the consistency that he does display is not dependent on his being unaffected by the accidents of life. It is a consistency that must be accounted for as the consistency of a being immersed in time. These aspects of his self-presentation are taken up especially in Chapter 7, where his character appears as his response to contingency, and in Chapter 8, where his moral judgments and innovations are discussed.

Second, Montaigne's thought is dialectical. He does often place arguments and opinions in opposition to each other but that does not lead to suspension of judgment. Rather, contradictions become part of a dialectical movement of thought that involves judgment about good and evil and that brings truth to light. This dialectical character of his thought emerges in a partial way in this chapter where I argue that Montaigne effects a kind of transformation of ancient Skepticism. In Chapter 4, I set out the dialectic more completely and also discuss the differences between Montaigne and the Skeptics with respect to the nature of the dialectic.

Third, the reply to the second objection against Sebond's natural theology (which is regarded as Montaigne's most explicitly skeptical statement) must be seen within the wider context of the "Apology" as a whole. In the first place, Montaigne himself draws attention to the rhetorical dimension of his reply by contrasting his harsh approach with the more gentle approach that he takes to those who put forward the first objection in the name of piety. Those who bring forward the second objection "insist on being whipped to their own cost and will not allow us to combat their reason except by itself" (VS449; F328). Montaigne sees himself as constrained here to argue in a certain way, within the limits of autonomous reason. Second and more important, the reply to the second objection cannot stand on its own but rather stands in a dialectical relation to the reply to the first objection. I set out this relationship in Chapter 5 as the dialectic of faith and reason.

Although I maintain that he is not a skeptic, I would argue that there is what might be called a "skeptical moment" in the movement of Montaigne's thought, a moment that resembles but transforms the doubt or suspension of judgment of ancient Skepticism. In this chapter, I follow out one aspect of that movement of thought in order to bring the skeptical moment to light.

We can begin by noticing one very curious fact about the essays and especially about the "Apology for Sebond." Here we have supposedly the most skeptical of all the essays, where attack after attack is made on the most universally held positions, where human reason is deflated to the point of nothingness. Here, in this most skeptical essay, we find instances of what appears to be an astonishing credulity. In their introduction to the "Apology," the editors Villey and Saulnier assure us that this essay contains numerous

borrowings from the Skeptics and presents unequivocal statements of Montaigne's adherence to Pyrrhonism. But then they must try to explain the fact that, in the reply to the second objection against Sebond, Montaigne presents numerous stories about animals, many of which appear to be fabulous. For example, there are reports of ants negotiating with the enemy to ransom their dead, elephants contemplating and worshipping, the grateful lion who refuses to attack Androcles the slave who years before had removed a thorn from his paw, the halcyon's floating nest, and numerous dog stories. Montaigne seems simply to accept these stories. He repeats them without any evidence of disbelief on his part.

Villey and Saulnier explain his credulity in this way: "If in . . . (the comparison of man with the animals) one is astonished at finding so little of that critical sense, of which Montaigne shows so much in other parts of the same essay, one should not forget that these stories were guaranteed by the authority of Plutarch, from whom they are borrowed often almost verbatim, and that most of these legends were accepted without reserve by the scholars of the 16th century" (VS437). So, Montaigne's uncritical repeating of these stories, his apparent credulity, cannot really be reconciled with the otherwise overwhelmingly skeptical tone of the essay. His credulity must be explained as a lapse, a moment of thoughtless deference to the authority of Plutarch and a failure to rise above the prejudices of his century.

This interpretation is, to my mind, unsatisfactory: it denies to Montaigne's thought an elementary level of self-conscious consistency. On the other hand, if we see Montaigne's skepticism as a moment within a more comprehensive movement of thought, his skepticism turns out to be compatible with his credulity with respect to these stories.

In "Of the power of the imagination" Montaigne also repeats many stories that are, or at least may be, fabulous. But at the end of the essay, he says quite plainly that he is well aware of what he is doing and he gives us some hints as to why he does it. After reporting stories about a cat who, by its steady gaze alone, caused a bird to fall from a tree and about a falconer who brought down a bird from the air by the power of his gaze, Montaigne writes: "At least, *so they say*, – for I refer the stories that I borrow to the conscience of those from whom I take them" (VS105; F75, emphasis added). So, in spite of the fact that he himself is not certain of the truth of the stories, he reports them and even uses them as material on which to reflect and as examples from which to draw conclusions. Why does he do this? How could the truth of the stories be irrelevant to what he is doing? Montaigne provides this explanation: "In the study that I am making of our *mœurs* and motions of the soul [*mœurs et mouvemens*] fabulous testimonies, provided they are possible, serve like true ones. Whether they have happened or not, in Paris or Rome, to John or Peter, this is always some human potentiality [*de l'humaine capacité*] of which I am usefully advised by the telling. I see it and profit from it equally in shadow as in substance. . . . There are authors

whose end it is to tell what has happened. Mine, if I knew how to attain it, would be to talk about what is possible to happen" (VS105–6; F75).

What does Montaigne mean by "possible"? What sense of "possible" can allow us to account for his apparent credulity? And what are the human capacities that are revealed in the telling of fabulous testimonies? There are two "levels" of possibility that Montaigne seems to be addressing. The first and more obvious is the possibility of human action, especially the achievements of the soul in heroic and extraordinary deeds. The second is the level of belief itself. What is revealed in the telling of fabulous testimonies is something about the nature and the possibilities of the human capacity of belief.

The believable is, on the whole, the familiar. We tend to believe or accept as true whatever fits with what we already believe or accept. So, for example, we have no difficulty believing a story about someone if it accords with our assessment of his character. That the coward once again acted like a coward is no surprise; it is just what we would have expected. What *would* be surprising and difficult to believe is that the coward did something courageous. This would not fit with what we already believe, and listening to the report of the deed would be hearing something outside our own experience. Then other factors would come into play, including, of course, the credibility of the reporter and the witnesses.

Now, the *Essays*, from beginning to end, are full of stories. (In the first essay, only three pages long, there are nine stories.) Most of these stories are borrowed from ancient historians, some from recent histories, and a few either from Montaigne's own experience or from witnesses close to home, for example, his household or his village. At least some of these stories are difficult to believe. Yet, almost without exception, Montaigne seems to believe and accept them as true.

"Of sleep" is a good example of Montaigne's way of proceeding. He begins by claiming that reason does not require the sage to be entirely immobile and impassable. "Even if Virtue herself were incarnate, I think her pulse would beat stronger going to the attack than going to dinner; indeed it is necessary that she should be heated and stirred. For this reason it has struck me as a rare thing to see sometimes that great men remain so entirely poised, in the loftiest undertakings and most important affairs, as not even to curtail their sleep" (VS271; F198). So he begins here by pointing to the rare, the extraordinary, to "great men," the lofty, and what is above the ordinary.

Then he tells several stories: first, Alexander the Great on the day appointed for the battle with Darius slept so soundly that he had to be called two or three times by name to wake him. Second, the emperor Otho resolved to kill himself and set about putting his affairs in order. While waiting to hear that his friends had reached safety, he fell into such a deep sleep that his servants heard him snoring. Third, the great Cato had decided to kill himself and was only waiting for word that his friends had gotten away

from the port of Utica. He fell asleep until the first messenger came and woke him to tell him that a storm was keeping the ship in port. Then he went back to sleep until the second report came that the ship had sailed. The fourth story is also about Cato. The night before he was to confront Metellus in the public square (Metellus accompanied by the favor of the people and of Caesar, and by slaves and gladiators; Cato fortified only by his courage), Cato comforted his friends, his wife, and his sisters (who spent the night weeping and tormented), then he went to bed and slept soundly until morning.

The two stories about Cato are followed by this judgment: “The knowledge we have of the greatness of this man’s courage from the rest of his life enables us to judge with complete certainty that his behavior proceeded from a soul elevated so far above such accidents that he did not deign to let them worry him any more than ordinary disturbances” (VS272; F199). Here it seems we have a clear case of what I mentioned earlier: these deeds of Cato are believable, even though they are rare and extraordinary, because they harmonize with the other aspects and deeds of Cato’s life that we know about already. The principle here is consistency of character. Cato’s character is itself extraordinary, and within the context of his extraordinary character, these deeds are believable.

The judgment on Cato is followed by two more stories. The first is about Augustus who, on the point of going into battle against Sextus Pompeius in Sicily, was overcome by such a profound sleep that he had to be wakened to give the signal for battle. The second is about the young Marius who, after having ordered his army and given the signal for battle against Sulla, lay down under a tree and fell asleep so soundly that he saw nothing of the combat and could hardly be awakened by the rout of his men. This is Montaigne’s judgment on Marius and perhaps on Augustus as well: “They say that this happened because he was so extremely weighed down from work and lack of sleep that nature could hold out no longer” (VS272; F199).

If we compare the judgments, three things can be said. First, the judgment about Cato is made with “complete certainty” whereas the judgment about Marius is introduced with “they say.” Montaigne presents the opinion but does not necessarily make it his own. Second, the metaphors heighten the opposition: Cato’s soul is “so far elevated” above even the accident of death that he is able to sleep in its immediate presence, whereas Marius’s soul is overcome or “weighed down” by sleep. Third, Cato’s sleep is due to his courage, whereas Marius’s sleep is due to nature. The essay then concludes in this way: “And, on this subject, let the doctors determine whether sleep is so necessary that our life depends on it. For we certainly find that they put to death King Perseus of Macedonia, when he was a prisoner in Rome, by preventing him from sleeping. But Pliny alleges that there are people who lived a long time without sleep. In Herodotus there are nations in which men sleep and wake by half-years. And those who write the life of the

sage Epimenides say that he slept for fifty-seven years on end” (VS272–73; F199).

Perhaps the first thing to notice is the way these last stories are introduced: “And, on this subject, let the doctors determine whether sleep is so necessary that our life depends on it.” What is the “subject” here? The subject is “nature.” He had just reported that Marius was said to have fallen asleep because “nature could hold out no longer.” It seems that in each case where “nature” is the cause, Montaigne distances himself from the truth of the assertion: “they say” that Marius fell asleep because nature could hold out no longer. In some sense, he even seems to want to put aside the question of nature: “Let the doctors determine whether sleep is so necessary that our life depends on it.” That is a question for the “naturalists” and, as he says elsewhere, “I am not a good naturalist” (VS75; F52).

There is, then, a certain degree of doubt expressed in the way Montaigne reports some of these stories. One possible explanation of his complete acceptance of some stories and his distancing himself somewhat from others is that he trusts some sources more than others. The stories about Alexander, Otho, and Cato are all from Plutarch. The story about Augustus is from Suetonius. The stories about Marius and Perseus are from Plutarch. Of the stories that Montaigne seems to accept without question, all except one are from Plutarch. And certainly Plutarch is one of the authors Montaigne borrows from most frequently. It may be helpful then to consider Montaigne’s views on the veracity and reliability of Plutarch. Here we can look especially to two essays, “Of the power of the imagination” and the “Defense of Seneca and Plutarch.”

In “Of the power of the imagination” he writes: “Plutarch might well say to us . . . that the credit belongs to others if his examples are wholly and everywhere true; but that their being useful to posterity, and presented with a luster that lights our way to virtue, that is his work. There is no danger – as there is in a medicinal drug – in an old story being this way or that” (VS106; F76). Montaigne acknowledges that Plutarch, from whom he borrows, may himself have borrowed at least some of the stories he reports. But in the context of this essay, the fabulous testimony reveals some human capacity, some possibility.

In the “Defense of Seneca and Plutarch,” Montaigne defends Plutarch against an accusation that Jean Bodin makes in his *Method of History*. Bodin accuses Plutarch “not only of ignorance . . . but also of writing incredible and entirely fabulous things” (VS722; F546). Montaigne does not object to the accusation of ignorance: “Let him [Bodin] have his say, for *that is not my quarry*” (emphasis added). What Montaigne objects to is the charge that Plutarch wrote “incredible and entirely fabulous things.” If Bodin had simply said “things otherwise than they are,” Montaigne would not object, for “that would have been no great reproach.” It would be no great reproach “for what we have not seen we take from the hands of others and on trust.”

Plutarch does not try to conceal the fact that he is often working with borrowed material and he does not pretend to report “things as they are.” What Montaigne objects to is Bodin’s assessment of Plutarch’s judgment: “[T]o charge him with having taken incredible and impossible things as genuine coin is to accuse the most judicious author in the world of lack of judgment” (VS723; F546). Lack of judgment is here identified by Montaigne with the failure to distinguish between the possible and the impossible.

Montaigne objects to Bodin’s example of Plutarch’s failure of judgment. Bodin finds incredible and impossible the story of the Spartan boy who let his stomach be torn up by a fox he had stolen and concealed under his robe rather than be discovered in his theft. Montaigne says that he finds Bodin’s example badly chosen because “it is very hard to assign bounds to the achievements of the faculties of the soul, whereas we have more chance to assign limits to physical powers and to know them” (VS723; F546). If Montaigne had had to come up with an example of something incredible and impossible in Plutarch, he would have chosen an example having to do with physical powers rather than with powers of the soul. And there are indeed such examples in Plutarch.

But as for the story of the Spartan boy, Montaigne finds it entirely credible. The story is believable because it fits in with so many other stories about Spartan endurance (just as the story about Cato is consistent with his character). Montaigne says “I find in his example no great miracle.” In fact, he says, “I am so steeped in the greatness of those people that not only does Plutarch’s story not seem incredible to me, as it does to Bodin, but I do not find it even rare and strange. Spartan history is full of a thousand more cruel and uncommon examples: by this standard it is all miracle” (VS723; F547).

At this point in the essay, Montaigne makes a move that he makes repeatedly throughout the essays, a move that is most significant for understanding his transformation of skepticism. After saying that the story of the Spartan boy is entirely credible because it fits with a history that is full of such examples, Montaigne proceeds to recount three stories of amazing endurance under torture, two from ancient Rome and one from his own day. He begins, in other words, to show that Spartan endurance is not so rare after all. His non-Spartan examples are of two peasants and one woman: it is not necessary to look for examples only among the great men.

Montaigne concludes these examples with a story that he says was made up by someone. This is a story of a woman who, in the face of dire threats of punishment, refused to stop saying that her husband had lice. Finally, when she was thrown into the water and drowning, she still raised her hands above her head and made the sign of killing lice. This is an example, he says, of the stubbornness of women that we see every day and of which he has seen hundreds of examples. What has this to do with Spartan endurance? “Stubbornness is the sister of constancy, at least in vigor and firmness” (VS725; F548).

Montaigne concludes his defense of Plutarch against Bodin's accusation in this way: "We must not judge what is possible and what is not, according to what is credible and incredible to our sense. . . . It is a great error and yet one into which most men fall . . . to balk at believing about others what they themselves could not do – or would not do. It seems to each man that the ruling pattern of nature is in himself; to this he refers all other forms as to a touchstone. The ways that do not square with his are counterfeit and artificial. What brutish stupidity!" (VS725; F548).

In this connection, it is worth noting that the great modern "mitigated" skeptic, David Hume, makes a similar point. Hume is accounting for the fact that men are so unequal in the degree of understanding they achieve. He provides a long list of reasons, including this: "After we have acquired *a confidence in human testimony*, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another."<sup>7</sup> Both Montaigne and Hume recommend "a confidence in human testimony" for the enlargement of experience.

But certainly Montaigne is not suggesting that we should just accept and believe everything we are told. First of all, as he says in his response to Bodin, it is not difficult to judge that certain feats of physical strength are impossible. But, with respect to feats of the soul, consistency of character seems to be a guide in determining what we can accept. So the story of the Spartan boy is completely consistent with what we know about the Spartans. And in the essay "Of cruelty" Montaigne describes Cato's suicide, Cato tearing out his own entrails. He believes that Cato, in that noble act, found bliss and manly exaltation; that he not only endured it without disturbance but "enjoyed himself more in it than in any other action of his life." Were it not for Cato's goodness, which made him prefer the good of his country to his own, Montaigne believes that Cato would not have wanted to be deprived of the opportunity for this noble act occasioned by the ruin of his country. Here Montaigne goes out of his way to reject "the popular and effeminate judgments of some men" who claim that Cato's deed was prompted by some hope of glory. That consideration, he says, is "too base" to touch a heart like Cato's. Cato's action was undertaken for "the beauty of the very thing in itself" (VS425; F309).

Montaigne's judgment of Cato's death is, of course, at odds with the popular and effeminate judgments of some men and even goes further than the judgment that Cato endured his death without disturbance as the rules of Stoic discipline require. Montaigne arrives at this judgment because he does not judge what is possible by what he himself can do. This is the skeptical moment of the movement of thought displayed here. The skeptical act admits the possibility of what is incredible by the standards of the familiar, of one's own. "It seems to each man that the ruling form of nature is in himself, and to this he refers all other forms as a touchstone." Anything that is not like him is incredible and therefore impossible. The world is



shrunk to the size of his own soul, whereas confidence in human testimony enlarges the sphere of experience. As Hume says, though, confidence in human testimony must be acquired. This is not simply what we might call “natural credulity.” But it is an *education* of natural credulity.

The skeptical act with respect to human testimony is the initial suspension of the judgment that what I am hearing is impossible because it is incredible, and incredible because unfamiliar. It is an act of openness to the possible, to the unfamiliar. In this sense, Montaigne’s credulity *is* his skepticism.

If we return now to that “most skeptical” of all the essays, the “Apology for Sebond,” and in particular to the animal stories that prompted the editors to try to explain Montaigne’s surprising credulity, we can perhaps move this account a step further. How do the animal stories fit into the “Apology”? Why are they there at all? Raymond Sebond was a Spanish theologian of the fifteenth century, whose book entitled *Natural Theology, or Book of Creatures*, was given to Montaigne’s father, who asked his son to translate it from the Latin into French. Montaigne did so and later wrote this “Apology” as a response to two criticisms commonly made of this and other such works in natural theology. Montaigne suggests that Sebond’s book may be a popularized version of Aquinas.

In the Prologue, Sebond claims that God has revealed himself clearly in two “books”; first, in the Bible, and, second, in nature. Sebond holds that man can know the truth about God and himself, insofar as it is possible for natural reason to know it, by reading these truths in the book of nature. In this book of nature, each creature is like a letter and man himself is the main, the capital letter. The two objections to Sebond that Montaigne addresses in the “Apology” are: first, that “Christians do themselves harm in trying to support their belief by human reasons, since it is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace” (VS440; F321); second, that Sebond’s arguments are weak and unfit to prove what he proposes (VS448; F327). The reason that there has been such debate over whether Montaigne’s defense of Sebond is sincere (whether he is really defending him at all) is that Montaigne’s response to the second objection is a skeptical attack on the ability of reason to know anything. But an attack on reason’s claim to knowledge is as much an attack on Sebond’s project as it is an attack on Sebond’s critics.

The animal stories occur at the beginning of the long response to the second objection. The general intent of the response is to beat down human presumption. Montaigne begins by taking on man’s exalted view of his place in nature, a view that ultimately amounts to the claim that man’s reason is divine. (This is close to Sebond’s own position: man is the image of God by virtue of his reason.) The animal stories are intended to bring man down to the level of the animals, to a recognition of his equality not with God but with the beasts. Montaigne introduces this long section on the animals with this question: “What sort of faculty of ours do we not recognize in the actions of

animals?” (VS454; F332). He then takes us through just about every human capacity one could think of and points to its presence in the animals: reasoning, deduction, induction, calculation, cunning, contemplation, worship, moral virtue, and vice.

What Montaigne is displaying in this entire discussion is a certain mode of reasoning: he is moving from effect to cause, from appearances to an underlying reality, and his reasoning is based upon the principle “like causes produce like effects” or “from like effects we must infer like causes.” When the fox goes out on the frozen river, brings his ear very near the ice to hear the water running beneath, then draws back or advances according as he finds the ice too thin or thick enough for his weight, why do we want to deny to him the faculty of reasoning, of ratiocination, and of drawing conclusions: “What makes a noise moves; what moves is not frozen; what is not frozen is liquid; what is liquid gives way under weight” (VS460; F337)? This is the process of reasoning that goes on in ourselves; therefore by the principle “like causes produce like effects” we must infer this faculty in the fox.

Montaigne’s own mode of reasoning here is by analogy. And it must be noted that this is the mode of reasoning that Aquinas identifies as the way we are entitled to speak about God. Montaigne is showing that analogy cuts both ways: if we are justified in beginning from ourselves and inferring what God must be, then we must accept the appropriateness of this way of reasoning in the case of our relation to the animals. We are not entitled to engage in reasoning by analogy only when it flatters our pretensions to divine likeness. This willingness to liken ourselves to God is due to our presumption, which Montaigne refers to as “our first and original malady” (VS452; F330).

Our presumption is the first and most persistent obstacle to wisdom. Thus, it is presumption with which the activity of philosophy must first come to terms and where its skeptical moment must occur. The “brutish stupidity” of those who judge what is possible and impossible according to what is credible and incredible to them, who balk at believing about others what they themselves could not do, who take themselves as the touchstone of all forms of nature – this “brutish stupidity” is one of the most significant manifestations of presumption that Montaigne points to in the *Essays*. The stories about Cato, the Spartan boy, and the fox on the frozen river are all of a piece in this regard: they are all encounters with our presumption. The skeptical moment is not immediate disbelief but precisely the refusal simply to dismiss what is not familiar, what is not immediately recognized as being like us. Montaigne’s “skepticism,” then, is not the doubt of the ancient Skeptics, but rather an openness to what is possible and an overcoming of presumption at the deepest level. Montaigne incorporates the transformed skeptical act into his own mode of thought. How does he incorporate the skeptical moment, and what follows the skeptical moment in the movement of his thought?

If it were not for the fact that we prefer, in some sense, what is foreign and strange, Montaigne would not have spent so much time on this long list of animal stories from ancient sources. He would not need to go collecting stories from foreign lands and centuries, for he says, “in my opinion, whoever would observe up close what we see ordinarily of the animals who live among us, would find there facts just as wonderful as those we go collecting in remote countries and centuries.” In the course of the long list of animal stories from Chrysippus, Plutarch, and others, he mentions the astonishing tricks that mountebanks teach their dogs. Then he says, “but I observe with more amazement the behavior, which is nevertheless quite common, of the dogs that blind men use both in the fields and in town; I have noticed how they stop at certain doors where they have been accustomed to receive alms, how they avoid being hit by coaches and carts. . . . I have seen one, along a town ditch, leave a smooth flat path and take a worse one, to keep his master away from the ditch” (VS463; F340). The movement of Montaigne’s thought is first to open us to the possibility of the strange and foreign, then to lead us back to the familiar and let us see the extraordinary in the ordinary, in the familiar and the common.<sup>8</sup>

Montaigne’s transformed skepticism, then, is fundamentally different from ancient Skepticism. The skeptical moment is incorporated into the more comprehensive dialectic of accidental philosophy. The differences between Montaigne’s skepticism and ancient Skepticism will emerge more clearly in the discussion of circular dialectic in Chapter 4.

### Deliberate Philosophy

One of the most persistent motifs of the *Essays* is Montaigne’s apparent preference for the ancients and their works over the men and works of his own day. He sees in the ancient philosophers “man in his highest estate.” These men “have regulated the world with governments and laws; they have instructed it with arts and sciences, and instructed it further by the example of their admirable conduct [*mœurs*]” (VS502; F371). When he turns to books, he finds that he prefers the ancient to the new, “because the ancient ones seem to me fuller and stronger” (VS410; F297). And when he compares himself to the ancients, he concludes that “the productions of these great rich minds of the past are very far beyond the utmost stretch of my imagination and desire. Their writings not only satisfy and fill me, but astound me and transfix me with admiration. I judge their beauty; I see it, if not to the utmost, at least enough so that I cannot aspire to it myself” (VS637; F482–83). His respect and admiration for the ancient authors is such that “they tempt me and move me almost wherever they please. . . . I find each one right in his turn, although they contradict each other” (VS569–70; F429).

The ancients are presented as “higher” and “stronger,” as though men had become lower and weaker over the centuries. When Montaigne compares

the ancient philosophers with those who call themselves philosophers in his time, the relation of philosophy to action seems most important to him. In the essays "Of pedantry" (I.25) and "On the education of children" (I.26), this distinction is especially clear with respect to the disdain that the vulgar have for the philosopher. The picture that Plato presents in the *Theaetetus*, that of the philosopher who appears to the nonphilosopher as ignorant of "the first and common things" and as presumptuous and insolent, is far from describing the philosophers of Montaigne's day. The ancient philosophers were envied as being above the common fashion, as despising public actions, as "having set up a particular and inimitable way of life regulated by certain lofty and extraordinary principles" (VS135; F98–99). The philosophers of Montaigne's day, on the other hand, are despised as being below the common fashion, incapable of public charges, as living a life of base and vile *mœurs*. The ancient philosophers were even greater in action than they were in knowledge, and if they were ever put to the test of action, they flew to marvelous heights. The ancient philosophers were both disdained and envied. The philosophers of Montaigne's day are simply disdained. Philosophy is "a thing of no use and no value, both in common opinion and in fact" (VS160; F118).

The worthlessness of contemporary philosophy and the contempt in which it is held are explained in this way: "I believe those [scholastic] quibblings... are the cause of this" (VS160; F118). Further, "this century in which we live... is so leaden that not only the practice but even the idea of virtue is wanting; and it seems to be nothing else but a piece of school jargon" (VS230; F169). Virtuous action is no longer even recognized. Montaigne sees it as his task and as part of his public purpose to place before his readers the vivid images of ancient virtue, the high and lofty actions that seem to have been so common in ancient times.

It would be easy to conclude that Montaigne is one of those people who feels so deeply dissatisfied and disgusted with the present that he tries to live in the past and tends to idealize that past, seeing it as a golden age, compared with which his own day looks pitiful and poor. Montaigne, however, sees his preference for the ancients as, in some measure, a manifestation of his own presumption. In "Of presumption" he tells us that there are two parts to the vice of presumption: esteeming oneself too much and esteeming others too little. "As for the first, . . . I feel myself oppressed by an error of my soul which I dislike, both as unjust and, even more, as troublesome. I try to correct it, but uproot it I cannot. It is that I lower the value of the things I possess, because I possess them, and raise the value of things when they are foreign, absent, and not mine. This humor spreads very far" (VS633–34; F480). One of its manifestations is that "far-off governments and *mœurs* and languages delight me; and I realize that Latin, by its dignity, beguiles me more than it should, as it does children and common people" (VS634; F480). So at the very least, Montaigne is aware of this tendency in himself. But even more