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Skepticism, Dogmatism and the Future of Liberalism

Contemporary postmodernists pride themselves on their awareness of the impossibility of genuine knowledge, and hence of “foundations” for our moral and political beliefs. They look with condescension towards the naiveté of past thinkers who believed in the accessibility of truth – as exemplified by Aristotle’s “teleological” view of the universe or the assertion of “self-evident” truths in the Declaration of Independence.

Such condescension, when directed at the philosophers of antiquity and early modernity, is doubly misplaced. It entails a superficial reading of the greatest classical philosophers. And it rests on a new form of dogmatism – that is, dogmatic skepticism or relativism – that is truly naïve, being the unreflective offshoot of a public teaching advanced by certain early modern philosophers as part of their enterprise of liberating humanity from Christian theocracy, but one the limitations of which they fully recognized.

My primary witness for both the foregoing claims will be Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essays* (1580-1592) was one of the most important and influential texts of early modern philosophy, particularly as a source of the skepticism elaborated by such writers as Locke and Descartes. Montaigne is often viewed as a pre-eminent skeptic who challenged the ostensibly dogmatic character of classical, pre-modern philosophy. He is thought to have grounded his skepticism in the doctrines of an ancient philosophic sect, the Pyrrhonians,

who denied the possibility of knowledge.¹ However, this interpretation overlooks the subtlety of Montaigne's account of Pyrrhonism in his "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (*Essays* II.12), which suggests that *all* the ancient philosophers were skeptics in the original, Socratic sense – being aware of the uncertainty of all human beliefs. Moreover, underneath a surface of mockery, Montaigne praises the philosophers as the greatest of human benefactors. The seeming dogmatism of Plato and Aristotle, he explains, was only a mask they donned to avoid being punished for their heterodoxy and unbelief – and in order to have a morally salutary effect on the nonphilosophic multitude (II.12, 481 [371], 487-93 [375-80]).² In his subsequent catalogues in II.12 of the philosophers' various and seemingly ludicrous doctrines about the gods and the human soul, he expresses doubt that they were "speaking in earnest" about such things; they concealed their ignorance to accommodate "public usage" and to avoid "frighten[ing] the children" (498 [384]; 527 [408]).

That Montaigne was not a serious advocate of the Pyrrhonian form of skepticism – which reportedly led its founder to deny (for instance) the existence of a cart that was about to hit him, compelling his followers to save him – he indicates through subtle mockery elsewhere in the *Essays* (II.29, 83-4 [533]).³ What more fundamentally distinguishes Montaigne from his predecessors among the political philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, he suggests, is rather his openly proclaiming his skepticism – even while covering its political and antitheological implications with just enough pretense of submission to ecclesiastic authority to avoid being punished for his heterodoxy. Indeed, in his chapter on "The Education of Children," he emphasizes the desirability of

encouraging youth to question all accepted doctrines, with specific reference to conventional religious beliefs – thus indicating the effect that Montaigne intended the *Essays* as a whole to have on its readers (I.26, 150 [111]).⁴

However, as Montaigne's periodic remarks about the distinction between men of truly philosophic capacity like himself and most human beings (e.g., II.12, 481 [377]) indicate, his project of disseminating a popularized skepticism is not grounded in a belief that most people are capable of (or interested in) achieving philosophic understanding. Rather, anticipating Nietzsche's description of Christianity as "Platonism for the people,"⁵ he blames the classical political philosophers' public stance for generating "edifying" myths that issued in the evils of theocracy, religious persecution, and civil war. He endeavors to replace that public teaching with a new one that will direct people away from the quest for transcendence, by making them fully "at home" in the terrestrial world with its pleasures. This entails "debunking" religious claims more openly than his classical predecessors chose, or dared, to do. And he denounces as well the philosophers' hypocritical enunciation of ascetic moral teachings, in contrast with the sensual indulgence in which they engaged behind the scenes: their "natural" way of life was one of hedonism, restricted only by "moderation and respect for others' liberty" (II.12, 567-8 [440-1]; III.9, 968-9 [757], III.10, 983 [769]).

Montaigne's popularized form of skepticism does not issue in an outright relativism, however. Rather, from the fact of the inevitable diversity of human opinions about the "sovereign good," combined with the fact of our undeniable sensitivity to bodily pleasure

and pain, he derives the formula for liberalism: “since philosophy has not been able to find a way to tranquility that is suitable to all, let everyone seek it individually” (II.12, 561 [435]; II.16, 605-6 [471]).⁶ His argument ultimately underlies the modern, Lockean doctrine of natural rights, according to which government has only the limited purpose of enabling individuals to enjoy the security of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” rather than seeking to impose a higher vision of the purpose of life on them.

Despite Montaigne’s rejection of the classical political philosophers’ public posture, there is a deeper link between his own form of skepticism (as distinguished from his public rhetoric) and that which characterized classical philosophy as a whole, but which sets him apart from the Pyrrhonian skeptics. As Montaigne observes, the Pyrrhonians’ aim was a condition of tranquility, or “ataraxy,” resulting from liberating oneself from “the agitations” generated by our claims to knowledge (II.12, 483 [372]). Their goal was an essentially passive one – in contrast to the never-ending pursuit of wisdom in which Montaigne depicts himself as engaged. And whereas it is the essence of philosophy to weigh all opinions open-mindedly, and to welcome challenges to one’s preconceptions as an aid to one’s pursuit of knowledge (III.8, 900-902 [704-5]), Montaigne’s portrayal of the Pyrrhonians goes beyond this, representing them as gamblers who would maintain the opposite of any proposition that was put before them, just to “create doubt and suspension of judgment” (483 [372]). Far from embracing their teaching, Montaigne acknowledges that the Pyrrhonians’ determined refusal to commit themselves to any opinion, even provisionally – including the opinion that we are necessarily ignorant –

makes the doctrine “difficult to conceive,” especially since its authors “represent it rather obscurely and diversely” (485 [374]).

As Montaigne depicts the Pyrrhonians, far from being thoroughgoing skeptics, they appear to have been dogmatically committed to a doctrine or at least an attitude of their own, which no observation or argument could shake. By contrast, the outlook and way of life that Montaigne expresses in much of the *Essays* is a *zetetic* skepticism, one that generates endless inquiry in pursuit of greater understanding, rather than resting content with the awareness of one’s ignorance (III.13, 1045 [817-18]). In this fundamental respect, Montaigne is faithful to the original philosophic way of life exemplified by Socrates (III.8, 903 [705]).⁷

Montaigne’s dedication to the continued pursuit of learning is manifest not only in the abundance of classical quotations that fill the *Essays*, and in his accounts of his enjoyment of philosophic conversation and “association” with books in III.3 and III.8, but also in specific remarks in II.12 and III.13 holding out the prospect of infinite future scientific progress (II.12, 543 [421]; III.13, 1045 [817]). It is paradoxical, of course, that an author who stresses the uncertainty of our judgment and our incapacity to penetrate the essences of things (II.12, 545, 547-8 [422, 424-5]) should express such hopes. The explanation of this paradox is that Montaigne espouses a new doctrine about nature that subsequently came to underlie the modern scientific quest: the view that since we cannot assume that we have access to the “real” natures of things, but can know only their sensible properties, we are free to reconstruct the objects we encounter – both in thought

and ultimately in practice – with a view to better understanding nature’s mode of operation (II.12, 545 [422]). The ultimate fruit of this enterprise is a new science of “medicine,” broadly understood (II, xxxvii, 745 [581]), that will generate what Montaigne’s successor Francis Bacon would call “the relief of man’s estate.”⁸

Why should all this matter to us today? Academic thinking is now dominated by a more radical sort of skepticism or relativism than Montaigne espoused, one that treats the principles of liberalism itself as ultimately groundless. “Pragmatic” theorists like John Dewey, followed more recently by postmodernists like Richard Rorty, maintain that such relativism is actually supportive of liberalism, since awareness of the relativity of all perspectives should deter us from imposing our views on other people.

But liberal postmodernism is a delusion. From the supposed fact of the relativity of all perspectives, it does not follow that I should tolerate other people’s views and ways of life rather than engage in a Nietzschean struggle to impose my will on them. The regime of liberal toleration entailed by the Declaration of Independence is unlikely to survive the sort of relativistic assault that regards it as in no sense objectively superior to, say, jihadism.

To discern potentially antiliberal consequences in Rorty’s doctrine is not to refute it. But Rorty stacks the deck in his favor by suggesting that the only alternative to an “ironism” that treats all moral and political beliefs as historically “contingent” is a dogmatic “metaphysical” demand that such beliefs be regarded as beyond question.⁹

In fact, it is Rorty, not the philosophic critics of historicism and relativism, who proves to be dogmatic. This point is illustrated by his mode of upholding the proposition that liberalism should avoid distinguishing “between absolutism and relativism, between rationality and irrationality, and between morality and expediency.” Citing the parallels between his position and Isaiah Berlin’s championing of “negative liberty” against what Rorty calls “telic conceptions of human perfection,” Rorty proceeds to defend Berlin’s favorable citation of Joseph Schumpeter’s dictum that a “civilized man” is distinguished from a “barbarian” by his capacity “to realise the relative validity of [his] conceptions yet stand for them unflinchingly” against Michael Sandel’s criticism. In response to Sandel’s observation of the “relativist predicament” which that remark exemplifies, Rorty contends that “it would be better to avoid using the term ‘only relatively valid’ to characterize the state of mind of the figures whom Schumpeter, Berlin, and I wish to praise.” In other words, “the claim that Berlin’s position is ‘relativistic’ ... should not be answered, but rather evaded.”¹⁰ Such evasion hardly seems consistent with the open-mindedness that we normally associate with the term “liberalism” – let alone with philosophy.

Rorty’s mode of supporting liberalism was hardly peculiar to him. Rather, it was the tack taken by the most celebrated Anglo-American academic writer on political philosophy of the past half-century, John Rawls, who defended his “theory of justice” against the criticism that it merely summarized the tenets of a particular ideology, or set of political preferences, by explaining that it was “political not metaphysical” – in other words, it made no claim to objective truth, but simply constituted a statement of the principles that

“we” (Rawls and those who thought like him) found “intuitively” appealing.¹¹ That position – a professedly foundationless liberalism – was more fully developed in Rawls’s 1993 book *Political Liberalism*. The move proved highly attractive to other liberals who sought “authoritative” confirmation for their opinions without having to subject them to rational assessment.¹²

An interesting anticipation of Rorty’s and Rawls’s posture can be seen in Socrates’ eponymous interlocutor in Plato’s *Meno*. In that dialogue Meno, having had his ignorance exposed by Socrates, labels the philosopher a “torpedo-fish” for numbing or “bewitching” him with dialectical examination, and warns of the punishment he may incur should he practice his art outside Athens. (The warning is made in the presence of Anytus, one of Socrates’ three future legal accusers.) In an attempt to forestall any continuance of their joint inquiry, Meno then propounds his celebrated paradox, according to which it is impossible to seek knowledge of something when you don’t know what it is to begin with.¹³

Psychologically, the professorial Rorty and Rawls would appear to have little in common with the notorious Meno. But Rorty’s disdain for rationalism and “objectivity,” and Rawls’s wish to dispense with any attempt to ground justice in some account of human nature, serve the same function as Meno’s paradox: to safeguard their political assumptions against rational critique. The core difference between Meno and Rorty is that whereas Meno wished to foreclose philosophic examination outright, Rorty would first inculcate the public with his own doctrine of “ironism” or “historicism,” and *then*

preclude further examination. The adoption of Rorty's position would entail the death of philosophy as a meaningful rather than trivial enterprise (reminiscent of the Pyrrhonians' game-playing).

All this is not to deny, however, that the postmoderns have uncovered a fundamental difficulty in the original, liberal-skeptical doctrine. The partial skepticism, directed against "transcendental" doctrines, that Montaigne publicly espoused (as distinguished from the zetetic skepticism, reflecting the love of knowledge, that characterized his own way of life) ultimately proved to be an intellectually vulnerable halfway house. Although the history of religious persecution and civil war that culminated in Montaigne's time would appear to justify his project of human liberation from the quest for transcendence, in the long run it proved impossible to divert humanity from that quest – so that fanatical religious doctrines were replaced, over the past two centuries, with no less fanatical secular, totalitarian ideologies. In a world that includes antiliberal peoples and regimes that are as convinced as Meno or Anytus of the objective rightness of their positions, mere skepticism provides little support for liberalism. It is doubtful that human beings can be persuaded to make the sacrifices necessary to perpetuate the liberal constitutional order if they believe it is grounded in nothing grander than the quest for comfortable self-preservation.¹⁴

Awareness of these problems should cause us to reassess the possibility of philosophy in its original form – an enterprise that, while appreciating the uncertainty of all beliefs, sees that as an incentive to pursue genuine knowledge; and yet is more modest than

Montaigne in its attitude towards conventional moral beliefs. Speaking politically, it would encourage an appreciation of Alexis de Tocqueville's account in *Democracy in America* of the potential harmony between political liberty and the moderate religious belief which grounds the moral principles that liberty presupposes.

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¹ See, e.g., Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* rev. ed. (New York, 1964), ch. 3.

² Parenthetic citations of the *Essais* refer to book, chapter, and page number in the Pléiade edition of Montaigne's *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Thibaudet/ Rat (Paris, 1962), with the fourth, bracketed number identifying the page in Donald Frame's translation (Stanford, CA, 1957). For an extended analysis of the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" see my *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), chs. 2-4.

³ Although in his initial presentation of the Pyrrhonian way of life as a reasonable one that accommodates "natural inclinations" and "laws and customs" Montaigne describes himself as unable to reconcile with this doctrine Pyrrho's reportedly "wild and unsociable" behavior (II.12, 485 [374]), in II.29 he treats such

reports as accurate and describes Pyrrho as having constructed an “amusing science” out of “ignorance,” hardly evincing any great approbation of Pyrrhonian doctrine (683 [533]).

⁴ This ambition contradicts the concern he professes near the beginning of the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” that the Reformation, if unchecked, “would easily degenerate into an execrable atheism” once “the vulgar” were “given the temerity to despise and judge the opinions that they had held in extreme reverence” (II.12, 416 [318]). In fact, in that chapter, while purporting to defend Sebond’s *Natural Theology* against its rationalistic critics, Montaigne actually upholds the cause of philosophy against that of revelation: see *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne, loc. cit.*, and studies by Zbigniew Gierczynski and Arthur Armaingaud cited therein.

⁵ See Nietzsche’s preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*.

⁶ Note that Montaigne’s source for the figure of 288 sects that supposedly divided over the issue of the supreme good is the Roman philologist Varro; see also Cicero, *Academica*, II.42. In other words, the variety of philosophic opinions is by no means a modern discovery.

⁷ On the distinction between Pyrrhonian and zetetic or Socratic skepticism, see Stewart Umphrey, *Zetetic Skepticism* (Wakefield, NH, 1990), 297-8. See also Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Glencoe, IL, 1963), 109-10.

⁸ See *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne*, 115-133.

⁹ See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Engl., 1989).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-6, 54.

¹¹ Rawls, “Justice As Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical” (1985), in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 388-414; see 388 for Rawls’s Rortyan “wish to avoid . . . claims to universal truth or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons” as grounds for his doctrine. See, similarly, Rawls’s 1974 address “The Independence of Moral Theory,” distinguishing his enterprise of “moral theory” from “the problem of moral truth,” which he proposed to “bracket” as “problematical” (*ibid.*, 286-302; quotation from 288). Rorty applauds Rawls’s renunciation of “Socratism” in “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge, Engl., 1991), 175-196.

¹² See Richard Parker, “The Jurisprudential Uses of John Rawls,” in J.R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman, eds., *Nomos XX: Constitutionalism* (New York, 1979), 269-295, at 270-79.

¹³ See *Meno*, 79e-80d; Umphrey, *Zetetic Skepticism*, 20.

¹⁴ Rorty's only rejoinder to the prediction that widespread dissemination of his "ironism" would "weaken and dissolve liberal societies" is that the analogous decline of religious faith has strengthened rather than weakened them (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 85). Aside from the questionableness of that judgment, one might respond that even if post-Enlightenment experience could be thought to demonstrate that liberal regimes can survive without a religious foundation, it hardly follows that their survival requires *no* belief in the objective superiority of their principles to the alternatives. (In fact, Rorty's repeated avowals of his own liberalism indicate his belief in its objective superiority, despite his struggles to avoid such terminology. His linguistic somersaults invite the sort of mockery Montaigne expresses of a philosopher who boasted about not calling pain an evil, even as he suffered from it: *Essays*, I.14, 55 [37].)