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THE DIALECTIC OF FAITH AND REASON IN THE *ESSAYS* OF MONTAIGNE

Ann Hartle

The question of Montaigne's sincerity in matters of faith has, in general, been answered in two opposite ways. On the one hand, he is said to be an atheist who hides his atheism behind infrequent and perfunctory assertions of faith and submission to the Church. On the other hand, he is said to be a sceptic-fideist who embraces scepticism at the philosophical level in order to remove the intellectual obstacles to a faith that must remain inarticulate. I attempt to show that the *Essays* display a dialectic of faith and reason, especially in the "Apology for Sebond" where Montaigne responds to two objections made to the project of natural theology. Commentators have described Montaigne's defense of Sebond as, at best, ironic because Montaigne's attack on reason in his reply to the second objection is, at the same time, an attack on Sebond's own form of rationalism. I argue that Montaigne is actually defending a *transformed* version of Sebond's fundamental assumption of the harmony of faith and reason, i.e., the harmony of examined faith and reformed reason.

There are few questions about the *Essays* that have given rise to such radically different interpretations as the question concerning Montaigne's sincerity in matters of faith.¹ On one side, there is the claim that Montaigne is really an atheist. This means that the passages where he does speak about the Christian faith must be explained away as merely rhetorical: the rhetorical dimension of the *Essays* would be intended both to couch his teaching in a form that can be acceptable to his largely Christian audience and to protect him from censorship and persecution by the Church. This view of Montaigne entails the claim that he writes in the tradition of the "noble lie," a tradition that he clearly knows since he mentions it several times in the *Essays*. This view also finds support in the highly ambiguous character of the "defense" of natural theology found in the "Apology."

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the interpretations of those who claim that Montaigne is a sceptic-fideist. In his *Le Scepticisme de Montaigne*, Frédéric Brahami presents a compelling version of this interpretation. He shows clearly that Montaigne's is a *new* scepticism, that he breaks with the ancient sceptics on the decisive issue of the sovereign good and goes further than the ancient sceptics in his annihilation of the pretenses of human reason. Brahami argues that this new scepticism is made possible, or rather, necessary, by the introduction of the Christian concept of God.² Montaigne, then, would be a sceptic on the natural, philosophical



level, and a "fideist" at the theological level. That is, he would deny the ability of reason to grasp or to ground the truths of faith, and he would deny that faith is itself a mode of thought that can give a public account of itself. "The fideist founds the faith on faith; he is, literally, one for whom there are no reasons to believe."³

The view of Montaigne as sceptic-fideist, finds support in Montaigne's praise of scepticism as the most useful of all the philosophical teachings because it presents man as naked, empty and weak, "annihilating his judgment to make more room for faith" (VS506; F375).⁴ It attempts to come to terms with Montaigne's assertion that the immortality of the soul cannot be established by reason but can be known only through faith (VS554; F415). And it accords with his defense of his practice of avoiding the theological language of divine providence. Montaigne puts forward his thoughts as simply human, not as celestial rules, as "matter of opinion, not matter of faith" (VS323; F234).

The claim that Montaigne is really an atheist who hides his atheism is, on one level, impossible to refute. If the atheism is really hidden, then no interpretation can find it and bring it out into the open. If it is only partly hidden or thinly veiled, then some of the things that Montaigne says must be deliberately false. But how do we tell which things are false? Ultimately, the selection must be either arbitrary or determined by *a priori* criteria. Of course, this claim to a hidden meaning cannot be refuted by appealing to Montaigne's avowals of his sincerity, since these avowals themselves may be merely rhetorical. But one reason why many readers of Montaigne are so reluctant to accept the claim that he lies, even nobly, is that his lying would be a betrayal of the reader's trust: what is offered to us in the *Essays* is not a mere verbal puzzle but the man himself and a man of a certain character, a man for whom truth is a moral imperative.⁵

The difficulty with the claim that Montaigne is a sceptic-fideist has to do with the way in which the sceptic-fideist must deliberately keep himself from thinking about the truths that are most important to him. I acknowledge that Montaigne rejects the mode of Sebond's natural theology, what Brahami calls Sebond's "rationalism." And I do recognize the need to make sense of Montaigne's claim that his project is simply human and of his apparently ambiguous defense of Sebond. But "rationalism" does not exhaust the meaning of thought. The sceptic-fideist interpretation really amounts to a frustration of the natural desire to think honestly about one's life and to a condition of conflict within the self that is not at all evident in the *Essays*. So Brahami says that faith cannot be formulated in terms of knowing, or even of thought. Man is a "believing thing," rather than a "thinking thing."⁶

Where, then, is Montaigne's faith? It must be nowhere (because he is really an atheist) or somewhere outside the *Essays* (because faith is inarticulate and private) or somehow in the *Essays*. This third possibility, that Montaigne's faith is somehow in the *Essays*, is the answer that I want to show to be true. We can begin, then, with the "Apology for Sebond," since this essay deals so explicitly with the issue of belief.

The Dialectic of Faith and Reason

Raymond Sebond was a Spanish theologian of the fifteenth century whose book, entitled *Natural Theology or the Book of Creatures*, was given to Montaigne's father who then asked his son to translate it from Latin into French. Montaigne did so and then wrote this "apology" as a response to two criticisms commonly made of this and other such works in natural theology. Montaigne reports that someone told him that Sebond's book was actually a kind of distillation of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas.⁷

In the Prologue to his *Natural Theology*, 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 by reading these truths in the book of Nature. In that book, each creature is like a letter and man himself is the main or capital letter. Montaigne describes Sebond's natural theology in this way: "His purpose is bold and courageous, for he undertakes by human and natural reasons to establish and prove against the atheists all the articles of the Christian religion." (VS440;F320). Montaigne's own task in the "Apology" is to defend Sebond against the two principal objections that are made to his work. By describing his task in that way, Montaigne is adopting the Scholastic terminology and mode of presentation, although his adaptation is very loose. The Scholastics, including Aquinas, wrote in a highly structured form called, in general, "The Question." A question is posed, e.g., Does God exist?; objections to the writer's own position are stated first, then the writer presents his own view in the *Respondeo*, and finally he answers the objections each in turn. The entire "Apology," then, in spite of its length and its appearance of disorder, actually has a very simple underlying structure: the statement of and response to the first objection and the statement of and response to the second objection.

If we compare this to the Scholastic disputed question, we see that what is missing is the "body" of the Question, the author's own view or, in Scholastic terminology, the "*Respondeo*" ("I answer that...."). The highly structured form of the Question is intended to require the author to state the authoritative objections to his own position and then to allow him the freedom to say what he himself thinks. Where, then, is Montaigne's "*Respondeo*"? It seems to me that it must be found in what I would call a kind of "dialectic" between the two objections and responses. In other words, it would be illegitimate to identify Montaigne's own position with either of the two objections or even simply with his responses to both objections. No doubt the responses by themselves do reveal something of his own stance, but they do not give us the complete picture any more than Aquinas's replies to objections would allow us to completely reconstruct his own fully articulated *Respondeo*. The replies are consistent with the *Respondeo* and give some idea of what the *Respondeo* must be, but they are incomplete and stated in a way that is determined by the objection. What I will now attempt to do is to work out that dialectic.

The first objection to Sebond's theology is put forward in the name of piety by those who think of themselves as believers. They say 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). The second objection is put forward by unbelievers and atheists. Sebond's arguments, they say, are "weak and unfit to prove what he proposes." And these unbelievers attempt to show that they can easily shatter them (VS448;F327).

The first objection identifies faith with belief that is held by particular inspiration of divine grace. The second objection identifies understanding with autonomous reason and, thus, with unbelief, since Sebond's arguments cannot command universal assent. Most commentators have placed Montaigne himself entirely on the side of one or the other of these objections. The view that he is an atheist places him on the side of the second objection to Sebond; the view that he is a fideist places him on the side of the first objection. Montaigne, however, refutes *both* objections and he also finds something true in each objection, so that any interpretation of the "Apology" that places him simply on either side must, in my view, be inadequate.

The two objections, as formulated by Montaigne, are usually regarded as the opposing and contradictory voices of belief and unbelief. Brahami, for example, says that "the second objection is diametrically opposed to the first" and that "these two radical positions, that of belief and that of unbelief undermine the synthesis of Sebond."⁸ But when these objections are exposed more fully, they show themselves to be related to each other and even dependent on each other at a deeper level. The first objection defines faith in terms of its origin: faith is "belief that is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace." God inspires those whom it pleases him to inspire: that is why they believe and others do not. There is a direct communication by God to the mind of the believer. Faith, then, is taken to be private, inarticulate, and incommunicable. The second objection is a reaction against the possibility of faith but it also accepts this understanding of what faith is. Unbelief must see faith as a private experience, an experience that it ultimately regards as illusory because it is publicly indefensible. Unbelief reacts against the first objection's claim to private knowledge and particular inspiration by putting forward as its standard what it takes to be the most public expression of the activity of the mind, autonomous reason.

Rationality prides itself in being both public and common. In the first place, it is completely transparent and communicable: when the demonstrations of Euclidian geometry are displayed, for example, they can be understood by any rational human being and they receive universal assent. The truths of faith, of course, do not receive universal assent. Secondly, rationality is universal, the defining characteristic of the human species, whereas particular inspiration is not universal. Therefore, on this view of reason, faith (understood as particular inspiration) cannot give a public account of itself. It is defenseless before the court of reason.

The first and second objections, then, share the same understanding of the meaning of faith. It is this shared understanding that gives rise to the "dialectic" of the two objections, and it is this shared understanding that Montaigne is most deeply concerned to refute.

Further, the first and second objections also share the same understanding of the meaning of reason. The first objection takes faith to be belief, but belief that each is justified in holding because it comes from God by a direct and particular inspiration. The beliefs that are guaranteed by particular inspiration are then elevated to the status of knowledge and certitude. The second objection sets demonstration as the standard of knowledge and whatever cannot meet this publicly accessible standard must count as mere belief or private opinion. Its demand, then, is that faith be defined and justified within the terms of the philosophical categories of knowledge, certitude, and doubt. The doubt to which the first objection is susceptible is due to the fact that faith cannot command universal assent because it cannot be demonstrated or proven. The first objection is prey to doubt because it implicitly concedes the definition of reason assumed by the second objection.

In other words, the second objection accepts the first objection's definition of faith, and the first objection accepts the second objection's definition of reason. It is to these shared understandings of what faith and reason are that Montaigne is really addressing himself. To the first objection he responds that faith is not belief held by particular divine inspiration. To the second objection he responds that reason is not autonomous and cannot secure universal assent.

The dialectic between the two objections and responses begins to come to light when we examine the three ways in which Montaigne responds to the first objection. Against the claim that Christian faith is held by means of particular inspiration of divine grace and that faith is therefore a private, incommunicable experience, Montaigne pushes in the direction of the public and the common. "We are Christians," he says, "by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans" (VS445;F325). This takes the pious objector out of his own private certitude and confronts him with the fact that, had he been born in a very different place or time, had he not been brought up as a Christian, he would not believe as he does. Montaigne is also moving away from the claim of divine origin and toward the acknowledgment of the human origins of faith: "Another region, other witnesses, similar promises and threats, might imprint upon us in the same way a contrary belief" (ibid). Little Moslem and Hindu babies do not grow up to find themselves somehow directly inspired by God to believe the articles of Christian faith. By moving in the direction of human origins, we come to the point where Christian faith looks no different from any other religious belief. If it is not of divine origin, how can it claim any superior status? It begins to appear "that we receive our religion only in our own way and with our own hands, and not otherwise than as other religions are received. We happen to have been born in a country where it was in practice" (VS445;F324).

Besides moving in the direction of the common and public, Montaigne is also moving in the direction of the natural and away from the supernatural. For Christian belief now appears no different from any other "natural" beliefs or customs. Just as customs vary from country to country or from culture to culture, so too do religious belief and practice. The terrible reproach to Christians, Montaigne says, is that we do not even believe in God to the same degree that we believe in the ordinary and natural. "If we

believed in him, I do not say by faith, but [even] with a simple belief . . . if we believed in him just as in any other story, if we knew him like one of our comrades, we would love him above all other things . . ." (VS444;F324). Montaigne is here making a distinction between faith and "simple belief" and this is precisely the distinction that the first objection fails to make: faith is belief held by particular inspiration. If confidence in its divine origin is shaken, what is left is ordinary belief, belief that is unexamined and presumptuous. It is this that begs for reason to step in because faith no longer has any definitive claim to truth. The first objection's view of faith is one that undermines itself and easily turns to unbelief. This is why Montaigne agrees with those who predict that the Reformation will degenerate into atheism and why he attributes the second objection to atheism. Once "personal consent" becomes authoritative, all of the ancient beliefs will be shaken off "as a tyrannical yoke" (VS439;F320).

The second way in which Montaigne responds to the first objection is by pointing to the lack of conformity between Christian belief and conduct. "All other signs are common to all religions: hope, trust, . . . , ceremonies, penitence, martyrs. The peculiar mark of our truth should be our virtue, as it is also the most heavenly and difficult mark, and the worthiest product of truth" (VS442;F322). Once again, Montaigne is calling the objectors into the public realm, demanding evidence of the presence of faith. But the actions of most Christians give no evidence of such faith: "so divine and celestial a teaching as ours marks Christians only by their words. . . . Compare our morals with a Muhammadan's or a pagan's; we always fall short of them. Whereas, in view of the advantage of our religion, we should shine with excellence at an extreme and incomparable distance, and people ought to say: 'Are they so just, so charitable, so good? Then they are Christians'" (VS442;F322). Instead, we have civil war, extreme cruelty, vengeance and hatred. Montaigne says: "There is no hostility that excels Christian hostility" (VS444;F324).

The failure of Christian moral action is a sign of the inadequacy of the first objection's understanding of what faith is. In some cases, the lack of conformity between belief and conduct entails hypocrisy and a deliberate attempt to deceive others. But in most cases, it is simply a matter of self-deception: "Some make the world [think] that they believe what they do not [really] believe. Others, in greater number, make themselves believe it, being unable to penetrate what it means to believe" (VS442;F322).

The third way in which Montaigne responds to the first objection is by appealing to the authority that the pious believer must acknowledge, the first great commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." God commands that we love him with our minds and it is this commandment that justifies the project of theology. The theologians interpret the commandment, as Sebond does, along the lines of natural philosophy, seeking the truth about God in the book of nature and appealing especially to St. Paul's claim that "the invisible things of God appear by the creation of the world, when we consider his eternal wisdom and his divinity in his works" (VS446;F326). So, then, Montaigne concludes his response to the first objection with an assertion of compatibility between faith and reason, a compatibility that the first

objection denies.

Now if we consider the medieval definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding" we see that faith is primary. In the words of St. Anselm's prayer: "Grant me to understand you to be as I [already] believe you to be."⁹ As the formula of medieval theology puts it, philosophy is the "handmaiden" of theology. Montaigne's formulation of Sebond's project (that "he undertakes by human and natural reasons to . . . prove against the atheists all the articles of the Christian religion") suggests that Sebond may actually be claiming something closer to the independence of reason from the first principles of faith, thus tending toward the reversal of Anselm's "unless I believe, I shall not understand" to "unless I can prove, I shall not believe."

But whether or not Sebond's mode of theology is an extreme and unorthodox rationalism (as some have described it), Montaigne's defense of the mind's place in the life of faith leads him directly into the second objection. It is here, I think, that we get a sense of the "Apology" not simply as a response to all those others "out there" who fall within the two categories of objectors, but rather as a dialectic within Montaigne himself. For in the process of responding to the understanding of faith in the first objection, he suddenly finds himself speaking in the voice of unbelief. He says: "I have already, without thinking about it, half involved myself in the second objection . . ." (VS448;F327).

The way in which Montaigne falls into the second objection and the way he characterizes reason from the very beginning of his response suggests that once reason is invited in, it claims for itself an authority that ultimately admits no other authority. There are three related aspects of reason's self-assertion that Montaigne emphasizes. Reason inevitably tends to see itself as what is highest in nature, therefore as entitled to rule, and therefore as autonomous. Those who put forward the second objection, he says, "will not allow us to combat their reason except by [reason] itself" (VS449;F328). Reason is their only "touchstone" and they will neither receive nor approve anything except by way of reason (VS541;F405). The first aspect of the arrogance of reason which Montaigne combats is the way in which it immediately sets out a hierarchy within nature and places itself at the top. Reason sees itself at the highest point in nature because it recognizes itself as the divine ordering principle of nature, and then concludes that man's reason is in harmony with this divine ordering principle. Montaigne asks: "Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as that this miserable and puny creature, [man, the rational animal] who is not even master of himself, exposed to the attacks of all things, should call himself master and emperor of the universe, the least part of which it is not in his power to know, much less to command?" (VS450;F329) And he characterizes the second objectors as "these people, who think Sebond's reasons too weak, who are ignorant of nothing, who govern the world, who know everything" (VS538;F402).

Now it must be said that this presumption of reason is very similar to the position taken by Sebond's natural theology: man is said to be in the image of God by virtue of his reason. This, of course, is why Montaigne's so-called "defense" of Sebond seems ambiguous or even ironic: an attack

on reason is an attack on the second group of objectors but, at the same time, it is an attack on Sebond's entire project of natural theology. In attacking the arrogance of reason, Montaigne is acknowledging what is true in the first objection, namely, that Christians do themselves harm by seeking to support their faith by reason, if reason is presumed to be the autonomous reason of the second objection. So also, in demanding public evidence of faith, he acknowledges what is true in the second objection, namely, the indefensibility of claims to private inspiration.

How, then, does Montaigne respond to the second objection, expressed as the presumption and autonomy of reason? He responds in two ways. First, he brings reason down from its heights, from its presumed divinity down to the level of the animals. The animal stories in the "Apology" are intended to bring man, the self-styled rational animal, to a recognition of his equality not with God but with the beasts. The thrust of Montaigne's argument is to show that reason is not the divine element in the human soul but so common, so pervasive in all of animal nature, that the unbelievers who pride themselves on their rationality should disdain this reason as lowly and base, by their own measure.

Montaigne's mode of reasoning in the discussion of the animals is analogical. The animal stories occur at the beginning of Montaigne's reply to the second objection. He introduces this section 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 a long list of human capacities and points to the presence of each in the animals, e.g., reasoning, deduction, induction, calculation, cunning, contemplation, moral virtue, and vice. The mode of reasoning consists in moving from effect to cause and 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 to whether he finds the ice too thin or thick enough for his weight, why should we 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 process of reasoning goes on in ourselves. Therefore by the principle "like causes produce like effects" we must infer a similar faculty in the fox.

Analogical reasoning 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 thinking about 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). With respect to natural theology's practice of analogical reasoning, Montaigne says that "our overweening arrogance would pass the divinity through our sieve" (VS528;F393) and he refers to "this arrogance of trying to discover God with our eyes" (VS528;F394). It is "vain," he says, "to try to make guesses about God from our analogies and conjectures, to

regulate him and the world by our capacity and our laws . . ." (VS512;F380).

The second way in which Montaigne responds to the objection of unbelief and the assertion of reason's autonomy is to point out and display in vivid detail what he calls the "unruliness" of reason, especially as it manifests itself in the wild diversity of human opinion. That diversity is especially acute and instructive in the case of philosophical opinion, for here we supposedly see man at his best, in his "highest estate." Yet, all of the centuries of philosophical speculation have not produced a single opinion on which there is universal agreement. Montaigne says that "we shall never heap enough insults on the unruliness of our mind" (VS24;F15). Even the greatest thinkers have only "amused themselves with reason as with a vain and frivolous instrument, putting forward all sorts of notions and fancies" (VS545;F408). Philosophy herself recognizes the unruliness of reason: "I am calling reason our reveries and dreams, with the dispensation of philosophy, which says that even the crazy man and the wicked man are mad with reason, but it is a particular sort of reason" (VS523;F389). Finally, then, we must conclude that reason, to which we had turned for a common ground, the universal and defining characteristic of the species, is so highly particularized that it cannot serve as the common, public ground we were seeking. Reason, Montaigne says, "always goes its way, even though crooked, lame, and broken-hipped and with falsehood as with truth . . . I always call reason that semblance of intellect that each man fabricates in himself. That reason, of which, by its condition, there can be a hundred contradictory ones about one and the same subject, is an instrument of lead and wax, stretchable, pliable, and adaptable to all biases and measures . . ." (VS565;F425).

The inability of reason to secure universal assent is especially clear in Montaigne's criticisms of the theological view that there are "natural laws" which are or can be known by all men through reason. "Men," he says, "have done with nature as perfumers do with oil: they have sophisticated her with so many arguments and farfetched reasonings that she has become variable and particular for each man, and has lost her own constant and universal countenance" (VS1049-50;F803). There may be natural laws that we can see in other creatures, "but in us they are lost; that fine human reason butts in everywhere, domineering and commanding, muddling and confusing the face of things in accordance with its vanity and inconsistency" (VS581;F438). So, there is nothing so absurd that it has not been said by some philosopher and nothing so bizarre or evil that it has not been the custom or law of some nation. The logic of his response to the first objection drove Montaigne to the common, public, universal ground of reason. But autonomous reason, instead of being the rock on which to build anything common, turns out to be a mere dream or, worse, a nightmare that dissolves into chaos.¹⁰

The Harmony of Faith and Reason

Where, then, does Montaigne himself stand on the question of the relation of faith and reason, at least insofar as that is revealed in the dialectic of the two objections? We can begin to answer this by returning to the issue of his sincerity in calling this essay a "defense" of Sebond. The tendency has been

to see Montaigne's apology for Sebond as either completely ironic or as unselfconsciously ambiguous and self-contradictory because, if he is either an atheist or a sceptic-fideist, then he must deny any harmony or compatibility between faith and reason, and that compatibility is Sebond's most fundamental assumption.

But it seems to me that, if we see the two objections in their relation to each other and follow the movement of Montaigne's thought as he works his way through the objections and their shared understandings of reason and faith, we find that he is in fact defending a transformed version of Sebond's assumption.¹¹ Montaigne calls this essay an apology for Sebond because he *does* affirm the harmony of faith and reason - but not faith as defined in the first objection and not reason as assumed in the second objection. For Montaigne, faith is not belief held by particular divine inspiration, and autonomous reason is not common and universal. The harmony that he recognizes and displays in the *Essays* is a harmony of *true* faith and *reformed* reason.

What, then, is true faith and what is reformed reason? How are they in harmony? Faith as defined in the first objection is incomplete, imperfect, and even presumptuous: it is unexamined belief and it must be completed and in some way transformed in its dialectic with reason. The autonomous reason of the second objection is proud and presumptuous: it must be reformed in its dialectic with faith. As we shall see, Montaigne's more complete response to the two objections may be stated in this way: it is faith, not autonomous reason, that is the ground of the common and universal. And that faith is not the opposite of thought but is itself a kind of thought, thought that has been purged of presumption and unruliness.

In essay I.54, Montaigne discusses the "error" of those who "regard our sticking to the old ways . . . as simplicity and stupidity." Some of these people are brought through this error to "the extreme limit of Christian intelligence" where they come to understand the meaning of the Church. A similar movement through error is mentioned in essay I.27 and in this case it is made explicit that the change is in Montaigne himself. The essay is entitled "It is folly to measure the true and the false by our own capacity" and it begins with a description of the presumption of the simple, ignorant, and uneducated. Their presumption consists in believing too easily what they are told, in being "led by the ears." But the educated are also susceptible to presumption, indeed to a more insidious kind of presumption. Montaigne says: "it is foolish presumption to go around disdainful and condemning as false whatever does not seem likely to us; which is an ordinary vice in those who think they have more than common ability." Then he adds: "I used to do [that] once . . . I felt compassion for the poor people who were taken in by these follies. And now I think that I was at least as much to be pitied myself" (VS178-9;F132). Now Montaigne is subject neither to the unthinking credulity of the simple nor to the arrogant presumption of the learned.

In "Of the power of the imagination" he makes a similar distinction between the simple and the learned. The simple think they see what they do not see. Here he mentions certain popular superstitions such as ghosts and visions. But the theologians and philosophers refuse to see what is

before their very own eyes. Their doubt is such, he says, that "of . . . actions that happen in their presence they would refuse to give testimony . . . and they know no man so intimately that they would undertake to answer fully for his intentions." He asks: how could these philosophers and theologians possibly stake their faith on a common faith? How could they bring themselves to accept the testimony of simple people they don't even know? (VS106;F76) Montaigne, on the other hand, *does* stake his faith on the common faith and on the witnesses that God has chosen "from the common people, simple and ignorant" (VS500;F369).

These passages reveal a mode and a movement of thought that is characteristic of the *Essays*, a movement of ascent and descent, from low to high and back to low, from the lowly and ignorant to the lofty and learned and then back to the lowly and ignorant. That movement of thought is just what occurs in the dialectic of the two objections: from simple, inarticulate belief he ascends through doubt to autonomous rationality and then descends through doubt to the truth revealed in the testimony of simple and ignorant witnesses. Of course, he cannot simply return to or deliberately adopt the stance of unthinking belief as if he had never ascended from it. He ends up in a kind of middle position that transcends both simple credulity and learned presumption, and that, in philosophical terms, would be called "learned ignorance." Perhaps this is what T.S. Eliot has in mind when he says that "what makes Montaigne a very great figure is that he succeeded . . . in giving expression to the scepticism of *every* human being. For every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it."¹² Montaigne's scepticism is integrated into the faith which transcends it. The faith that has transcended and transformed doubt is not an unthinking and inarticulate faith but Montaigne's way of living the examined life as a Christian.

For Montaigne, the common bond among men is not to be found in autonomous reason but in "the Church" which he calls "that great common way" (VS520;F387). The universal is not to be found in reason but in "the universal Church" (VS321;F232). The bond that unites all men, the learned and the unlearned, is the Church. The truths of faith are common to the lowliest village woman and the greatest theologian. What Montaigne means by the Church is not simply the invisible Church or the heavenly city of the reformers. Rome, he says, is "the only common and universal city. . . . It is the metropolitan city of all Christian nations; the Spaniard and the Frenchman, every man is at home there. To be one of the princes of that state one need only be of Christendom, wherever it may be" (VS997;F763).

In his reply to the first objection, Montaigne discusses the reasons why some men are atheists. In a few cases, atheism is an opinion that they hold seriously. But for many, it is "out of vanity and pride in conceiving opinions that are not common and that reform the world." When these people are near death, when they have a sword thrust in the chest, when fear or sickness beats down their fervor for distinction, they lift their hands to heaven. Then, he says, "they will not fail to come back to themselves and

very discreetly let themselves be formed by the common faith and examples." But there is another motive that he gives for returning to the common faith: "we are brought back to the belief in God either by force [the sword thrust in the chest] or by love" (VS446;F325). Where is his example of returning to the common faith through love? This, I believe, is Montaigne himself. What it means to love God with all one's mind is to engage in a mode of thought that finds its proper expression in the philosophical but non-authoritative form of the essay.

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NOTES

1. For an excellent summary of the various approaches to making sense of the "Apology," see Marcel Gutwirth, "Montaigne pour et contre Sebond," *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 34 (1969), Section I. Among those who see Montaigne as a believer, see Pierre Moreau, *Montaigne: L'homme et l'œuvre* (Paris: Boivin et Cie, 1939), especially 42; Homer Woodridge, "Montaigne, the Friend," *The Texas Review* 1 (1915-16), 109; Joseph Coppin, "La morale de Montaigne est-elle purement naturelle?" *Facultés Catholiques de Lille, Mémoires et travaux* 32 (1927), 107, 115-16. Patrick Henry, *Montaigne in Dialogue* (Stanford, CA: ANMA Libri and Co., 1987), 27-32, concludes that Montaigne is not an atheist. "It is not Montaigne's Catholicism that should be questioned but the view that he always speaks in accordance with the Church's teaching" (29). See also Patrick Henry, "Les titres façades, la censure et l'écriture défensive chez Montaigne," *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne* ser. 5, no. 24 (1977): 11-28. Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 105, and Leon Brunschvicg, *Descartes et Pascal, lecteurs de Montaigne* (New York and Paris: Brentano's, 1944), 89, both view Montaigne as Hellenistic rather than Christian. Richard A Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne: A Critical Exploration* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 228, holds that Montaigne is not really Christian but adheres to Catholicism because he hates civil war. Gustav Lanson, *Les Essais de Montaigne* (Paris: Librairie Mellottee, 1947?) regards Montaigne as moderately religious: there is no real effort towards holiness (263). Andre Gide, *Essai sur Montaigne* (Paris: Jacques Schiffrin, Editions de la Pléiade, n.d.), 41-42, claims that Montaigne speaks of Christianity with an almost malicious impertinence and that he never speaks of Christ and may never have even read the Gospels. Arthur Armaingaud, "Montaigne: était-il ondoyant et divers? Montaigne était-il inconstant?" *Revue du seizième siècle* 10 (1923), 44, says that Montaigne sometimes hides his meaning. Therefore, his contradictions have to be interpreted by seeing what is real and what is pretended. Armaingaud concludes that only Montaigne's anti-religious opinions are sincere. David Lewis Schaefer, in both his *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) and his "'To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die': Montaigne vs. Socrates," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5-6 (1988): 23-30, agrees with Armaingaud. Jesse V. Mauzey, *Montaigne's Philosophy of Human Nature* (Annadale-on-Hudson, NY: St. Stephen's College, 1933), 40, claims that Montaigne is an agnostic.
2. Frédéric Brahami, *Le Scepticisme de Montaigne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 58, 73.
3. *Ibid.*, 29. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 52,

describes the sceptic-fideist position as "complete doubt on the rational level, joined with a religion based on faith alone." Herman Janssen, *Montaigne fideïste* (Nijmegen, Utrecht: N. V. Dekker and Van de Vigt en J. W. Van Leeuwen, 1930), says that an essential element of fideism is the deliberate sacrifice of reason to faith (37, 111) and the complete separation of reason and faith (114). Dorothy Gabe Coleman, *Montaigne's Essais* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 53, describes fideism as the view that the intellect is incapable of attaining knowledge of divine matters. Alexandre Micha, *Le Singulier Montaigne* (Paris: Librairie A. G. Nizet, 1964), 172-73, on the other hand, holds that Montaigne is not entirely a fideist, and Clement Sclafert, *L'Âme religieuse de Montaigne* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1951), 63, claims that Montaigne is not a fideist: the problem posed by the "Apology" is really the problem of who should interpret Scripture.

4. References to the French text of the *Essais* are to the edition by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, 3 volumes, Presses Universitaires de France, 2nd edition, "Quadrige," 1992. The English translation is that of Donald Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Stanford University Press, 1943. In some instances, I have emended Frame's translation. The citation (VS506; F375), for example, refers to p.506 of the Villey - Saulnier edition and to p. 375 of the Frame translation.

5. See F. L. Lucas, "The Master-Essayist," in *Studies in French and English* (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1934), 118: "if an essay like that on Prayers, with its casual allusions to his own special fondness for the Paternoster and for the sign of the Cross, is all merely a cunning piece of stagecraft, then instead of the sincerest he was the insincerest of men. And why should he tell us, unless it were true, that he always receives the rites of the Church at the beginning of any attack of illness, to set his mind at rest?"

6. Brahami, *Le Scepticisme*, 46-47. Terence Penelhum, "Skepticism and Fideism," in Myles Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 293, describes Montaigne as a "Catholic Pyrrhonist." Montaigne equates faith that comes from grace with the Sceptic's acquiescence in local tradition. Montaigne's faith is tepid: he participates but without really identifying himself with faith. Penelhum offers three objections to fideism: 1) faith would be a groundless choice, 2) there could be no grounds for professing one faith rather than another, 3) the very possibility of such faith is questionable. These are among the reasons why I maintain that Montaigne is not a fideist: I believe that each can be answered through an elucidation of the dialectic of faith and reason in the *Essays*.

7. See Schaefer, *Political Philosophy*, 48.

8. Brahami, *Le Scepticisme*, 23.

9. St. Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. M.J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 117.

10. Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 96: Montaigne simultaneously turned against natural philosophy and the Reformation because he saw in both a common danger: a claim to the autonomy of human reason. Maturin Dreano, *La Pensée religieuse de Montaigne* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne et Fils, 1936), 276, refers to those who make the second objection as "rationalists." The Reformers were faithful to Aristotle (252). Dreano claims that the "new doctors" are atheists and Reformers. For Montaigne, atheism was only the reform pushed to its logical conclusion (263-64). According to Floyd Gray, "The 'Nouveaux Docteurs' and the Problem of Montaigne's Consistency in the *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*," *Symposium* 18 (1964), 27-29, the "new doctors" mentioned by Montaigne in his caution to the Princess are the Calvinists whose rationalism he intends to combat. Further, the Reformers appealed to a notion of "individ-

ual" reason in their attack on the authority of the Church. See Frieda S. Brown, *Religious and Political Conservatism in the Essais of Montaigne* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963), 41. Donald M. Frame, "Did Montaigne Betray Sebond?" *Romanic Review* 38 (1947), 303, refers to the reason of the second objection as "isolated." Frame argues that Montaigne was fully aware of his differences from Sebond and that he changed from fondness to coolness (314-15). The "Apology" presents "the analysis of the origin of atheism in unbridled rationalism" (325).

11. Schaefer, *Political Philosophy*, 45: neither atheism nor fideism accounts for the title "Apology." Catherine Demure, "Montaigne: The Paradox and the Miracle — Structure and Meaning in 'The Apology of Raymond Sebond' (*Essais* II: 12)," *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 188-208, is one of the few commentators who argue for the coherence of the "Apology." She argues that the essay manifests the rigor of a maintained contradiction: the need for theology but the impossibility of theology (189). This is a paradox that moves towards transcendence (206).

12. T.S. Eliot, "The *Pensées* of Pascal," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), 363.