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*Philosophical scepticism and its tradition in
Michel de Montaigne's Essais*

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Abstract:

Montaigne has widely been regarded as one of the most significant sceptics of the XVI Century. Yet, if we consider his *Essais* as a whole, he turns out to be more a sceptical thinker like Socrates or Saint Augustine rather than a pyrrhonist like Sextus Empiricus. He is closer to the Academic scepticism rather than to the absolute scepticism of Pyrrhonism. This thesis contends that despite most of modern research, Montaigne's biggest debt to ancient sources is with Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine and Plutarch rather than with Sextus Empiricus. I argue that Montaigne was familiar with the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism and his quest for truth meant that he had more affinity with Socrates and St. Augustine than with Sextus Empiricus or Pyrrho. He did not suspend his judgment *more pirronico*: on the contrary, he exerted it in every occasion. The Christian tradition left a more important mark than it was initially thought in Montaigne's *Essais*. This reconsideration of Montaigne's scepticism leads to a re-evaluation of different aspects of the sceptical tradition since the ancient times.

In this thesis I show that Montaigne's scepticism was partly shaped by the presence of scepticism in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Old Testament and in St. Paul, Lactantius and St. Augustine. Powerful currents of scepticism permeated different traditions during the Middle Ages and although their existence has been acknowledged, their potential debt to Greco-Roman antiquity and their influence in the recovery and transmission of scepticism in the early modern period still need further investigation.

I argue that in the sceptical crisis of the early modern period Sextus' writings may have fuelled this crisis, but they did not initiate it. I claim that Sextus Empiricus revival was more a result rather than a cause of the sceptical crisis. Considering that scepticism is a fundamental part of the *Essais* as a whole we can say that Montaigne was an important part of the sceptical crisis but his scepticism was not shaped by Sextus.

I present in this thesis Montaigne's originality and the complexity of his thought, and even though sometimes it is difficult to follow, his vision is utterly harmonious and consistent. Montaigne considered the ideas of many who had gone before him, sometimes following them, sometimes taking his own path. Montaigne believed in the possibility of real knowledge, even if, in the tradition of Socrates and Augustine, he despaired of achieving it in one person's life. Montaigne was a sceptic who believed in the existence of truth and he sought that truth through the medium of the essay.

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Despite recent concerns about the viability of the concept of the “scientific revolution” and ongoing debates over the relative “continuity” and “discontinuity” between ancient, medieval and early modern science, most historians of science agree that the western scientific enterprise was fundamentally transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The story of this transformation is, in part, that of the methodological debates that lay at the heart of the development of the “new learning” of the seventeenth century. The story of these methodological debates centers on the reactions to a “sceptical crisis”, a “crisis of doubt” about the human capacity to achieve meaningful knowledge independently of divine revelation. A central figure in this latter tale is the sixteenth-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne, generally regarded as one the most influential of the sixteenth-century sceptics and a very important figure in the story of the development of early modern scepticism. This study tries to be a story about the scepticism of Montaigne, a story about the “scientific revolution” that emphasizes both continuity and discontinuity.

The standard account of Montaigne’s scepticism focuses on the supposed influence on Montaigne and his *Essais* of the writings of the ancient sceptic Sextus Empiricus. The principal responsible of this understanding of Montaigne’s scepticism was Pierre Villey with his book *Les sources et l’évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, (Paris, 1908). Important scholars like Richard Popkin, Donald Frame, Hugo Friedrich, and many others who are Montaigne’s most recent biographers, have followed Pierre Villey in this. This interpretation of Montaigne and this reading of the *Essais*, however, is problematic. It overlooks largely the use made by Montaigne of other classical

authors who are far more important to an understanding of the *Essais* than is Sextus Empiricus. My position is also that this interpretation dismisses, essentially, Montaigne's complex relationship with the long-standing Christian commitment to the primacy of faith over reason and virtually ignores the important part played by the experience of self and other in the world of the later sixteenth century. The standard reading makes Montaigne a simple mouthpiece of ancient sceptical ideas, portrays his scepticism as a mere revival of ancient scepticism and diminishes the philosophical originality of the French. Finally, and perhaps more tellingly, it is based on a basic misreading of the *Essais*, for the scepticism of Montaigne is not the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus, and the evidence of the influence of Sextus Empiricus on the *Essais* is scanty at best.

The scepticism of the *Essais* is in part the product of a voyage of self-discovery set within the context of the tumultuous events of the later sixteenth century, which included the expansion of Europe's physical and intellectual horizons in the Age of Discovery and the chaos brought on by the Protestant and Catholic reformations and the wars of religion that spread all over the continent. In this journey, Michel de Montaigne sought guidance from a number of ancient and Christian authors and fought against the relative merits of reason, experience and faith in the search for veritable knowledge. His model in this quest, however, was not the Pyrrho of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, but his image of the Socrates of Plato and Xenophon, a Socrates who for him did not symbolize the impossibility of the attainment of knowledge, but rather the quest itself. For Montaigne as for the eidolon of Socrates, scepticism was not the result of the quest, but its sign, its emblem, encapsulated by him in the famous motto, "*Que sçais je?*" (What do I know?). As for Socrates, Montaigne's scepticism was an affirmation rather than a negation. Ultimately, Montaigne did not embrace the Pyrrhonic *epoché* or "suspension of judgment", but rather the Socratic search for knowledge, despite the inevitability of uncertainty.

The story of Montaigne's scepticism is part of the story of early modern science. It does not offer nor suggest a meta-narrative of the science of the period as a whole, but it does shed light on some of the things going on at the time. It is part of the story of

developments in one area of inquiry, and it is one of continuity and discontinuity for Montaigne partakes of a deeply rooted tradition, even as he helps to transform it. In the hands of Montaigne and some of those who come after him, like Bacon, Descartes, Mersenne, Gassendi or Newton, scepticism was not merely a statement about human limitations or simply a problem to be surmounted, but an integral part of the quest for knowledge, and ultimately, a tool. In short, in the methodological debates of the period, scepticism is not just an obstacle to overcome, but an essential part of the search for a new epistemological foundation for rational discourse.

The sceptical crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is widely believed to have been brought on by the Protestant Reformation and fueled primarily by the rediscovery of ancient sceptical teachings, particularly those writings attributed to Sextus Empiricus (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the professors*, second century), Cicero's interpretation of academic scepticism (particularly his play *Academica*, first century) and Diogenes Laertius' widely disseminated book, *Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers* (probably written in the third century). In truth, however, and this is my reading in this study, the basic arguments of the ancient sceptics were known throughout the Middle Ages, and the flowering of scepticism in the early modern period was essentially the reaffirmation of a long-standing Christian commitment to the primacy of faith over reason that evolved in response to continuous and dramatic cultural upheaval rather than as a reaction to discreet, seminal events. This question is paradoxical since, from the XVIII century onwards the word "sceptic" will be synonymous with "unbeliever".

One of the ideas I defend in the present study is that classical sources, some of which ultimately must be seen as more significant in this respect than the writings of Sextus Empiricus, played an important role, but so did Judeo-Christian materials that have received little attention in this context.

Montaigne's scepticism, as I have pointed out, has been often portrayed as a mere phase in his thought, the temporary result of a personal sceptical crisis supposedly provoked by reading Sextus Empiricus' books. According to this idea, there would be two more phases in his thought: a phase of Stoicism before and a phase of hedonism

later. Relatively little attention has been devoted to other possible influences on Montaigne's scepticism.

Recent Montaigne scholarship, however, has begun to address this problem and has demonstrated that scepticism is fundamental to Montaigne's outlook and to the *Essais* as a whole, and pre-dates his alleged encounter with Sextus Empiricus writings. Donald Frame, for example, has considered that Montaigne's scepticism was not confined to the Apology. Dikka Berven and Marcel Tetel have argued that there are Stoic, Sceptical and Epicurean ideas together in the *Essais* as pieces of the whole. André Tournon, Geralde Nakam and Frédéric Brahami have considered the importance and the presence of scepticism in Montaigne's *Essais* in different ways. Nonetheless, most scholars still regard Sextus Empiricus as one of the most important of Montaigne's sources, and considerable disagreement remains as to the impact of theological considerations and contemporary events on Montaigne's thought. In this study I am going to argue that Montaigne's scepticism has more affinity with the doubt of Socrates and Saint Augustine than with the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus and that his reflection on the human condition led him to a probabilistic, rather than a truly sceptical or relativistic, conception of knowledge in matters both earthly and divine. And we must not forget that the probabilistic option had a platonic origin. In short, I maintain that ultimately Montaigne believed in the possibility of real knowledge, even if, together with Socrates and Augustine, he despaired of achieving it in one person's life.

Before proceeding further, it seems appropriate to say a few words about the methodological underpinnings of this study. Montaigne can be read from a diverse variety of perspectives and historians, philosophers and literary scholars and others all approach him in slightly different ways. This is as it should be, for the pursuit of knowledge in the modern Academy is truly a group undertaking that benefits from a plurality of voices, even if they do not always speak as one. This study is offered as a contribution to an extended dialogue, and to paraphrase Timaeus, Cicero and Montaigne, if I were more than merely human I would offer certainties rather than conjectures. There are, however, different means of pursuing probabilities. There are

“idea-driven”, “text- or data-centered”, and “problem-focused” approaches among others. Arguments may be presented rationally, empirically, or consequentially. Mixed approaches and methodologies are perhaps the most common, and this study is an example of this fact. If it is fundamentally “problem-focused”, ideas and texts, nonetheless, play a part in it, for although it centers on Montaigne's relationship to the sceptical tradition, it necessarily has to deal with the ideas and texts that embody that tradition. They themselves are not the primary focus, however; the problem is. If it is primarily consequential, often offering its conclusions in advance of the evidence, it nevertheless frequently falls into a kind of rationalism, and even occasionally pretends to a sort of empiricism. The problem, however, always remains central, and the function of the evidence is to provide the possibility of a solution. At the heart of this investigation are a handful of questions about the nature of Montaigne's scepticism and the “influences” on its development. The answers are to be found in the complexities of texts, if they are to be found at all, but “influence” is a tricky thing to establish. Authors frequently cite other authors and more often borrow ways of framing ideas, but it seems to me that the true test is whether or not the ideas of one author echo, either in a positive or a negative way, the ideas of another. After that, if it can be clearly established that the later author knew the writings of the earlier author, it seems to me that we can start to talk about “influence”. “Affinity”, however, might be a better term. An author has an affinity, a connection, with another author whose works present similar ideas. In such cases the later author can reasonably be described as having engaged the ideas of the earlier author, even if ultimately some aspects of those ideas are rejected.

The case of Montaigne presents the scholar with a number of interesting challenges. Although he discusses philosophical, theological and anthropological problems, he rarely does so in a straightforward way. He read many different kind of texts, and had many literary approaches to choose from. He intentionally chose not to adopt a philosophical, a theological or an historical style. Instead, following Plutarch and other classical authors, he chose a model of discourse, the essay, that allowed him the freedom to explore a wide range of topics in an unsystematic way. Montaigne's choice not so systematize should not be mistaken as a failure to present a coherent vision, however. Montaigne is coherent, and the self-portrait of the *Essais* is one, for

even if there is diversity within it, there is also an overall unity. Montaigne relates anecdotes that seem to reveal to him essential features of the human condition and juxtaposes alternative perspectives on those anecdotes in an effort both to penetrate their meaning and to convince his reader of the plausibility of his judgments. Montaigne had a rare gift, the ability to see things from different perspectives, and he utilized that gift to its fullest in the *Essais*. The *Essais* speak with multiple voices, but it must never be forgotten that all of them are Montaigne's voice, and if we seem to encounter many different Montaignes in the *Essais*, it is only because the meta-Montaigne has chosen that we should. It might be argued that this is an expression of Montaigne's Pyrrhonism, of his relativism, a literary sceptical monument that embodies the impossibility of knowledge and the contingency of custom. It is not, however. It is a rhetorical strategy that he uses to persuade his reader of the tentative conclusions that he has at least temporarily embraced in his search of knowledge. It is an expression and a symbol of his ultimate conviction of the existence of truth.

Chapter 1

Critical reconsideration of Michel de Montaigne's scepticism

- The sceptical tradition.

Before a complete account of Montaigne's scepticism can be given, a few words must be said, from my point of view, about the sceptical tradition out of which it emerged. A brief look also must be taken at the man himself and at his *Essais*. Finally, the standard account of Montaigne's scepticism and the problems associated with it must be explored more thoroughly before an alternative and its implications for our understanding of Montaigne's place in the history of early science can be laid out in full.

The sceptical tradition to which Montaigne was heir and from which his philosophy came had roots in Greek antiquity but spread, at least, some measure of continuity through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Within this rich and varied tradition, scepticism took many forms, ranging from the simple expression of doubt to the formal denial of the possibility of knowledge, from a sort of probabilism to debates about the relative roles of reason, experience and faith in the acquisition of knowledge.

In this brief overview, only a quick glance at the history of scepticism in Greek and, in a lesser extent, Roman antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early modern period is possible. This cursory investigation, however, will help to contextualize the scepticism of Montaigne.

The history of ancient scepticism extends from classical Greece in the sixth century before Christ through the late Roman imperial period in the third century *anno domine*. Although Greek scepticism did not come to full fruition until some time after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B. C. in the Hellenistic period, to varying extents the principal Greek sceptics all claimed presocratic predecessors to their

thought. Scepticism was also an important current in Hellenistic and Roman thought.¹ The nature of this unsystematic tradition, nonetheless, is not easily characterized. The sources for ancient sceptical arguments include Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius and other ancient writers with Saint Augustine and other patristic authors. Among these, Cicero, Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius are, perhaps, the richest and certainly the most important for our understanding of the chronological development of ancient scepticism.²

The story of ancient scepticism runs then from roughly the sixth century B.C., to the third century a.d.³ It begins with the Presocratics in the sixth and fifth centuries before Christ, but the most important early figures are Socrates, who died in 399 B.C. and his students Plato (427-347 B.C.) and Xenophon (434-355 B.C.), who are largely important in this context as sources of their master's thought. The first of the great Hellenistic sceptics was Pyrrho of Elis (365-270 B.C. approximately) –after whom the later pyrrhonian sceptics were named- and his student Timon (325-235 B.C.).⁴ The election of Pyrrho as the beginner of this philosophical movement probably was kind of arbitrary. It was Sextus Empiricus who pointed out Pyrrho as the origin of the scepticism's line of thought in the third century A.D. It would not have had any sense to make Pyrrho the creator of a philosophical school, because it was the origin of scepticism at stake, a line of thought that made its motto with the difficulties of grasping knowledge.

The history of ancient scepticism proper, however, begins in Plato's Academy with the succession of Arcesilas (dead 242 B.C.) as head of the Academy around the

1 A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, v. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. xiii.

2 At least these three authors are paid more attention than the others in works as important as Richard Popkin's *The history of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, Oxford University Press, 2003. The origin of this book, Popkin's *The history of scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, written in 1960, was the portico of much of the contemporary research on scepticism.

3 Much of what follows in this brief chronological summary is taken from Myles Burnyeat's introduction to *The Skeptical Tradition*, Burnyeat ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 4-5.

4 Timon was a poet and some of his poems in which the figure of Pyrrho appears have survived and they are one of the scarce sources we have about Pyrrho.

year 273 B.C. Both Arcesilas' second or middle Academy and the Third or New Academy established with the succession of Carneades (219-129 B.C.)⁵ some time before 155 B.C. were dominated by sceptical arguments.⁶ Academic scepticism flourished until 87 B.C. when the succession of Antiochus (dead 67 B.C.) signaled a return to a more dogmatic interpretation of Plato's thought. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.) was heir to this tradition of Academic scepticism. Around the time of Antiochus's restoration of the Old Academy, Aenesidemus broke with the Academy and initiated a revival of pyrrhonic scepticism. The two most important descendants of this revived pyrrhonism were Agrippa in the first century A. D. and Sextus Empiricus, the last major and the culminating figure in the story of ancient scepticism, in the second century.

The leading proponents of Academic and Pyrrhonic⁷ scepticism all claimed Presocratic precursors for their ideas, but while these claims cannot be dismissed entirely, they need to be taken with some caution. Cicero included Democritus, Anaxagoras and Empedocles in his description of the pedigree of Academic scepticism.⁸ Sextus Empiricus, while ultimately arguing that none of the Presocratics were sceptics in the true sense, considered the historical importance of Heraclitus, Democritus, the Cyrenaics and Protagoras to the development of the sceptical tradition.⁹ In the biographical sketch of Pyrrho in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius indicated that some considered Homer, the Seven Wise Men of Greece, Archilochus,

5 On the successor line in the Academy see Diogenes Laertius, *Life and Opinions of Eminent philosophers*, IV, 59-60.

6 On the distinction between academies see Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 220.

7 Language matters: in Spanish, Italian and French it is possible to make a difference between two concepts: pyrrhonic and pyrrhonian. Pyrrhonic, whose origin would be "pyrrhonism", would refer to everything regarding the sceptical movement, while pyrrhonian, coming from "Pyrrho", would indicate, exclusively, the information regarding the figure of Pyrrho. Very interesting the nuance, see Ramon Roman, *El escepticismo antiguo: posibilidad del conocimiento y búsqueda de la felicidad*, Córdoba, 1994, p. 28, n. 20.

8 Cicero, *Academica*, I, xii, line 44.

9 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, xxix-xxxii, lines 210-219.

Euripides, Xenophanes, Zeno of Elea and Heraclitus as sceptics.¹⁰ This list perhaps could be expanded almost indefinitely. In general, however, as David Sedley and others have suggested, it is probable that the sceptical tendencies of various Presocratic thinkers are nothing more than simple expressions of doubt or statements about the prerequisites for the search for knowledge by philosophers who should otherwise be regarded as dogmatic, even though, as Sedley is careful to point out, later sceptics often made profitable use of such expressions.¹¹ More work needs to be done on this subject, however, and the importance of similar tendencies in the thought of Socrates and the writings of Plato is a little more complicated, as Sedley shows elsewhere.¹²

The relationship of Socrates and Plato to the sceptical tradition that had its real beginning in the Academy is not a simple one. Arcesilas and Carneades both claimed to represent the true spirit of the Academy, a claim with which Cicero seems to have concurred.¹³ Sextus Empiricus considered both Socrates and Plato to be relevant to the history of scepticism, but thought of neither of them nor the Academic tradition that they founded as representative of the true nature of scepticism.¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius called Socrates a sceptic, but Plato a dogmatist.¹⁵ At times Cicero seemed to agree with this, at other times he seemed to have regarded Plato as essentially having been a sceptic.¹⁶ The solution to this puzzle lies in a closer examination of the relationship of the thought of Socrates and Plato to the tradition of Academic scepticism. While such an examination lies outside the confines of the current study, some additional light needs to be shed on this subject before the nature of Montaigne's can be explored fully, for both

10 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX, 71-74.

11 David Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism", in Burnyeat ed., *Skeptical tradition*, pp. 9-10.

12 David Sedley, "The Protagonists", in Malcolm Schofield, Myles Burnyeat and Jonathan Barnes, eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 9-10.

13 Cicero, *Academica*, I, iv, lines 13-14.

14 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, xxxiii, lines 220-235.

15 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III, 51-53.

16 See the conflicting evidence in Cicero, *Academica*, I, iv, lines 15-18 where Varro argues for this interpretation and Cicero's ultimate response in *Academica*, I, xii, lines 43-46.

Socrates and Plato are crucial to the reading of Montaigne in this and many other aspects.

Although the answer to this question can only be sketched out here, its essence seems to me to lie in the fact that the Academic sceptics basically transformed the teachings of Socrates and Plato in a way that was neither wholly faithful nor completely unfaithful to their teachings. The Socrates portrayed in some of the early and late dialogues of Plato and in the writings of Xenophon, and to a certain extent Plato himself, considered scepticism or acknowledgment of the state of ignorance as a sign of the quest for a possibly unattainable knowledge. For Socrates, and possibly for Plato, scepticism was the symbol of the philosopher's quest. Simply put then, among the Academic sceptics, the symbol of the quest became its essence, its end rather than its indication. For Montaigne, as for Socrates, however, it remained a symbol of a quest that for both in the final analysis was one for self-knowledge.

Socrates' confession of his own ignorance was a powerful symbol for those who came after him. This was, perhaps, especially true in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed from antiquity through the present this image of Socrates has endured as one of the most resonant symbols of scepticism. Socrates was one of the first to make the distinction later elaborated by Plato and Aristotle between "knowledge", that which can be known with certainty, and "opinion", that which is, at best, only probable.¹⁷ Socrates, however, unlike some later sceptics, did not assert that since man can know nothing with certainty, the search for certain knowledge should be abandoned, but rather that knowledge should be sought even if it can never be found. His was not a retreat from the quest for certain knowledge, as it often was for later sceptics, but rather, as Terry Penner has shown, the stance of one who was continuously striving for knowledge while realizing that it could never be gained fully.¹⁸ For Socrates, the goal of philosophy was knowledge, a knowledge that was ultimately knowledge of self. This image of the

17 This was the origin of the old dispute between *dóxa* and *episteme*.

18 Terry Penner, "Socrates and the Early Dialogues", in Richard Kraut ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 137.

historical Socrates comes principally from the early dialogues of Plato and such late works of Plato's as the *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides* and thus raises the question for Plato's own views on the subject.

Plato has generally been regarded as a dogmatist, as asserting numerous positive claims about the self and the world, but the shadow of Socrates' scepticism nonetheless permeates Plato's writings, making Plato an important source for ancient sceptical ideas and making it impossible in the final analysis to view Plato as a thorough-going dogmatist. As Penner has shown, in the early Socratic dialogues, Plato was still in the shadow of his master, and his ideas were still very close to those of Socrates. Even in his later dialogues, however, and especially in such late examples as the *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides*, where Plato returns to something of that earlier Socratic doubt, Plato continued to display the influence of Socrates. Furthermore, at the core of Plato's thought, and crucial to his epistemology, is the idea presented in the "Allegory of the Cave" in the *Republic* and in passages in other contemporary dialogues that in this life the soul cannot have direct knowledge of eternal ideas. It is thus at least possible to read Plato as being committed ultimately to the proposition that real knowledge can never be attained in this lifetime. Socrates professed his own ignorance and his dedication to the unrealizable quest for knowledge. Plato asserted a number of positive claims while retaining a healthy doubt about the certainty of his own ideas, as we see in the *Parmenides* where he virtually overthrows all of his own main propositions. Pyrrho, the Academic sceptics and the later Pyrrhonians made this doubt, in one form or another, the end of the philosophical quest, rather than the sign of it.

Relatively little is known about Pyrrho of Elis and his student Timon. There was even some debate in antiquity, and to some extent this debate continues today, as to whether or not Pyrrho properly belongs in the tradition that took his name. In his lives of Pyrrho and Timon, Diogenes Laertius makes Pyrrho one of the tradition's founders. Sextus Empiricus considers him a forerunner of his school, but notes that his own brand of scepticism, though descended from that of Pyrrho is, ultimately, more complete than that of the tradition's founder. Cicero did not regard Pyrrho as a true sceptic, but as a

philosopher dedicated to ethics.¹⁹ R. G. Bury, the Loeb editor and translator of Sextus Empiricus, concurred with Cicero's interpretation, calling Pyrrho "not at all a full-blown sceptic, but rather a moralist of an austere and ascetic type".²⁰ Anthony Long pointed out that Cicero seems to have been ignorant to Timon's writings and maintained that there were good reasons for the subsequent adoption of Pyrrho's name by later sceptics.²¹ David Sedley suggested that Pyrrho's student Timon may have used his teacher's name as a sort of propaganda device to promote his own ideas, and that Aenesidemus, the reviver of Pyrrhonism, may have used Pyrrho's name to establish a sound ancient precedent for his scepticism.²² In any event, Pyrrho apparently wrote nothing, and as the works of Timon did not survive, the ideas of both are known only through later sources such as Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus. Both Pyrrho and Timon seem to have maintained that certain knowledge is impossible, that the *epoché* or "suspension of judgment" is, therefore, the only feasible solution, and that this stance will lead to inner tranquility. At the beginning of the Pyrrhonic tradition there is thus something apparently new. This is not a mere expression of doubt, or a statement about the nature of the philosophical quest, but a formal epistemological claim about the impossibility of knowledge. The solution then, for Pyrrho, Timon and those who follow them, is not to strive to come ever closer to the truth, but to acknowledge that it can never be attained and to seek inner peace thorough the suspension of judgment rather than answers to questions that cannot even be formulated meaningfully.

The principal formulators of Academic scepticism were Arcesilas and Carneades. These also left no writings behind, and among the later descriptions of their thought, Cicero's is the fullest, and as such is the primary source for our understanding of Academic scepticism. It is possible that Arcesilas' sceptical stance was influenced by

19 Cicero, *Academica*, II, XLII, 130. Modern scholars are reconsidering this vision of Pyrrho as a sceptic, see, for example, Spinelli, E., *Questione scettiche: Letture introduttive al pirronismo antico*, Lithos, Roma, 2006, p. 4.

20 R. G. Bury, in the introduction to Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, p. xxx.

21 Anthony A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 77.

22 Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism", pp. 19-20.

that of Pyrrho, but the Academic sceptics themselves derived the history of their ideas from Plato and his predecessors, as was noted above. At any rate, Academic scepticism was developed largely in opposition to Stoicism, and most of the arguments of the Academic sceptics were articulated in response to Stoic propositions. Arcesilas seems to have maintained a position similar to that of Pyrrho, advocating an absolute scepticism that is incapable of knowing even that it knows nothing.²³ Carneades, on the other hand, seems to have argued that while ultimately it is impossible to know anything with certainty, it is possible to entertain likely opinions, or to have a provisional or probable knowledge of things.²⁴ This one seems to have been the position of Cicero himself.

Of the later Pyrrhonic sceptics, Sextus Empiricus is the most important, and it is in his writings that a fully developed sceptical system emerges. At the heart of Sextus Empiricus' system is the Pyrrhonic idea of the suspension of judgment described above. In the writings of Sextus, however, this became more than a general principle. For in addition to giving the fullest account of the history of ancient scepticism, Sextus Empiricus' writings offer a veritable manifesto of scepticism and provide an array of detailed sceptical arguments which are employed in a thorough and exhaustive critique of virtually all realms of ancient thought. It is thus with Sextus that the ancient sceptical tradition, which essentially began with Socrates even if ultimately it involved a transformation of Socrates' ideas, reached its fullest flowering. It is, perhaps, because of this fact that Sextus Empiricus has often been viewed as the most important figure in the history of ancient scepticism and in the history of the later development of the sceptical tradition.²⁵

Sextus Empiricus was not the only ancient sceptic, however, and his writings, although important, are not the only source for ancient sceptical ideas. Plato, Cicero and

23 Cicero, *Academica*, I, xi, line 45.

24 Cicero, *Academica*, II, xxxi, lines 98-101.

25 That's why modern scholars tend to think about the recovery of Sextus' books in the Renaissance as the very beginning of the recovery of scepticism after the Middle Ages, well above other sceptical sources. See Richar Popkin, *The history of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, pp. 64 and ff and Manuel Bermúdez, *La recuperación del escepticismo en el Renacimiento*, Fundación Universitaria Española, Madrid, 2006, pp. 100-128.

Diogenes Laertius are also important, and because of the relative obscurity of Sextus Empiricus and the low popularity of his works compared to theirs, they may in fact, in the long run, be more important for the subsequent historical development of the sceptical tradition than Sextus Empiricus.

Later Christian authors, like Saint Augustine, also a much more significant and influential figure than Sextus Empiricus, are also important in this regard, both as sources for ancient sceptical ideas and as part of the continuing evolution of the tradition of scepticism.

For Socrates, Plato, Pyrrho and Timon, Arcesilas, Carneades, Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, the question was what can be known. For some, the answer was unclear, but the search was what mattered. For others, probable knowledge, or the acquisition of likely opinions, was a reasonable goal. For still others, inner peace could be found through acceptance of the fact that we cannot know even if we know nothing, and through the embracing of permanent suspensions of judgment. This debate lived on, in altered form and with new influences, in the context of the Christian tradition. For at least some of the early fathers of the Church, these epistemological questions were crucial. The same would be true later for some authors within the Islamic and Jewish traditions.²⁶

In the preface of the most recent edition of his *History of Skepticism*,²⁷ Richard Popkin, the principal author of the standard account of the “revival” of scepticism in the early modern period, acknowledges the contributions of the medieval Christian, Islamic and Jewish sceptical traditions, but sceptical tendencies within Christian, Islamic and Jewish theological debates generally have been treated as less important developments,

26 For the presence of the Jewish thought in the sceptical tradition see Manuel Bermúdez, “A glimpse of Jewish thought in Francisco Sanchez’s *Quod nihil scitur*”, in *Contrastes*, University of Malaga, vol. XIII, 2008, pp. 285-294.

27 Which is the one entitled *The history of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, and published in 2003. The first edition of this book was published in 1960 with the title *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. This work has been the threshold for the study of scepticism and it has been extended some times until its latest edition which is the one cited above. Richard Popkin died in April 2005 and he was working until his very last day. I spent with him a very productive period of study and research in the spring of the year 2004 in his house at Pacific Palisades in California.

continuous with and significant for neither the story of ancient scepticism nor that of early modern scepticism. This fault cannot be redressed here, but certain features of early modern scepticism, and of Montaigne's scepticism in particular, do not make sense without at least some consideration of their medieval Christian antecedents. The scepticism of Montaigne and his contemporaries had a profoundly Christian component that it inherited in part from the Middle Ages.

The early Christian fathers were deeply sceptical of the human capacity to understand either the Creator or his creation, and this current remained strong, although not all pervasive, in medieval theology. Examples of scepticism in *Ecclesiastes*, *Proverbs* and elsewhere in the Old Testament perhaps may be dismissed as evidence of simple "anti-intellectualism", or, at least, of some measure of hostility to the Greek philosophical tradition, as may similar examples in the New Testament, specifically in the writings of Saint Paul.

Saint Augustine and some of the other early Christian apologists who were trained within the classical tradition, however, are another story. St. Augustine and others routinely made use of sceptical arguments in their refutation of pagan philosophy and were, at least, sympathetic to the ancient sceptics, whom they viewed as being less guilty of vanity and folly than were their dogmatic counterparts. Of these early apologists, Saint Augustine is the most important in this as in many other respects. For Augustine, nothing can be known with certainty without divine illumination. Augustine rejected scepticism in its extreme form, but he essentially embraced the Socratic idea that knowledge can never be attained fully in this lifetime and inclined towards a pragmatic Ciceronian probabilism in most matters. In the *Confessions*, Augustine tells us that the scepticism of the Academics helped to lead him to the truth of Christian belief. In the *Contra Academicos*, he tells us that faith ultimately gives the lie to scepticism and maintains that through God man can strive for knowledge, even if, as for Socrates, it must remain elusive because of the nature of the human condition. For Augustine, as for the later Augustinian theologians who followed him, reason is weak and incapable of understanding the Creator or his creation. Man can formulate likely

opinions about matters earthly and divine, but can obtain certainty only through revelation.

As Popkin and others have argued, the principal ancient sources for sceptical ideas appear to have been largely unknown in the Middle Ages, but the basic position of the Academic sceptics was known, in part through Augustine, to at least a few, and that position was not viewed unfavorably.²⁸ In the twelfth century John of Salisbury commended the caution of the Academic sceptics, which he contrasted with the folly of other ancient philosophers who thought they could plumb the mysteries of the world.²⁹ Nicholas of Autrecourt in the fourteenth century clearly was aware of the basic arguments of the Academic sceptics, even if their influence on his own scepticism is uncertain.³⁰ Leading late medieval theologians such as Saint Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus made reference to the arguments of the Academic sceptics in their defense of Augustinian epistemology, which emphasized the primacy of faith over reason, against the attacks of medieval Aristotelians.³¹ The basic ideas of the Academic sceptics were known in the Middle Ages and were regarded with sympathy by Christian thinkers committed to an Augustinian vision of human capacities. In the early modern period, against the backdrop of the Reformation, this would take on new significance as Protestant and Catholic Reformers battled for theological authority. The seeds of much of this, however, were sown in the Middle Ages, as were those of many other aspects of the history of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.

28 See Richard Popkin, *History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. xvi and Charles B. Schmitt, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times", in Burnyeat ed., *The Skeptical Tradition*, pp. 226-228.

29 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, Cary J. Nederman tr., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, book VII, chapter 2.

30 What we know of Nicholas of Autrecourt's epistemology comes largely from his second letter to Bernard and from the articles condemned at Paris in 1346. Texts of both, together with facing English translations, are to be found in L. M. de Rijk ed., *Nicholas of Autrecourt; His Correspondence with Master Giles and Bernard of Arezzo*, New York: E. J. Brill, 1994, pp. 58-75 and 167-207 respectively.

31 For Bonaventure see *Quaestiones disputatae de scientia Christi*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1992, *Quaestio* 4. For Duns Scotus see Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, Allan Wolter tr., Edinburgh, Nelson, 1962, pp. 103-106.

The broad features and, indeed, many of the details of the story of the revival of ancient scepticism in the early modern period have been described by Richard Popkin and others and only a few words are necessary here.³² According to Popkin, a “sceptical crisis”, a “crisis of doubt” about the human capacity to achieve meaningful knowledge independently of divine revelation, occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in part as a result of the Protestant Reformation and in part because of the rediscovery of ancient sceptical writings, most notably those of Sextus Empiricus. As Popkin has shown, some early Protestant and Catholic Reformers made use of sceptical arguments in their theological debates, and later thinkers created a substantial early modern sceptical tradition. For Popkin, the major early figures in this story were Erasmus and Montaigne, in the latter of whose writings Popkin saw the first example of a mature, fully developed scepticism. For Popkin, perhaps the most significant events in the story of the development of early modern scepticism were the publication of a Latin translation of portions of Sextus Empiricus’ writings by Henri Estienne in 1562 and that of a complete Latin edition of Sextus Empiricus by Gentian Hervet in 1569.³³ According to Popkin, these events marked a turning point in the history of early modern scepticism and made the mature scepticism of Montaigne and those who came after him possible. The major weaknesses of Popkin’s account of the early phase of the sceptical crisis are, from my point of view, his tendency to dismiss the contributions of thinkers prior to Montaigne, his perhaps exaggerated emphasis on the importance of Sextus Empiricus and his failure to consider personal, psychological factors and other more general developments in the culture of the period.

Many factors shaped the evolution of the sceptical crisis. The new wider availability of ancient texts, the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the Age of Discovery and other events on the broader level of European culture, as well as the local, personal experience of all of this contributed to shape the development of early modern scepticism. A number of things were going on and the causes of the sceptical

32 The most important work in this field remains Richard Popkin, *The History of skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*.

33 Popkin, *History of skepticism*, p. 19.

crisis were complicated. It is important to keep this in mind when thinking about the general picture and individual thinkers. With regard to the role of ancient texts in this story, this word of caution is particularly important.

There has been a tendency to view the re-discovery of Sextus Empiricus as a primary cause of the unfolding of the sceptical crisis, and this, ultimately, is a mistake. The basic arguments of the ancient sceptics were known throughout the Middle Ages and within the medieval Christian tradition there was, at least, a current of scepticism, which consisted in the assertion of the certainty of revealed tradition in contrast with the highly speculative nature of fallible, human inquiries. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a number of texts that added to the understanding of ancient scepticism became available. The writings of Sextus Empiricus were among these, but also included were the relevant writings of Plato, Cicero, Diogenes Laertius and others. Although Sextus Empiricus offers the most complete account of ancient scepticism and the only example of a “sceptical system”, it is important to note that his works never, at any time, enjoyed anything like the popularity of those of either Plato or Cicero, or of the Christian sources, such as the writings of St. Augustine, which also provided access to ancient scepticism. A better interpretation of the role of the writings of Sextus Empiricus is to suppose that within the context of an already emerging sceptical crisis, caused by a number of different factors, renewed interest in this relatively obscure ancient author was paid and that although they contributed to future developments, they may not have played as large a causal role as is often assigned to them. In the long run, it is more plausible to believe that the wider circulation of the writings of Sextus Empiricus was one of the results rather than one of the causes of the sceptical crisis.³⁴ Although the writings of Sextus Empiricus may have fueled the sceptical crisis, they did not ignite it. Finally, we must keep in mind that the factors besides renewed interest in ancient texts were, at least, equally important to the story of early modern scepticism.

34 I'd like to point out this situation, since it is a new opinion in the research of the recovery of scepticism in the Renaissance.

In general, then, although renewed interest in ancient sceptical ideas was part of the story of the development of scepticism in the early modern period, it was only one part of the story and as with Sextus Empiricus, interest in ancient sceptical writings was as much a product of the sceptical crisis as it was a cause of its further development. Ancient sceptical ideas inspired early modern sceptical discussions. Disagreements between philosophers also helped to weaken the confidence in any one particular philosophical system. Early modern thinkers made use of ancient ideas, but their scepticism was not in the final analysis simply the result of the encounter with those ideas. Like their ancient predecessors, a number of early modern thinkers wrestled with the questions of what it is possible to know and how much confidence can be had in the outcomes of speculative investigations of all kinds. The sceptical crisis had important ramifications for virtually all realms of knowledge and human inquiry. The status of “religious” claims, “scientific” claims, “moral” claims, indeed of any and all claims, came under renewed and intense scrutiny in this period. In their efforts to explore these questions, early modern thinkers looked actively at ancient sources for guidance. They were not the passive recipients of ancient wisdom, they developed their own originality.

Other factors contributed to the development of early modern scepticism. The religious debates of the period and the bloody encounters that often erupted over them were immensely important. Although Popkin does an excellent job of showing how such issues set the sceptical crisis in motion, he says little about their ongoing effect as events unfolded. Protestant and Catholic Reformers alike made use of sceptical arguments in their attacks on one another. Their efforts and, indeed, the very nature of their disputes over the content and forms of Christianity, fueled the crisis. Things like the Wars of Religion and the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, which set neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother gave immediacy to the problem. The turmoil that all of this produced in the social and political climates of France, Germany, England and elsewhere turned this into a true crisis. While all of this was going on, Europe’s physical and intellectual horizons were in the process of expanding. The discovery of the “New World” changed the very identity of Europe and the place of educated Europeans within the world as a whole. New lands, new plants, new animals, new peoples and new customs provided an overload of new information to be processed

and assimilated. The world and man's place in it needed to be reconceived. Finally, all of this, and the sceptical crisis which was but one part of the overall picture, was not happening on some separate, abstract, universal level, but within the hearts and minds of real people situated in specific times and places.

The case of Montaigne provides both an excellent example of some of these issues and an entry point into future discussions of the varied causes of the sceptical crisis. As Popkin has shown, Montaigne was perhaps the most significant of the early "sceptics" and certainly one of the most influential. He wrestled with the problems of reason, experience, faith and doubt that lay at the heart of the sceptical crisis and he made use of numerous ancient authors in this endeavor. A member of the elite of European society, he participated directly in some of the most important events of the day and he offered insightful reflections on many of the cultural factors that shaped the development of the sceptical tradition. He also left us a rare look behind the scenes at the private mental life of an early modern sceptic.

- Michel de Montaigne and his *Essais*.

Montaigne is one of the most fascinating figures in the history of sixteenth-century France. In many ways his private life was that of a quiet country nobleman with a contemplative, scholarly inclination. His public life, however, was set within the circles of power. Ultimately of course, the distinction is somewhat artificial, and nowhere is this truer than in the case of Montaigne. Montaigne seemed to shift back and forth between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, so that making a hard division between the two is impossible in his case.³⁵ This mingling of the public and private, the universal and the personal, is part of what has made the *Essais* both his greatest legacy and one of the world's great treasures.

35 For a discussion of this subject see George Hoffmann, *Montaigne's Career*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

Much of Montaigne's private life took place within the environs of Chateau Montaigne, the ancestral family home east of Bordeaux in the gentle hills of Guyenne in southern France. Montaigne's great-grandfather, Raymon Eyquem, a wealthy merchant, had purchased the title and estate of Montaigne in 1477.³⁶ Montaigne's grand-father, Grimom Eyquem, also a merchant, further enriched the family with the cultivation of numerous contacts among the local magistrates and Church officials. After his return from the Italian wars, Montaigne's father, Pierre Eyquem, married Montaigne's mother, Antoinette de Louppes in 1528.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne was born in Chateau Montaigne on 28 February 1533. According to Montaigne, for the first six years of his life he heard and spoke nothing but Latin. He apparently was sent to school at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux at the tender age of 6 in 1539. His studies there continued until he left the Collège in 1546 at the age of 13. Montaigne was thus prepared from an early age for intellectual greatness.

In 1557, the 24 year old Montaigne, now a member of the Parlement of Bordeaux, struck up a friendship with another of the Parlement's members, Étienne de La Boétie. This friendship was to be one of the most important of Montaigne's life, and La Boétie's death six years later, in 1563, was a great blow to Montaigne. He deeply mourned the loss of his friend and wrestled with the pain of it for the remainder of his life.

In 1565, at the age of 32, Montaigne married Françoise de la Chassaïne. In 1568 his father died. Three years later, in 1571, Montaigne, now 38, officially retired from public life. He inscribed these words on the wall of this study to commemorate the occasion:

36 This and the other details of this brief biographical sketch of Montaigne are taken from the chronology of Montaigne's life in Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, Villey-Saulnier ed., v. 1, Paris: Quadriga, 1999, pp. xxxiii-xxxix. There is a delicious biography of Montaigne, written by Stephan Zweig, which is also an interesting source: Stephan Zweig, *Montaigne*, Barcelona, Acanalado, 2008.

*“In the year of Christ 1571, at age of thirty-eight, on the day before the Calends of March, the day of his birth, Michel de Montaigne long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life, now more than half run out. If the fates permit, he will complete this abode, this sweet ancestral retreat; and he has consecrated it to his freedom, tranquility, and leisure”.*³⁷

It was after his ultimately short-lived withdrawal from the world that Montaigne began work on the *Essais*. The longest of them, and the most important to an understanding of Montaigne’s scepticism, the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, was probably completed some time in 1576. In that same year Montaigne commissioned his famous medallion bearing the motto, “*Que sçais je?*”, “What do I know?” Montaigne continued to work on the *Essais* for the rest of his life. He died in 1592, at the age of 59, having suffered severely for many years from kidney stones.

As noted above, however, Montaigne’s withdrawal from public life was short lived, or rather never fully complete. Indeed, although in the twenty-one years between 1571 and 1592 he spent long intervals at home, working on the *Essais*, he nonetheless continued to be an active participant in the events shaping the future of France and was frequently away from Chateau Montaigne. In the eighteen years between the end of his school-days in 1546 and his “retirement” in 1571, Montaigne had made a place for himself in the circles of power. In the last twenty-one years of his life his involvement there continued.

In 1554, Montaigne, then 21, became a member of the Cour des Aides de Périgeux. He became a judge in the Parlement of Bordeaux in 1557. In 1559, at the age of 26, he apparently made his first appearance in the French royal court. Between 1561

³⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, p. xxxiv. N.B.: here and throughout this study I have relied heavily on Donald Frame’s translation of the *Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958 and in my own efforts to render Montaigne’s thought into English and into Spanish.

and 1562 he participated in the siege of Rouen. In 1562 he became a member of the Parlement of Paris, the highest legal court in the land, at which time he was required to make a public declaration of his allegiance to the Catholic religion. He gave this position up in 1570 (the position in the Parlement, not the position about his religious beliefs). In 1571, the year of his “retirement”, he was made a Knight of the Order of St. Michael. In 1574, only three years after his retirement, Montaigne was with the French royal army in Poitou, where he apparently participated in important diplomatic missions. Montaigne had made a place for himself among the favorites of the liberal Catholic supporters of the French crown.

He also developed important and powerful connections among the liberal Protestant enemies of the crown, however. In 1577, Montaigne was named a Gentleman of the Chamber of the Protestant King Henri of Navarre,³⁸ who eventually ruled France as Henri IV from 1589 to 1610. Henri of Navarre later spent two days as a guest in Chateau Montaigne in 1584 and dined with Montaigne there in 1587.

However, Montaigne retained the favor of the Catholic King Henri III as well. In 1580 Montaigne took a trip to Italy from which he was recalled in 1581 by a letter from Henri. Montaigne had been elected to a two-year term as Mayor of Bordeaux, and the king was eager that he should take up his duties. Montaigne was elected to a second term in 1583. During his tenure as Mayor of Bordeaux, Montaigne, who had highly placed connections among liberal Catholics and Protestants, served as a go-between for the two camps. This, of course, did not make him popular among conservative Catholics, however, and during a journey to Paris in 1588 he apparently was thrown into the Bastille by supporters of the extremist Catholic League. He was released on the orders of the Queen Mother.

Montaigne lived a rich and varied life. He was a judge, a statesman, and a confidant of princes. He participated at the highest level in some of the most important events of his day. Nonetheless, he was also a scholar -not a university-trained

38 This was the king who supposedly pronounced the famous and well known sentence: “*Paris vaut bien une messe*”, “Paris is well worth a mass”, carrying out an interesting exercise of *real politik*.

philosopher or theologian, but rather an educated “man of letters”, perhaps one of the first, and certainly one of the most popular among later generations. This popularity, and the fame of Montaigne, rests on his *Essais*.

The *Essais* of Montaigne are divided into three Books, which all together occupy some one thousand pages in modern editions. Book I contains 57 essays, about a third of the total. Most of the essays in Book I are no more than a few pages in length. Book II contains 37 essays, which account for something like another third of the whole work. The essays in Book II vary considerably in length. The longest of them, indeed the longest of all of the essays, the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, the twelfth in Book II, runs to well over a hundred pages. Book III contains 13 essays, most of fairly substantial length. Modern editions of the *Essais* employ a simple system to note the different layers of the text, which was revised and revised again by Montaigne between the first edition of 1580 and the posthumous edition of 1592.

As indicated above, Montaigne began work on the *Essais* after his “retirement” in 1571. Between 1572 and 1573 he completed much of Book I and portions of Book II. The longest of the essays, the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, was probably written in 1576 as were other portions of Book II. Between 1578 and 1580, he completed the first drafts of the essays in Books I and II, and the first edition of the *Essais*, consisting of Books I and II only, was published in 1580. Subsequent editions of the *Essais*, with modifications, appeared in 1582 and 1587. A fourth edition, which included substantial changes to some of the material in Books I and II and the thirteen new essays of Book III, appeared in 1588. A final revised edition was published posthumously in 1592.

Montaigne's *Essais* are both the sign and the product of his quest for self-knowledge. He viewed them as a sort of self-portrait. In the “Note to the Reader” that appeared at the beginning of the first edition of 1580, Montaigne tells us something of the purpose of the *Essais*:

“This is a book of good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no other goal than a domestic and private one. I have given no

consideration either to your service or to my glory. My powers are not capable of such a design. I have dedicated it to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive. If I had written to seek the world's favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray. My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed. Had I been placed among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet liberty of nature's first laws, I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked. Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on a subject so frivolous and so vain. So farewell. Montaigne, this first day of March, fifteen hundred and eighty".³⁹

Montaigne tells us that he himself is the “matter of his book”. The *Essais* of Montaigne are not, however, autobiographical in any straightforward or traditional sense. Rather the *Essais* are the record of Montaigne's reflections on a wide variety of subjects. They are the record of this quest for self-knowledge. They are also, since the private and public cannot truly be separated, the work of this exploration of the world. The self is the substance of his book, but the self's relationship with the other is the concern of this book as well. The place of the self in the world is the matter of Montaigne's book. The world is the matter of Montaigne's book.

The *Essais* are both the most important and the most substantial of Montaigne's literary undertakings. In addition to them, however, he left several other writings. In 1569 he made a translation of the *Natural Theology* of Raymond Sebond, a work that is important for an understanding of Montaigne's scepticism. In 1571 he published an

39 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. 3. The French critical edition chosen is: Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes*, Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat ed., Paris, Gallimard, 1962, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

edition of the works of this friend, the poet La Boétie. The brief *Journal de Voyage* written on Montaigne's trip to Italy in 1580 was published for the first time in 1774, long after his death. In addition, he also left behind a number of letters and an important set of inscriptions of lines taken from various sources, which he inscribed on the beams of the ceiling of his library in Chateau Montaigne. The *Essais*, however, are the heart of Montaigne's legacy. Although these other materials are not without their relevance, it is in the *Essais* that we truly encounter the scepticism of Montaigne.

- Montaigne's scepticism reconsidered.

Montaigne's scepticism has often been considered the product of a personal sceptical crisis brought on by the reading of Sextus Empiricus works. This idea, and this is one of the most original contributions of this study, is not supported by the evidence of the *Essais*, however. Instead, a sceptical outlook seems to have been fundamental to their author, and the scepticism of Montaigne has more affinity with the scepticism of the Socrates of Plato and Xenophon than it does with that of Sextus Empiricus. This account of Montaigne's scepticism does little justice to his deep engagement with the numerous other sources for the sceptical ideas contained within the sceptical tradition, most especially the writings of Plato, Cicero and St. Augustine. It also pushes Montaigne's participation in the tradition of the Christian commitment to the primacy of faith over reason well into the background. Furthermore, it all but ignores the role of personal and cultural factors in the shaping of Montaigne's thought. Finally, it makes Montaigne a passive receptacle for ancient ideas, rather than an active reader searching for guidance.

The "evolutionary thesis" first articulated by Pierre Villey and since subscribed to by many scholars makes scepticism a phase in Montaigne's thought. According to this interpretation of the *Essais*, Montaigne's scepticism was inspired by a study of the works of Sextus Empiricus sometime around 1575, just before the composition of the longest and most-straightforwardly sceptical of the *Essais*, the "Apology for Raymond

Sebond”, by Villey's dating.⁴⁰ But as Donald Frame and others have noted, Montaigne's scepticism is not confined to this essay, and expressions of it come both before and after the Apology in the chronological layering of Montaigne's text.⁴¹ Indeed, and this is one of the main theses of this study, scepticism is a fundamental part of the basic worldview of the *Essais*. Moreover, there is little if any actual evidence to suggest that Montaigne was as deeply influenced by Sextus Empiricus as is sometimes supposed. Finally, as a number of recent readers of the *Essais* have pointed out, Montaigne's thought is not easily reducible to a straightforward evolutionary scheme.

According to the evolutionary thesis there were three phases to Montaigne's thought, the Stoic, the sceptical and the Epicurean. Recent trends in Montaigne studies, however, have moved away from the evolutionary thesis in favor of an interpretation of the *Essais* which makes all three elements an integral part of the work as a whole. The evolutionary thesis was first articulated by Pierre Villey. In *Les sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne* and elsewhere, Villey argued that the three books of the *Essais* corresponded to three successive phases in Montaigne's thought. For Villey the essays of Book I were primarily representative of Montaigne's “Stoicism”, those of Book II of his scepticism, and those of Book III of his “Epicureanism”. Villey considered Montaigne's scepticism as an ultimate rejection of his “Stoicism” and a stage in the development of his “Epicureanism”. His “Epicureanism” for Villey subsequently came about as Montaigne seemingly realized that scepticism could be defeated only by a reliance on experience, as the Epicureans argued.

Villey's influence on subsequent generations of scholars of Montaigne has been enormous, and the debt to him is significant. Villey's dating of the composition of the individual essays and the various recensions of them and interpolations within them, although not without potential problems, remains an important tool for anyone engaged

40 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. xxxiv.

41 See Donald Frame, *Montaigne's Discovery of Man*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1955, chapters III and IV.

in the serious study of Montaigne. The same is also true of Villey's attempt to trace the "influences" on Montaigne's thought.

All of this notwithstanding, there are serious problems with the traditional formulation of the evolutionary thesis, and with its treatment of Stoic, sceptical, and Epicurean elements within the *Essais*. In general, such an argument presupposes a model of the development of thought and of the idea of influence that is ultimately too linear and simplistic. In the case of Montaigne in particular, it does serious injustice to one who was anything but systematic by attempting to make of him and adherent successively of different and distinct schools of thought. Finally, it misrepresents the very nature of the ancient traditions that Montaigne was drawing on and the way he made use of them by dealing with them as if they were completely separate in themselves, which ultimately they were not.

In a recent collection of essays on Montaigne, Dikka Berven noted that "something unclassifiable lies at the heart of Montaigne's self-portrait in the *Essais*, a desire to question everything, to affect no wish to resolve and conclude, and this extraordinary fluidity resists the rigidity of Villey's formal categories".⁴² Berven's sentiment more closely resembles the traditional conception of the *Essais* common to literary readers like Emerson and Gide than it does that of Villey and those critics who follow him. Berven further agrees with Marcel Tetel and many others that the idea of Montaigne being first a Stoic, later a sceptic, and then an Epicurean is somehow inimical to Montaigne and the *Essais*. In Tetel's words, "the growing consensus maintains that Montaigne was not successively a Stoic, a sceptic and finally an Epicurean; instead he was all three at the same time and refused to mold himself into a school of thought".⁴³

42 See Berven's introduction to *Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, Dikka Berven ed., v. 1, New York: Garland, 1995, p. viii.

43 Marcel Tetel, "Montaigne: Evolution or Convolution", in Berven ed., *Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, v. 1, New York: Garland, 1995, p. 213.

This notion of the blending of Stoic, Sceptical and Epicurean elements in Montaigne's thought and within the *Essais* is ultimately much more organic and satisfying. Montaigne and the *Essais* are complicated, confused, and often even potentially contradictory. In the *Essais*, Montaigne revels in this complexity, making of it a badge of honor, proclaiming it as his right, and perhaps even as his duty in the attempt at faithful self-portrayal. This reading of the *Essais* is further supported by the fact that in the chronological layering of Montaigne's text, Stoic, sceptical, and Epicurean ideas stubbornly refuse to remain completely separated. These themes or currents flow throughout the *Essais*. For Montaigne these tendencies that have been described as "Stoic", "Sceptical" and "Epicurean" interpenetrate one another and are not easily separable. They are pieces of the whole. The influence of the older reading of Montaigne by Villey, however, has lingered on, especially among those not directly engaged in Montaigne studies.

An example of this can be seen in Richard Popkin's treatment of Montaigne. Popkin's discussion of Montaigne's scepticism in the *History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* identifies all the broad features of Montaigne's scepticism and its importance to later developments. Nevertheless there are some potential problems with the details of Popkin's interpretation of Montaigne. Following Villey, Popkin placed too much emphasis on the importance of Sextus Empiricus.⁴⁴ Furthermore, although Popkin touched briefly on the problem of Montaigne's belief in Christianity and its relationship to the religious debates of the period, he offered no extended discussion of the subject. Then too, while Popkin considered some of the other events that helped to shape life in the later part of the sixteenth century, the relevance of Montaigne's experience of life amidst them to the evolution of his scepticism lay largely outside the scope of his study.

44 It is not only Popkin who follow this trend, scholars like Luciano Floridi, in his *Sextus Empiricus. The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism*, Oxford University Press, 2002, go the same way. For example, Floridi devotes a good part of his book to studying the influence of Sextus Empiricus in Michel de Montaigne's thought, and the importance of the Greek physician in the inscriptions inscribed on the beams of the ceiling of his library. See Manuel Bermúdez, "The recovery and transmission of Sextus Empiricus works", *Elenchos*, anno XXIV, 2, 2003, pp. 517-518.

Finally, Popkin's claim that Montaigne's response to doubt was the advocacy of the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment is mistaken.⁴⁵

In the beginning of his account of Montaigne's scepticism, Popkin maintained the importance of Sextus Empiricus to an understanding of Montaigne.⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, in the same place Popkin acknowledged that Montaigne's scepticism pre-dated his supposed reading of the works of the ancient sceptic (Sextus Empiricus).⁴⁷ Popkin mentioned Sextus Empiricus only twice more in his treatment of Montaigne, moreover. The first was when he noted that Montaigne made use of “practically all the gambits and analysis of Sextus Empiricus”.⁴⁸ Unfortunately Popkin, from our point of view, failed to address the question of whether or not Montaigne took these ideas from Sextus Empiricus or from some other source. The second mention of Sextus Empiricus came at the end of Popkin's discussion of Montaigne, where he asserted without any real investigation of the potential debt to the ancient sceptic that Montaigne had “revitalized” the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus.⁴⁹ Popkin also argued that Montaigne endorsed the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment but offered little in support of this claim.⁵⁰ He offered no investigation of the use made by Montaigne of other ancient sources.

Popkin's treatment of Montaigne's relationship to the tradition of Christian scepticism is problematic as well. His judgment of St. Paul's “anti-rationalism” is insufficiently elaborated.⁵¹ His declaration of Erasmus's “anti-intellectualism” is ill-

45 I talked with Richard Popkin in the year 2004 about this problem during a stay of work in his house in Pacific Palisades. Successive editions of this important work, the *History of skepticism*, repeated the same position about Montaigne's scepticism. Unfortunately, he died in April 2005 at the age of 82, and he did not change his opinion about it.

46 See Popkin, R., *History of skepticism*, pp. 41 and 43.

47 To check this acknowledgement of Popkin see his *History of Skepticism*, p. 43.

48 Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, p. 52.

49 Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, p. 54.

50 See Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, p. 52.

51 We can see this clearly in Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, p. 45.

considered.⁵² Indeed, in general, his consideration of the Christian sources, both ancient and contemporary, that Montaigne drew on is somewhat sparse. Finally, although he properly called attention to the fact that the question of faith in an age of religious strife is central to Montaigne's scepticism, he offered no extended consideration of the nature of Montaigne's relationship to faith. In one place he calls Montaigne's "Apology" a "defense of the Catholic rule of faith".⁵³ In another he complicated this claim by referring to the fact that Montaigne sometimes has been read as making a veiled attack on religious belief, as asserting that belief in impossible.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Popkin judged that either interpretation can be supported, but that Montaigne was probably "mildly religious" and that his defense was genuine.⁵⁵ Montaigne's position *vis-à-vis* the religious debates of the day is far from transparent, and while in the final analysis it seems likely that Montaigne was a liberal Catholic both spiritually and politically, as Popkin here maintained, the nature of faith in Montaigne is far from simple. The problem of Montaigne's understanding of faith is, from our point of view, crucial.

Finally, although Popkin considered the religious debates of the period and touched briefly on the impact of the discovery of the "New World", the focus of his account of early modern scepticism is on the interplay of the ideas under discussion.⁵⁶ The exploration of the events that helped to shape sixteenth-century society, the sceptical crisis in general, and the scepticism of Montaigne in particular lay outside the confines of this study. This aspect of the story was left untold by Popkin. It is crucial to an understanding of both sixteenth-century scepticism in general and scepticism of Montaigne in particular.

52 For Popkin's interpretation of the relevance of Erasmus's thought to Montaigne see Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, pp. 46 and 54.

53 Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, pp. 52-53.

54 Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, p. 54.

55 Popkin, *History of Skepticism*, p. 55.

56 For the theological debates see especially chapter 1 of Popkin's *History of Skepticism*. For mentions of the significance of the encounter with the New World to Montaigne's scepticism see pp. 50 and 53 of the same work.

To summarize, Popkin's account of Montaigne's scepticism identifies all of the proper elements, but his overall judgment about the nature of Montaigne's scepticism is flawed. The texts of the sceptical tradition, contemporary theological debates, and the experience of life in Europe in the later sixteenth-century are all part of the story. But although Popkin's treatment of the importance of these elements to the understanding of Montaigne's scepticism is the best overview currently available, the story has not been told fully. Many of the details require further investigation and research. Most importantly, Popkin's reading of Montaigne's scepticism as an advocacy of the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment is mistaken. Montaigne did not follow Pyrrho but Socrates. As for the latter, Montaigne's response to the inevitability of uncertainty was the continuous pursuit of understanding, even if certainty could never be attained.

As indicated above, unlike Popkin, most Montaigne scholars have moved away from the "evolutionary thesis" of Villey. Not all have abandoned the idea that Montaigne's scepticism was shaped by an encounter with Sextus Empiricus, however. André Tournon argues that scepticism was a basic feature of Montaigne's thought, but he also claims, in a very interesting book, that Montaigne's juridical experience led him to embrace the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment that he presumably encountered in the writings of Sextus Empiricus.⁵⁷ For G eralde Nakam, it was the study of history and culture that confirmed Montaigne's Pyrrhonian and relativistic sceptical outlook.⁵⁸ Although Tournon sees French legal culture as the principal influence on Montaigne's scepticism, and Nakam the study of custom, both accept the idea that Montaigne's thought was influenced by the writings of Sextus Empiricus.

A more recent treatment of Montaigne's scepticism by Fr d eric Brahami follows Villey and Popkin in arguing that Montaigne's scepticism was influenced by that of Sextus Empiricus, but unlike Popkin and others, Brahami maintains that Montaigne's scepticism ultimately departed from that of Sextus Empiricus. Brahami also considers

57 Andr  Tournon, *Montaigne; La glosse et l'essai*, Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1983. I am planning to consider Tournon's argument in greater detail in the following chapter.

58 G eralde Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993. My idea is to discuss Nakam's argument in the penultimate chapter of this study.

the problem of faith in Montaigne. He offers no discussion of other relevant features of late sixteenth-century society, however. The core of Brahami's argument is that Montaigne, unlike Sextus Empiricus, should be read as an anti-rationalist. According to Brahami, Montaigne rejected the suspension of judgment of Sextus Empiricus and maintained that man has no choice but to exercise judgment in the face of an absolute incertitude.⁵⁹ With regard to religious issues, Brahami argues that Montaigne believed, departing for Augustine, that here could be no rational defense of belief, and that Montaigne's only defense of belief was faith.⁶⁰

Brahami's argument is subtle, but not without its problems. The essential feature of the relationship between Montaigne's scepticism and that of the ancient sceptics is not Montaigne's departure from Sextus Empiricus, but rather his debt to the Socrates of Plato and to Cicero. Following Socrates, Montaigne maintained the necessity of the continuous striving for understanding, even if it cannot be achieved fully. Following Cicero, Montaigne believed in the possibility of entertaining likely opinions, of acquiring a kind of probable knowledge. Ultimately, Montaigne's conviction of the certitude of incertitude is not a retreat from rationalism, but a proscription of the limits of human understanding. Like Socrates, however, Montaigne was deeply committed to the search of understanding. In this Montaigne was perfectly in harmony with Augustine, and Montaigne's defense of Christian belief was a rational, if complicated, one, for Montaigne, finally, seems to have had no faith with which to defend belief.

Elaine Limbrick has also seen Montaigne's affinity with Socrates and Augustine.⁶¹ Her claim that Montaigne may not have fully understood the distinction between Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism is problematic, however, as is her apparent failure to see Montaigne's significant departures from Augustine. In general,

59 Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, pp. 106-107.

60 Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*, p. 78.

61 Limbrick's reading of Montaigne is presented in a series of articles listed in the bibliography from which the most important for this issue could be: Elaine Limbrick, "Montaigne et Saint Augustin" in *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XXXIV (1972), pp. 49-64 and Limbrick, "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonian", in *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XXXIX (1977), pp. 67-80.

moreover, Limbrick fails to see much that is original in Montaigne, and all too often seems to read him as simply following in the footsteps of others rather than actively engaging the ideas of his predecessors. She also has little to say about the relevance of contemporary culture and Montaigne's study of it and of history.

There are three major pieces then to the story of Montaigne's scepticism. His use of ancient sources must be investigated. His understanding of the problems of reason, experience and faith must be explored. Finally, his reaction to his own life experience must be considered. Ultimately, a proper understanding of Montaigne's scepticism is crucial to our overall understanding of the origins, development and consequences of the sceptical crisis of the early modern period.

Our main position is that Montaigne's scepticism was fundamental to his outlook. In the self-portrait of the *Essais*, he grapples and wrestles with the problem of reason, faith and experience. His motto, "*Que sçais je?*" is not a negation of the possibility of knowledge, but the battle cry of its quest. For Montaigne, as for Socrates, knowledge is something to be sought after, even if it can never be fully attained. For Montaigne, as for Socrates, this quest is ultimately an existential one, the search for self-knowledge, the search for an understanding of one's place in the overall scheme of things. In the end, for Montaigne reason is weak, faith is uncertain, and experience reaches only our own fallibility. They are pitiful guides through the pitfalls of life, but they are all that we have. Montaigne's response to the turmoil of the sixteenth century was an admission of the misery of man's condition but not a turning away from it. In the end, Montaigne embraced the imperfect experience of an imperfect world.

Montaigne's scepticism was also part of his search for faith. Montaigne sought grace, but in the long run he did not claim to possess it. He seems to have believed with Augustine that man can be illuminated only through God, but unlike Augustine, he did not claim to have experienced that illumination, nor even in part. He submitted himself and man to the judgment of a God he knew that he did not and could not know in this life. He was not a sectarian, but he aspired to be a Christian. His "Apology for Raymond Sebond" is perhaps the ultimate defense of Christian belief, for it is offered by one who

only aspires to faith. Montaigne's scepticism is an affirmation of the Christian commitment to the primacy of faith over reason. Montaigne sought, he did not find.

In his quest, he made use of a wide variety of ancient sources. He sought guidance in ancient writings. Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius and others gave him food for thought. He drew from many, and all are important to an understanding of his scepticism. Of all of them, Plato and Cicero may be the most important, however. For it was in Plato that Montaigne found Socrates and in Cicero he found a fully developed Socratic scepticism. The scepticism of Montaigne, like that of Socrates and Cicero, was an expression of the commitment to the search for knowledge rather than a negation of its possibility.

Montaigne's search for knowledge was not confined to the exploration of a set of abstract philosophical and theological problems, however, and the real subject of the *Essais* is Montaigne's study of man and society. As he tells us in a number of places, it is a knowledge of man that Montaigne seeks. In pursuit of this knowledge, he makes use of his own experience and of a wide variety of sources that provide him with human stories and the bulk of the *Essais* is devoted to the presentation and consideration of anecdotes drawn from historical and contemporary, western and non-western, cultures. Montaigne explores the nature of man and culture through an examination of primarily anecdotal material. This is what occupies him. Man is the greater puzzle of which philosophical and theological problems are only pieces. Man is Montaigne's obsession, and it is his study of man that reveals the true nature of Montaigne's scepticism. Like Socrates, Montaigne is concerned with ethics, and the question of public and private conduct is of central concern. He seeks the answer to this question in the study of human situations, and he almost invariably pronounces some sort of tentative, if often complicated, judgment on them. He does not withhold or suspend his judgment in a Pyrrhonian fashion, nor does he conclude the relativity of custom. He believes in the existence of a universal moral standard, even if he is uncertain of its susceptibility to human comprehension and fulfillment.

Montaigne and his contemporaries offered a critique of human capacities that drew on the labors of their predecessors. Their successors in the next century continued

that critique. Ultimately, their development of new theories of knowledge was as much a continuation of the quest of Montaigne and others as a response to it.

In the next chapter we will consider Montaigne's use of ancient sources. His relation to the Christian tradition will be discussed in a later chapter. The final chapter will deal with Montaigne's experience of self in the world of the late sixteenth century. The conclusion will deal with Montaigne and the "sceptical crisis".

Chapter 2

Montaigne and ancient scepticism

Like many who came before and after him, Michel de Montaigne questioned the human capacity to achieve true understanding of matters earthly and divine. Although not a philosopher in the formal sense, neither by training nor inclination, but rather a *litteratus*, a man of letters in its translation in English, and a statesman, Montaigne was nonetheless deeply philosophical. In the *Essais*, which he tells us are both the way and the outcome of a journey of self-discovery, he returns again and again to the most crucial of philosophical problems, the question both of how we come to know and how much confidence we can have in that knowledge. Montaigne wrestles with this question throughout the *Essais* and in his struggle to understand the relative values of reason, faith and experience, traditionally the principal claimants to epistemological authority, he draws on numerous classical sources for guidance. As indicated above, it has long been argued that the most important of these sources were the writings of the ancient sceptic Sextus Empiricus, and Montaigne's scepticism has often been interpreted as the result of a personal sceptical crisis brought on by a reading of Sextus Empiricus and, therefore, as a mere phase in the linear development of his thought from Stoicism, through Scepticism, to Epicureanism.

As we have shown previously, however, most Montaigne scholars have come to acknowledge that Montaigne's scepticism pre-dated his alleged encounter with Sextus Empiricus and that rather than being simply a phase in his intellectual development, the scepticism of Montaigne, together with his “Stoicism” and his “Epicureanism”, was a permanent and basic feature of this thought. In short, from our point of view Montaigne was not first a Stoic, then a sceptic and finally an Epicurean, but all three and none of these at once. Indeed Montaigne, as is now widely acknowledged, like Cicero, Plutarch and many of his other favourite classical authors, drew piecemeal from a variety of traditions as his needs and inclinations dictated. Montaigne was not an adherent of an ancient “school” of thought, nor successively of different schools of thought. The facile

notion of rigid “schools of thought” is even more absurd as regards Montaigne than it is with respect to the intellectual history of late antiquity. Moreover, Montaigne was not a mouthpiece for ancient sceptical ideas, but rather a man grappling with an epistemological crisis who drew on ancient sources, including the writings of Sextus Empiricus. And as I hope to demonstrate, Sextus Empiricus was not the most important of Montaigne's sources.

Indeed the scepticism of Montaigne is closer to the doubt of Socrates and the probabilism of Cicero than it is to the complete scepticism of Sextus Empiricus, and although Montaigne drew on a number of ancient sceptical sources in addition to Sextus Empiricus, including Xenophon, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, the Socratic dialogues of Plato and the *Academica* and other sceptical writings of Cicero are undeniably the most important of his ancient sources in this context. Sextus Empiricus, the culminating figure in the late-antique Pyrrhonian revival named for Pyrrho of Elis, maintained a position of absolute scepticism. In his early dialogues and in some of his late writings, Plato displayed the doubt of his master Socrates. Cicero embraced the probabilistic scepticism that developed in Plato's Academy under the stewardship of Arcesilas and Carneades.⁶² Ultimately, Montaigne inclined more towards Academic doubt than Pyrrhonian scepticism. In the potentially problematic terms of both Sextus Empiricus's and Montaigne's days, Montaigne was more of a “New Academician” than he was a “Pyrrhonian”. Unlike Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne did not reject the quest for knowledge in the face of absolute uncertainty. Instead, like Socrates and Cicero, he believed in the search for knowledge despite the inevitability of uncertainty. Montaigne's choice of the motto “*Que sçais je?*”, “what do I know?” over the Pyrrhonian formula “*επεχο, I suspend judgment*”, illustrates this.

Immediate, if not entirely convincing, evidence of this can also be gleaned from a brief glance at the frequency of references to classical authors in Montaigne's *Essais*.

62 There is a very important book about the scepticism in Plato's Academy which has turned into a classic book on the topic, Carlos Lèvy, *Cicero scepticus*, Rome, Ecole Française de Rome, 1992. There are also other interesting writings on academic scepticism, among which we would like to point out Ramón Román, *El enigma de la Academia platónica*, Córdoba, Berenice, 2007.

The picture that is partially revealed thereby is suggestive at the very least. As mentioned above, modern editions of the *Essais* run to about 1000 pages. In these 1000 pages, Montaigne makes in excess of 2500 references to more than 500 figures drawn from classical literature. These references include more than 1000 direct quotations. Montaigne mentions by name, and indeed discusses, all of the major figures of the ancient sceptical tradition with the sole exception of Sextus Empiricus. Montaigne considers Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Pyrrho and his student Timon, Arcesilas and Carneades, Cicero, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, but never Sextus Empiricus. In addition to making him the principal subject of at least two essays, Montaigne refers to Socrates more than 70 times and quotes him on more than 15 occasions. Montaigne mentions Plato more than 100 times, and quotes him more than 10 times. Xenophon is referred to more than 30 times but apparently quoted directly only once. Cicero is the subject of at least one essay and is mentioned some 50 times. He is quoted more than 100 times. Plutarch is mentioned more than 50 times and quoted more than 10 times. Diogenes Laertius is mentioned by name only once, and quoted directly only once, but both references make it clear that Montaigne was extremely fond of him. Sextus Empiricus is not mentioned once in the *Essais*, and the single, unacknowledged potential borrowing from him is problematic, as will be shown below. Montaigne did not follow Sextus Empiricus. Socrates, Cicero and others were the principal ancient guides of his quest for self-knowledge.

None of this can be regarded as conclusive, however, and a complete account of Montaigne's debt to ancient sceptical sources cannot be given without a thorough examination both of the most relevant of these sources and of the use to which Montaigne put them. The first part of what follows deals primarily with the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus, the doubt of Socrates as portrayed in Plato and Xenophon and the probabilism of Cicero. The second part deals with Montaigne's understanding of these sources and of additional material which he found in the writings of Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius. The third and final part considers more fully the relationship of the scepticism of Montaigne to that of the ancients.

- Academic doubt and Pyrrhonic scepticism.

The sceptical tradition of antiquity was considerably diverse. The respective positions of Cicero, Socrates and Sextus Empiricus effectively define a spectrum of opinion ranging from probabilism through doubt to absolute scepticism. That of Sextus Empiricus, although chronologically the last, as the sceptical extreme, will serve as a benchmark. It is also the position at the furthest remove from Montaigne's own.

Sextus Empiricus flourished around the beginning of the third century *anno domine*. He was a Greek physician who, although called “Empiricus”, was apparently a follower of the “methodic” rather than the “empiricist” tradition in Hellenistic medicine.⁶³ Little else is known about him.

It seems that the practice of medicine and the sceptical stance have had a special relationship throughout the history of thought.⁶⁴ As John Christian Laursen has described: “At first glance, it might not seem particularly likely that physicians would be attracted to philosophical skepticism. After all, if you have to doubt and suspend judgment about everything, how are you going to treat patients?”⁶⁵ Following Laursen, there were three different schools of medicine in the Ancient period.

The dogmatists or rationalists believed that the main element of knowledge was logic and assigned little importance to experience. Anatomy and logic were their instruments and the used to rely in Aristotle, the Stoics and other dogmatic philosophies. For the dogmatist school studying medicine meant reading a lot of philosophical texts.

The empiricist school was the school of the Academic scepticism. They opposed the dogmatists and thought that philosophy was of little help in medicine and that the

63 R. G. Bury, in the introduction to Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, p. xli.

64 For further information on the topic, the relationship between scepticism and medicine, see M. Bermúdez, “Escepticismo y medicina: la *Opera medica* de Francisco Sánchez”, in *El pensamiento político en la Edad Media*, Pedro Roche ed., Madrid, Fundación Ramón Areces, 2010, pp. 297-308.

65 John C. Laursen, “Medicine and Skepticism: Martín Martínez (1684-1734)”, in *The return of Scepticism from Descartes and Hobbes to Bayle*, de. Gianni Paganini, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003, pp. 305-325.

main tool to be used in order to cure somebody should be “the empirical observation, histories provided by others, and a sort of analogy (*metabasis*)”.⁶⁶

The third school was the methodist, and this one was in opposition of the previous two and claimed to solve their problems. One of its main spokesman was Galen and he said the methodist school rejected dogmatists and empiricists claims about medicine. This school maintained that it was “unnecessary to know what part of the body was ill, nor what may have caused the illness. The patient's age, constitution, and habits and the climate and location were insignificant. The disease alone would be the teacher, and the physician just observes certain general conditions: the body's restriction/constriction/costiveness and its dilation/relaxation/flux with respect to bodily fluids, and the mixture of the two”.⁶⁷

Among the little information we have about Sextus Empiricus we do know that he was a physician, but we do not know to which school he belonged. On the one hand, Diogenes Laertius in the chapter IX of his *Life and opinions of eminent philosophers* and the Pseudo-Galen in his *Isagogé* call him an “Empirical Physician”; his name also would indicate that. But, on the other hand, Sextus Empiricus himself wrote that a true sceptic could only be a methodical physician, not an empiricist.⁶⁸ We can only muse or lucubrate about the real position of Sextus Empiricus. Some scholars, among them John C. Laursen, try to solve this problem proposing that perhaps “Sextus was highly critical of the empirical school while remaining inside of it and pushing it back toward its roots in a more Pyrrhonian skepticism”.⁶⁹

The three works of Sextus Empiricus that have survived are the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, *Against the Dogmatists* and *Against the Professors*. Two additional works, *On the soul* and *Notes on Medicine*, are sometimes ascribed to him. The first of the three

66 John C. Laursen, art. cit., p. 306.

67 John C. Laursen, art. cit., p. 307.

68 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I 236ff.

69 John C. Laursen, art. cit., p. 308.

books of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* presents a summary of Pyrrhonian scepticism. The latter two books of this work and all of *Against the Dogmatists* and *Against the Professors* are devoted to the employment of sceptical arguments against a variety of specific propositions. Of the extant writings of Sextus Empiricus, the first book of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is the most important in the present context, for this is where Sextus Empiricus defines the Pyrrhonian position.

Sextus Empiricus maintained that man cannot know even that he knows nothing. Because of this absolute and unmitigated scepticism, he rejected philosophical speculation and advocated the cultivation of the suspension of judgment, which he believed would lead to inner balance and tranquillity, the also know as *ataraxia* or freedom of worry. To Sextus Empiricus, all propositions were equally tenable and equally untenable, and neither truth nor its approximation could ever be attained. For Sextus Empiricus, the wise man refrained from judging between equally uncertain propositions, refrained in essence from speculation into the nature of things, and cultivated acceptance of the inevitability of man's ignorance of the nature of the world and his place in it. This position of Sextus Empiricus can be illustrated by a brief analysis of a few key passages from the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

Sextus Empiricus defines scepticism as “an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'unperturbedness' or quietude”.⁷⁰ In the elaboration of this definition, he tells us that the sceptic is able to oppose appearances and judgments and is thereby able to show the equal probability and improbability of all propositions.⁷¹ He further says that “'suspense' is a state of mental rest owing to which we neither deny nor affirm anything” and that “'quietude' is an untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul”.⁷² For Sextus Empiricus, all propositions are equally likely and

70 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, book I, line 8.

71 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 9-10.

72 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 10.

equally unlikely. “Suspense of judgment” and mental “quietude” are the only appropriate goals of the sceptic.

Sextus Empiricus admits that “the originating cause of scepticism is (...) the hope of attaining quietude”.⁷³ He contrasts the sceptic with “men of talent” who, “perturbed by the contradictions in things and in doubt as to which of the alternatives they ought to accept” are “led on to inquire what is true in things and what false”.⁷⁴ By contrast, the “basic principle of the sceptic system is that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition”, which leads to an end to dogmatizing.⁷⁵ According to Sextus Empiricus, philosophical speculation leads only to confusion because of the inevitability of uncertainty. It produces anxiety rather than peace of mind. Accepting this, the sceptic seeks tranquillity through the suspension of judgment and refrains from philosophical speculation into the nature of things.

But what about appearances? If Sextus Empiricus rejects judgments about the nature of things, what about the data of sense impressions? His position here is fairly clear as well. He argues that those “who say that 'the skeptics abolish appearances', or phenomena” are misled, saying that “when we question whether the underlying object is such as it appears, we grant the fact that it appears, and our doubt does not concern the appearance itself but the account given of that appearance”.⁷⁶

Sextus Empiricus thus accepts that we perceive phenomena, but rejects all attempts to interpret their meaning. It is crucial to note here that he is not an empiricist. He is as mistrustful of the senses as he is of reason. He makes this clear when he says in a very important fragment of his writings that “no one, I suppose, disputes that the underlying object has this or that appearance; the point in dispute is whether the object is in reality such as it appears to be”.⁷⁷ He maintains that the senses do not reveal the

73 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 12.

74 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 12.

75 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 12.

76 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 19.

77 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 22.

natures of things in themselves and asserts that reason cannot discover them. He acknowledges the existence of appearances, but argues that real accounts of them cannot be given. He rejects the investigation of appearances. His scepticism is unmitigated and he denies either a rational or an empirical foundation for philosophical inquiry. He rejects the existence of all criteria in the search for truth. Sextus Empiricus disavows the ability of either reason or sense to obtain truth.

For Sextus Empiricus, the wise man avoids fruitless speculation into the nature of things. “Suspension of judgment” and mental “quietude” are his goals and we can see it in this representative passage:

*“We assert still that the Skeptic's End is quietude in respect of matters of opinion and moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable. For the Skeptic, having set out to philosophize with the object of passing judgment on the sense-impressions and ascertaining which of them are true and which false, so as to attain quietude thereby, found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment; and as he was thus in suspense there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude in respect of matters of opinion. For the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted: when he is without the things which he deems good he believes himself to be tormented by things naturally bad and he pursues after the things which are, as he thinks, good; which when he has obtained he keeps falling into still more perturbations because of his irrational and immoderate elation, and in his dread of a change of fortune he uses every endeavor to avoid losing the things which he deems good. On the other hand, the man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is unperturbed”.*⁷⁸

78 Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I, 25-28.

Like Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, who lived some 200 years before him, also sought peace of mind. Indeed this was one of the main goals of virtually all Hellenistic and late ancient philosophers; and Academicians both new and old, Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans and Pyrrhonians all sought it in different ways. Neoplatonists, Aristotelians, Stoics and Epicureans defined dogmatic positions. The sceptics, both Academic and Pyrrhonian, convinced by the inevitability of uncertainty, did not. Cicero was an Academic sceptic.

Like Sextus Empiricus, Cicero believed that certainty could never be achieved, but unlike the former, he believed in the possibility of a provisional or probabilistic knowledge. Although illustrations of Cicero's epistemology can be found in a number of his writings, its clearest expression, from our point of view, is to be found in the *Academica*, which Cicero offered in defence of the sceptical Second (or Middle) Academy of Arcesilas and the Third (or New) Academy of Carneades against the dogmatic claims of the restored Old Academy of Antiochus. Although as noted above, Arcesilas's position is closer to that of Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus, Cicero treats the probabilistic scepticism of Carneades as its natural outgrowth, and it is this latter version of scepticism that Cicero defends in the *Academica*. Cicero's position is easily illustrated by an examination of two passages from this work. In the first, he speaks through Catulus with whom he ultimately agrees.⁷⁹ Asked where he stands, Catulus says that he is “coming round to the view” of his father, the view of Carneades, “that nothing can be perceived”, but “that the wise man will assent to something not perceived, that is, will hold an opinion, but with the qualification that he will understand that it is an opinion and will know that there is nothing that can be comprehended and perceived”. For Cicero, the wise man knows that although he cannot comprehend or perceive anything as it really is, he can, nonetheless, entertain opinions about things, and can give his assent to them, at least provisionally. In this way, he can acquire a probabilistic knowledge.⁸⁰

79 Cicero, *Academica*, Book II, chapter xlvi, line 148.

80 There is a very interesting account on the philosophical stance of Carneades and on the probabilistic question in Ramón Román, *El enigma de la Academia de Platón*, Córdoba, Berenice, 2007, pp. 83-87.

This notion is made clearer in the second passage, where Cicero, speaking for himself, defines what he considers the true Academic position:

*“But for our part, since it is our habit to put forward our views in conflict with all schools, we cannot refuse to allow others to differ from us; although we at all events have an easy brief to argue, who desire to discover the truth without any contention, and who pursue it with the fullest diligence and devotion. For even though many difficulties hinder every branch of knowledge, and both the subjects themselves and our faculties of judgment involve such a lack of certainty that the most ancient and learned thinkers had good reason for distrusting their ability to discover what they desired, nevertheless they did not give up, nor yet will we abandon in exhaustion our zeal for research; and the sole object of our discussions is by arguing on both sides to draw out and give shape to some result that may be either true or the nearest possible approximation to the truth. Nor is there any difference between ourselves and those who think that they have positive knowledge except that they have no doubt that their tenets are true, whereas we hold many doctrines as probable, which we can easily act upon but can scarcely advance as certain”.*⁸¹

Cicero's response to scepticism is to accept the conclusion that true knowledge or understanding, certainty, can never be achieved and that all we can have are opinions; but he maintained that we can judge the relative merit of those opinions and decide, in a provisional way, which seem more or less likely. Cicero's differentiation between knowledge or understanding in the one hand, that would be certain, and opinion on the other hand, that would not be certain, is fundamentally Socratic and is derived principally from Plato's and Aristotle's elaboration of a Socratic formulation. Cicero maintained that though we cannot achieve true understanding, we must continue to aim for it. Along the way, we entertain various approximations of the truth, opinions, which

81 Cicero, *Academica*, II, iii, 7-8.

partake of greater and lesser probability. Probability is Cicero's response to scepticism. Moreover, Cicero maintained that this stance is in harmony with that of Socrates and Plato. Indeed, the core of Cicero's argument in the *Academica* is the idea that the scepticism that developed in the Academy under the stewardship of Arcesilas and Carneades was consistent with the teachings of Socrates and Plato.⁸² He, Cicero, states this quite explicitly when he adopts the opinion of Philo that there were not two Academies, but one,⁸³ and again when he defends Arcesilas's claim that the sceptical position could be traced back to Plato, Socrates and various of the Presocratics.⁸⁴ Additionally, he says, of the scepticism of the “New” Academy and its relationship to Plato and the teachings of the “Old”, that “they can call this school the New Academy to me it seems old, at all events if we count Plato as a member of the Old Academy, in whose books nothing is stated positively and there is much arguing both *pro* and *contra*, all things are inquired into and no certain statement is made”.⁸⁵

Cicero thus asserted that his opinion was that of Socrates and Plato. At the risk of sounding facetious, however, we must be a little sceptical of this claim. Socrates' position, although close to that of Cicero, is not identical. Plato's is perhaps more complicated still.

Our knowledge of Socrates comes primarily from the writings of his students Plato and Xenophon. The latter, however, was not a philosopher, but rather essentially an historian and, perhaps a moralist. His evidence on the philosophical opinions of Socrates is less substantial than the one found in Plato. Nonetheless, Xenophon provides corroboration of some of the features of Socrates' thought, and Xenophon was a favourite of Montaigne. Xenophon's extant writings are numerous, but his Socratic writings, the *Oeconomicus*, the *Symposium*, the *Apology* and particularly the *Memorabilia*, are the most relevant in this context.

82 This is also the opinion of Roman, *op. cit.*, pp.19-29.

83 Cicero, *Academica*, I, iv, 13.

84 Cicero, *Academica*, I, xii, 44-45.

85 Cicero, *Academica*, I, xii, 46.

In the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon gives us three glimpses of a Socrates whom we know well from Plato. In the first, Xenophon tells us that Socrates linked justice, virtue and wisdom.⁸⁶ In the second, Xenophon portrays an imaginary conversation between Euthydemus and Socrates in which the latter two agree that wisdom and knowledge are equivalent and that no man can know all things.⁸⁷ In the third, Xenophon gives his vision of the wisdom of Socrates and his defence of Socrates against the latter's Athenian accusers:

*“Moreover, Socrates lived ever in the open; for early in the morning he went to the public promenades and training grounds; in the forenoon he was seen in the market; and the rest of the day he passed just where most people were to be met: he was generally talking, and anyone might listen. Yet none ever knew him to offend against piety and religion in deed or word. He did not even discuss that topic so favored by other talkers, “the Nature of the Universe”; and avoided speculation on the so-called “Cosmos” of the Professors, how it works, and on the laws that govern the phenomena of the heavens: indeed he would argue that to trouble one's mind with such problems is sheer folly. In the first place, he would inquire did these thinkers suppose that their knowledge of human affairs was so complete that they must seek these new fields for the exercise of their brains; or that it was their duty to neglect human affairs and consider only things divine? Moreover, he marvelled at their blindness in not seeing that man cannot solve these riddles; since even the most conceited talkers on these problems did not agree in their theories, but behaved to one another like madmen”.*⁸⁸

86 Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, book III, chapter ix, lines 4-6 in *Memorabilia, Oeconomicus*, E. C. Marchant tr., *Symposium, Apology*, O. J. Todd tr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.

87 Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV, vi, 7.

88 Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, I, 10-13.

Xenophon does not provide an in-depth analysis of Socrates' thought, but he does give us a look at some of its essential features. Socrates saw a connection between knowledge and virtue or justice. Socrates was more concerned with human affairs and transcendental ideas than with the nature of the cosmos. Socrates was sceptical about the human ability to achieve true understanding. To explore the ideas of Socrates in more depth, we must turn to Plato.

Several recent studies have emphasized the importance of Socrates and Plato to the development of ancient scepticism in general and to that of Academic scepticism in particular. The possibility of a sceptical reading of Plato himself, however, remains as problematic today as it was in antiquity when there was considerable debate as to whether Plato should be regarded as a “dogmatist” or a “sceptic”.⁸⁹ Cicero, as we have seen, maintained that the position of the Academic sceptics was consistent with the teachings of Plato. As was indicated in the preceding chapter, Arcesilas, Carneades and other early Academic sceptics claimed both Socrates and Plato among their forerunners.⁹⁰ Anthony Long and David Sedley have indicated that Arcesilas's scepticism was modelled on the “critical dialectic of Plato's early work”, arguing that Arcesilas could legitimately maintain that Plato, at least in the early dialogues, merely hypothesized and rarely sought to defend positive conclusions.⁹¹ Long and Sedley claim that there was a lack of consensus on the teachings of Plato in the years following his death, and maintain that in part Arcesilas was reacting against the efforts of some of his contemporaries to create a dogmatic system out of the ideas expressed in the dialogues.⁹² Long and Sedley further maintain that ultimately a purely sceptical reading of Plato is neither more nor less of a distortion of his thought than a thoroughly dogmatic one.⁹³ Part of the reason, of course, why Plato can easily be read as either a

89 Anthony Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 223-224.

90 Anthony Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 77.

91 A. Long and D. Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, v. 1, p. 445.

92 A. Long and D. Sedley, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 445.

93 Long and Sedley, *op. cit.*, v. 1, pp. 445-446.

“sceptic” or a “dogmatist” is the fact that these concepts themselves grew out of the efforts of subsequent readers of Plato to interpret the teachings of their master. Hellenistic “dogmatists” and “sceptics” defended different readings of Plato, but although support for both interpretations can be found in Plato's writings, the terms of the debate are not in themselves Platonic. In short, although Plato himself can with some legitimacy be read either as being dogmatic or sceptical, ultimately, as the historical initiator of the debate, he must be regarded as either both or neither. His thought occupies a space prior to the debate which it sparked and cannot, therefore, be situated at either extreme within in. Paul Woodruff perhaps put it best when he said: “Which came first, the skeptic or the epistemologist? The answer is, 'Neither: Plato came first’”.⁹⁴

Woodruff argues that although scepticism only truly emerged with Arcesilas, both Socrates and Plato are part of the story, and maintains that Plato himself is a dogmatist, a sceptic and neither of these, but that he laid the foundations for both positions.⁹⁵ Plato thus is not a sceptic, at least not in the formal sense that such a designation, arising after the debates between Hellenistic “sceptics” and “dogmatists” implies. Nonetheless, there are sufficient sceptical tendencies in his writings to make a sceptical reading of Plato possible, and more that enough material to inspire subsequent advocates of sceptical positions.

If Plato's relationship to the sceptical tradition is complicated, that of Socrates is no less so. As with Plato, Socrates pre-dated the debates that defined “scepticism” and “dogmatism” and Socrates' relationship to the issues raised in those debates is perforce as complicated as Plato's. Moreover, in the case of Socrates, we are confronted by another set of problems entirely. As has been noted many times, Socrates himself wrote nothing, and we are dependent on other sources for his thought. We know Socrates only through the eyes and pens of others. Nevertheless, while Xenophon, Plato and other

94 Paul Woodruff, “Plato's Early Theory of Knowledge”, in Hugh H. Benson ed., *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 87.

95 P. Woodruff, art. cit., p. 87.

contemporaries of Socrates all employ him for slightly different rhetorical purposes, there is considerable consistency in their portraits of him. Historically, that of Plato, which is the most elaborate, has been the most influential, and although the Platonic Socrates cannot be identified with the historic Socrates with any degree of certainty, the ideas of the Platonic Socrates, whether they ultimately belong to Socrates himself or only to Plato's conception of him, have nonetheless acquired a life of their own and the Platonic Socrates has effectively become the Socrates of history. It is this Socrates with whom we must deal and his semi-mythical nature complicates matters.

Like the student on whose portrait of him we must rely, Socrates pre-figured the debates between the “sceptics” and the “dogmatists”, but whereas Plato seems sometimes sceptical and sometimes dogmatic, Socrates is more consistently sceptical, if never a sceptic in the sense in which that term eventually came to have. He is sceptical of man's ability to acquire certain knowledge in this life, and unlike Cicero, he seems to reject the possibility of a probabilistic knowledge; but he does not maintain that real knowledge is unobtainable, as Sextus Empiricus does. Traditionally, Socrates has not been regarded as an epistemologist, but Hugh Benson has argued that “much of what we take to be distinctively Socratic appears steeped in epistemological content” and that the Socratic equation of virtue with knowledge makes Socrates' focus on moral philosophy ultimately epistemological in nature.⁹⁶ Benson also reads Socrates as a qualified sceptic.⁹⁷ He says: “Socrates (...) is sincere when he professes his ignorance, and to this extent he is a genuinely sceptical philosopher”.⁹⁸ Unlike other sceptics, however, Socrates does not believe that knowledge is necessarily unobtainable. Socrates does not reject the possibility of knowledge and is devoted to its pursuit, even if he is sometimes uncertain that it can be obtained.⁹⁹ In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates says, “I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story [the theory of recollection], but one thing I am ready to

96 Hugh H. Benson, *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 4-5.

97 Hugh Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

98 Hugh Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

99 Hugh Benson, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.

fight for as long as I can, in word and act that is, that we shall be better, braver and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover".¹⁰⁰

Socrates' scepticism consists in the acknowledgment of his own ignorance, but recognizing his lack of knowledge, he endeavours to acquire it.¹⁰¹ Although not a sceptic in the formal sense, Socrates was sceptical enough to become the seminal figure in the history of the sceptical tradition.

Socrates' ideas are expressed most clearly in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, the *Hippias Minor*, the *Charmides*, the *Laches*, the *Protagoras*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, the *Ion*, the *Gorgias*, the *Meno*, the *Lysis*, the *Euthydemus*, the *Menexenus*, the *Hippias Major* and in Book I of the *Republic*. These works all stem from a period in Plato's career when he was still in the shadow of his master's thought and had not yet completely defined his doctrine of ideas.¹⁰² Later Platonic writings, specifically the *Theaetetus*, the *Parmenides* and portions of the *Timaeus*, however, are also relevant and reveal that Plato never entirely abandoned the doubt of Socrates.¹⁰³

Although they deal with various subjects, all of the Socratic dialogues portray the doubt of Socrates, and all end, in one form or another, with an admission of ignorance. The nature of virtue is considered in the *Hippias Minor*, the *Protagoras*, the *Crito*, the *Gorgias*, the *Hippias Major* and Book I of the *Republic*. Piety is the principal subject of the *Euthyphro* and the *Euthydemus*. Courage is the main subject of the *Laches*, friendship of the *Lysis*, and the nature of authority of the *Menexenus*. Knowledge is the primary topic of the *Ion*. The most crucial of the Socratic dialogues

100 Plato, *Meno*, 86b, W. K. C. Guthrie tr., in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989. See also Hugh Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, pp. 183-184.

101 Hugh Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

102 This division of Socrates' dialogues is taken from Terry Penner, "Socrates and the Early Dialogues" in *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Richard Kraut ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 121-169.

103 Terry Penner, art. cit., p. 137.

here are the *Apology*, which presents Socrates' defence of himself against the charges levelled against him at his trial, and the *Charmides* and the *Meno*, each of which deal with the nature of knowledge. The *Theaetetus* is crucial to an understanding of both the epistemology of Socrates and that of the mature Plato. The *Parmenides* deals with an argument against the Platonic ideas which ends inconclusively and is relevant largely because it shows Plato's own lack of "dogmatism". Finally, several passages in the *Timaeus* provide partial support for Cicero's, and indeed Montaigne's, understanding of both Socrates and Plato.

Socrates' basic philosophical concern, and indeed perhaps Plato's, is the nature of virtue which is equated with knowledge, ultimately of good and evil, and with the question of whether or not true knowledge, or understanding, can ever be achieved. Socrates' fundamental interest is thus epistemological in its fullest sense. His concern is with what we can and cannot know. Socrates seems to believe that we cannot achieve true understanding in life, but that we must nevertheless strive for such understanding. At times Plato seems to maintain this as well. Both reject the ultimate value of approximate truth, or provisional knowledge, but both are willing to entertain likely opinions in the continuing search for knowledge, and both accept that, at least in some cases, probability may be the best we can ever achieve.

The basic nature of Socratic doubt is revealed in the *Apology*, the *Charmides* and the *Meno*. In the *Apology*, Socrates repeats the famous pronouncement of the Oracle at Delphi, that there is no one wiser than himself.¹⁰⁴ He further relates that the only way that he can make sense of this is because he is the only man who knows that he knows nothing.¹⁰⁵ In the *Charmides*, Socrates confesses his ignorance of the nature of knowledge itself.¹⁰⁶ In the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno differentiate between knowledge and true opinion. There, Socrates says that true opinion only becomes knowledge when

104 Plato, *Socrates' Defence (Apology)*, 21a, Hugh Tredennick tr., in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

105 Plato, *Socrates' Defence (Apology)*, 23a-b.

106 Plato, *Charmides*, 175a-d, Benjamin Jowett tr., in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

the reason of its truth is understood. In Socrates' words: "true opinions are a fine thing and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place, but they will not stay for long. They run away from a man's mind; so they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason".¹⁰⁷ For Socrates, thus, man can have opinions, and he can have true opinions, but unless he has understanding, which he can apparently never achieve, he cannot know whether or not he has true opinions. This is a very provisional sort of knowledge indeed. Interestingly, it is in the *Meno* that we first encounter Plato's doctrine of recollection, the idea that all knowledge may ultimately depend on the soul's memory of the eternal ideas which it understood prior to its physical incarnation. It seems likely that this familiar Platonic formulation was articulated in response to the scepticism of Socrates, as a possible solution to one aspect of the problem of knowledge contemplated by both Socrates and Plato.¹⁰⁸

The fullest explication of Socrates' epistemology, but one of the most perplexing with regard to Plato's, however, comes in the *Theaetetus*. There Socrates and Theaetetus consider more fully the nature of knowledge. They start, in fairly typical Platonic fashion, by rejecting the notion that knowledge is the knowledge of some particular craft or discipline.¹⁰⁹ Later on comes the famous passage where Socrates compares himself to a midwife (like his mother was), saying that he, who knows nothing and has no ideas of his own, merely assists in the births of the ideas of others.¹¹⁰ Shortly after this comes an extended discussion of the possibility that knowledge is equivalent to perception, a proposition that is eventually rejected on the grounds that there is no way to tell whether or not the senses reveal the true nature of reality.¹¹¹ Further on, the idea is proposed that knowledge consists of true belief together with an account of why such

107 Plato, *Meno*, 98a.

108 Hugh Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, pp. 257-258.

109 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 146-147c, Francis M. Cornford tr., in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

110 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150b-e.

111 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151e-187.

belief is true.¹¹² Ultimately, however, Socrates and Theaetetus come to the conclusion, familiar from the *Meno*, that it is possible to have true belief without understanding its truth.¹¹³ The dialogue ends with Socrates and Theaetetus acknowledging that their midwifery has produced “mere wind eggs” which are “not worth the rearing”:

“SOCRATES: Are we in labor, then, with any further child, my friend, or have we brought to birth all we have to say about knowledge?”

THEAETETUS: Indeed we have, and for my part I have already, thanks to you, given utterance to more than I had in me.

SOCRATES: All of which our midwife's skill pronounces to be mere wind eggs and not worth the rearing?”

THEAETETUS: Undoubtedly.

*SOCRATES: Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh, Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today's scrutiny, and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know. For that, and no more, is all my art can effect; nor have I any of that knowledge possessed by all the great and admirable men of our own day or of the past. But this midwife's art is a gift from heaven; my mother had it for women, and I for young men of a generous spirit and for all in whom beauty dwells”.*¹¹⁴

112 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 201a-d.

113 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 208-210a.

114 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 210b-d. We must admit that the stance of intellectual modesty expressed in this passage is beautiful, but, on the other hand, we would like to point out that there is an interesting critic position against Socrates and against his so-called modesty initiated by I. F. Stone in *The Trial of Socrates*, New York, Anchor Books, 1989. Stone's book, even if it is not a philosophical book, offers quite a new view about Socrates and about the reasons that took him to drink the hemlock.

Here we see the essential Socrates, wise in his ignorance, a midwife at the mental labors of others, in the storyline of this particular dialogue, *Theaetetus*. Socrates and Theaetetus have been attempting to define knowledge. They have tried all of the possibilities they can think of but in the end have concluded that they have failed. The exercise, however, has not been fruitless. It has provided a foundation for future inquires, should they ever succeed in conceiving afresh. It has also shown them the limits of their understanding. This is what Socrates claims for himself: the ability to inquire, and the knowledge of his own ignorance.

The *conception* of all of this, however, is Plato's. This is the mature Plato, returning again to a problem that continues to vex him, the nature of knowledge. Like the earlier *Meno*, the *Theaetetus* ends with the distinction between true opinion and knowledge or genuine understanding. Understanding itself is stillborn, however, for the exploration of the problem here ultimately produces only “mere wind eggs”. His master's midwifery has not led Plato to knowledge; it cannot yield the ideas that are at the core of Plato's teaching. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato presents a powerful vision of philosophy as a process, a quest for knowledge that is at the furthest possible remove from dogmatism.¹¹⁵

This brings us to the *Parmenides*, where Plato, in true Socratic/Platonic fashion becomes the first to challenge the Platonic Ideas, a fact that lends considerable support to a sceptical reading of Plato.¹¹⁶ The *Parmenides* presents a conversation between the young Socrates and Parmenides. It begins with Socrates presenting a challenge to the Eleatic idea of the unity, or oneness, of all things.¹¹⁷ It ends with Parmenides' offering of an inconclusive argument in favour of his doctrine.¹¹⁸ In between comes Parmenides'

115 Ronald M. Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge: A Commentary of Plato's Theaetetus*, London, Associated University Presses, 1992, pp. 242-245.

116 A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 223. Also Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, v. 1, pp. 445-446.

117 Plato, *Parmenides*, 129, Francis M. Cornford tr. In Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

118 Plato, *Parmenides*, 136 on.

indictment of the Ideas, or Forms. He argues that the Forms are known by the Form of knowledge and that we do not possess the Form of knowledge. In the words of Parmenides, “then, none of the forms is known by us, since we have no part in knowledge itself”.¹¹⁹ Unfortunately for Parmenides, virtually the same argument can be turned against his doctrine of unity. Plato here ends with uncertainty. He cannot choose between the Eleatic idea of unity and his own doctrine of Forms. He cannot achieve understanding, only “wind eggs”. Again, as in the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus*, he shows philosophy at work, portraying it as an inconclusive search for a perhaps unobtainable truth. It is not at all difficult to imagine that later readers of Plato would see this as his and Socrates' view of philosophy.

Finally, we come to the *Timaeus*, wherein certain passages suggest that Socrates, and by association Plato, accepts that at least sometimes the best we can ever achieve is a provisional, probabilistic knowledge. In the *Timaeus*, Plato offers an account of the creation and nature of the cosmos, and this dialogue gives the fullest statement of Plato's cosmogony and cosmology. The principal speaker is Timaeus, who at regular intervals insists that his account is a likely story only. The first is when he says, it will be “enough if we adduced probabilities as likely as any others, for we must remember that I who am the speaker and you who are the judges are only mortal men, and we ought to accept the tale which is probable and inquire no further”.¹²⁰ Further on, he advises that we accept the opinion of the ancients with respect to the genealogy of the Gods, for “although they give no probable or certain proofs, still, as they declare that they are speaking of what took place in their own family, we must conform to custom and believe them”.¹²¹ Later still, discussing the generation of the body and the nature of the soul, he says, “and holding fast to the probability we must pursue our way”.¹²² Still later, Timaeus calls on God and begs him “to be our saviour out of strange and

119 Plato, *Parmenides*, 134b.

120 Plato, *Timaeus*, 29d, Benjamin Jowett tr., in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

121 Plato, *Timaeus*, 40d-e.

122 Plato, *Timaeus*, 44c.

unwonted inquiry, and to bring us to the haven of probability”.¹²³ Shortly after this, Timaeus repeats the familiar distinction between knowledge and true opinion.¹²⁴ Finally, regarding the question of whether the number of worlds is indefinite or definite, he says, “arguing from probabilities, I am of the opinion that they are one; another, regarding the question from another point of view, will be of another mind”.¹²⁵ Plato understands that the cosmogony and cosmology that he gives in the *Timaeus* is at least partly provisional, a likely story only.

The *Timaeus* presents a number of interpretative challenges, however. Among modern scholars, A. E. Taylor emphasized the provisional nature of the work and argued that Plato was not presenting his own ideas but rather summarizing earlier, Pythagorean teachings.¹²⁶ Francis Cornford rejected Taylor's reading of the *Timaeus* and treats the work essentially as original and dogmatic.¹²⁷ Cornford's reading of Plato in general, moreover, is largely dogmatic, as is further illustrated by his interpretation of the *Theaetetus* which he regards as a defence of the doctrine of recollection.¹²⁸ For Cornford in general, Plato's expressions of doubt are usually to be taken rhetorically. W. G. Runciman, who reads the *Theaetetus* as an inconclusive inquiry into the problem of knowledge, considers Cornford's attitude towards the *Theaetetus* as an example of the questionable practice which perhaps began with Aristotle of treating “all parts of Plato's teachings as part of a unified and consistent system”.¹²⁹ More recently, Luc Brisson and F. Walter Meyerstein, like Taylor, have also argued for a speculative reading of the

123 Plato, *Timaeus*, 48d.

124 Plato, *Timaeus*, 51d.

125 Plato, *Timaeus*, 55c-d.

126 A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary of Plato's Timaeus*, Oxford, 1928.

127 Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1977.

128 Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The Theaetetus and the Sophist of Plato*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935.

129 W. G. Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 127.

Timaeus.¹³⁰ Ultimately, as indicated above, Plato can with some legitimacy be read both as dogmatic and as sceptical, and here, as elsewhere in his writings, there is evidence to support a sceptical reading. Cicero read the *Timaeus* as speculative. For later Christian thinkers it presented a perhaps divinely inspired approximation of revealed teachings. Montaigne, as will be shown below, seems to have regarded it in the light of both the Ciceronian Academic and the Christian traditions.

Unlike Socrates, Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, Plato cannot be regarded as a “genuine sceptic”; he also, however, cannot be read as a “thorough-going” dogmatist. Plato did after all advance numerous positive propositions, and the doctrine of ideas is the centrepiece of his philosophy. His full epistemology, which is connected to the doctrine of ideas and to his cosmogony and cosmology and which ultimately involves the soul's recollection of its prior existence, is more complicated than has been set forward here. Nonetheless, if not a sceptic, Plato was sceptical, and, partially because of his debt to Socrates, he was aware of the limitations of his own speculations. In this vein, it seems reasonable to argue that both the “dogmatic” and the “sceptical” traditions of the later Academy were legitimate offspring of Socrates the midwife and his apprentice Plato. This, however, must remain the subject of future inquiries.

For now, it is enough to state that the epistemological positions of Socrates, Plato and Cicero had some similarities and, further, that these positions differed significantly from that of Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonians. For Sextus Empiricus the inevitability of uncertainty dictated the necessity of the suspension of judgment and, essentially, the fruitlessness of speculative inquiry. For Cicero, it called for relentless inquiry and the acceptance of the fact that our understanding of things could never be more than provisional. For Socrates, uncertainty was inevitable, provisional knowledge was inadequate, indeed almost a contradiction in terms, but likely opinions were a useful tool in the pursuit of a never-attainable. For Plato, certainty was at least

130 Luc Brisson and F. Walter Meyerstein, *Inventing the Universe: Plato's Timaeus, the Big Bang, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1995, p. 19.

sometimes unobtainable, and likely opinions were all that we could hope for in such cases.

Having explored the ideas of the principal ancient sceptics, we must turn to Montaigne. Together Socrates, Cicero and Sextus Empiricus define the basic positions of ancient scepticism, which ranges from the Academic doubt of the former two to the full-blown Pyrrhonic scepticism of the latter. What did Montaigne know of their ideas? How did he know it? Whom did he follow?

- Montaigne's knowledge of Ancient scepticism.

Montaigne's struggle with the problem of knowledge is one of the basic themes of the *Essais*, and to reconstruct this theme it is necessary to pull bits and pieces from several different, individual essays. Such a piecemeal approach to any author is not without its potential dangers, however, and nowhere perhaps is the danger greater than with Montaigne, who wears chameleon colours like a badge of honour. Still, paradoxically, Montaigne's text, and the author's self-professed attitude towards it, lends itself to this approach and, indeed, makes it a necessity. Montaigne's text, like Montaigne its subject, is fluid and complex and must be approached with subtlety. Montaigne warns us of this himself:

“Others form man; I tell of him and represent a particular one, most ill-formed, whom if I had to make over I should really make very different from what he is. Now it is done. Now the lines of my painting do not stray, though they change and vary. The world is in eternal motion. All things move without cessation, the earth, the rocks of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt, both with the common motions and with their own. Stability itself is nothing other than a more languid motion. I cannot fix my object. It goes along troubled and unsteady, with a natural drunkenness. I take it like this, as it is in the instant that I give my attention to it. I do not portray being. I portray passing, not the passing from one age to another; or, as people say, from seven years to seven years,

but from day to day, from minute to minute. It is necessary to accommodate my history to the hour for I may change this afternoon, not only by chance, but also by intention. It is a record of various and changeable events, and of irresolute and occasionally contradictory ideas, either because I myself change, or because I consider the subjects in different circumstances and aspects. So, I may indeed, possibly contradict myself, but the Truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict at all. If my spirit could fix itself, I would not make essays, I would make resolutions, but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial”.¹³¹

Montaigne tries to portray passing rather than being, and we try to portray Montaigne who has already passed by looking at the fragments that he left behind. The *Essais* are the exploration of a man and the world in which he finds himself. They are essays, as the word indicates, attempts, because he can find no firm footing in a moving self from which to view a moving world. He cannot conclude, he can only conjecture. His ideas are an apprenticeship, tentative and changeable. He may contradict himself, but in his quest he does not contradict the truth that he is continuously striving after, a truth that he cannot find but that he nonetheless seeks. This surely sounds more like the doubt of Socrates, the Socratic Plato, and Cicero than it does the scepticism of Pyrrho and the Pyrrhonic Sextus Empiricus, but we must delve deeper into Montaigne and look at his seeming contradictions before we can agree with him that ultimately his self-portrait is one.

Montaigne's decision to write essays, and the rhetorical strategies that he employs within the *Essais*, reveal much about his thought. He maintains that he is not a philosopher, yet he clearly addresses philosophical issues, which he chooses to explore, like Plutarch, through the medium of the essay.¹³² He does so because the essay has a mobility that fits his need. It gives him the freedom to wander, to digress, in his search

131 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 2, “Of repentance”, pp. 804-805.

132 Ian MacLean, *Montaigne Philosophe*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, pp. 10-11.

for the truth. It allows him to make use of drama, irony, subtlety, and nuance in a way that other vehicles would not. Perhaps most importantly, it gives him the chance to create and to juxtapose alternative perspectives on the subjects he considers. The essay fits his need perfectly. Searching for truth, he writes a search for the truth, playing ideas against one another, comparing and contrasting them. He presents a living philosophy for a living philosopher, an undogmatic and unsystematic philosophy.¹³³ It appears to me that he writes *sceptically*. It has been suggested that he provides no resolutions, that his discourse is inconclusive and open-ended, a testament to the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment.¹³⁴ But if Montaigne presents no philosophical system in the *Essais* and offers no defence of formal theses, he nonetheless makes clear and precise *distinctions*.¹³⁵ Furthermore, it seems that he pursues the truth relentlessly, like a hunter at the chase, and if in the end the conclusions he reaches are tentative only, they are, nevertheless, conclusions.¹³⁶ Montaigne, as we hope to be able to show, exercises his judgment throughout the *Essais*, for although he entertains multiple perspectives in his search for the truth, he himself always remain apart, attempting to resolve the tension between those perspectives.

In his quest for the truth, Montaigne draws on a number of sources for guidance, including the ancient sceptics. But as Michael Screech has said, “Montaigne was born with a mind made for doubt”, and although the “Greek skeptics strengthened that cast of mind” they did not create it.¹³⁷ Montaigne is inspired by the ancients, but he is not dominated by them and we totally agree with this statement.¹³⁸ He considers their lives

133 André Comte-Sponville, “*Je ne suis pas philosophe*”; *Montaigne et la philosophie*, Paris, Champion, 1993, pp. 43-45.

134 André Tournon, “L’humaine condition: Que sais-je? Que suis-je?” in Marie-Luce Demonet, ed., *Montaigne et la question de l’homme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999, pp. 16-20.

135 Emmanuel Faye, “La philosophie de l’homme de Montaigne et Charron face à la censure des théologiens”, in Demonet, ed., *Montaigne et la question de l’homme*, p. 147.

136 M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, Selinsgrove, Susquehanna University Press, 1983, pp. 17-20. This book was suggested to me by a former professor of history of the University of Massachusetts Dean Ware, I would like to thank him.

137 M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, p. 20

138 Emmanuel Faye, *Philosophie et Perfection de l’homme*, Paris, Vrin, 1998, p. 205.

and their thoughts, and frequently he draws their words into his own text. He chooses from among them to suit his needs, and the choices he makes reveal the lines of his thought. The text of the *Essais* can be read as an encounter between texts, and it is that, but it is also an encounter between minds through the medium of the text. The essay for Montaigne is the act of the chase, ideas are the quarry. The truth is the quarry. Montaigne considers the thoughts of the ancients in his search for the truth.

Montaigne's knowledge of ancient scepticism was drawn from a big number of different sources, so it is only fitting that we begin with them. Evidence from the *Essais* makes it clear that Montaigne knew the Dialogues and Laws of Plato, although in what edition or editions we do not know.¹³⁹ The same is true of various writings of Cicero, including the *Academica*.¹⁴⁰ The question of Montaigne's knowledge of the writings of Sextus Empiricus is more complicated as we said before, but if Montaigne knew them, at present it is not known in what form and whatever statement supporting this affirmation would be simple speculation.¹⁴¹ Montaigne's understanding of ancient scepticism was supplemented by the writings of Xenophon, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, but again what edition of the last of these writings he might have worked with is uncertain,¹⁴² nor is it clear which edition of Plutarch's *Moralia* he knew.¹⁴³ Montaigne owned a Latin translation of the works of Xenophon printed in Basle in 1551 and a Greek edition of Plutarch's *Lives* printed in the same place in 1550.¹⁴⁴ The latter raises the thorny question of Montaigne's knowledge of Greek, which will be of some concern further below. In the *Essais*, he tells us that he does not know Greek and praises Amyot's French translation of Plutarch.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless this and other evidence on this

139 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lvi.

140 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. xlvi.

141 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lix.

142 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. xlvi.

143 Montaigne, *Essais*, pp. lvi-lvii.

144 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lxi and p. lvi.

145 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 4, "Let business wait till tomorrow", p. 363.

subject must be regarded as unclear and inconclusive. Montaigne owned books in Greek, used Greek words in the *Essais*, and had numerous lines inscribed in Greek on the rafters of his library at Chateau Montaigne, but he tells us in the *Essais* that he had “almost no knowledge” of the language despite his father's efforts to ensure that he learned it.¹⁴⁶ In another place he tells us that he does not take to books in Greek, because his “judgment cannot do its work with a childish and apprentice understanding”.¹⁴⁷ In yet another place, however, he says that he finds French “sufficiently abundant, but not sufficiently pliable and vigorous” and feels that “it ordinarily succumbs to a powerful conception”.¹⁴⁸ When it fails, he tells us, Latin, and sometimes Greek, come to his aid.¹⁴⁹ The picture that emerges here is complicated. Montaigne seems to have had some, rather than no knowledge of Greek, but it was not a language with which he was comfortable. This issue will come up again when Montaigne's potential debt to Sextus Empiricus is considered.

Montaigne speaks of his favourite books and authors in a number of places in the *Essais*. In the essay “Of books”, he praises Cicero's philosophical works.¹⁵⁰ In the same place he speaks of his admiration for Plato, while indicating that he dislikes the dramatic elements in the dialogues.¹⁵¹ However, his highest praise is reserved for others:

“The historians are my obverse. They are pleasant and easy; and at the same time, man in general, the knowledge of whom I seek, appears in them more alive and entire than in any other place -the diversity and truth of his inner conditions in mass and in detail, the variety of the means of his assembly, and the accidents that menace

146 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, “Of the education of children”, p. 174.

147 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, pp. 409-410.

148 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 5, “On some verses of Virgil”, p. 874.

149 Montaigne, *Essais*, III; 5, “On some verses of Virgil”, p. 874.

150 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, pp. 413-414.

151 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, p. 414.

him. Now those who write biographies, all the more so because they occupy themselves more with intentions than with events, more with what comes from within than from without, are most proper to me. That is why in all ways Plutarch is my man. I am very sorry that we do not have a dozen Laertiuses, or that he is neither more receptive nor more perceptive, because I consider no less curiously the fortune and the life of these great teachers of the world than the diversity of their opinions and fantastic notions”.¹⁵²

The historians, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius especially, are his favourites, and their role in shaping his understanding of ancient scepticism is critical, as we hope to show. Both are of immense importance to an understanding of Montaigne, but although he draws heavily on each of them, he is more effusive and direct in his praise of Plutarch, saying that it is hard for him “to do without Plutarch” because he finds him “so universal and so full that on all occasions, and on whatever extravagant subject you have taken up, he meets your need and offers you a liberal hand, inexhaustible in riches and embellishments”.¹⁵³ Comparing him to Seneca, another of his favorites, he says, “Plutarch's manner, inasmuch as it is more disdainful and less tense” is to him “all the more virile and persuasive”, adding that he could “easily believe that the movements of his soul were more assured and more regulated”.¹⁵⁴ Plutarch “forms, settles, and fortifies us constantly” and “touches our understanding more”.¹⁵⁵

Montaigne praises Plutarch, saying that he wins our judgment,¹⁵⁶ and while the expression could be taken as hyperbolic, it should be noted that at least here Montaigne does not sound like one who embraces the Pyrrhonic suspension of judgment. Instead, he sounds like one who seeks knowledge, understanding, and finds it, at least in

152 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, p. 416.

153 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 5, “On some verses of Virgil”, p. 875.

154 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1040.

155 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1040.

156 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1040.

Plutarch, and perhaps in Diogenes Laertius, Plato, and Cicero as well. Cicero's philosophical works, the ideas considered in Plato's dialogues, and the lives treated by Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius provide Montaigne matter in his search for knowledge of "man in general". The historians show him man "more alive and entire than in any other place the diversity and truth of his inner conditions in the mass and in detail, the variety of the means of his assembly, and the accidents that menace him". Montaigne seems to be saying here that he finds understanding in the historians who witness the experience of man and portray the truth of his nature. This is not in keeping with Pyrrhonism which accepts the evidence of the senses and the report of witnesses, but rejects interpretations and conclusions derived from this material, rejects *ιστορία*, inquiry, historical or otherwise, in general, claiming that man and his world cannot be understood. The Pyrrhonian can no more assent to the historian who judges man's deeds than to the philosopher who judges his nature and his world. Montaigne is not always so full of praise, however, and at times in the *Essais* his tone with regard to a number of ancient authors is more critical than it is here, and on occasion he is openly scornful; but even his ridicule is affectionate and reflects long study and a deeply-rooted respect. Nevertheless, Montaigne does not merely study the ancients, he engages them, exercising his judgment on the matter that he finds in them, appropriating what seems useful and plausible, rejecting what does not. On balance, Montaigne's judgment of the classical tradition is positive, and he finds in it much to which he can at least give his provisional assent.

For Montaigne, the writings of Plato, Cicero, Plutarch and others are sources of wisdom, of guidance. They are, however, the works of men, who like himself can have only an imperfect grasp of truth at best.¹⁵⁷ Nonetheless, he regards them as masters to be learned from, and his debt to them is as deep as his affection. He speaks to us directly of this at the very beginning of the essay "Of books", where he says that he has no doubt that he often speaks of things that are better and more truthfully treated by the "masters of the craft".¹⁵⁸ He tells us in the same place that the *Essais* are only the attempt of his

157 M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, pp. 17-19.

158 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, "Of books", p. 407.

natural faculties. Anyone who points out his ignorance will not offend him because he himself is unsure of and dissatisfied with the ideas he entertains. He bids the seeker of knowledge look for it where it lives, saying that there is nothing he professes less.¹⁵⁹ He calls the *Essais* “his fantasies”, in which he tries “to give knowledge not of things” but of himself. He says that the things “will perhaps be known to me one day, or have been before, according as fortune may have brought me to the places where they were made clear”, but that he no longer remembers them.¹⁶⁰

Montaigne further tells us that he seeks “knowledge not of things”, but of himself. Following Socrates and the prescription of the Delphic oracle, Montaigne seeks self-knowledge. In the *Essais* he tries his judgment on Montaigne, but also, despite his occasional claims to the contrary, on “man in general”, on God, and on nature, for the knowledge of self ultimately cannot be divorced from an understanding of the world, nor from an understanding of understanding itself. Perhaps Montaigne must understand the world to understand himself. The meaning of Pythian Apollo's admonition, however, and the message of Socrates, and of Montaigne, is that to understand the world, we must understand ourselves, and seeking self-knowledge we seek also knowledge of the world. Moreover, like Socrates in Plato's *Parmenides*, Montaigne knows that in order to truly understand anything, we must achieve an understanding of what it is to understand. To know, we must know what it is to know. As with Plato, this is not the only problem that Montaigne considers, and, like Plato but unlike Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonians, its exploration does not bring his inquiries to a halt. It is, however, a problem to which Montaigne, like Plato, returns again and again. Montaigne seeks understanding, and the ancients whom he commends to us are his guides as well.

Montaigne is sceptical, frequently saying, as at the beginning of the essay “Of books”, that “there is nothing that he professes less” than knowledge. The most powerful statement of his scepticism, and his most complete account of ancient scepticism, occurs in a few brief sketches in the longest of the *Essais*, the “Apology for

159 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, p. 407.

160 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, pp. 407.408.

Raymond Sebond”, a work primarily concerned with faith and which, as such, is considered more fully in the next chapter. Discussions of Montaigne's scepticism that focus too heavily on the “Apology” present a skewed vision of the subject, however, for Montaigne's scepticism is not confined either to the physical or the chronological limits of the “Apology”, and there is much in it that cannot fully be understood without reference to other parts of the *Essais* and to the *Essais* as a whole. A complicated work, the “Apology” must be approached with caution.

Montaigne refers to a number of ancient thinkers in the *Essais*, but although he mentions Pyrrho and the Pyrrhonians on a few occasions, he never names Sextus Empiricus, as we already said, and others are his principal guides in the exploration of the limits of human reason. Pyrrho is mentioned 4 times in the “Apology” and 3 times elsewhere in the *Essais*, and Pyrrhonians are spoken of 7 times. References to and borrowings from Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius appear in considerable number throughout the *Essais*. In the “Apology” Socrates alone is mentioned 14 times and quoted once. Plato is mentioned 24 times and quoted 4 times. Cicero is quoted 22 times and mentioned an additional 14 times in the “Apology” alone. Nine of these quotations occur in the brief discussion of ancient scepticism that appears in the middle of the “Apology”, offering Montaigne's most extended treatment of the subject.¹⁶¹

Montaigne's choice of references here potentially reveals a great deal about the nature of his scepticism. It seems that his reliance on Plato and Cicero, and his decision to mingle their words with his own, indicate not only that he was wrestling with their ideas, but that he was willing to submit himself, at least in part, to their guidance. He learned from them, and his thought, his scepticism, whether or not it ultimately resembles theirs, was shaped by his encounter with them. It is possible that Sextus Empiricus also shaped his thought, but whereas there is abundant evidence that Montaigne actively engaged the writings of Plato and Cicero, there is little to suggest that Sextus Empiricus made much of an impact on him. Absence of evidence may not

161 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, pp. 500-512.

be conclusive evidence of complete absence, but it is at least highly suggestive, and extremely problematic for anyone who would argue for presence. Still, it is possible that Sextus Empiricus had a *subtle* influence on Montaigne. Plato and Cicero, however, had an obvious one, and the voices of the Academic sceptics speak frequently in the *Essais*. Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero and Plutarch, all members of the Academic family, appear throughout the *Essais*. The Pyrrhonians are represented exclusively by the figure of Pyrrho and the expressions attributed to the later Pyrrhonians. Montaigne may choose to walk with Pyrrho occasionally, but he returns again and again to the paths of the Academy and the company of Socrates, the first and archetypal master of philosophical discourse.

The figures of Socrates and Pyrrho offer Montaigne two alternative visions of scepticism, but while his pattern of citation suggests a preference for the former, this cannot yet be regarded as conclusive. Academic sources predominate, but this does not necessarily mean that Montaigne has more affinity with the Academic position. Modern scholars remain divided on this subject. André Tournon has argued that Montaigne was a Pyrrhonist whose juridical training contributed to the development of an open-ended discursive style that allowed him the freedom to consider various alternatives without forcing him to make a final choice between them.¹⁶² Tournon maintains that the *Essais* are an exercise in the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment. Tournon's argument is plausible and elegant, but it is also fatally flawed, for Montaigne, as we shall see, self-consciously and almost defiantly exercises his judgment throughout the *Essais*. More recently, Frédéric Brahami has also argued that Montaigne's scepticism was influenced by that of Sextus Empiricus, but unlike Tournon, Brahami maintained that Montaigne ultimately departed from Sextus Empiricus. The core of Brahami's argument is that Montaigne, unlike Sextus Empiricus, should be read as an anti-rationalist. According to him, Montaigne rejected the suspension of judgment of Sextus Empiricus and maintained that man has no choice but to exercise judgment in the face of an absolute

162 A. Tournon, *Montaigne: la glose et l'essai*. We are planning to consider Tournon's thesis at length in chapter 4 of the present study.

incertitude.¹⁶³ Brahami's argument is subtle, but not without its problems. His claim that Montaigne is anti-rationalist is tied to his assertion of Montaigne's supposed fideism, an understanding of Montaigne which we argue against in the next chapter. We concur, however, with Brahami's claim that Montaigne exercises his judgment in the *Essais*, but we question the conclusion that he does so despite a belief in an inescapable and absolute incertitude. Most importantly, we feel troubled by Brahami's argument for a negative influence on Montaigne by Sextus Empiricus and we are convinced that if Montaigne does in fact prefer some other model of scepticism over the Pyrrhonian one, there is a much more straightforward and simpler explanation. In short, we suspect that if Montaigne follows Socrates rather than Pyrrho, articulating an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian position, he does so consciously and relies primarily on Academic sources in doing so. Unlike Tournon and Brahami, Elaine Limbrick has argued for a strong Socratic and Ciceronian influence on Montaigne, but like them she has also maintained the importance of the supposed influence of Sextus Empiricus.¹⁶⁴ Curiously enough, she seems to regard Montaigne as having embraced an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian scepticism, but seems to believe that this was unconscious on Montaigne's part, arguing that he may not have made a clear distinction between the two¹⁶⁵. The only way to resolve these questions is to take another look at Montaigne's scepticism, starting with what he has to say explicitly about the Academics and the Pyrrhonians in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond". There, as indicated above, Montaigne looks both to Socrates and to Pyrrho for aid in his philosophical quest.

Socrates, however, is his principal guide, the Virgil to his Dante. Socrates is his role model, and it is to Socrates that he returns again and again throughout the *Essais*. The prelude to the extended discussion of ancient scepticism in the "Apology" fittingly begins with a reference to Socrates. Speaking of the vanity of the human claim to true

163 F. Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*, pp. 106-107.

164 See Elaine Limbrick, "Montaigne and Socrates", *Renaissance and Reformation*, IX, 1973, pp. 46-57; and "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonist?", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XXXIX, 1977, pp. 67-80.

165 E. Limbrick, "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonist?", p. 67.

understanding, Montaigne says that pride hinders us.¹⁶⁶ He relates Socrates' astonishment that the "God of Wisdom had given him the name of Sage" and tells how, "examining through and through, he found no basis for this divine sentence".¹⁶⁷ Montaigne relates that Socrates "knew men as just, as temperate, as valiant, as learned as himself, and more eloquent, handsomer, and more useful to their country".¹⁶⁸ Socrates "concluded that he was distinguished from the others, and wise because he did not think himself so, and that his God considered the opinion that man possesses wisdom and knowledge singularly savage, and that man's best doctrine was the admission of ignorance, and simplicity his best wisdom".¹⁶⁹

The image of Socrates, together with Plato's and Cicero's elaboration of the Socratic position, is central to Montaigne's scepticism. The wisdom of Socrates consisted in his acknowledgment of his own ignorance. For Montaigne, "the wisest man that ever was, when they asked him what he knew, answered that he knew this much, that he knew nothing".¹⁷⁰ Montaigne continues, maintaining that "we know things in a dream" as Plato says, and "are ignorant of them in reality".¹⁷¹ Finally, Montaigne says that even "Cicero himself, who owed all his worth to learning (...) began to lose his esteem for letters" in his old age, and that "while he practiced them, it was without obligation to any party, following what seemed probable to him now in one sect, now in another, keeping himself always in Academic doubt".¹⁷² Socrates professes his own ignorance, Plato says we know things in a dream, and Cicero, following the founders of the Academic tradition, keep himself "always in Academic doubt". Here again, Montaigne

166 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 498.

167 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 498.

168 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 498.

169 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 498.

170 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 501.

171 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 501.

172 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 501.

sounds like an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian. A little further on, however, when he begins to explore the distinction between the two, everything becomes less clear:

“Whoever seeks anything comes to this point: he says either that he has found it, or that it cannot be found, or that he is still in quest of it. All philosophy is divided into these three types. Its purpose is to seek out truth, knowledge, and certainty. The Peripatetics, Epicureans, Stoics and others thought they had found it. They established the sciences that we have, and treated them as certain knowledge. Clitomachus, Carneades, and the Academics despaired of their quest, and judged that the truth could not be conceived by our means. Their conclusion is that man is feeble and ignorant. This party had the greatest following and the noblest adherents. Pyrrho and other Sceptics or Epechists -whose doctrines, many of the ancients maintained were derived from Homer; the Seven Sages, Archilochus, and Euripides, and were held by Zeno, Democritus, Xenophanes- say that they are still in search of the truth. They judge that those who think they have found it are infinitely mistaken; and that there is also an overbold vanity in that second class that assures us that human powers are not capable of attaining it, for this matter of establishing the measure of our power, of knowing and judging the difficulty of things, is a great and supreme knowledge, of which they doubt that man is capable”.¹⁷³

This is a dense and important passage, and each of its main points must be examined in turn. As a beginning, here is a brief summary of its contents. First, Montaigne describes three possible epistemological positions, that of the Dogmatists, who claims to possess certainty, that of the absolute sceptic, who claims that it cannot be found, and that of one who quests for certainty but has not attained it. After identifying the Peripatetics (Aristotelians), Epicureans, and Stoics as the Dogmatists,

173 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 502. It is interesting to stress the importance of these lines.

Montaigne considers first the Academics and then the Pyrrhonians. In describing these groups, Montaigne is presenting his own summary of their respective positions, one that is not drawn from any particular, single source, although, as we shall see presently, it is clear that he is relying on Diogenes Laertius here for his account of the Pyrrhonians.

Montaigne articulates the three basic epistemological stances: the claim of certainty, the claim of absolute scepticism and the claim of probable knowledge. It is clear enough that the first two of these are what he is talking about when he writes, “whoever seeks anything comes to this point: he says either that he has found it, or that it cannot be found”, but that he is talking about probabilism when he says “he is still in quest of it [i.e., certainty]” is less clear. Such a reading of this particular passage is at best ambiguous, and it is necessary to look elsewhere to find support for it.

Montaigne speaks next of the Academic sceptics, of whom he writes, “this party had the greatest following and the noblest adherents”. He says that the conclusion of the Academics was that man was “feeble and ignorant” and they “judged that truth could not be conceived by our means”. This sounds like an endorsement of Academic doubt, but the rest of the passage, and much that follows it calls this endorsement into question.

Finally, Montaigne turns to Pyrrho and the Pyrrhonians, who seem here and in much of what follows to receive his highest praise. He begins with a description of the pedigree of Pyrrhonism that is worth noting. The derivation of the sceptical position from Homer, the Seven Sages, Archilochus, Euripides, Zeno, Democritus, and Xenophanes is reported by Diogenes Laertius in his sketch of Pyrrho.¹⁷⁴ It is rejected by Sextus Empiricus, however.¹⁷⁵ In Cicero and in Plutarch, we read that the claim more properly belongs to Arcesilas and the Academics than to Pyrrho.¹⁷⁶ Whether he knew the claims of the others or not, Montaigne is clearly following Diogenes Laertius here.

174 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book IX, lines 71-73.

175 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 210-219.

176 Cicero, *Academica*, I, xii, 44 and Plutarch, *Moralia*, v. 14, “Reply to Colotes in Defence of the Other Philosophers”, in Benedict Einarson and Phillip H. De Lacy tr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967, 1121F-1122A.

Of the Pyrrhonians, Montaigne says here that “they judge that those who think they have found it [certainty] are infinitely mistaken; and that there is also an overbold vanity in that second class that assures us that human powers are not capable of attaining it”. Immediately afterwards, in a new passage, Montaigne has this to offer: “Ignorance that knows itself, that judges itself and condemns itself, is not complete ignorance: to be that, it must be ignorant of itself. So that the profession of the Pyrrhonians is to waiver, doubt, and inquire, to be sure of nothing, to answer for nothing”.¹⁷⁷

All of this sounds as if Montaigne sees the Academics as the absolute sceptics, and his tone implies a preference for the Pyrrhonians, whom he perhaps understands only imperfectly as a result of a reliance on inferior sources. Does he misunderstand the respective positions of the Academics and the Pyrrhonians? A little further in the text he gives the “Pyrrhonic expressions”. Here too he seems full of praise for the Pyrrhonian position:

*“Their expressions are: ‘I establish nothing; it is no more thus than thus, or than either way; I do not understand it; the appearances are equal on all sides; it is equally legitimate to speak for and against. Nothing seems true, which may not seem false’. Their sacramental word is επεχο that is to say, ‘I hold back, I do not budge’. These are their refrains, and others of similar substance. Their effect is a pure, complete, and very perfect postponement and suspension of judgment. They use their reason to inquire and debate, but not to conclude and choose. Whoever will imagine a perpetual confession of ignorance, a judgment without leaning or inclination on any occasion whatsoever, has a conception of Pyrrhonism”.*¹⁷⁸

177 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 502.

178 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 505.

However, some doubt is cast on Montaigne's attitude towards the Pyrrhonians by what immediately follows. He says, "I express [their] opinion as well as I can, because many find it difficult to conceive; and its authors themselves represent it rather obscurely and diversely".¹⁷⁹ It may seem over-subtle at this point to read in this indication that Montaigne, despite his apparent admiration for the Pyrrhonians, does not share their position, but we think that this is precisely the case.

In all likelihood, even if he did not acknowledge it, Montaigne took the aforementioned "Pyrrhonic expressions" from Sextus Empiricus, but he nowhere shows any interest in Sextus Empiricus himself, only in the Pyrrho whom he seems to have known largely through Diogenes Laertius: indeed with the exception of these expressions, there is little material on Pyrrho or Pyrrhonism that Montaigne made use of that he could not have found in Diogenes Laertius. These expressions, some of which were inscribed on the rafters of Montaigne's library, are the extent of Montaigne's indebtedness to Sextus Empiricus. Our main point here, as we would like to state clearly, is that Montaigne simply does not make substantial use of Sextus Empiricus. The reasons for this are uncertain. As discussed in preceding pages it has long been assumed that Montaigne read Sextus Empiricus in translation, but perhaps he had access only to a Greek edition, which, as indicated above, he was not equipped to engage properly. Maybe he knew him only indirectly. Maybe he simply did not find him that interesting. Whatever the truth is, Montaigne seems to have made little use of material borrowed from Sextus Empiricus. Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism may have fascinated him, but Sextus Empiricus clearly did not. This in itself is suggestive of his ultimate judgment on Pyrrhonism as well. In the crafting of the *Essais*, he returned once and again to the writings of Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius for guidance, and direct borrowings from these authors take up a significant portion of the words in Montaigne's own text. Montaigne drew most heavily on the texts, and the ideas presented in them, that resonated most strongly for him.

179 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 505.

While he had no abiding interest in Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne did have an enduring fascination with Socrates, Plato and Cicero, and was interested in both kind of scepticism: Academic scepticism which he knew primarily through the writings of Plato and Cicero, and Pyrrhonism, which he knew partly through Sextus Empiricus and partly through Diogenes Laertius. His understanding of the nature of the two traditions, and the question of which he found more attractive, has not been made clear yet, however. As stated before in the beginning of this chapter, the Pyrrhonians maintained a position of absolute scepticism, while, with the exception of Arcesilas who shared this stance, the Academics, following Carneades, inclined towards probabilism.¹⁸⁰ Socrates and Plato were sceptical, but not sceptics, at least in the Pyrrhonian sense. Does Montaigne understand it this way?

A little further on in the “Apology”, Montaigne probes more deeply into the tradition of Academic scepticism. Here he makes direct references to Socrates, Plato and Cicero, and touches on the debate over Plato's epistemological position as discussed by a number of ancient authors, including Cicero, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius on the one hand, and Sextus Empiricus on the other. Cicero reads Plato as putting forth nothing but probabilities.¹⁸¹ Diogenes Laertius see him as affirming some things positively, but suspending his judgment on others.¹⁸² Plutarch seems to waiver between these two alternatives.¹⁸³ Sextus Empiricus, who rejects probabilism, says that Plato cannot be regarded as a true sceptic whether he speaks assertively or only of probabilities and seems to doubt even that Plato has genuine sceptical tendencies.¹⁸⁴ If Montaigne is familiar with the arguments of Sextus Empiricus, he does not employ them. Instead he

180 See, R. Román, *El enigma de la Academia*, pp. 35-69, as we said before, in these pages there is a very good analysis of the scepticism of Arcesilas and an acute study on the Arcesilas's stance.

181 Cicero, *Academica*, I, xxii, 46.

182 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III, 52.

183 This issue is considered in several places in Plutarch's *Moralia*, most notably in the “Platonic Questions” and in the “Reply to Colotes”, but Plutarch's position is unclear because of his own struggle with the problem of knowledge and confused further by his complicated Academic affiliations.

184 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 221-224.

draws on Cicero, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius. Montaigne's judgment concerning Plato's epistemology, however, is the same as Cicero's, and, as he often does in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" and elsewhere in the *Essais*, he uses Cicero's words in formulating his own position. Montaigne refers to Timaeus's proposition to speak to Socrates "mano to man" since "it will suffice if his [Timaeus's] reasons are as probable as another's".¹⁸⁵ Montaigne says that Cicero imitated Plato in the *Timaeus* when he said that he, Cicero, would not "declare certain and fixed things like Pythian Apollo" but would "speak like a mere man with probabilities following conjectures".¹⁸⁶ Finally he quotes from Cicero's translation of Plato's *Timaeus*, to show that Cicero adopted the stance of Timaeus, and of Plato in parts of the *Timaeus*, as his own.¹⁸⁷ Montaigne reveals here his familiarity with the probabilistic Plato of the *Timaeus*. He calls Cicero Socrates' follower, high praise coming from Montaigne, and says that he pursued probabilities rather than speaking certainties like Pythian Apollo. Finally, quoting Cicero quoting Plato, he says that we who are judging are only men, and that if probabilities are stated we can ask for nothing more.¹⁸⁸ A little further on, Montaigne speaks again with Cicero's words when he says, "this method in philosophy of arguing against everything and making no open judgment in any matter, started by Socrates, repeated by Arcesilas, confirmed by Carneades, continues still in our own time", and that "we are those who say that some falsehood is joined with every truth, with so much similarity that there is no juncture in them that we can mark to judge and to assent with certainty".¹⁸⁹

Montaigne understands Cicero's position, but what happen with Plato's? The tradition started by Socrates, repeated by Arcesilas, confirmed by Carneades, continued in Cicero: where does Plato fit in? Here is Montaigne's reading:

185 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 507.

186 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 507. The quotation from Cicero comes from the *Tusculan Disputations*, I, ix.

187 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 507.

188 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 507.

189 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 507. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, v.

*“Moreover some have considered Plato a dogmatist, others a doubter; others, in certain things one, in certain things the other. The conductor of his dialogues, Socrates, is always questioning and exciting discussion, never concluding, never satisfying; and says he has no other knowledge than the knowledge of opposing. Homer, their author, laid the foundations equally for all sects of philosophy, to show how indifferent he was about which way we would go. From Plato arose ten different sects, it is said. In my opinion, never was teaching wavering and noncommittal, if his is not”.*¹⁹⁰

Montaigne reads Plato through Cicero's eyes, seeing him as “wavering and noncommittal”. Elsewhere he tells us that where Plato “writes on his own, he prescribes nothing certain”.¹⁹¹ Some of this must be regarded as hyperbole, for there is evidence in the *Essais* to suggest that Montaigne understands the complexity of Plato, as do Cicero, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius. All four know that there is some merit in each of the rival traditions within the Academy. Nevertheless all four accept the pedigree of academic scepticism given by Arcesilas and rejected by Sextus Empiricus, and Cicero and Montaigne, heirs of the sceptical Academy, ultimately read Plato himself as an Academic sceptic.

In the passages examined earlier, Montaigne seems at least potentially unclear about the difference between Academic doubt and Pyrrhonic scepticism, but a later passage in the “Apology” makes it plain that this was not the case. He says that the “Academics allowed some inclination of the judgment, and found it too crude to say that it was no more likely that snow was white than black, and that we were no more assured of the movement of a stone that leaves our hand than of that of the eighth sphere.”¹⁹² To avoid such absurdities, “they admitted that some things were more

190 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 509.

191 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 512.

192 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 561.

probable than others”, even though ultimately they maintained that man can know nothing with certainty because “truth is engulfed in deep abysses where the sight of humans cannot penetrate”.¹⁹³ Montaigne, drawing here indirectly on Cicero's *Academica*, understands the Academic position and sounds sympathetic to it. Immediately afterwards, however, he says that the “advice of the Pyrrhonians is bolder and at the same time more plausible”.¹⁹⁴ He maintains that by accepting the idea of probable knowledge the Academics are essentially claiming that they can distinguish the true from the false.¹⁹⁵ He writes, “if our understanding is capable of the form, the lineaments, the carriage and the visage of the truth, it would see it all as well as half of it, nascent and imperfect”.¹⁹⁶ He argues that if “that appearance of verisimilitude which makes them lean rather to the left than to the right” is increased “it will come about finally that the balance will be tipped all to one side and come to rest on one choice and one entire truth”.¹⁹⁷

Here the scales of his own balance seem to be tipping back towards the Pyrrhonians, and they seem to rest in their favour in what follows immediately after when he says of the Academics, “how can they be persuaded to yield to the likeness of truth, if they know not the truth? How do they know the semblance of that whose essence they do not know? Either we can judge absolutely, or we absolutely cannot”.¹⁹⁸ Note, however, that Montaigne's argument here against probability is essentially the one that Socrates gives in the *Meno*, the *Theaetetus*, and elsewhere, without subsequently coming to the same conclusion as the Pyrrhonians, namely that suspension of judgment is the correct response to this state of affairs. Note also, Montaigne's use of the idea of plausibility. Finally, there is the fact that Montaigne himself seems to be making a

193 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 561.

194 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 561.

195 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 561-562.

196 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 562.

197 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 562.

198 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 562.

judgment, or at least building up to one. Montaigne uses irony here to undermine his praise of the Pyrrhonians.

What is Montaigne's true opinion? Is his position closer to that of the Academic sceptics or to that of the Pyrrhonians? To resolve this question we must look at other portions of the "Apology" and elsewhere in the *Essais*. The answer, in part, is to be found in the nature of the *Essais* as a whole. In his exploration of this subject, Montaigne relied partially, here and elsewhere, on Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius and others. In the final analysis, however, the judgment was his own.

- Montaigne: facing academic doubt and Pyrrhonic scepticism.

Montaigne's fascination with Pyrrhonism is ultimately a fascination with the tradition's founder, Pyrrho, who at times he almost seems to see as exemplifying a deeply satisfying ideal of simplicity. The essentially pastoral motif of the idealized peasant, the simple man who is free from the cares and concerns of the gentle and scholarly, virtually a trope in western letters since Homer, strikes a powerful note in the *Essais*. If Montaigne is drawn to the simple life, however, he is keenly aware that it is a chimera. Nonetheless there is an abiding tension in Montaigne between involvement in the affairs of the world and engagement in intellectual inquiry, on the one hand, and withdrawal, both social and intellectual, on the other. Montaigne the courtier flees the *vita activa* for the *vita contemplativa*, but the world of the court and the law draws him back again and again. Montaigne the "retired" scholar dreams of the *vita rustica*, but knows that his conception of it is fantastical, for Montaigne the jurist and the student of Man knows that the so-called "simple life" is as full of ignorance and violence as the life of the town and the court. There remain, however, these tensions in Montaigne between the active and the contemplative and between the sophisticated and the simple. That Montaigne's interest in Pyrrho relates to this is perhaps not immediately apparent. Montaigne does not entirely seem to see Pyrrho as a "holy fool", but there is certainly something of saintly anti-intellectualism in his image of Pyrrho. In the "Apology" he maintains that he cannot accept the portrait of Pyrrho as "stupid and immobile,

following a wild and unsociable way of life, waiting for carts to hit him, risking himself on precipices, refusing to conform to the laws”.¹⁹⁹ Although he does not acknowledge it here, Montaigne has taken this image from Diogenes Laertius,²⁰⁰ and this is perhaps one of the reasons why Montaigne laments that the latter is not “more receptive” and “more perceptive” in the essay “Of books”.²⁰¹ Montaigne believes that this image of Pyrrho “is outside his doctrine” and that “he had no desire to make himself a stone or a stump; he wanted to make himself a living, thinking, reasoning man, enjoying all natural pleasures and comforts, putting to work and being served by all his bodily and spiritual faculties in regular and upright fashion”.²⁰² Montaigne's “reasoning man” does not sound like holy fool whom Diogenes Laertius seems to portray or like a devotee of the “simple life”, but listen to what Montaigne says a little further on:

*“How many arts are there that profess to consist of conjecture more than of knowledge, that do not decide on the true and the false and follow only what seems to be? There are, they say, both a true and a false, and there is in us the means to seek it, but not to test it by a touchstone. We are much better if we let ourselves be led without inquisitiveness in the way of the world. A soul guaranteed against prejudice is marvelously advanced towards tranquillity. People who judge and check their judges never submit to them as they should. How much more docile and easily led, both by the laws of religion and by political laws, are the simple and incurious spirits, than those spirits that survey divine and human causes like pedagogues!”*²⁰³

199 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 505.

200 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX, 62.

201 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, “Of books”, p. 416.

202 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 505. This kind of passages, eventhough this one is inside the more “sceptic” essay of Montaigne, the “Apology”, have driven some scholars to suggest the possibility of the three different stages of Montaigne's thought: stoic, sceptic, and hedonistic.

203 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 506.

Montaigne may or may not see Pyrrho as a holy fool, but for Montaigne, Pyrrhonism approaches the ideal of simplicity, an ideal to which Montaigne is drawn but that ultimately he considers illusory. When he speaks of arts that “follow only what seems to be” and do not involve conjecture, he has the crafts of the artisan in mind, as will become clearer momentarily. They, the simple, here artisans, do not seek to test the true and the false, but are “led without inquisitiveness”. They are “guaranteed against prejudice” and “marvelously advanced towards tranquillity”. These “simple and incurious spirits” are “more docile and easily led, both by the laws of religion and by political laws”, than those who “survey divine and human causes like pedagogues”, and “people who judge and check their judges never submit to them as they should”. These are weighted words coming from Montaigne the judge and the author of an essay on education. There is an irony here that Montaigne at the moment of writing may or may not be aware of, a withdrawal from what he is extolling. He was extolling the ideal of simplicity, but he does it in a way that portrays those who have not achieved it as gregarious individuals easy to control and dominate. That was not what he was trying to get, or was it?

Montaigne equates the balance that the Pyrrhonian seeks by suspension of judgment with the tranquillity known naturally by the “simple and incurious”, but although he occasionally seems to long for the simple life, Montaigne the judge who also aspires to the life of a retired scholar has a judicial and balanced understanding of the tension between the imaginary ideal of simplicity and his own commitment to *ιστορία*, inquiry, and to judgment. Montaigne's decision in the case of the simple vs. the learned is crucial to an understanding of his scepticism. Montaigne's judgment on judgment is, in our point of view, his decision in the Academy vs. Pyrrhonism.

To understand this fully, we must look closely at Montaigne on simplicity and learning and finally turn our attention to Montaigne on judgment itself. Earlier in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, he says that he has seen a “hundred artisans, a hundred labourers, wiser and happier than university rectors” and that he would rather be like the former than the latter. He suggests there that learning may have some importance in life, but not as much as many think. He argues that we really have no

more need of “offices, rules and laws of living” than do cranes and ants, who do well enough without erudition.²⁰⁴ He maintains that “if man were wise, he would set the true price of each thing” according to its utility and appropriateness”, and that “a greater number of excellent men will be found among the ignorant than among the learned”. Finally, he says that the “old Rome” produced men of greater worth.²⁰⁵

Montaigne says again here, in different words, that the “simple and incurious” are happier and better than the inquisitive. Artisans and labourers, and cranes and ants who live without laws and judges, are happier than university rectors. Erudition is not necessary to orderly conduct. Montaigne the historian longs with Livy the historian for an idealized Rome that never existed and could have produced neither of them. Like Livy (Titus Livius), Montaigne lives in what he perceives to be a decadent and contentious age. He equates “worth and innocence” with simplicity. He longs for a simple past that was dominated by good husbandmen who let themselves be “led without inquisitiveness”. In his histories, Livy propagandizes the virtue of the old Roman Republic. In the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, Montaigne resorts to similar tactics in his search for an antidote to the troubles of his own day. Whether the irony of this was self-conscious in either of them is ultimately irrelevant, although it is hard to imagine that it was not, at least in Montaigne.

Although occasionally he longs for it, Montaigne knows that the ideal of the simple life is an imaginary one, and in any event it is not the one that he chooses, for among other things Montaigne is both a student and a teacher. He is committed to the quest for knowledge, and although he is contemptuous of the state of learning in his day, he believes that education is essential to the formation of judgment.²⁰⁶ All of this, and Montaigne's commitment to the life of the scholar, is stated clearly in many places in the *Essais*, but nowhere perhaps as strongly as in the essays “Of pedantry” and “Of the

204 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 487.

205 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, pp. 487-488.

206 A. Tournon, *Montaigne: la glosse et l'essai*, pp. 92-93. See also E. Limbrick, “Montaigne and Socrates”, p. 52.

education of children”. In the latter, Montaigne tells the reader that he is writing on education at the behest of a female friend who has requested that he consider the subject and whom he addresses in the essay as “Madame”. At one point he writes, “Madame, learning is a great ornament and a tool of marvellous service, notably for people raised to such a degree of fortune as you are”.²⁰⁷ Montaigne says that learning belongs to the elite of society and that “in truth, it does not find its true use in base and vile hands”.²⁰⁸ This is Montaigne the nobleman speaking. Although it may be pleasant to dream of simple shepherds, ploughmen, and artisans, they are neither *nice* nor gentle, but rather crude, low-born, and apparently deservedly ignorant. Montaigne is not egalitarian, and although he likes at least some of his servants and sometimes likes to pretend that they live simpler lives, he does not wish to exchange places with them. Ultimately, Montaigne aspires more to the ideal of the philosopher than to that of the shepherd.

Although severely critical of the state of learning in his own day, Montaigne, a gentleman, a scholar, and a confidant of princes, identifies more with gentlemen and with scholars than with peasants and artisans. In the beginning of the essay “Of pedantry”, he tells us that as a child he disliked the fact that teachers were the butt of jokes in Italian comedies.²⁰⁹ He reports that this disdain for the learned is ancient and notes that Plutarch claimed that “Greek and student were terms of reproach and contempt among the Romans”.²¹⁰ He tells us that as he grew older he came to realize that the most learned were not always the most wise, but he wondered how this was possible and how “vulgar” souls could entertain the “discourse and the judgments of the greatest minds that the world has produced” without becoming more wise.²¹¹ He is confused by the fact that ignorant peasants can sometimes have a natural understanding

207 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, “Of the education of children”, p. 149.

208 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, “Of the education of children”, p. 149.

209 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 133.

210 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 134.

211 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 134.

of the wise that is not always shared by the learned.²¹² Montaigne draws a distinction here between the simple, the learned and the wise. Although he does not express it thus, it is hard to imagine that it did not come to his mind as it does to ours that the simple are like the boy in Plato's *Meno* from whom Socrates coaxes knowledge. The wise are like Socrates. Both the simple and the learned can be unwise, however, and both ultimately are guilty of condemning Socrates. All of this sounds very Platonic. To be wise is clearly best. To be simple is maybe the next best thing. To be learned but not wise is to be worthy of the scorn of all. As Montaigne says, thinking doubtless of the examples in Aristophanes and Lucian, the philosophers have “in truth sometimes been mocked by the comic liberty of their times, their opinions and ways making them ridiculous”.²¹³ Montaigne, who sometimes joins in the fun, as did Socrates, nonetheless has a deep respect for philosophy and philosophers, at least for the true lovers of wisdom. For Montaigne, the real aim of education is to produce such love, a love that for him is embodied in the person of Socrates.²¹⁴

Montaigne is not one of the “vulgar” who in antiquity disdained philosophers as “ignorant of the elementary and common things, as presumptuous and insolent”.²¹⁵ He is amused by men who are “still trying to find out whether there is life, whether there is movement, whether man is something other than an ox”.²¹⁶ A nobleman himself, he sees the arrogance of men who regard princes and sons of noble houses as no better than other men.²¹⁷ He sees all of this, but he also sees its justification on the part of the wise.

212 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 134.

213 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 134.

214 See E. Limbrick, “Montaigne and Socrates”, p. 52 for a brief discussion of the importance of Socrates to Montaigne's educational theory.

215 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 135.

216 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 134.

217 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 134.

He says that as the philosophers “were great in knowledge, so they were greater in every kind of action”.²¹⁸

Montaigne says of the wise among the philosophers that it “clearly appeared that their heart and soul had been marvellously enlarged and enriched by the understanding of things”.²¹⁹ He speaks of Archimedes, whom he knew through Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, who knows the craft of the artisan better than the artisan himself but disdains it as merely the “apprentice work and plaything” of his art.²²⁰ The wise philosopher has achieved the true understanding that the artisan and the foolish among the learned lack.²²¹ The former do not inquire into the nature of things, and the latter labour to fill the memory, “and leave the understanding and the conscience empty”.²²² Montaigne argues that “just as birds sometimes go in quest of grain, and carry it in their beak without tasting it to give a beakful to their little ones, so our pedants go pillaging knowledge in books and lodge it only on the end of their lips only to disgorge it and

218 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 135.

219 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 135.

220 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 135.

221 We have found some similarities between this conception and the way that Joseph Conrad depicts the relationship of the black men with technology in *The heart of Darkness*. We cannot avoid to see some analogies between this consideration of a lack of understanding in the artisans and the foolish and the way in which white culture of Conrad's *The heart of Darkness* was confident of its superiority. Perhaps it is worthy to stop a bit in this extraordinary passage of Conrad: “*And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity--and he had filed teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this--that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst, and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and fired up and watched the glass fearfully (with an impromptu charm, made of rags, tied to his arm, and a piece of polished bone, as big as a watch, stuck flatways through his lower lip)*”, Joseph Conrad, *The heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition, London, 2006, chapter 2. An interesting analysis could be made on understanding, technology, education and superstition reading this passage, but this is probably not the right place to do it.

222 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 136.

scatter it to the winds”.²²³ Montaigne asks “what is the making of knowledge, if not understanding?”²²⁴ For Montaigne, learning is neither for giving “light to the soul that has none, nor for making the blind man see”.²²⁵ He maintains that its purpose “is not to furnish him with sight but to direct the sight that he has, provided it has straight and capable feet of its own”.²²⁶ He says that knowledge is a good drug, “but no drug is strong enough to preserve itself without alteration and corruption, according to the taint of the vessel that contains it”.²²⁷

Montaigne praises true learning and true knowledge, despising only pedantry, and makes it clear that the former is not the province of the simple. Following Plato he argues that different men are made for different things.²²⁸ He writes, “cripples are ill-suited to exercise of the body, and crippled souls to exercises of the spirit; the bastard and the vulgar are unworthy of philosophy”.²²⁹ Montaigne prefers the wise to the learned and to the simple. These sentiments are voiced early on in the *Essais*, but they remain with him at their end. In the essay “Of experience”, one of the most important of the essays and one that is considered more fully in the penultimate chapter of this work, he writes this:

“It is more of a task to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books about books than about any other subject: we only write glosses about each other. The world is swarming with commentaries; of authors there is a great scarcity. Is it not the principal and most reputed learning of our times to learn to

223 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 136.

224 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 140.

225 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 141.

226 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 141.

227 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 141.

228 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 141.

229 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 25, “Of pedantry”, p. 141.

*understand the learned? Is that not the common and ultimate end of all studies? Our opinions are grafted on one another. The first serves as a stock for the second, the second for the third. Thus we climb, step by step. And it happens that he who has mounted highest has often more honour than merit; for he has only mounted one bit higher on the shoulders of the last”.*²³⁰

Montaigne laments the state of learning in his day, but borrowing an image from St. Bernard argues that although the efforts of his contemporaries are puny in comparison to those of the ancients, progress in the work of understanding, in the exercise of the judgment, is nonetheless being made. Scaling the ladder step by step, we climb higher than we were before. We come closer to knowledge.

Although Montaigne's stance on the value of philosophy seems clear, he is nonetheless a sceptic, professing his own ignorance again and again like Socrates, but whether his scepticism is closer to that of the sceptical Academy or that of the Pyrrhonians has yet to be established. The answer depends on Montaigne's judgment. Both the Academics and the Pyrrhonians argue that it is impossible to achieve certainty in this lifetime. With the exception of Arcesilas, the Academics believe that it is possible to differentiate between more and less likely opinions, however. The Pyrrhonians reject this notion and recommend the perfect and complete suspension of judgment, arguing that this will lead to a state of balance in which the mind is freed from the anxiety that is produced by fruitless inquiry into the nature of things.

Judgment and Montaigne's attitude towards it are the keys. To get at this, we must look again at Montaigne's thoughts on Pyrrho and on Pyrrhonism. Finally, we must look at what he has to say of judgment, and of Socrates, the true founder of the Academic tradition.

²³⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1069. To read these lines nowadays and not getting blushed being a modern researcher seems difficult. The vanity of our task is a doubt that sometimes can hit us and can make us ask about our work. To gloss and study Montaigne and then being pointed out by him is a subtle and terrible irony.

Montaigne admires the Pyrrhonians, and perhaps at times aspires to their ideal, but in the end he considers them as extreme as the dogmatists. In the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, he says that the Pyrrhonians “have reserved a wonderful advantage in combat, having discharged themselves of the need to cover up”.²³¹ He maintains that it does not matter to them “that they are struck, provided that they strike; and they do their work with everything”.²³² He writes, “if they win, your position is lame; if you win, theirs is”; either way, proving that nothing is known, or not proving it, they win. He says, “they make their way in finding much more easily why a thing is false than why it is true, and what is not than what is, and what they do not believe than what they believe”.²³³ The Pyrrhonians here sound little ridiculous. In the essay “Of cripples”, he is even more critical of the ancient sceptics, however. He quotes Clitomachus as saying with scorn that the labours of Carneades who refused to give his assent to anything were even greater than those of Hercules.²³⁴ He argues that the doctrine of Carneades arose only as a backlash against the arrogance of other philosophers. He compares the position of the sceptics to that of Aesop who when he found himself being sold with two other slaves who each claimed great things for himself, said that he could do nothing for the others had already claimed everything. He declares that the sceptics adopted their position “through spite and emulation” of the arrogance of the dogmatists. He said that the first “hold the same extreme in ignorance that the others do in knowledge”.²³⁵ Ultimately, he sees this as an example of man's vanity.

Here the ancient sceptics, both Academics and Pyrrhonians, are castigated for the immoderacy of their opinions, the extremity of their scepticism. Carneades the Academic alone is named, but if Carneades, whom Montaigne knew to embrace the possibility of likely opinions, is criticized, how much greater is the implied criticism of

231 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 504.

232 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 504.

233 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 505.

234 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 11, “Of cripples”, p. 1035.

235 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 11, “Of cripples”, p. 1035.

the Pyrrhonians who reject even this? However one reads this, Montaigne the sceptic rejects absolute scepticism.

Elsewhere, in the essay “Of virtue”, where he touches again on some of the anecdotes concerning Pyrrho recorded by Diogenes Laertius, Montaigne seems to consider Pyrrho himself a little extreme.²³⁶ Among other things, Montaigne relates that if Pyrrho “was going somewhere, he would not change his path for any obstacle that presented itself, and was saved from precipices, from being hit by carts, and from other accidents, by his friends” because “to fear or avoid anything would have been to clash with his own propositions, which deprived even the senses of any choice of certainty”.²³⁷ As seen above, Montaigne defends this in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, as he does here, but he also says that “it is something to bring the soul to these ideas”.²³⁸ He maintains that it is even harder, but not always impossible, to practice them, but he also says, to practice them “with such perseverance and constancy as to establish them as our ordinary course, certainly, in these undertakings so remote from common usage, it is almost incredible that it can be done”.²³⁹ Montaigne finds the Pyrrhonic position extreme and almost incredible.

In the “Apology”, Montaigne directly considers *ataraxy*, freedom from worry, the ultimate goal of the Pyrrhonians, the balance which they claim results from the suspension of judgment and produces freedom for “fear, avarice, envy, immoderate desires, ambition, pride, superstition, love of novelty, rebellion, disobedience, obstinacy, and most bodily ills”,²⁴⁰ and again his feelings seem mixed. Montaigne admires the balance of the Pyrrhonians as an ideal, but ultimately he considers it unattainable:

236 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 29, “Of virtue”, pp. 705-706.

237 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 29, “Of virtue”, pp. 705-706.

238 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 29, “Of virtue”, pp. 706.

239 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 29, “Of virtue”, pp. 706.

240 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 503.

“Is it not an advantage to find oneself disengaged from the necessity that curbs others? Is it not better to remain in suspense than to entangle yourself in the many errors that the human fancy has produced? Is it not better to suspend your conviction than to get mixed up in these seditious and quarrelsome divisions? What am I to choose? Whatever you please, provided you choose! A stupid answer, to which nevertheless all dogmatism seems to come, by which we are not allowed not to know that which we do not know”.²⁴¹

The Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment follows for Montaigne from the dogmatism that is its reverse, but the former is no less extreme and no more acceptable than the latter in his eyes, and *ataraxy* is a chimera. Undoubtedly it would be better “to find oneself disengaged from the necessity that curbs others”, but it is an impossibility. For Montaigne, the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment is ultimately as foolish and dogmatic an answer as the dogmatism to which it is in opposition.²⁴²

Montaigne rejects the Pyrrhonian affirmation of doubt and chooses instead the words “*Que sçais je?*” What do I know?, which together with a pair of scales form his device or strategy.²⁴³ He understands the Pyrrhonian ideal and admires it, but he rejects it as extreme. He chooses a balance, not to represent *ataraxy*, but to symbolize judgment. In the end his judgment of the Pyrrhonians is negative, for they have gone too far and “use their arguments and their reason only to ruin the apparent facts of experience; and it is marvellous how far the suppleness of our reason has followed them in this plan of combating the evidence of the facts”.²⁴⁴ Montaigne accepts the existence of facts and, unlike the Pyrrhonians, is willing to try to interpret them. He says, “they prove that we

241 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 504.

242 As Brian C. Ribeiro suggested, one could read Pyrrhonism as the offering of an ideal, and on this reading, it does not matter that it is in practice unattainable. See “Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?”, *Ancient Philosophy*, 22, 2002, pp. 319-331. Montaigne probably did not consider this possibility.

243 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 527.

244 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 571.

do not move, that we do not speak, that there is no weight or heat, with the same force of arguments with which we prove more likely things”.²⁴⁵ Montaigne places himself among those who “prove more likely things”, saying, “having essayed by experience that where one man has failed, another has succeeded, and that what was unknown to one century the following century has made clear, and that the sciences and arts are not cast in a mould, but are formed and shaped little by little, by repeated handling and polishing, as the bears lick their cubs into shape at leisure, I do not leave off sounding and testing what my powers cannot discover; and by handling again and kneading this new material, stirring it and heating it, I open up to whoever follows me some facility to enjoy it more at his ease, and make it more supple and manageable for him”.²⁴⁶ Montaigne, at least potentially believes in progress in the quest for knowledge and makes attempts at judgment. Ultimately, of course, they remain attempts only, and the idea of progress itself may be chimerical.²⁴⁷ He knows that human judgment is weak, but he also knows that its exercise cannot be escaped and this is what Montaigne does tirelessly all over his *Essais*.

Montaigne says that judgment holds an “insecure seat in man”, but that it holds it nonetheless.²⁴⁸ He maintains that our notions, our opinions change constantly.²⁴⁹ He argues that no matter how many times we discover that we have been mistaken, no matter how well we know that ultimately true understanding is impossible in this lifetime, we still cannot avoid exercising our judgment and attempting to distinguish the

245 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 571.

246 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 560. This kind of passages together with the previous one and many others which we are offering in this chapter show that perhaps Montaigne was closer to those who, at least, try to “prove more likely things”, in other words, closer to the Academic scepticism rather than the Pyrrhonian scepticism. And this is one of our strong points in this study.

247 See Jan Miernowski, *L'Ontologie de la contradiction sceptique*, Paris, Champion, 1998, pp. 61-65.

248 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 563.

249 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 563.

true from the false, or at least the more likely from the less likely.²⁵⁰ He tells us in no uncertain terms that this is part of the human condition.

Montaigne may lament the weakness of human judgment, but he does not regret that to judge is part of what it means to be human. In fact he revels in it; we should keep in mind that he is after all a judge by profession. A sceptic, he does not claim to possess the truth that (like Socrates and Plato) he might once have known but has since forgotten, but like them he hopes to discover it again one day. For Montaigne, as for Socrates, ultimately the quest for knowledge, as uncertain as its end must be, is nonetheless a necessity. Its pursuit is a sign of strength, withdrawal from it a sign of weakness. He tells us this clearly in the last of the *Essais*, the essay “Of experience”:

*“It is nothing but a particular weakness that makes us content with what others or we ourselves have found out in this hunt for knowledge. An abler man is not content with it. There is always a place for a successor, yes, and for ourselves, and another road. There is no end to our inquiries; our end is in the other world. It is a sign of contraction of the spirit when it is content, or of weariness. No generous spirit ever rests in itself; it always tends towards more and goes beyond its strength; it has impulses beyond its means. If it is not advancing and pressing forward and standing at bay and clashing, it is only half alive. Its pursuits are without limit and without form; its food is wonder, the chase, ambiguity. Apollo revealed this clearly enough, always speaking to us equivocally, obscurely, and obliquely, not satisfying us, but amusing and occupying us. It is an irregular, perpetual motion, without model and without aim. Its inventions excite, pursue, and produce one another.”*²⁵¹

For Montaigne, engagement in the quest for knowledge is a sign of strength. He calls it a weakness to shirk from the quest and maintains that an “abler man is not

250 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 563.

251 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1068.

content with it". He says, "there is no end to our inquiries", no rest, no *ataraxy*, in this world. He argues that no generous spirit ever rests in itself unless it is only "half-alive". Montaigne declares that "its pursuits are without limit and without form; its food is wonder, the chase, ambiguity", that the quest for knowledge will always end, in this life at least, in uncertainty. The gods speak to us obliquely only because we are incapable of apprehending the truth directly. He writes:

"Judgment holds in me a magisterial seat, at least it carefully tries to. It lets my sentiments go their way, both hatred and friendship, even the friendship I bear myself, without being altered and corrupted. If it cannot reform the other parts according to itself, at least it does not let itself be deformed to match them; it plays its game apart. The advice to everyone to know himself must have an important effect, since the god of knowledge and light had it planted on the front of his temple, as comprising all the counsel he had to give us. Plato also says that wisdom is nothing other than the execution of this ordinance, and Socrates verifies it in detail in Xenophon".²⁵²

Following the advice of Pythian Apollo with Socrates, Plato, and Xenophon, Montaigne turns his judgment on himself, but like them he also turns it on the world. Elsewhere, he says that he "proposes formless and unresolved notions, as do those who publish doubtful questions to debate in the schools, not to establish the truth but to seek it".²⁵³ He writes, "I speak pompously and opulently of ignorance, and speak of knowledge meagrely and piteously, the latter as an accessory and accidentally, the former expressly and principally. And I treat nothing by name except nothing, and no knowledge except that of the lack of knowledge".²⁵⁴ Here, however, Montaigne is not

252 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, "Of experience", p. 1074-1075.

253 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 56, "Of prayers", p. 317.

254 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, "Of physiognomy", p. 1057.

being entirely honest, for he treats virtually every topic under the sun in his *Essais*, essaying his judgment on each of them.

Judgment holds a magisterial seat in Montaigne and in his *Essais*, and the *Essais* as a whole are evidence that Montaigne is no Pyrrhonian. Look at the table of contents of the *Essais*. Montaigne tries his judgment on a staggering diversity of subjects, searching in his own roundabout and oblique way for the truth in each of them as he plums the depths of his soul. Montaigne exercises his judgment on everything. In the essay “Of Democritus and Heraclitus”, he says this explicitly:

“Judgment is a tool for all subjects, and comes in everywhere. Therefore in the tests that I make of it here, I employ it on all occasions. If it is a subject that I do not understand at all, even on that I make an attempt, sounding the ford from a good distance; and then, finding it too deep for my height, I hold to the bank. And this acknowledgment of not having the power to cross over is a token of its action, indeed one of those it is most proud of. Sometimes in a vain and nonexistent subject I try to see if it will find the wherewithal to give it body, prop it up, and support it. Sometimes I lead it to a noble and well-worn subject in which it has nothing to discover, the road being so beaten that it can walk only in the footsteps of others. There it makes its play by choosing the way that seems best to it, and of a thousand paths it says that this one or that was the most wisely chosen”.²⁵⁵

Montaigne tells us that in his search for knowledge he sometimes follows in the footsteps of others who are wiser than he, exercising his judgment by choosing whom to follow. He says that judgment is a “tool for all subjects”. He tells us that in the *Essais* he makes “tests” of it. He writes, “if it is a subject that I do not understand at all, even on that I make an attempt, sounding the ford from a good distance; and then, finding it too deep for my height, I hold to the bank”. With the metaphore of the ford Montaigne

255 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 50, “Of Democritus and Heraclitus”, pp. 301-302.

acknowledges scepticism, saying that he cannot cross over. And with the universal exercise of judgment we can see now why the book is entitled *Essais*. This term refers to the method that the author is using to get his goal, a method which consists in proving and trying, keeping himself faithful to the provisional and the unstable, resigning explicitly to try to become in a solid theory, in a system, but without sacrificing the educational eagerness.²⁵⁶

Montaigne's scepticism has more affinity with Academic doubt than with Pyrrhonism, and although his guides are Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, it is Socrates whom he, like they, follows after. In the very last of the *Essais*, he says that he “affirms human ignorance” as the “most certain fact in the school of the world”, and that “those who will not conclude their own [ignorance] from so vain an example as mine, or theirs, let them recognize it through Socrates, the master of masters”.²⁵⁷ Elsewhere he calls the “soul of Socrates (...) the most perfect that has come to my knowledge”.²⁵⁸ In the essay “Of physiognomy”, he tells us that we know Socrates only through the writings of his friends, not by our own knowledge.²⁵⁹ He tells us that no monument left by the men of his own benighted day could win such approval. He says, “it happened most fortunately that the man most worthy to be known and to be presented to the world as an example should be the one of whom we have most certain knowledge”.²⁶⁰ For Montaigne, Socrates is the “man most worthy to be known and to be

256 See María Dolores Picazo, “Los *Ensayos*, un discurso más allá del sistema y la autobiografía”, in *Revista de Filología Francesa*, num. 3, 1993, cit. in *Michel de Montaigne: Ensayos*, edición de María Dolores Picazo, Madrid, Cátedra, 2001, p. 369 and ff.

257 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, pp. 1075-1076.

258 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 11, “Of cruelty”, p. 423.

259 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1037.

260 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1038.

presented to the world as an example”, and “we have light on him from the most clear-sighted men who ever lived”.²⁶¹ Montaigne follows Socrates and his students, not Pyrrho.

Montaigne performs on himself the ministrations of Socrates the midwife, and the *Essais*, in Socrates' words in Plato, no “mere wind eggs”, are the fruit of his labours. He is a sceptic throughout, but he exercises his judgment everywhere. The *Essais* are a patchwork and full of apparent inconsistencies, but the pattern is whole, and the self-portrait is one. Montaigne is true to himself, and to the prescription of Apollo's oracle, from beginning to end. Sometimes, he may seem to contradict himself, but the Truth he never contradicts:

*“My book is always one. Except that at each new edition, so that the buyer may not come off completely empty-handed, I allow myself to add, since it is only an ill-fitted patchwork, some extra ornaments. These are only overweights, which do not condemn the original form, but give some particular value to each of the subsequent ones, by a bit of ambitious subtlety. Always from this it will easily happen that some transposition of chronology may slip in, for my stories take their place according to their timeliness, not always according to their age”.*²⁶²

261 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1038.

262 Montaigne, *Essais*, III; 9, “Of vanity”, p. 964.

Chapter 3

Montaigne's Apology

The preceding chapter dealt with the relationship of Montaigne's scepticism to classical sceptical models. This chapter considers the relevance of ideas that emerged in the Judeo-Christian context. There is, however, considerable affinity between the two traditions since Christianity was shaped in part by Greco-Roman thought, and much that is to be found in Augustine and other Christian authors ultimately perhaps derives from Athens and Rome rather than from Jerusalem. Montaigne knew all about Socrates, but so did Augustine. Montaigne shared the Christian commitment to the primacy of faith over reason, along with the scepticism with respect to the limits of human understanding that is a basic feature of the Christian sceptical tradition. For the Christian sceptic, doubt may be mitigated by faith, but uncertainty, for some at least, remains an inescapable part of the human condition. Like Augustine and others, Montaigne believed that the Creator and his Works are beyond human comprehension, at least in this life.

Several terms that deserve a brief initial consideration figure prominently in this discussion. The central ideas that this chapter tries to revolve around are reason, faith and grace. "Reason" is used here both as a noun and as a verb. As a verb, it signifies the act of rational thought or discourse. As a noun, it refers to the ability to reason. It is an internal, human capacity. In contrast, "grace", within the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is a virtue enjoyed by human beings through the independent action of God, an external agency. The word "faith" is more complicated. Its most common usage below is as an alternative means to the attainment of belief.²⁶³ The complications arise when faith is considered in conjunction with reason and grace. As I employ it, faith is

263 It is my intention to include here a new consideration of faith, in order to do so I start this chapter trying to define and delimit this concept to fit it with the reality of the scepticism present in Montaigne's philosophy. For the classical vision of faith and fideism see Terence Penelhum, *God and skepticism*, Dordrecht, 1983 and also R. Popkin, *The history of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, 2003.

separate and distinct from reason and grace, although it may interact with either or both, an independent, internal quantity. It may function in cooperation with them, but it is human rather than divine, and fundamentally non-rational. The conclusions of faith, whether a specific belief or set of beliefs, may or may not be susceptible to rational explication, but faith itself exists apart from reason. Reason and grace may support faith, but ultimately faith comes from within and involves the acceptance of ideas for which there can be no purely rational justification. For many authors within the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, faith is the only road to true knowledge; reason has a part to play in the acceptance of the teachings of faith, but it cannot discover them on its own. As I hope to show, Montaigne has an essentially Augustinian understanding of these concepts. He believes that truth, particularly the truth of divine revelation, cannot be fully apprehended by rational means, but that rational assent to the truth of faith or revelation that comes solely through the free gift of God's grace is a pre-requisite to salvation and to the limited understanding attainable by the *viator*.²⁶⁴ In this respect, the state of doubt, the acknowledgment of ignorance or the realization of the absence of knowledge, whether derived through reason or faith, becomes a sign of the quest for illumination. This was as true for Montaigne as it was for Socrates and Augustine.

Montaigne's scepticism was in part a response to the problem of faith in an age of religious upheaval. For Montaigne and his contemporaries, faith was central to epistemological discussions. This should come as no surprise, for although the proponents of faith are frequently dismissed by many in the modern world as irrational or even anti-intellectual, and not always without good reason, faith has had, and continues to have, a powerful claim to epistemological authority.

Indeed, the problem of knowledge itself is inextricably intertwined with that of faith. This is as true for us as it was for Montaigne, for Socrates and for Job. Reason, experience, and faith or revelation, are all possible routes to knowledge. Traditionally, many have regarded the authority of faith, in contradistinction to that of reason and

²⁶⁴ This Latin term means “traveller”, in general, I will use this concept to refer to a common or regular individual.

experience, as unimpeachable. But just as the limits of reason can be explored, and the verisimilitude of experience questioned, so too a reflection on the nature of faith can also lead to doubt. As with reason and experience, the problem of faith is the question of the security of the foundation on which it rests. In the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, faith ultimately depends on divine revelation.

The problem of faith in this context is twofold, and consists both of the acceptance of the revealed status of the Word, and of its interpretation. There is little evidence to suggest that anyone in Montaigne's day seriously questioned the former, but Jews, Christians, and Muslims all revered different canons and were aware of other religions that claimed still other sources of revelation, and there were bitter and often bloody controversies over religious issues. In Montaigne's day, in the Christian context specifically, there was also bitter internecine rivalry. The early modern crisis of doubt was also a crisis of faith, and conflicts over the interpretation of the Word were crucial, and ultimately seen by many as posing a threat to the status of divine revelation itself. These were not just philosophical or theological conundrums; the order of human society and the promise of salvation were at stake, for the affairs of the City of Man and those of the City of God were seen as being interwoven.

In his consideration of the problems of knowledge and faith, Montaigne drew on traditional, Judeo-Christian sources for assistance. He found food for thought in Wisdom, Job, and Ecclesiastes, in the letters of St. Paul, and in the writings of some of the other early Fathers, but it was in the writings of Augustine and other early Christian Apologists who had dealt with fundamentally similar problems that he found the most guidance. Ultimately, Montaigne the sceptic had no confidence in reason, experience, or faith without grace, and remained a Christian, a Catholic, and defended his belief as Augustine in part did, historically. In the final analysis, Montaigne's judgment on faith was historical, and his ιστορία²⁶⁵ here led him to history.

265 This Greek term includes several meanings, from “investigation” to “knowledge”, but also “story”, “account”, “tale” but even “history”. I include it here because it is multipurpose and allows the reader to choose the most appropriate meaning.

The problem of faith is central to Montaigne, and the problem of Montaigne's belief has been a subject of some controversy for centuries. Some have seen him as a devout, if potentially unorthodox, Catholic. Others have regarded him as a Christian by circumstance, with no strong conviction of belief. Some have viewed Montaigne's exploration of faith in the *Essais* as being ultimately unresolved. Still others have seen a thinly-veiled attack on religion in the *Essais*, and have at least suspected him of a secret agnosticism or even atheism. Most serious contemporary Montaigne scholars, however, reject the latter extreme. Nonetheless, the question of Montaigne's belief is a tricky one. Still, a close reading of the *Essais* makes the idea that Montaigne is an agnostic or an atheist seem almost ludicrous. He is a self-professed Catholic who aspires to be a good son of the Church and repeatedly and convincingly acknowledges his submission to the ecclesiastical authority of Rome. Nevertheless, he is still Montaigne, and in the *Essais*, he essays his judgment even on the question of faith. He could not do otherwise. The problem of faith is crucial to his day, and, moreover, faith and its shadow, doubt, are central not only to religious questions, but also to the very exploration of self, the task that he has set himself in the *Essais*. Indeed, the problem of faith is one of the underlying themes of the *Essais*, and Montaigne returns to it again and again. Ultimately, Montaigne's vision of faith is essentially Augustinian, and like Augustine, Montaigne believed that reason, faith and grace are all necessary for the attainment of the limited understanding of the divine that is possible in this life. Like Augustine, Montaigne believed that doubt and imperfect belief are the best that most of us can ever hope to achieve. Like Augustine, Montaigne conceived his own belief as imperfect. His defense of that belief, his apology, the "Apology for Raymond Sebond", reflects this. Like Augustine, Montaigne sought to defend his belief against its detractors with the only tools at his disposal, his limited human reason, his narrow and fallible earthly experience, and his imperfect mundane faith. He spoke as a man, not as messenger for the divine. Montaigne's judgment on faith is that at best it can only be imperfect.

To demonstrate this more fully, and to give a complete account of the role of the problem of faith in Montaigne's scepticism, we must look more closely at the sceptical, Judeo-Christian sources with which Montaigne was familiar and consider the uses to which he put them. The first part of what follows deals with the most important of these,

specifically the Books of Wisdom, Job, Ecclesiastes, the letters of St. Paul, and the writings of St. Augustine and others. The next section treats the problem of Montaigne's belief. The last considers his defense of that belief and attempts do delineate more clearly the Christian nature of Montaigne's scepticism.

- Judeo-Christian sceptical sources.

Scepticism is an important if not all-pervasive theme within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and sceptical tendencies can be found in both the Old and the New Testaments and in the writings of the early fathers of the Church.²⁶⁶ In this context its basic feature is the belief that human reason and experience are essentially incapable of understanding the divine. God and his works, both the Creator and his Creation, are seen as being beyond the understanding of man. For Jewish and Christian sceptics, man's capacity to know, to understand, is severely limited. Desire for knowledge is perhaps proper to man, but only God has true understanding. What understanding man can achieve comes, as do all things, either directly or indirectly from God. Examples of all of this are not hard to find in the sacred writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition; indeed, on the contrary, they are hard to miss. Some of the most powerful and seminal expressions of this sceptical motif appear in the Books of Wisdom, Job, and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament.

The most sceptical voice in the New Testament is that of St. Paul, whose importance to the development of Christian thought cannot be overstated. Indeed, Paul's deeply rooted scepticism of human claims to knowledge derived solely through the operation of reason became almost central for many early Christians and has continued

²⁶⁶ The fathers of the Church are generally bishops, although not always, of the Church of the firsts centuries. Their teachings, in a collective sense, are considered like the dogma and foundations of the Christian orthodox doctrine. Some of them were disciples of the apostoles, these are known as "apostolian fathers" and they offer an interpretation of the Scriptures considered more reliable and correct. There were four main criteria to acknowledge a father of the Church: age, orthodoxy, sanctity, and Church aproval. Nothwithstading, not all the father of the Church were orthodox. If centered in their doctrine, this study is called Patristic, if centered in the personal life of the fathers of the Church is known as Patrology.

to exercise a powerful influence throughout the history of the Christian tradition. Paul's scepticism has often been regarded as anti-intellectual, as has that of many of his successors.

Unfortunately, the Church Fathers who succeeded Paul have often been portrayed as anti-intellectual, and many have regarded them as unilaterally hostile towards the classical philosophical tradition. This, however, was not the case, and this claim has been badly over-stated. The reality is far more complex.

Although some early Christian thinkers were hostile towards the classical tradition and others were at least mistrustful of its utility, still others were sympathetic to it, some even deeply respectful of it.²⁶⁷ Moreover, most, if not all, of the early Fathers were educated in the Classical tradition. Although they transformed what they had inherited, the early Christians were as much the heirs of Greece and Rome as they were of Judea, and both Greek philosophy and Roman law exerted a powerful influence on the development of early Christianity. Many of the most important early Christian theologians viewed themselves as successors of Plato as well as of Paul, and from a philosophical standpoint it is at least possible to view Christianity itself as a Neoplatonic offshoot. Indeed, many early Christian thinkers saw no real conflict between Neoplatonic thought and Christianity, and many of the early Christian Apologists emphasized this notion in their attempts to defend and promote Christianity through philosophical argument. Occasionally, they also made use of sceptical arguments. In this they were undoubtedly influenced by the scepticism of Paul, but some of them at least were also influenced by Academic scepticism. St. Augustine, in this respect as in many others, is the most important of these, and the Christian scepticism of Augustine, which partakes of both the scepticism of Paul and the doubt of Socrates, has had a profound influence on Christian thought.

267 For a discussion of the early Fathers attitude towards the Classical tradition see David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Early Church" in Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers de., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 19-48.

Nonetheless, even though the Christian tradition was nurtured in the academy of Greek philosophy, its progenitors were the authors of the Old and New Testaments, and the Christian sceptical tradition, though midwived by Socrates, was born of Paul, Ecclesiastes, Job and Wisdom. There are, however, a number of similarities between biblical scepticism and the Greek sceptical tradition.²⁶⁸ At the heart of each is the notion that human understanding is limited and ultimately incapable of apprehending the mysteries of the cosmos. One of the themes of the Book of Wisdom is that man's happiness consists in knowledge of God's law, a knowledge that comes only from God. The central message of Job is that man's happiness is unimportant and that the highest understanding that man can achieve is the knowledge of the necessity of submission to the divine will. Part of the teaching of Ecclesiastes is that happiness and understanding pertain in the end, as all things do, not to man, but only to God. In all three, knowledge or understanding is the province of God, not of man.

In the Book of Wisdom, or Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed as being essential to happiness, but available only through the Lord. It comes from God, not from man. Knowledge begins with fear of the Lord, and ends with obedience to the divine will.²⁶⁹ "Knowledge and discernment are by His decree".²⁷⁰ Man is advised to trust in the Lord and not to rely on his own understanding.²⁷¹ Man is told not to be wise in his own eyes, but to "fear de Lord" and to "shun evil".²⁷² The author of Wisdom tells us that the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord, "and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding".²⁷³ Man's happiness depends on knowledge of and obedience to God's

268 Katherine J. Dell, *The book of Job as Skeptical Literature*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991, p. 167.

269 *Proverbs*, 1. 7: "Fear of Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction", *The New English Bible. The Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

270 *Proverbs*, 2. 6.

271 *Proverbs*, 3. 5-7: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straigh. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil".

272 *Idem*.

273 *Proverbs*, 10.

revealed will. Man's only true understanding consists in this realization and in nothing else.

In the Book of Job, God's prophet is shown that the only thing proper to him, the only understanding, indeed the only thing that he can claim as his own, is obedience and submission. Job asks “whence does wisdom come? / Where is the source of understanding? / It is hidden from the eyes of all living”.²⁷⁴ Speaking with the words of Abaddon and Death, he says that “we have only a report of it”.²⁷⁵ He says that “God understands the way to it; / He knows its source”. Speaking with the words of the Lord, and echoing Wisdom, he says, “See! Fear of the Lord is wisdom; / To shun evil is understanding”.²⁷⁶ Later on, the Lord asks Job if he knows the secrets of the universe, saying to him, “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? / Speak if you have understanding”.²⁷⁷ Job replies, “See, I am of small worth; what can I answer You? / I clap my hand to my mouth”.²⁷⁸ Confronted with the divine, Job acknowledges his own insignificance, his own ignorance. According to Job, man speaks “withouth understanding” of things that are beyond him, which he does not know. It does not belong to man to know, but to ask and to be informed. Knowledge does not pertain to man, only obedience:

“I know that you can do everything,

That nothing you propose is impossible for You.

Who is this who obscures counsel without knowledge?

Indeed, I spoke without understanding

Of things beyond me, which I did not know.

274 Job, 28. 20-28. *The New English Bible. The Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

275 Job, 28. 20-28.

276 *Idem*.

277 Job, 38. 4.

278 Job, 40. 3.

Hear now, and I will speak;
I will ask, and You will inform me.
I had heard You with my ears,
But now I see You with my eyes;
Therefore, I recant and relent,
*Being but dust and ashes”.*²⁷⁹

The messages of Wisdom and Job are echoed in Ecclesiastes: experience of the divine and its works belongs to man, knowledge and understanding of them pertain only to God. Man's only true knowledge is that revealed to him by the Lord, and man's only true happiness is obedience to the Lord's will. Man cannot know the way of the world.²⁸⁰ The poet asks, “who can possibly know what is best for a man to do in life -the few days of his fleeting life?”²⁸¹ The answer is the Lord. Man can devote himself to contemplation and reflection, “even to the extent of going without sleep day and night”, he can observe “all that God brings to pass”, but he “cannot guess the events that occur under the sun”, and “even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them”.²⁸² Just as he cannot “know how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of the pregnant woman”, so man “cannot foresee the actions of God, who causes all things to happen”.²⁸³ The quest for knowledge, for understanding, belongs to man, is perhaps part of the human condition, but the only true knowledge that man can obtain is that revealed to him by God. Comprehension of the nature of

279 *Job*, 42. 2-6.

280 *Ecclesiastes*, 1. *The New English Bible. The Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

281 *Ecclesiastes*, 6. 12.

282 *Ecclesiastes*, 8. 16-17.

283 *Ecclesiastes*, 11. 5.

things is beyond the capacity of man. He cannot understand the Lord or his ways. He cannot explain the mysteries of the cosmos. He cannot account for, predict, or control his own destiny. All of these things belong only to God. To man belongs only obedience:

“The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments”.²⁸⁴

Many of these sceptical themes were later taken up and Christianized by St. Paul. Paul's thought was deeply rooted in the traditions of the Old Testament and in the articulation of his Christian scepticism Paul frequently made use of older formulations. The main feature of Paul's epistemology is that genuine knowledge is bestowed only by the grace of God through the mediation of Christ. Man is incapable of arriving at this truth through the exercise of the intellect alone.²⁸⁵ The only true knowledge, and the only true happiness, is through faith in Christ and in the divinely revealed teachings of the Prophets and Apostles. Paul was as or more suspicious of the “wisdom of this world” than the authors of Wisdom, Job and Ecclesiastes and frequently contrasted this fallible human wisdom with the revealed and certain preachings of the Apostles. For Paul, man can know with certainty only what God has revealed to him, all else is subject to doubt, and all of man's other pretensions to knowledge, ultimately, are signs of his pride and his true ignorance. Philosophy, and the traditions of man, are nothing more than vain deceits. Man's proper study and knowledge is God, and what man knows of God he knows only through the grace of Christ, the Living God. The thorny question of man's debt to God, and of the precise nature or mechanism of salvation in Paul may be sidestepped here, for although there are clearly connections between Paul's conception of knowledge, faith and grace and his teachings regarding salvation, the nature of his scepticism can be gleaned from an examination of his more

284 *Ecclesiastes*, 12. 13-14.

285 W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, revised edition, New York, Harper, 1965, p. 154.

straightforward epistemological pronouncements without reference to his statements on soteriology.²⁸⁶ Some of Paul's most sceptical remarks are to be found in the first letter to the Corinthians and in the letter to the Colossians.

Paul was sceptical of the wisdom of this world and of the vain deceits of philosophy. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul said that “it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the prudence of the prudent I will reject. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world?'”.²⁸⁷ He said that God has “made foolish the wisdom of this world”.²⁸⁸ He contrasted this earthly wisdom with the teachings of the Apostles, saying that “for seeing that in the wisdom of God the world, by wisdom, knew not God, it pleased God, by the foolishness of *our* preaching, to save them that believe”.²⁸⁹ The wisdom of this world cannot know God. God can only be known through special revelation. Paul tells us not to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are wise and urges those of us who think that we are to unlearn our supposed wisdom, “for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God”.²⁹⁰ He tells us that it is written, “I will catch the wise in their own craftiness”, and “the Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain”.²⁹¹ He said, “if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he hath not yet known as he ought to know”.²⁹² Man's only true knowledge is the knowledge bestowed by divine revelation. In the letter to the Colossians, he tells us that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in the “knowledge of the mystery of God the Father and of Christ Jesus”.²⁹³ All that man

286 Soteriology is the study of everything related with salvation, but always in the context of the Christian tradition.

287 *Corinthians*, 1. 19-20, Rheims New Testament translation, *The Precise Parallel New Testament*, John R. Kohlenberger III ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

288 *Corinthians*, 1. 20.

289 *Corinthians*, 1. 21.

290 *Corinthians*, 3. 18-19.

291 *Corinthians*, 3. 19-20.

292 *Corinthians*, 8. 2.

293 *Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, 2. 2-3. Rheims New Testament translation, *The Precise Parallel New Testament*.

can know is to be found in and through God. Finally, he warns us to “beware lest any man cheat you by philosophy, and vain deceit; according to the tradition of men, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ”.²⁹⁴ Philosophy is a cheat and a deceit, only faith is reliable.

If Paul was hostile toward philosophy, not all of his successors among the early Fathers were. Some were, but others were not. Some perceived no real conflict between pagan philosophy and Christian teaching. Among the early Apologists, specifically, there were some who saw the Christian revelation as the final truth for which Greek and Roman philosophers had been blindly groping for centuries. Men like Aristides (2nd century A.D.), Justin Martyr (c. 100 - c. 165), and Minucius Felix (2nd or 3rd century) had a profound respect for Greek philosophy in general and for the philosophy of Plato and the Neoplatonists in particular, and the relationship between Christianity and Platonism became one of the central themes of Christian apologetics by the third century.²⁹⁵ Of all the great pagan thinkers, they believed that Plato had come as close to the truth as it was possible for man to come without the aid of divine revelation. They saw close parallels between Plato's teachings and some of the basic tenets of Christian belief. In fact, it could reasonably be argued that Plato's ideas about immortality, the Demiurge, and the World of Forms helped to shape Christian doctrine itself, for many of the Church Fathers, who were responsible for creating Christian dogma out of the raw material of biblical revelation, were trained in Neoplatonic philosophy *before* converting to Christianity. As D. P. Walker put it, “Christianity was born and bred in a Hellenistic world”.²⁹⁶ The intellectual landscape of that world was largely dominated by the thought of Plato and the Neoplatonists.

The Apologetic writings of the early Fathers were written in defense and promotion of Christianity. They were directed at educated pagans whom their authors

294 *Colossians*, 2. 8. Rheims New Testament translation, *The Precise Parallel Testament*.

295 Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, London, Hutchinson, 1971, pp. 70-71. Avery Dulles was a bishop of jesuitic formation.

296 D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, London, Duckworth, 1972, p. 4.

believed could be convinced to accept the teachings of Christianity by rational argument. Some of the early Apologists saw philosophy as a potential servant to Christianity, a handmaiden who could help them lead educated pagans to the truth of the Word.

Apologetic authors like Lactantius (c. 240 – c. 320) made use of sceptical arguments that hearkened back both to biblical and to pagan, specifically Academic, sources.²⁹⁷ He regarded the scepticism of the Academics in particular as a potentially useful foundation for Christian belief.²⁹⁸ Lactantius wrote of the “knowledge and science of truth which no one can attain by thinking and disputing”.²⁹⁹ Like Paul and the authors of Wisdom, Job and Ecclesiastes, Lactantius believed that truth comes only from God. He argued that “knowledge cannot come from ingeniousness, nor can it be grasped by cogitation, because it is not of man to have in himself proper knowledge, but it is of God”.³⁰⁰ Lactantius praised Socrates and the Academics who followed him for arguing that nothing can be known with certainty. He believed that philosophy, both moral and natural, was purely speculative. He said that philosophers “do not know the truth, since truth is knowledge of something certain; their speculation is of an uncertainty”.³⁰¹ Lactantius rejected absolute scepticism, however. He argued that the philosophers possessed wisdom without truly realizing it. He maintained that those who thought that all things could be known were not wise, nor were those who thought that nothing could be known. He wrote, “the former attributed too much to man, the latter too little; to both and in each part measure was lacking”. He asked, “Where, therefore, is wisdom?”³⁰² His answer was “that you may not think that you know all things, which is characteristic of God, nor that you do not know all things, which is characteristic of the

297 M. Bermúdez, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

298 Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 237.

299 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, Sister Mary Frances McDonald, O. P., tr., Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964, p. 165.

300 Lactantius, *Divines Institutes*, p. 168.

301 Lactantius, *Divines Institutes*, p. 169.

302 Lactantius, *Divines Institutes*, p. 173.

beasts”.³⁰³ He conceived a “middle state which belongs to man, that is, a knowledge joined with and tempered by ignorance”.³⁰⁴ Lactantius embraced a sort of nascent probabilism and argued essentially that God had given man sufficient wisdom to differentiate between more and less likely propositions. With many of the other Apologists, he believed that the articles of Christian belief could be assented to on rational grounds. He wrote, “wherefore, in that matter especially, in which the purpose of life is concerned, it is necessary for each one to have confidence in himself and rely on his own judgment and personal opinions for investigating and weighing out the truth, rather than believe in errors of others as though utterly gullible and lacking in wisdom, to be deceived”.³⁰⁵ He said, “to all, according to their capacity as men, God gave wisdom in order that they might seek out things not heard of and weigh out things heard of”.³⁰⁶

Lactantius was sceptical, but he rejected absolute scepticism. He thought that man's capacity for knowledge was limited, but that God had endowed man with sufficient mental ability to grasp the truth of revelation rationally. He believed that true knowledge and understanding belong only to God, but he was also convinced that between the extremes of absolute certainty and absolute scepticism there was “a middle state which belongs to man, that is, a knowledge joined with and tempered by ignorance”. He believed in probable knowledge in matters both mundane and spiritual.

Like Lactantius, St. Augustine (354-430), perhaps the most important and influential Patristic author, also made use of both biblical and Academic sceptical arguments in his Apologetic writings. Again, like Lactantius, and others, Augustine was

303 *Idem*.

304 *Idem*.

305 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, p. 121.

306 *Idem*. For an extended version about Lactantius' opinion on scepticism and its role in the history of the evolution of this line of thought see M. Bermúdez, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-64. Lactantius was one of the first Christian authors who used the fideism (the very first one was Saint Hippolytus). Fideism emphasizes the impossibility of attaining knowledge through rational means, situating faith as the only source to get any truth, truths that are not based in any kind of rational evidence. About fideism see T. Penelhum, “Scepticism and fideism”, in *The skeptical tradition*, pp. 287-318.

a philosopher before he was a Christian. Even after his conversion, however, Augustine retained a powerful admiration for pagan philosophy, specifically for that of Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Academics.

Indeed, in his *Confessions*, Augustine tells us that before his ultimate conversion he embraced Academic scepticism, but in the same work he also relates his subsequent rejection of the philosophy of Academic doubt. In another important work, the *Contra Academicos*, he set out to refute that philosophy. He also criticized the Academics in the *City of God*, his most straightforwardly Apologetic work. Nonetheless, Augustine ultimately must be regarded as sceptical even though he is clearly not an absolute sceptic, and his position *vis-à-vis* the tradition of Academic doubt is more complicated than it might at first appear. In fact, in the final analysis, Augustine's split with the Academics is perhaps not as complete as it might seem, despite of the title of *Contra Academicos*, for his only answer to the doubt of the Academics is faith. Like Lactantius, Augustine thought that man has a limited capacity for knowledge, but again like Lactantius he also felt that God had made man in such a way that man has the ability to differentiate between more and less likely opinions. Augustine believed that with the assistance of faith and grace man's reason is sufficient to assent to probable ideas. He believed that man could only attain a provisional knowledge, and a provisional faith, in this life. As many before him, he maintained that knowledge and understanding belong only to God, but that with God's help man could attain to belief and assent.³⁰⁷

Much has been written about Augustine's relationship with Academic scepticism. The general consensus among Augustinian scholars seems to me to be that while Augustine ultimately rejected the teachings of the Academic sceptics, his thought was, nonetheless, deeply influenced by his encounter with the sceptical Academy, and he retained a sceptical position with respect to the limits of human knowledge. He believed, however, that he had found a response to the sceptics in Christianity. He believed that man could achieve a limited understanding, a belief in the probable truth of likely opinions, through the mediating grace of divine illumination. He maintained

307 See M. Bermúdez, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-26 and 62-68.

that man was incapable of discovering truth through the action of reason alone, but that through grace man could attain to faith in matters beyond his ultimate understanding. In short, faith was Augustine's answer to scepticism. Etienne Gilson argued that Augustine rejected radical scepticism but maintained that truth was only accessible to man through the mediation of faith.³⁰⁸ Robert Cushman said that for Augustine, “men are born blind in Adam and need Christ to awaken them”.³⁰⁹ Julius Weinberg argued that for Augustine, the approach to truth must always begin with faith but that Christ, the Internal Teacher, will always teach those who approach him properly.³¹⁰ He also said that belief, rather than knowledge, is the centerpiece of Augustinian epistemology, which is to say that man can have genuine belief in the truth without fully apprehending it as such.³¹¹ Peter Brown maintained that Augustine rejected Academic scepticism but argued that he learned from the Academics that the search for wisdom was an on-going quest in which only the authority of Christ could lead to truth.³¹² Bruce Bubacz suggested that Augustine's encounter with Academic scepticism taught him both the possibility of knowledge and the possibility of doubt.³¹³ He argued that for Augustine doubt was the beginning of the search for knowledge.³¹⁴ Anthony Long said that although Augustine ultimately rejected the conclusions of the Academics, their teachings nonetheless made a strong impression on him.³¹⁵ He also said that Christian revelation was Augustine's only answer to scepticism.³¹⁶ Frederick Copleston said the

308 Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, L. E. M. Lynch tr., New York, Random House, 1960, pp. 38, 227-229.

309 Robert E. Cushman, “Faith and Reason”, in Roy W. Battenhouse ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 305.

310 Julius Weinberg, *Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964, pp. 32-41.

311 J. Weinberg, *Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, p. 44.

312 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, p. 80.

313 Bruce Bubacz, *St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*, New York, Edwin Mellon Press, 1981, p. 39.

314 B. Bubacz, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

315 A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 237.

316 A. Long, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

same.³¹⁷ Gerard O'Daly argued that although Augustine rejected radical scepticism, he nonetheless believed that “true philosophy” dealt with things that could not be fully comprehended in this life.³¹⁸ Augustine Curley considered Socrates and Plato as part of the story of the evolution of scepticism but argued that both “held that truth did exist, and that it could be known at least in a vague way”.³¹⁹ He further argued that in rejecting the New “sceptical” Academy in favor of the Old “dogmatic” one, Augustine was following them in this.³²⁰ Carol Harrison also put Augustine squarely in the Academic tradition, noting likewise his shift from the teachings of the New to those of the Old Academy.³²¹ The picture that emerges from the writings of all of these scholars is much the same on this point. Although Augustine initially embraced the conclusions of the Academic sceptics, he ultimately found a response to scepticism in Christianity. He, nonetheless, remained sceptical about the human ability to apprehend truth without divine mediation. He was sceptical, if not an absolute sceptic.

Although Augustine criticizes the Academics in several places, the picture of his epistemology that emerges from the *City of God* and some of his other writings is decidedly sceptical and owes much to the Academic sceptics. Though Book VIII of the *City of God* is devoted to a critique of pagan philosophy, Book IX is concerned with the attempt to reconcile Platonism with Christianity, and Augustine's tone with respect to pagan philosophy is generally sympathetic throughout the work. Augustine believed that Plato and the Neoplatonists in particular had come as close to the truth as it was possible for man to come without the benefit of divine revelation and grace. He maintained that all of the works of the philosophers were merely opinions, but he

317 Frederick Copleston, *Historia de la filosofia*, v. 2, Madrid, Ariel, 2010, p. 51. I have used the Spanish edition of this book since it was easier at hand at the moment.

318 Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, pp. 162-164.

319 Augustine J. Curley, *Augustine's Critique of Skepticism: A Study of Contra Academicos*, New York, Peter Lang, 1996, p. 36.

320 *Idem*.

321 Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 10-11.

argued that sometimes the opinions of the philosophers were correct, or nearly so, but that the philosophers themselves were incapable of realizing this because they lacked grace.³²² He said that the philosophers, nonetheless, had a nascent and unrecognized conception of grace which they revealed when they spoke of it being “granted only a few to reach God by virtue of their intelligence”.³²³ He saw this as an “undoubted confession of the grace of God and the insufficiency of man”.³²⁴ He saw as a foreshadowing of Christian teaching the belief of Porphyry and Plato that “man cannot by any means reach the perfection of wisdom in this life, but that, after this life, all those who live the life of the intellect receive all that is needed for their fulfillment from the providence and grace of God”.³²⁵ Augustine argued that the “mind of man, the natural seat of his reason and understanding, is itself weakened by long-standing faults which darken it”.³²⁶ He called it “too weak to cleave to that changeless light and to enjoy it”, “too weak even to endure that light”.³²⁷ He argued that man's mind “must be renewed and healed day after day so as to become capable of such felicity”. He believed that the mind of man had to be “trained and purified by faith” and that its “journey towards the truth along the way of faith” could only be realized through the mediating grace of Christ.³²⁸ He believed that man's reason is weak, but he rejected the absolute scepticism of the Academy, calling it madness.³²⁹ Following Paul, he acknowledged that our knowledge is partial only, but he argued that certainty can be achieved in some matters, that the evidence of the senses can be trusted, that the scripture, which is

322 St. Augustine, *City of God*, Henry Bettenson tr., London, Penguin, 1972, Book XVIII, Chapter 41, pp. 815-819.

323 St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, Book X, Chapter 29, p. 414.

324 *Idem.*

325 *Idem.*

326 St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, Book X, Chapter 29, p. 430.

327 *Idem.*

328 St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XI, Chapter 3, pp. 430-431.

329 St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 18, p. 879.

ultimately based on the testimony of “witnesses whom it would be irrational to distrust”, can also be trusted, and that man's faith can be sustained by God's grace.³³⁰

Augustine was sceptical of man's natural abilities, and he thought that man could only attain a limited understanding in this life, but he maintained that through faith and grace man could aspire to salvation. He believed that with their assistance, man's reason was sufficient to assent to the historical, miraculous evidence of the truth of revealed teaching. For Augustine, ignorance and doubt are part of the condition of the *viator*, but faith and grace can lead to salvation.

Even though Augustine's position has at least some similarities to that of the Academics, ultimately he claimed to have rejected Academic scepticism, but his critique of the Academics in the *Contra Academicos* is somewhat problematic, for even as he claims to reject their scepticism, he retains his admiration, and indeed seems to consider himself to be a legitimate successor to their school. The message of Book I of the *Contra Academicos* is that while the search for wisdom belongs to man, wisdom itself belongs only to God.³³¹ The position of the Academics is laid out in full in Book II, but there is also some talk there of the possibility that the sceptical Academics might have had some secret teaching that they communicated only to the initiated among them.³³² In Book III, Augustine attempted to refute Academic scepticism by arguing that certainty can be achieved with divine help.³³³ Curiously, he also speculated that the sceptical Academics might have secretly clung to the teachings of Plato, which they sought to protect against the attacks of the Stoics by hiding behind an assumed scepticism.³³⁴ In the end, Augustine seems to describe himself as heir to what he sees as

330 *Idem*.

331 St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians* and *The Teacher*, Peter King tr., Indianapolis, Hackett, 1995, 1. 8. 23.

332 St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, 2. 13. 29. About the secret teachings of Plato's Academy see R. Román, “¿Son los ágrapha dógmata las lecciones no escritas de Platon?”, in *Anales del seminario de historia de la filosofía*, n° 16, 1999, pp. 85-108.

333 St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, 3. 6. 13.

334 St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, 3. 17. 37 – 3. 20. 43.

the complicated traditions of the Academy, although he claims to have more affinity with the Old Academy than with the New.³³⁵

Additional light can be shed on Augustine's relationship to pagan philosophy and the traditions of the Academy, and on the nature of his scepticism, by a glance at his *Confessions*. There he tells us quite straightforwardly that his study of philosophy, specifically the teachings of Plato and Cicero, is part of what led him to God.³³⁶ He said that during the course of his journey to God, he “began to thinking that the philosophers known as the Academics were wiser than the rest, because they held that everything was a matter of doubt and asserted that man can know nothing for certain”.³³⁷ He also said, echoing the conclusion of the *Contra Academicos*, that “this is the common belief about their teaching and it seemed to me that it was what they thought, but I did not yet understand what they really meant”.³³⁸ He later tells us that “treating everything as a matter of doubt, as the Academics are generally supposed to do, and hovering between one doctrine and another, I made up my mind at least to leave the Manichees, for while I was in this state of indecision I did not think it right to remain in the sect now that I found the theories of some of the philosophers preferable”.³³⁹ He also tells us, however, “nevertheless I utterly refused to entrust the healing of the maladies of my soul to these philosophers, because they ignored the saving name of Christ”.³⁴⁰ He chose to remain a “catechumen in the Catholic Church” until he “could clearly see a light” to guide his steps.³⁴¹ Ultimately he found the answers he sought through grace and the mediation of Christ.³⁴² Subsequently he said that he came to believe that the teachings of Plato

335 St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, 3. 20 43-44.

336 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, R. S. Pine-Coffin tr., London, Penguin, 1961, Book III, Chapter IV, pp. 58-59.

337 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book V, Chapter 10, p. 104.

338 *Idem*.

339 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book V, Chapter 14, pp. 108-109.

340 *Idem*.

341 *Idem*.

342 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, Chapters 17-18, pp. 151-152.

contained truth, but not all truth, and that they lacked the divine illumination conveyed by revelation through faith and grace.³⁴³ Augustine spoke of the “poverty of the human intellect”, of true knowledge coming through God alone,³⁴⁴ and of the saving power of faith and grace:

*“What man can teach another to understand this truth? What angel can teach it to an angel? What angel can teach it to a man? We must ask it of you, seek it in you; we must knock at your door. Only then shall we receive what we ask and find what we seek; only then will the door be opened to us”.*³⁴⁵

Augustine's scepticism is in part a transformation of the teachings of the Academy. He believed that Plato and the Academics who followed him most closely had come as near to truth as man could come without the assistance of God. He rejected the scepticism of the later Academics, but he retained a healthy measure of Academic doubt. Like Plato before him, he labored under the shadow of the doubt of Socrates, but also like Socrates, Plato, and at least some of the Academics, he believed in the possibility of divine revelation. Unlike his Greek and Roman predecessors, however, he believed that at last he had found truth in theology.

The Christian scepticism of Paul, Augustine, and others has remained a powerful force within Christian thought. At its heart lies the idea that in this earthly existence man cannot comprehend fully the nature of God and his works. Man's senses are frail, his reason weak, and it is only through faith and grace that he can approach true understanding. For Augustine and others, knowledge belongs only to God, man can have only belief.

343 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, Chapter 21, pp. 155-156.

344 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XII, Chapter 1, p. 281 and Book XIII, Chapter 16, p. 323.

345 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XIII, Chapter 38, p. 347.

In the later Middle Ages, this Christian scepticism influenced both philosophical and theological discussions. St. Bernard's response to Abelard and the Schoolmen was fundamentally that of the Christian sceptic. The thirteenth-century clashes over Aristotle at the University of Paris and elsewhere were essentially a struggle over the relative epistemological authority of reason and faith. The radical scepticism of Nicholas of Autrecourt in the fourteenth century was in part a resurgence of this deeply-rooted Christian sceptical tradition. The *docta ignorantia*, the doctrine of learned ignorance, of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), perhaps the last great medieval theologian, was also an expression of it. Although each of these well-known cases was separated by a hundred years or more, and each has a complicated history of its own, they are, nonetheless, inseparably linked. The full history of the Christian scepticism of the Middle Ages has yet to be written, but taken together, these examples signal the presence of a powerful and vibrant tradition.³⁴⁶

This medieval sceptical tradition helped to shape the “sceptical crisis” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the scepticism of Montaigne and his contemporaries cannot be fully understood without reference to its fundamentally Christian roots. Indeed for people like Erasmus, with whom Richard Popkin effectively begins his consideration of the “sceptical crisis”, questions of faith were central.³⁴⁷ Much of what can be described as sceptical in Erasmus is the result of an attraction to an idealized vision of Pauline simplicity and a commitment to a simple faith that rejects the human capacity to fully comprehend the divine truth.³⁴⁸ For Erasmus and other Christian authors, faith alone can lead to truth. Montaigne and others like him were not merely responding to ideas encountered in ancient philosophical texts. They were

346 For a brief analysis of the scepticism of Nicholas of Autrecourt see M. Bermúdez, *La recuperación del escepticismo en el Renacimiento*, Madrid, 2006, chapter 1, pp. 23-54. For the sceptical implications of Nicholas of Cusa see E. Colomer, *De la Edad Media al Renacimiento: Ramón Llull, Nicolás de Cusa, Juan Pico de la Mirándola*, Barcelona, 1975.

347 R. Popkin, *History of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*.

348 A. H. T. Levi, introduction to Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten Van Dorp 1515*, Betty Radice tr., A. H. T. Levi, ed., London: Penguin, 1971, pp. xi-xviii. Erasmus' words: “For so great is the obscurity and variety of human affairs that nothing can be clearly known, as it is truly said by our academics, the least insolent of all the philosophers”.

grappling with an age-old problem within a changing Christian context.³⁴⁹ The theological controversies of the sixteenth century played an important part in the development of the sceptical crisis. Indeed, the question of authority in matters pertaining to faith was perhaps central to it. In their explorations of human capacities, men like Montaigne drew not only on the philosophical traditions of Greece and Rome, but also on the teachings of scripture and of the Christian Fathers, and in fact, the latter two were widely regarded as being the more important and reliable of these sources. Moreover, Montaigne and his contemporaries wrestled with these questions not only with their reason, but also with their faith, for faith was central to the problem.

- The problem of Montaigne's belief.

The problem of Montaigne's belief is an interesting one. Montaigne knew his Bible, and he was familiar with the writings of many of the Fathers. Although not trained in theology, as he was the first to admit, he was more than familiar with the basic theological controversies of his day. As a judge and a statesman, he was involved at the highest levels with their legal, social, and political repercussions. He wrote about religious issues in the *Essais*, and the problem of belief in particular is central to several of them, including the "Apology for Raymond Sebond". He proclaimed that belief on a number of occasions. He was a self-professed Catholic who repeatedly avowed his submission to the ecclesiastical authority of Rome. Nonetheless, in the centuries since his death, many have questioned Montaigne's orthodoxy, indeed his belief itself. In the final analysis, however, there is little room for doubt as to the sincerity of Montaigne's belief, but the more interesting question, that of how he defended that belief, follows directly from the consideration of the other.

349 For further information about the religious disputes and its influence on the development of scepticism see F. Todesco, "La rinascita dello scetticismo in età moderna", in *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, vol. XI, 1991, pp. 142-145. See also Charles B. Schmitt, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times", in *The Skeptical Tradition*, 1983, pp. 225-251.

Donald Frame, one of Montaigne's numerous biographers, has argued that the burden of proof lies with those who maintain that Montaigne's many professions of belief were insincere.³⁵⁰ Michael Screech has called Montaigne a Roman Catholic layman who recognized the authority of Rome.³⁵¹ Elaine Limbrick has shown quite convincingly that Montaigne's belief was unquestioned by his immediate contemporaries, and that in fact he was regarded as a champion of Catholicism by many of the most powerful among them.³⁵² Thierry Wanegfellen has argued that Montaigne was intellectually committed to Catholicism.³⁵³ Most Montaigne scholars, however, acknowledge with Claude Blum that Montaigne can be read with some legitimacy as sceptical, indifferent, agnostic, fideistic, a sincere Catholic, or a Catholic by custom only, and that the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" in particular can be read as an unresolved investigation of the question of faith.³⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Blum agrees with Frame, Limbrick, and the majority of Montaigne scholars, most of whom do not seriously question the truthfulness of Montaigne's pretensions to belief. There remains, nonetheless, considerable debate as to the nature of that belief. Ultimately, of course, the answers to these questions must be sought in the *Essais* themselves, but they must be sought with caution, for while it is impossible to agree with Terence Cave that they perhaps cannot be found by a close reading of the text, it is necessary to keep in mind that the text is a complicated one that can be read y many ways.³⁵⁵ Not all readings are equally plausible, however. As with the philosophical issues treated in the previous chapter of this thesis, Montaigne approaches the problem of belief through the medium

350 Donald M. Frame, "What Next in Montaigne Studies?", *French Review*, XXXVI, 1962, p. 583.

351 Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, pp. 17-19.

352 Elaine Limbrick, "Métamorphose d'un philosophe en théologien", in *Montaigne: Apologie de Raimond Sebond de la Theologia à la Théologie*, Claude Blum ed., Paris, Champion, 1990, pp. 229-231.

353 Thierry Wanegfellen, *Ni Rome ni Genève: Des fidèles entre deux chaires en France au XVIe siècle*, Paris, Champion, 1997, pp. 389-390.

354 Claude Blum, "L'Apologie de Raimond Sebond et le déplacement de l'apologétique traditionnelle à la fin du xvie siècle", in *Le Signe et le Texte*, Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., Lexington, French Forum, 1990, pp. 161-162.

355 Terence Cave, *Pré-Histoires*, Geneva, Droz, 1999, pp. 15-16.

of the essay, assaying his judgment on the religious controversies of his day and arguing a particular point of view, as we shall see, with great rhetorical skill.

Montaigne read the Bible and the writings of many of the Fathers, and the *Essais* abound with both scriptural and patristic references, as well as references to later Christian sources. One of Montaigne's bibles is still extant.³⁵⁶ We know that Montaigne knew Lactantius's works, although we cannot be certain in which edition. The same is true of Augustine's *City of God*, and passages in the *Essais* at least suggest that Montaigne knew other Augustinian works as well.³⁵⁷ Montaigne tells us in the *Essais* that the Christian religion owes much to Augustine's writings.³⁵⁸ He also tells us that he follows St. Augustine's opinion, "that is better to lean toward doubt than toward assurance in things difficult to prove and dangerous to believe".³⁵⁹ Montaigne knew some of the writings of St. Bernard and the works of Nicholas of Cusa.³⁶⁰ Montaigne was also quite familiar with the *Natural Theology* of Raymond Sebond, a work that he translated and whose author's defense served as the starting point for his Apology.³⁶¹ Montaigne knew and cited many other Christian authors as well. All of this, of course, is proof only that Montaigne was well read, even by the standards of his day. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that these do not sound like the reading tastes of someone who rejects the Christian tradition.

Montaigne also had numerous passages from scripture, patristic authors, and later Christian sources inscribed on the rafters of his library. In fact, of the fifty-seven total inscriptions that provided him with immediate inspiration as he worked, twenty-one are from Judeo-Christian sources. Eleven of these, the most from any single source,

356 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. xliii.

357 Montaigne, *Essais*, pp. lii-xliii.

358 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 8, "Of the affection of fathers for their children", p. 401.

359 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 11, "Of cripples", p. 1032. Text in French: "*Et suis l'avis de saint Augustin, qu'il vaut mieux pancher vers le doute que vers l'assurance es choses de difficile preuve et dangereuse creance*".

360 Montaigne, *Essais*, pp. xliii-xlvi.

361 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lviii.

were rightly or wrongly attributed by Montaigne to Ecclesiastes alone. Four come from St. Paul. Again, this does not sound like someone who has abandoned Christianity.³⁶²

Montaigne's selections from scripture, moreover, strongly indicate his indebtedness to Judeo-Christian sources in the formulation of his scepticism. Inscription 2, falsely ascribed by Montaigne himself to Ecclesiastes, indicates that the desire for knowledge was given to man by God.³⁶³ Inscription 12, taken from the Book of Proverbs or Wisdom, calls attention to the foolishness of the human pretension to wisdom.³⁶⁴ Inscriptions 17 and 24-26 are all from St. Paul. Inscription 17 is an injunction not to be wise in our own eyes.³⁶⁵ Inscription 24 says that the man who presumes his own knowledge does not even know what it means to know. Inscription 25 has the sense that man seduces himself when he forgets that he is nothing. Inscription 26 warns of the danger of seeking to know more than man is capable of knowing. Inscription 29, taken from Ecclesiastes, says that all things are too difficult for man to understand. Inscription 36, from Isaiah, warns man of the misfortune that follows the belief in his own wisdom.³⁶⁶ Inscription 48, from the Book of Psalms, says that God's judgments are unknown to man.³⁶⁷ Montaigne had these sayings inscribed on the rafters of his library, so that every time he paused in his thoughts to raise his eyes to heaven he would be reminded of man's weakness and ignorance, reminded that understanding belongs to God alone.

Turning to the *Essais* themselves, we find even more powerful evidence of Montaigne's belief, even though some of its passages seem to call that belief into

362 Luciano Floridi has written a very interesting analysis on the topic of Montaigne's inscriptions in his book *Sextus Empiricus. The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 39-49. For a description written by Montaigne himself see, Montaigne, III, 3, "Of the three commerces", pp. 51 and ff.

363 Montaigne, *Essais*, pp. lxviii.

364 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lxix.

365 *Idem*.

366 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lxx.

367 Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lxxii.

question when taken in isolation. A believer in moderation in all things, Montaigne is mistrustful of excessive zeal. His defense of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate in the essay “Of freedom of conscience”, for example, might strike those looking for signs of apostasy in Montaigne as significant. Montaigne argues here that the early Christians went overboard in their zeal and destroyed much that was of value in classical civilization.³⁶⁸ He argues that they badly defamed Julian, who sought to preserve that civilization's traditions. Montaigne acknowledges Julian's persecutions, without defending them, but argues that Julian was not as much an enemy of Christianity as others both before and after. Indeed Montaigne's defense of Julian consists of nothing more than a catalogue of the latter's admirable qualities, most importantly his morality, his philosophical nature, and his general regard for justice. Montaigne expresses nothing but contempt, nevertheless, in the matter of Julian's religion.³⁶⁹ Montaigne does not sound particularly religious, however, when he writes, “our religion has no surer human foundation than contempt for life” in the essay “That to philosophize is to learn to die”, and essay that, despite its nature, contains no biblical or scriptural citations.³⁷⁰ Nor does he sound especially pious in the essay “Of the art of discussion” when he says of religion, “there are some who think that it would have escaped and melted through their fingers if it did not hold fast among us by a mark, title, and instrument of division and faction more than by itself”.³⁷¹

Taken in their proper context, however, even such remarks as these suggest, rather than challenge, the sincerity of Montaigne's belief. In “That to philosophize is to learn to die”, Montaigne speaks of being ready for death when God chooses, and although this need not indicate any strong belief, it certainly does not immediately

368 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 19, “Of freedom of conscience”, pp. 668-669.

369 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 19, “Of freedom of conscience”, pp. 669-671.

370 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 20, “That to philosophize is to learn to die”, p. 91. This essay has inspired the title of the most recent biography of Montaigne: Sarah Bakewell, *How to live: a life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at An Answer*, London, Random House, 2010.

371 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 8, “Of the art of discussion”, p. 930.

suggest the absence of it.³⁷² As for the line quoted from “Of the art of discussion”, Montaigne there is attacking some of the Protestant Reformers, for the more zealous of whom at least he feels little sympathy.

Indeed, Montaigne frequently proclaims his allegiance to Catholicism and his belief in its teachings. In the essay “It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity”, he maintains that we should accept the scriptural testimonies of miracles.³⁷³ In the same place he also argues that Catholics should not yield to Protestants in any doctrinal matter and that although he used to question the validity of some the Church's teachings, his discussions with theologians have convinced him that there are good reasons behind all of them. He calls the abandonment of traditional Catholic teaching an example of a vanity that forgets its own ignorance.³⁷⁴

In the beginning of the essay “Of prayers”, he says that he “proposes formless and unresolved ideas, as do those who publish doubtful questions to debate in the schools, not to establish the truth but in search of it”.³⁷⁵ He submits “to the judgment” of the theological authorities, whose task it is “to regulate not only my actions and my writings, but even my thoughts”.³⁷⁶ Their “condemnation and approval” will be “equally acceptable and useful” to him because he considers it “execrable if anything is found which was said by me, ignorantly or inadvertently, against the holy prescriptions of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church, in which I die and in which I was born”.³⁷⁷ At the end of the essay he writes, “I propose ideas that are human and my own, simply as human ideas considered in themselves, not as fixed and decreed by heavenly ordinance, incapable of being doubted or disputed; matter of opinion, not matter of faith; what I reason out according to me, not what I believe according to God; as children set forth

372 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 20, “That to philosophize is to learn to die”, pp. 88-89.

373 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 27, “It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity”, p. 181.

374 *Idem*, pp. 181-182.

375 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 56, “Of prayers”, p. 317.

376 *Idem*, pp. 317-318.

377 *Idem*, p. 318.

their essays to be instructed, not to instruct; in a lay manner, not clerical, but always very religious”.³⁷⁸ In the same essay, he recommends the Lord's prayer, saying that it is the one he himself uses most commonly, since it was “prescribed and dictated word for word by the mouth of God”.³⁷⁹ He also argues that before we pray, we should always stop to think about the legitimacy of the object of our prayers.

Although these pious sentiments bracket a discussion likely to be of interest to theological authorities, and it might be reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Montaigne is merely being cautious, it must be remembered that it was Montaigne who invited this learned scrutiny, even as he often did on less dangerous ground. In the essay “A custom of the island of Cea”, for example, he writes, “if to philosophize is to doubt, as they say, then to play the fool and follow my fancies, as I do, is all the more to doubt”.³⁸⁰ He says there, “it is for the apprentices to inquire and debate, and for the masters to decide” and that his “master is the authority of the divine will, which rules us without contradiction and has its place above these vain and human disputes”.³⁸¹ In the essay “Of repentance”, speaking of his self-portrait in the *Essais*, he says, “I make excuses for here that which I often say, that I rarely repent and that my conscience is content with itself; not as the conscience of an angel or a horse, but as the conscience of a man; always adding this refrain, not ceremoniously but in sincere and real submission: that I speak as an ignorant inquirer, referring the decision, purely and simply, to the common and legitimate beliefs”.³⁸² Montaigne speaks as a man speaking to other men.

He acknowledges the ecclesiastical authority of Rome, “not ceremoniously but in sincere and real submission”. Montaigne braves potentially dangerous territory in his *Essais* because he cannot be faithful in his quest for self-knowledge without doing so. He does not seriously fear theological censure, even in his most sensitive inquiries,

378 *Idem*, p. 323.

379 *Idem*, p. 318.

380 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 3, “A custom of the island of Cea”, p. 350.

381 *Ibidem*.

382 Montaigne, *Essais*, III; 2, “Of repentance”, p. 806.

because he knows that he is highly thought of by Catholic leaders. He does not fear theological censure but rather invites it, because he is eager for the instruction of learned men. He sees himself as a faithful son of the Church and wants his self-portrait to be true.

Montaigne's piety comes out in a number of passages. In the essay "Of vanity", he writes, "Oh, how beholden to God am I that it pleased him that I should receive all that I have directly from his grace, that he has retained all my debt particularly to himself".³⁸³ Speaking of his illnesses, he says, "at the very beginning of my fevers and the maladies that lay me low, while still whole and in the neighborhood of health, I reconcile myself with God by the last Christian offices, and find myself thereby more free and unburdened, feeling all the more triumphant over the sickness".³⁸⁴

To deny the sincerity of Montaigne's belief is to accuse him of utter hypocrisy. Further, it is to make him not only a heretic in the eyes of Rome, but also in the eyes of Delphi. It makes his quest for self-knowledge nothing more than a sham and a deceit. It makes the author of the *Essais* nothing more than a liar. Surely, Montaigne is more than that. The author of the *Essais* may be mistaken, perhaps on occasion even self-deluded, but surely he would never contradict the truth so completely and intentionally.

Perhaps the most powerful testimony of Montaigne's belief, however, comes to us directly in his own words. He tells us explicitly of his rejection of the Reformation and his loyalty to Rome. He seems to speak to us across the ages, scoffing at our hesitancy to accept that he could believe what many of us simply cannot. He comments scathingly on our presentism, our all-too-frequent inability to grapple with the past on its own terms. We do not honor Montaigne by trying to make him more like ourselves. We insult him, and make ourselves fools in future eyes, as he and those of his time often seem to be to our own limited vision. Too confident in our present state, we ignore the wisdom, and even the occasional honesty, of the past at our own peril:

383 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 9, "Of vanity", p. 968.

384 *Idem*, p. 982.

“How fantastic seemed to me the imagination of those who in recent years had the habit of reproaching each and every man in whom there gleamed some light of intelligence, who professed the Catholic religion, maintaining that it was hypocritical and, even, thinking to honor him, that whatever he said for appearance, he could not help having his belief within reformed according to their measure. A disagreeable malady, to believe yourself so wise that you persuade yourself that no one can believe the contrary. And even more disagreeable, to persuade yourself that one of such spirit would prefer I know not what disparity of present fortune to the hopes and threats of eternal life. They may believe me. If anything had tempted my youth, ambition for the risk and difficulties that followed this recent enterprise [the Reformation] would have played a good part in it”.³⁸⁵

- Montaigne's Apology.

Montaigne had faith, but the precise nature of that faith remains as yet unclear. Montaigne was a sceptic, and his scepticism clearly had Christian antecedents, but the specific connections between his scepticism and his faith have also yet to be delineated. Montaigne was a Christian, a Catholic, but the foundations of his Christianity, his Catholicism, are uncertain. How did Montaigne defend his faith? How did his scepticism influence that defense? How did the defense influence his scepticism? Did Montaigne justify his faith by rational means, through reason? Did he claim direct mystical experience of revelation? Did he defend his belief through faith alone? Montaigne was sceptical of the power of reason and of the verisimilitude of experience; was he also sceptical with respect to faith? Did he seek to make a defense by some other means? Is it possible that, in the end, he had no real defense to give?

The three best interpretations of Montaigne's defense of Christianity to be offered in the last thirty years are all plausible, if not equally likely. Elaine Limbrick has

385 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 56, “Of prayers”, p. 320.

argued that Montaigne's vision of faith was essentially Augustinian.³⁸⁶ She maintains that Montaigne employed Augustine in his critique of human reason, his attack on anthropomorphism, that his *fideism*, his belief in the primacy of faith, was fundamentally Augustinian, and that Montaigne used Augustine to justify his religious and political conservatism.³⁸⁷ She says that Montaigne believed, following Augustine, that such knowledge that man can achieve comes through God and that for Montaigne, as for Augustine, knowledge of God begins with knowledge of self. Montaigne followed Augustine in believing in the necessity of God's grace to the fostering of human understanding and belief.³⁸⁸ Elsewhere, Limbrick argues that Montaigne, like Augustine, believed in the rational foundations of faith.³⁸⁹ For both, Montaigne and Augustine, reason is a pre-requisite for faith³⁹⁰ and is essential to its acceptance.³⁹¹ Although both Montaigne and Augustine had fideistic tendencies, for both, faith on its own, without reason and grace, is insufficient.³⁹²

Frédéric Brahami reads Montaigne quite differently from Limbrick. He agrees with her that theological concerns are central to Montaigne's scepticism, that the relation between faith and reason is central to Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond", and that the "Apology" must be viewed in relation to the Christian Apologetic tradition to be properly understood.³⁹³ He points out that one of the goals of the Apologetic tradition

386 Elaine Limbrick, "Montaigne et Saint Augustin", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XXXIV, 1972, p 49.

387 *Idem*, p. 50.

388 *Idem*, pp. 50-59.

389 Elaine Limbrick, "Le scepticisme de Montaigne: étude des rapports de la raison et de la foi dans l'Apologie", in *Montaigne et les Essais, 1580-1980*, Pierre Michel, François Moureau, Robert Grandroute, and Claude Blum eds., Paris, Champion, 1983, p. 168.

390 Limbrick, "Le scepticisme provisoire de Montaigne", p. 172.

391 Limbrick, "Métamorphose d'un philosophe en théologien", p. 243. One of the most important answers given to the problem of the relationship between reason and faith has been Saint Augustine's. Augustine considers faith as something previous to reason. It is his the well-known formula "*credo tu intelligam*", "I believe to understand".

392 *Idem*, p. 244.

393 Brahami, *Scepticisme de Montaigne*, pp. 6-7.

was to produce rational assent. He argues that that tradition is essentially anti-fideistic, that it maintains that faith is founded on reason, and that faith on its own is insufficient. Departing significantly from Limbrick, he maintains that Sebond, whom Montaigne purported to defend in the “Apology”, had carried rationalism to an extreme and that Montaigne had gone to the other extreme, that his was fundamentally an irrational defense of Christianity based on faith alone.³⁹⁴ Looking ahead to later, seventeenth-century developments, Brahami argues that Montaigne's alleged fideism ultimately became problematic in the eyes of the Church because fideism, which rejects the role of reason in the defense of faith, makes faith private and subjective rather than universal and presumably therefore subject to theological authority. Brahami describes a split within the fideistic tradition between the rational fideism promoted by Pomponazzi and the Paduan school in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and the irrational, radical fideism fostered by people like Pierre Daniel Huet in the seventeenth century for whom scripture was the only source of truth. He sees Montaigne as a precursor of this irrational fideistic tradition, essentially a radical fideist.³⁹⁵ In this, Brahami regards Montaigne as being fundamentally anti-Augustinian.

Claude Blum has argued that ultimately Montaigne's “Apology for Raymond Sebond” must be viewed as an attack on both rationalism and fideism.³⁹⁶ Like Limbrick, he seems to read Montaigne as essentially Augustinian, maintaining that for Montaigne, as for Augustine, faith, grace, and reason are all essential to understanding, and that faith and grace give form to reason.³⁹⁷ Blum departs from Limbrick and Brahami, however, in maintaining that there is much ambiguity in Montaigne, such that he may be read with almost equal legitimacy in a number of radically different ways.³⁹⁸

394 *Idem*, pp. 7-13.

395 *Idem*, pp. 29-47.

396 Claude Blum, “L'Apologie de Raimond Sebond et le déplacement de l'apologétique à la fin du xvie siècle”, p. 162.

397 *Idem*, p. 164.

398 *Idem*, pp. 161-162.

To me, all three of these readings of Montaigne are ultimately flawed, however, although perhaps not equally. Each suffers from an ahistorical view of Montaigne's relationship to a fideistic tradition that had not fully emerged in his day, and although Montaigne may reasonably be regarded as having been significant in the evolution of fideism, it is quite unreasonable to read later developments back into Montaigne. Of the three, Brahami is particularly guilty of this, especially when he speaks of the official position of the Catholic Church and of the unorthodox and heretical nature of fideism.³⁹⁹ Brahami's radical fideistic reading of Montaigne in general is at least potentially ahistorical and at best overly conceptual. Brahami's belief in Montaigne's radical empiricism *a la* Ockham and medieval nominalism, a claim I am planning to consider in greater detail in the next chapter, is similarly flawed and suggests an equally poor understanding both of Montaigne and of Ockham and the “nominalist” tradition.⁴⁰⁰ In general, moreover, Brahami's reading of Montaigne suffers from a dangerous reliance on too many unexamined assumptions and on what must be regarded as at best a selective reading of Montaigne. Montaigne is neither a “radical empiricist” nor a “radical fideist”. Blum's and Limbrick's readings of Montaigne, on the other hand, are much more historical and much more faithful to Montaigne and to the sources on which he drew. Nevertheless, both are guilty of seeing Montaigne as simply adopting an Augustinian vision of grace, faith, and reason. Andrée Comparot's even more radical assertion that Montaigne should be read as a Christian Neoplatonist and an Augustinian theologian reacting against a stale Aristotelian scholasticism is an even more extreme example of such a claim.⁴⁰¹ As Emmanuel Faye has argued, such arguments rob Montaigne of all originality and obscure the very real differences he has with many of the sources he utilizes.⁴⁰² Montaigne is not a theologian, but he thinks about theological

399 Brahami, *Scepticisme de Montaigne*, pp. 12-13 and p. 29.

400 *Idem*, p. 104.

401 Andrée Comparot, *Augustinisme et Aristotélisme de Sebon à Montaigne*, Paris, Editions de Cerf, 1984, p. 1.

402 E. Faye, *Philosophie et Perfection de l'homme*, pp. 205-208.

problems.⁴⁰³ In doing so, he draws on a number of sources for guidance, but although they inform his judgments, they do not overrule it. The claim that Montaigne is a pure Augustinian ultimately will not work, for although he had nothing but admiration for Augustine and, indeed, followed him in many things, in the end he was far more sceptical than Augustine and, perhaps, less secure in his own faith than the saint had been. Montaigne clearly did not see himself as possessing the wisdom of the Fathers. He longed for it, and he had an essentially Augustinian vision of it, but he did not claim to have attained it.

Although they disagree as to the particulars, Blum, Limbrick, and Brahami all agree that the relation between grace, faith, and reason are essential to the understanding of Montaigne's faith and of his scepticism, and Blum and Limbrick read Montaigne as having a fundamentally Augustinian vision of that relationship. For Augustine, all three concepts are intertwined, but grace is central. God's grace, freely given and unattainable by human effort, is essential to the operation of reason, and faith; belief, which must be assented to by reason, must constantly be sustained by a continuous influx of grace. For Augustine, man is incapable of either real faith or true understanding without the continuous presence and operation of grace.

What relationship did Montaigne perceive between grace, faith, and reason? He had a limited belief in the power of the latter. How strong was his faith? What measure of grace did he believe that he possessed? How did he conceive of grace, of faith? How did his Christianity shape his scepticism? How did he defend the former?

Montaigne's most extended discussion of faith appears in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond". Indeed, although the "Apology" starts out as a defense of the *Natural Theology* of Raymond Sebond, it essentially becomes an Apology for, or a defense of, Christian belief. In the beginning of the work, Montaigne relates how his father first became acquainted with the writings of Sebond, a fourteenth-century theologian who sought to prove nearly all the truths of Christianity by rational means.⁴⁰⁴

403 *Idem*, p. 205.

404 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 439.

He tells us that Sebond's book came into his father's house in a timely fashion, when the "innovations of Luther were beginning to gain credit and to shake our old belief in many places".⁴⁰⁵ Montaigne says that his father's interest in Sebond was "very well advised" because he rightly foresaw "that this incipient malady would easily degenerate into an execrable atheism".⁴⁰⁶ Montaigne appears to have seen the theological controversies of the Reformation as a threat to the very existence of Christianity, arguing that the belief of the "vulgar" in particular was in danger of being shaken by them. He tells us that he translated Sebond's book at his father's request.⁴⁰⁷

Montaigne then tells us of two charges against Sebond that he, Montaigne, will attempt to refute. The first objection against Sebond "is 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".⁴⁰⁸ Montaigne says that "in this objection there seems to be a certain pious zeal, and for this reason we must try with all the more mildness and respect to satisfy those who advance it".⁴⁰⁹ He tells us that he respects this criticism, and those who offer it, but that he does not accept it and will argue against it, even though he is sympathetic to those who advance it. Furthermore, he gently and mildly suggests here that those who make this objection to Sebond may be guilty of excessive zeal, which the moderate Montaigne does not admire. In response to their argument, Montaigne argues that "in a thing so divine and so lofty, and so far surpassing human intelligence, as is this truth with which it has pleased the goodness of God to enlighten us, it is very necessary that he still send us his help, by extraordinary and privileged favor, so that we may conceive it and lodge it in us".⁴¹⁰ He agrees in part with this criticism, but not completely. We cannot achieve faith without God's grace,

405 *Ibidem*.

406 *Ibidem*.

407 *Idem*, pp. 439-440.

408 *Idem*, p. 440.

409 *Ibidem*.

410 Montaigne, "Apology", pp. 440-441.

and human reason alone is incapable of discovering its truth, but faith is not conceived and lodged within us by the operation of grace and faith alone either. Rather, God's grace assists reason in the attainment of understanding. Reason is not enough on its own, but without it, by definition, any sort of understanding at all is impossible.

Montaigne agrees with those who say that reason alone is insufficient, but argues that we must “accompany our faith with all the reason that is in us”.⁴¹¹ He says that “there is no occupation or desing more worthy of a Christian man than to aim, by all his studies and thoughts, to embellish, extend, and amplify the truth of his belief”.⁴¹² Faith does not depend on reason, and the divine is ultimately beyond human understanding, but Montaigne argues that there is no higher use to which reason can be put.

Further, he argues that if faith comes to us through any human agency, it is not pure and unshakable, but it is all that we have. He is “afraid that we enjoy it only in this way”.⁴¹³ He says, “if we held to God by the mediation of a living faith, if we held to God through him and not through ourselves, if we had a divine foothold and foundation, human accidents would not have the power to shake us that they have”.⁴¹⁴ If we had this other, stronger and more complete faith we would be immune not only to the vicissitudes of fortune, but also to things like religious controversy which “would not have the power to shake and alter our belief”.⁴¹⁵ It is perhaps tempting to suppose that Montaigne is proposing such a “living faith” as an anodyne, but it must be remembered that that one is the very objection to Sebond that he is arguing against, and what he has to say about the nature of faith and the service that reason owes to it makes it clear that he does not believe that such a faith is attainable. He maintains that “if this ray of divinity touched us at all, it would appear all over; not only in our words, but also our works would bear its light and luster” and that “everything that came from us would be

411 Montaigne, “Apology”, p. 441.

412 *Ibidem*.

413 *Ibidem*.

414 *Ibidem*.

415 *Ibidem*.

seen and illuminated by this noble clarity”.⁴¹⁶ He says that “if we had a single drop of faith, we should move mountains from their place... our actions, which would be accompanied and guided by divinity, would not be simply human; they would have something miraculous about them like our belief”.⁴¹⁷ He calls such a faith “miraculous” and more than human. It is not the lot of ordinary men to be “accompanied and guided by divinity”. That dignity belongs to prophets and to saints. For ordinary men, there can only be an imperfect faith. Montaigne argues that “some make the world believe that they believe what they do not believe. Others, in greater number, make themselves believe it, being unable to penetrate what it is to believe”.⁴¹⁸ The Protestant Reformers are mistaken, but so too are those who hope to answer them with faith alone; both ultimately are “unable to penetrate what it is to believe”.

But where is Montaigne? What does he believe? How does he hope to defend that belief? Montaigne rejects the idea of this living faith and asserts an historical belief that is ultimately based, at least in part, on human capacities. He says “if we believed in him, I do not say by faith, but with a simple belief; in fact (and I say it to our great confusion), if we knew and believed in him as in any other history, like one of our companions, we would love him above all other things, for the infinite goodness and beauty that shines in him”.⁴¹⁹ Here is Montaigne's answer to the Protestant Reformers and to the claim that belief must be based on faith alone. Montaigne believes historically, he believes in the testimonies of the saints and prophets as interpreted by the authority of the Roman Church. This belief is based on the rational acceptance of the testimony of what he takes to be incontrovertible witnesses. His belief is juridical. He has no direct knowledge, no real understanding. He is a sceptic who exercises his judgment as best he may.

416 *Idem*, p. 442.

417 *Ibidem*.

418 *Ibidem*.

419 *Idem*, p. 444.

Montaigne has a potential problem, however: what protects the status of Christian revelation? What makes Christianity superior to other religions? We will return to this problem again, but here is Montaigne's answer in a nutshell. "Our religion", according to him, comes to us by human means and in that it is no different from other religions.⁴²⁰ We are Christians by accident of place of birth and of custom and that if we cling to our religion it is perhaps only because of the threat of damnation and the authority of tradition.⁴²¹ He writes, "we are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans".⁴²² He says, "the knot that should bind our judgment and our will, that should clasp and join our soul to our creator, should be a knot taking its twists and its strength not from our considerations, our reasons and passions, but from a divine and supernatural clasp, having only one form, one face, and one aspect, which is the authority of God and his grace".⁴²³ God's grace is all that makes belief in Christian revelation feasible, but grace must be combined with reason to produce faith.

Enter Sebond in particular and natural theology in general. Montaigne alludes to the argument from design, suggesting that if we could understand the creation, we would understand its creator. He argues that our reason is too weak, however, to accomplish such a task on its own. Nevertheless, he praises Sebond's attempt. Montaigne is saying, *à la* Augustine, that if we apply ourselves to the study of the divine, with the help of God's grace, faith will lead us to understanding. He writes: "our human reasons and arguments are like the heavy and barren matter; the grace of God is their form; it is that which gives them shape and value".⁴²⁴ As with the ancients who sought the divine on their own, like Socrates and Cato, "so it is with our ideas and reasonings: they have a certain body, but it is an unformed mass, without form or light,

420 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 445.

421 *Ibidem*.

422 *Ibidem*.

423 *Idem*, p. 446.

424 *Idem*, p. 447.

if faith and the grace of God are not joined to it”.⁴²⁵ Montaigne says, “faith, coming to color and illuminate Sebond's arguments, makes them firm and solid: they are capable of serving as a start and a first guide to an apprentice to set him on the way of this knowledge; they fashion him to some extent and make him capable of the grace of God, by means of which our belief is afterward completed and perfected”.⁴²⁶

Montaigne argues that Sebond's apologetic efforts are successful. They do what they are supposed to do. They provide the non-believer and the beginner with an apprentice understanding which only faith and grace can perfect.

But does Montaigne have this understanding, or is he only an apprentice himself? Is moderate Montaigne likening to the saints and prophets? Montaigne follows the masterful guidance of Augustine, but in the end he does not claim to have been incepted into the guild. Montaigne wants to believe. He submits himself to the authority of Rome, he remains a Catholic, a Christian, but he has doubts. He is a man and claims only the knowledge proper to his state. Make no mistake, this is not an insult to his belief, but rather its ultimate defense. Montaigne is a Christian despite his doubts, and as he hopes for eventual understanding in other things, so too he hopes for understanding here. He does not ultimately have even the imperfect faith of an Augustine, of a saint. Instead, he has the provisional faith, the provisional understanding that he sees as proper to his place in the journey.

This brings us to the second objection to Sebond and Montaigne's response to it. Some of Sebond's detractors have said that his reasons are too weak and can be shattered with ease.⁴²⁷ Montaigne says that those who say this “must be shaken up a little more roughly, for they are more dangerous and malicious than the first”.⁴²⁸ I would like to note that although Montaigne calls them “more dangerous and malicious than the

425 *Ibidem*.

426 *Ibidem*.

427 *Idem*, p. 448.

428 *Ibidem*.

first”, the implication, again, is that the ideas of those others, those who maintain that faith must be supported by faith alone, are problematic as well.⁴²⁹ Montaigne agrees that Sebond's arguments can be overcome by a merely human reason, but he will argue that the same is true of all human arguments, and the bulk of his defense of Sebond, his defense of Christian belief, is devoted to a consideration of the frailty of human reason. He has already admitted, however, that Sebond's arguments do not prove the truth of Christianity, that they merely pave the way for the operation of faith and grace on an ultimately all-but impotent human understanding. Nevertheless, Montaigne will set out to demonstrate the weakness of man's natural, innate capacities. Montaigne's response to the second criticism of Sebond, the idea that his arguments in defense of Christian teachings are insufficient, is to offer a critique of reason, in order to show that reason itself is insufficient.

This then, is the beginning of the “manifesto” of Montaigne's scepticism, an essentially Socratic scepticism that he marshals in defense of Christianity. Montaigne is a Christian sceptic. As we have seen before, however, he is not an absolute sceptic. He does not suspend judgment. Rather, as he tells us elsewhere, he “exercises it throughout”. In merely human undertakings, he weighs probabilities. In divine matters, he does as well, bowing to an authority to which he consents because of what he sees as the probable nature of its claims. Montaigne's critique of ancient philosophy in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” takes on a whole new light when placed in its Christian context, as does his consideration of Academic and Pyrrhonic scepticism. Can anyone believe that Montaigne takes Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus as his guides in his exploration of Christian belief? Will he suspend judgment in this? Or, will he not rather, like Socrates, pursue knowledge and faith relentlessly, even if he can never be sure of attaining them in this life? Montaigne's scepticism and his faith are inseparably intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Montaigne is a sceptic, but he has faith. He does not claim to possess certain knowledge or perfect

429 Let's keep in mind that those others are the ones that presented the first objection to the Sebond's *Theologia naturalis*, and this objection was that Christians made a mistake trying to support their belief in human reasons. See note 410.

belief; he has only doubts and uncertainties, but he believes in the possibility of true understanding. Like Socrates, if he ever knew them, he has forgotten, but he hopes to understand some day with the help of God's grace. To suspend judgment in matters of faith is a legitimate choice, but it is the agnostic's choice, and Montaigne, although an agnostic in the sense that he does not claim to have experienced *gnosis*, is not an agnostic in the common sense. Rather he is a Catholic. He does not suspend his judgment; rather he submits it to what he perceives as a higher authority.

To demonstrate this more fully, we must continue our exegetical journey through Montaigne's Apology. We must see what else Montaigne has to say about grace, faith, and reason and experience. We must consider his judgment on Christianity in the *Essais*. Let us start, however, with what he has to say specifically about submission. He writes, "the knowledge of his duty should not be left to each man's judgment; it should be prescribed to him, not left to the choice of his reason".⁴³⁰ He claims that "otherwise, judging by the imbecility and infinite variety of our reasons and opinions, we would finally forge for ourselves duties that would set us to eating one another, as Epicurus says".⁴³¹ He affirms, again, that reason is incapable of reaching truth on its own. Furthermore, he maintains that "the first law that God ever gave to man was a law of pure obedience; it was a naked and simple commandment about which man had nothing to know or discuss; since to obey is the principal function of a reasonable soul, recognizing a celestial superior and benefactor".⁴³² For Montaigne, obedience is the principal function of a reasonable soul and virtue comes from it, and sin from presumption. He claims that man's first temptation was the idea that knowledge and intelligence could belong to him on his own. The "opinion of knowledge" is the "plague of man".⁴³³ Supporting this claim with reference to St. Paul, he says "that is why ignorance is so recommended by our religion as a quality proper to belief and

430 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 448.

431 *Idem*, p. 488.

432 *Ibidem*.

433 *Ibidem*.

obedience”.⁴³⁴ He claims that “the participation that we have in the knowledge of truth, whatever it may be, has not been acquired by our own powers”.⁴³⁵ Our faith is the “present of the liberality of another”.⁴³⁶ He says “we have received our religion... by the authority and command of another”.⁴³⁷ According to Montaigne, “it is by the mediation of our ignorance more than of our knowledge that we are learned with that divine learning”.⁴³⁸ Our learning proceeds not despite, but because of our ignorance. Our understanding is insufficient on its own, but with grace it suffices enough to receive the instruction of faith. Here again, Montaigne supports his claims with reference to St. Paul.⁴³⁹

Submission, then, is the key for Montaigne because reason is insufficient. He says that our reason “does nothing but go astray in everything, but especially when it meddles with divine things”.⁴⁴⁰ He argues that the current crisis of the Reformation is evidence of this, of how faith is lost when obedience to the Church is laid aside through the vanity of human reason. He claims that “man can be only what he is, and imagine only within his reach”.⁴⁴¹ Echoing Plutarch, he talks about the “presumption” of those who are “only men” and who yet “venture to talk and discourse” about the divine.⁴⁴²

Montaigne maintains that we are lost without grace. He writes, “all that we undertake without his assistance, all that we see without the lamp of his grace, is only

434 *Ibidem*.

435 *Idem*, p. 500.

436 *Ibidem*.

437 *Ibidem*.

438 *Ibidem*.

439 *Ibidem*. This is a clear reference to Paul, *Corinthians*, 1, 19: “*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart*”.

440 *Idem*, p. 520.

441 *Ibidem*.

442 *Ibidem*.

vanity and folly”.⁴⁴³ The very essence of truth is corrupted and adulterated by our deficiency. He claims that “whatever course man takes by himself, God permits him always to arrive” at the same confusion.⁴⁴⁴ In support of his arguments here, he marshals the specter of Nimrod, and the words of Paul and Augustine. Montaigne argues that we are “beholden to God alone, and to the benefit of his grace, for the truth of so noble a belief, since from his liberality alone we receive the fruit of immortality, which consists in the enjoyment of eternal beatitude”.⁴⁴⁵ The belief in our eventual, eternal beatitude is produced in our current, limited, temporal understanding by the free gift of God's grace. This belief comes to us from God alone and is known to us through faith alone for it is a lesson of neither faith nor reason.⁴⁴⁶ He says, “the more we give, and owe, and render to God, the more like Christians we act”.⁴⁴⁷ All that we are, and all that we hope to become, we owe to God and not to ourselves. Hope, here, is the key. Montaigne does not claim to possess this thing that he sees in Paul and in Augustine, whose beatitude he acknowledges; rather he aspires to it. He, Montaigne, cannot reach faith or grace, he can only use his reason, such as it is, to defend his belief in faith. With Plato's *Timaeus* and with Cicero, he cannot “declare certain and fixed things like Pythian Apollo” but can only “speak like a mere man with probabilities following conjectures”.⁴⁴⁸ He cannot speak for the divine, but he can speak of it. His limited, human understanding is too weak to apprehend the divine, but he can seek it nonetheless. He has not found it, and he believes that without grace it cannot be found, but he hopes that with grace it can.

Here, however, we must deal with Montaigne's curious warning to the unnamed princess to whom he offers his *Apology*. She is commonly supposed to have been

443 *Idem*, p. 553.

444 *Ibidem*.

445 *Idem*, p. 554.

446 *Idem*.

447 *Ibidem*.

448 *Idem*, p. 507. The quotation from Cicero comes from the *Tusculan Disputations*, I, ix. See also note 187.

Margot of Valois, the sister of the Catholic Henri III, and the wife of the Protestant Henri of Navarre, the future Henri IV. It is tempting to speculate that Montaigne might have hoped to reach the understanding of the husband, who in fact eventually converted to Catholicism, by attempting to sustain the Catholic sensibility of the wife.⁴⁴⁹

Montaigne admonishes the princess to defend Sebond, and by implication her religion, by the common means, through the arguments of her reason. He tells her not to engage in a critique of the power of reason, as he has done, warning that “this final fencer's trick must be employed only as an extreme remedy”.⁴⁵⁰ It is a “desperate stroke, in which you must abandon your weapons to make your adversary lose his, and a secret trick that must be used rarely and reservadly”.⁴⁵¹ He calls it “great temerity to ruin yourself in order to ruin another”.⁴⁵² He says also that “here we are shaking the barriers and last defenses of knowledge, in which extremity is a vice, as in virtue”.⁴⁵³ Instead of taking this course, she should “hold to the common road”, since “it is not good to be so subtle and so fine”.⁴⁵⁴ He advises her to be moderate and temperate in all things, saying that “all eccentric ways irritate” him. He also tells her that she could have given this assignment to a better man, but that he hopes that what he offers will be sufficient for her needs.⁴⁵⁵ Montaigne believes that “one has reason to give the most constraining barriers to the human mind that one can” because it is “an empty body, with nothing by which it can be seized and directed; a diverse and formles body, which can neither be tied nor grasped”.⁴⁵⁶ He writes, “there are few souls so well regulated, so strong and wellborn, that one can trust their proper conduct to themselves, and that can sail with

449 See note 39.

450 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, pp. 557-558.

451 *Idem*, p. 558.

452 *Ibidem*.

453 *Ibidem*.

454 *Ibidem*.

455 *Ibidem*.

456 *Idem*, p. 559.

moderation and without temerity in the freedom of their judgments beyond the common opinions. It is more expedient for them to be placed in tutelage".⁴⁵⁷ For Montaigne, the mind a "dangerous blade", even to its owner, "for anyone who does not know how to use it with order and discretion".⁴⁵⁸

There are several layers of meaning in this passage, and a good deal of irony. On the surface, it is a straightforward enough admonition to moderation, but ultimately it is more complicated.⁴⁵⁹ It also echoes the opening of the "Apology", reminding the princess that it is just as dangerous to place too little confidence in human understanding as it is to place too much in it. It is a reminder to her that both sets of Sebond's critics are, in Montaigne's opinion, in error. It also, frankly, advises her, princess though she may be, not to meddle with affairs that are more properly, in Montaigne's eyes, the province of (presumably male) theologians. Here, however, is where the irony comes in, and there are several shades of it as well. Nonetheless, he seems to suggest that he is equal to the task, possibly because he thinks it ultimately a simple one. At any rate, Montaigne apparently considers his own powers sufficient for this particular tutelary endeavor. On yet another level, however, he has done and said something a little troubling. He has just performed the very fencer's trick that he has advised the princess against! In attempting to defeat his opponent, he has disarmed himself. In destroying the sword of his foe's reason, he has cast aside his own. He has in fact defeated two foes, both groups of Sebond's detractors, but where does that leave him? Where does it leave anyone unprepared merely to applaud his mental gymnastics and return to the affairs of court? What are the consequences of what he has done? If faith cannot be defended by faith alone, and the truth of revelation cannot be demonstrated by reason, how can faith be supported, and what kind of faith are we left with?

457 *Ibidem*.

458 *Ibidem*.

459 Miernowski, *L'Ontologie de la contradiction sceptique*, pp. 61-62.

Montaigne's guide to the perplexed Catholic is very confusing. If neither faith nor reason is sufficient, what does that leave? Perhaps grace, but if full understanding is the ultimate prize of grace, a prize that most of us have not achieved, what sort of understanding is left to the ordinary *viator* who is neither saint nor prophet?

Perhaps the only solution is to be constant in one's opinions. Montaigne advises that "whatever they preach to us, whatever we learn, we should always remember that it is a man that gives and a man that receives; it is a mortal hand that presents it to us, a mortal hand that accepts it".⁴⁶⁰ He says, "the things that come to us from heaven have alone the right and authority for persuasion, alone the mark of truth; which also we do not see with our own eyes, or receive by our own means".⁴⁶¹ He argues that "this great and holy image could not be in so ignoble a domicile, unless God prepares it for that purpose, unless God reforms and fortifies it by his particular and supernatural grace and favor".⁴⁶² Man cannot achieve even a limited understanding, a limited faith, without God's grace. But is Montaigne saying that constancy of opinion is all that that grace can produce? At first glance that would seem to be the case. God's grace, and the knowledge of his own "mobility" have produced in Montaigne a "constancy of opinions" that has preserved him in Catholicism:

"Now from the knowledge of this mobility of mine I have accidentally engendered in myself a certain constancy of opinions, and have scarcely altered my original and natural ones. For whatever allure there may be in novelty, I do not change easily, for fear that I will lose in the change. And since I am not capable of choosing, I accept other people's choice and stay in the position where God put me. Otherwise I would not know how to keep myself from rolling about without end. Thus I have, by the grace of God, conserved myself intact, without agitation or disturbance of conscience,

460 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", p. 563.

461 *Ibidem*.

462 *Idem*, pp. 563-564.

*in the ancient beliefs or our religion, in the midst of the many sects and divisions that our century has produced”.*⁴⁶³

If the only solution is constancy of opinion, how can the Catholic know that the teachings of Catholicism are superior to those of the Protestants, or indeed of anyone else? How are the teachings of Christianity superior to those of any other religion? What is to prevent a Protestant, a Jew, a Muslim, or the adherent of any other religion from making the same claim? Does salvation depend merely on an accident of birth?

Montaigne is aware of this dilemma. He asks, “if nature enfolds within the terms of her ordinary progress, like all other things, also the beliefs, judgments, and opinions of men; if they have their cycle, their season, their birth, their death, like cabbages; if heaven moves and rolls them at its will, what magisterial and permanent authority are we attributing to them?”⁴⁶⁴ He asks, “since a wise man can be mistaken, and a hundred men, and many nations, yes, and human nature according to us is mistaken for many centuries about this or that, what assurance have we that sometimes it stops being mistaken, and that in this century it is not mistaken?”⁴⁶⁵ This is a dangerous stratagem indeed. It can be used against the Protestants, but why can it not be used against Catholics as well? Montaigne asks, “O god, what obligation do we not have to the benignity of our sovereign creator for having freed our belief from those vagabond and arbitrary devotions, and having based it on the eternal foundation of his holy word?”⁴⁶⁶ A fine answer, but what prevents the Jew and the Moslem from making the same?

How are Christians to know the authority of Christian revelation? Against the first group of objectors to Sebond, Montaigne argues that mere faith is not enough. Against the second, he argues that reason cannot demonstrate its truth.⁴⁶⁷ He also argues

463 *Idem*, p. 569.

464 *Idem*, p. 575.

465 *Idem*, p. 575-576.

466 *Idem*, 579.

467 It may be worthy to remind that the first objection against Sebond was that Christians were wrong when they tried to support their believes, which can only be conceived through faith and divine grace,

that the senses as well are insufficient, for they do not reveal being, but only passing, temporality rather than eternity: the creator is hidden from them and they do not reveal the eternal underlying truth of him that is inherent in creation.⁴⁶⁸

Montaigne's answer is that it cannot be known, only submitted to. Historical evidence, the revealed word of scripture supported by miracles attested to by sound witnesses, is sufficient in his eyes, with the help of faith and grace, to compel the provisional assent of understanding. God has made man in such a way that his reason is sufficient to embrace the truth of revelation with the help of faith and grace. It is a submission, however, an assent and not a true understanding. That belongs only to the beatified. Man cannot rise above his humanity, his own limited understanding, by his own means, but he can rise with God's help. His reason can achieve sufficient understanding with the aid of faith and grace:

*“For to make the handful bigger than the hand, the armful bigger than the arm, and to hope to straddle more than the reach of our legs, is impossible and monstrous. Nor can man raise himself above himself and humanity; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only by his own grasp. He will rise, if God miraculously gives him a hand; he will rise by abandoning and renouncing his own means, and letting himself be raised and uplifted by purely celestial means. It is for our Christian faith, not for his Stoic virtue, to pretend to that divine and miraculous metamorphosis”.*⁴⁶⁹

Montaigne's understanding of grace, faith, and reason is fundamentally Augustinian, but Montaigne departs from Augustine in a number of important ways. Montaigne is far more sceptical than Augustine, and ultimately, he has a much more pessimistic conception of *viatores*. Moderate Montaigne does not pretend to the perfect belief of the saint, and although he follows the saint's lead, he cannot offer as

upon human reasons. The second objection was that Sebond's arguments were weak and incorrect for defending faith rationally and they could be refuted.

468 Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, pp. 587-601.

469 *Idem*, p. 604. These are the last words of the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”. The Stoic referred to is Seneca.

resounding a defense of his belief. He cannot supply the purely rational apology that Sebond attempted, nor does he have the confidence in his own abilities, his own knowledge, his training, or his belief to explicate the intricacies of theology as Augustine did. He does not pretend to that degree of wisdom. With Socrates, he claims only to know the limits of his own understanding and claims only the quest for knowledge, not its end, as his own. He believes that there are levels, degrees of understanding. He has sufficient faith to admire rationally the simple, irrational, unquestioning belief of the ignorant and to accept as probable the veracity of the enlightened belief of the saints, but he places himself somewhere between the two and calls it moderation. Following Paul, he sees the pretension to wisdom as vanity,⁴⁷⁰ but he maintains that “these exquisite subtleties are proper only to preaching; they are arguments that would send us all saddled into the other world”.⁴⁷¹ He writes, “life is a material and corporeal movement, an action imperfect and irregular in essence; I employ myself to its service according to its fashion”.⁴⁷² Montaigne aspires to a higher understanding and a higher faith, but he rests at the level of each that has been allotted to him. Echoing Ecclesiastes, he says the “knowledge of causes appertains solely to Him who has the guidance of things, not to us who have only the sufferance of them, and who have the perfectly full use of them according to our nature, without penetrating to their origin and essence”.⁴⁷³ He argues that determining and knowing, like giving, appertain to rule and mastery; to inferiority, subjection, and apprenticeship appertains enjoyment and acceptance”.⁴⁷⁴ Montaigne claims apprenticeship rather than mastery. He seeks the instruction of the wise, he does not pretend to offer it.

Montaigne, then, does not see himself as having the belief of a saint, but he also does not claim the simple belief of the ignorant. Montaigne sees several sorts of

470 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 9, “Of vanity”, p. 988.

471 *Ibidem*.

472 *Ibidem*.

473 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 11, “Of cripples”, p. 1026.

474 *Ibidem*.

viatores. There are “simple souls, less curious and less learned”, of whom are made good Christians, who, “through reverence and obedience, believe simply and maintain themselves within the laws”.⁴⁷⁵ Then there are those, among them the Protestant Reformers, who are “in the middle range of mental vigor and capacity”, where “error in opinion is engendered; these follow the first apparent sense, and have some right to interpret our holding to the old ways, those of us who are unlearned, as simplicity and stupidity”.⁴⁷⁶ Montaigne himself is among those who hold to the old ways without being learned. He does not place himself among the simple souls, nor among those of intermediate mental vigor and capacity, but seemingly somewhere just below those “great minds”, who, “more settled and clear-sighted, make up another type of good believers, who, by long and religious investigation, penetrate to a deeper and more abstruse light on the Scriptures and sense the mysterious and divine secret of our ecclesiastical polity”.⁴⁷⁷ Moderate Montaigne claims to be somewhere just above the middle in understanding. He is not a simple and unlearned soul, and he is above the errors of the Protestant Reformers, but he is beneath the wisdom of the prophets, saints, and Catholic theologians.

Montaigne has the reason, experience, and faith proper to man, and he defends his belief with them as best he can. He says that “God must touch our hearts. Our conscience must be amended through the reinforcement of our reason, not through the weakening of our appetites”.⁴⁷⁸ Montaigne does not reject his reason; he seeks to perfect it, insofar as it is capable of being perfected. Montaigne does not despise the mingling of the human and the divine that is man, nor does he deny it. Montaigne accepts his vision of man's condition. For Montaigne, the language of the divine is not the language of man, but man must endeavor to translate it as best he may:

475 Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 54, “Of vain subtleties”, p. 312.

476 *Ibidem*.

477 *Idem*, pp. 312-313.

478 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 2, “Of repentance”, p. 816.

*“Is it not an error to esteem some actions less dignified because they are necessary? No, they will not knock it out of my head that it is a very convenient marriage of pleasure with necessity, with which, says an ancient, the gods always conspire. Why do we dismember by divorce a structure made up of such close and brotherly correspondence? On the contrary, let us bind it together again by mutual services. Let the mind arouse and quicken the heaviness of the body, and the body stop and fix the lightness of the mind. 'Anyone who praises the soul as the supreme good, and condemns the nature of the flesh as evil has a carnal desire for the soul and a carnal revulsion of the flesh; for this feeling is inspired by human vanity, not by divine truth'. There is no part unworthy of our care in this gift that God has made us; we are accountable for it even to a single hair. And it is not merely a formal charge to man to conduct himself according to his condition; it is express, simple, and essential, and the creator has given it to us seriously and sternly. Authority alone has power over common understandings, and has more weight in a foreign language”.*⁴⁷⁹

479 Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1114. The quotation in the middle of the passage is from St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIV, Chapter 5, p. 554.

Chapter 4

Montaigne, man and society

In the two previous chapters I have attempted to demonstrate that Montaigne was not a sceptic in the sense that he denied the possibility of the acquisition of knowledge as Pyrrho and the Pyrrhonians did. Instead, he embraced the search for true understanding despite the inevitability of uncertainty, as Socrates and Augustine did. A conclusion that follows logically from the assumption of Montaigne's Pyrrhonism is the idea that Montaigne believed that all knowledge, and all human custom, is relative. In this chapter I try to show that just as Montaigne is not a pure sceptic, he is also not an absolute relativist; he believes in, and even has some tentative conclusions about, the nature of a truth that is fundamentally linked to morality. Montaigne not only did not deny the existence of truth; like Socrates and Augustine he had an idea of its shape. He could see its outline, if he could not perceive its features clearly.

Ann Hartle has tried to show that Montaigne incorporated a sceptical moment into what she called the “dialectical movement of his thought” that is, the moment of openness to the possible that allows the French thinker “to find the strange in the familiar”.⁴⁸⁰ Hartle sets out this dialectical thought as a circular movement that can be described as a motion from low to high to low, from familiar to strange to familiar, from common to rare to common: in other words, Montaigne would initiate his thought in a certain manner to return to his starting position after a long reflection and after consideration of those beginnings in a totally new way.⁴⁸¹ To establish her ideas, Hartle merely uses some examples from five different essays which she considers that can be proofs of Montaigne’s circular movement of thought. However, I think that those five examples are not enough to talk about a “dialectical moment” in Montaigne’s thought.

⁴⁸⁰ Hartle, Ann, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 3.

⁴⁸¹ *Idem*, p. 5.

Hartle draws a striking contrast between this so called Montaigne's circular dialectic with the sceptical mode of thought of Sextus and even Hume.⁴⁸²

To fully grasp Hartle's position it is necessary to first understand the idea behind the concept of "accidental philosophy". For this British scholar, accidental philosophy is, on one hand, a certain type of philosophy that discovers the truth, but a kind of truth that was already there in a pre-philosophical or non-philosophical moment, and, on the other hand, is a circular dialectic. She says: "We have seen one manifestation of this in the discussion of Montaigne's transformation of scepticism –that is, in his openness to the possible, the rare and the extraordinary, and his return to the common and familiar. Thought comes back to its starting point but only after having gone through a movement of departure and return, in this case, a dialectic of scepticism and credulity".⁴⁸³ I do not really see that Montaigne elaborated his method from this dialectic purpose. Furthermore, I think that Montaigne's method has more to do with the election of the essay as a philosophical genre than with anything else. Our French thinker decided to use the essay knowingly that this is not exhaustive and does not try to determine "in advance that the object in question can be fully grasped by the concepts which treat it; that nothing is left over that could not be anticipated by these concepts".⁴⁸⁴ Even if we concede the presence of a certain dialectical tone in Montaigne's *Essais*, this question appears marginally or almost casual. It is true that Hartle makes the effort to show some examples in certain essays, but if we consider the three books as a whole, as an entity with unity, we cannot see any dialectical method used systematically. Montaigne reasons in a different way.

Montaigne's scepticism was shaped to a large extent by reflection on a set of philosophical and theological problems, but ultimately it was more than a mere response to formal epistemological concerns alone; it was also a judgment on man

⁴⁸² *Idem*, pp. 104-105.

⁴⁸³ *Idem*, p. 34.

⁴⁸⁴ Adorno, T. W., "The Essay as Form", in *New German Critique*, n. 32, 1984, p. 163. Quoted in Hartle, *Accidental Philosopher*, p. 34.

and society, and as such it was at least as much the product of Montaigne's study of man, the true focus of the *Essais*, as it was a reaction against ancient scepticism and Christian theology. Indeed, the story of early modern scepticism in general is about more than individual encounters with ancient sceptical ideas and theological debates. It is also a social story. At its heart it is the story of the local and personal experience of human society in a particular time and place; but it is also a universal story, a story about man's interaction with man, and as such it concerns not only the footing of rational discourse, but also the very foundations of human society itself. In fact, the flowering of scepticism in the long sixteenth century can only be described as a "sceptical crisis" because of its social aspect. Morality and law, the obverse and reverse of human society, were in the balance together with philosophy and theology. In short, the sceptical crisis was not merely philosophical or theological; it was also ethical and political. Man's understanding of man and society was as much at stake as man's understanding of God and the world.

For Montaigne, the proper study of man is man. He tells us this again and again in the *Essais*. Montaigne explores a wide variety of subjects in the *Essais*, but although he assays his judgment from time to time on philosophical and theological themes, for the most part it is the private and public life of man that intrigues him the most, and he is first and foremost a student of man. The bulk of the *Essais* is devoted to the relation of anecdotes, which Montaigne uses to explore and illustrate his inquiries, and anecdotes occupy most of the space in each of the individual essays and can be found in all but two of them, "Of idleness" and "Twenty-nine sonnets of Etienne de La Boetie", each of which is less than 500 words in length. From a textual standpoint then, the *Essais* as a whole is essentially a lengthy collection of anecdotes interspersed with speculative reflections. The anecdote, whether personal or public, historical or contemporary, is Montaigne's favorite medium, but he almost always uses it either to illustrate the general with the particular or to move from the local to the universal. The majority of Montaigne's anecdotes are either personal or drawn from classical sources, but some are also taken from medieval and contemporary writers. Most of them are either about ancient or contemporary people, places, and events, but almost all are fielded in the

service of the exploration of a universal, usually ethical or political, theme. Many of them thus are directly relevant to his own day, but even the ones that are not are most often linked to some issue or event of current or general interest. Among the specific contemporary topics that Montaigne considers directly are the European discovery and exploitation of the New World and the upheavals attendant upon the Protestant Reformation and the French Wars of Religion. The general topics that concern him most are ethics and government, public law and private morality. Montaigne's study of man, his quest for self-knowledge, is ultimately a search for knowledge of the good.

In the final analysis, it is the study of man that, more than anything else, leads Montaigne to scepticism, and ultimately he concludes that all *human* knowledge is relative to the culture that produces it; he does not, however, conclude that all *knowledge* is relative. Montaigne's study of human society, past and present, European and non-European, teaches him the diversity of human customs and mores, but it also teaches him the unity of the human condition. He sees all human laws and customs as contingent, but he does not see them all as equally valid, rather as equally flawed. Montaigne's relativism is not an absolute relativism. For Montaigne, all cultures are perhaps ultimately equal, but it is an equality based on a shared, if variously manifested, imperfection. The conclusion of Montaigne's relativism, of his scepticism, is not belief in the absence of a universal standard of virtue, but rather belief in the universal failure to adhere to that standard absolutely.

Montaigne believes in an ideal, which even if it can never be fully attained in this lifetime is still, nonetheless, to be sought after. For Montaigne, human knowledge and human society are shaped by the nature of the human condition, by fortune, and by a divine providence that rules over all. Man in his temporal state is imperfect both in his knowledge and in his society, but for Montaigne, as for Socrates and Augustine, there is more to man than the accidents of his earthly condition. There is something higher to which man can and must aspire. For Montaigne, man may be incapable of perfection in this life, but he can at least strive to be less imperfect. Although Montaigne is a sceptic and a relativist, he nonetheless has at least an imperfect idea of the ideal, and,

unsurprisingly, his conception is Western, classical, and Christian; and Montaigne's cultural relativism is ultimately not so relativistic at all.

The investigation of Montaigne's understanding of the relative and the absolute requires a closer look at his study of man. The first part of what follows deals with Montaigne's reflections on the France of his day and on contemporary, non-Western cultures. The second treats his consideration of the nature of man and society in more general terms. The third deals with Montaigne's prescription for the human condition.

- The world.

Montaigne's reflections on the great affairs of his age reveal that his scepticism was not just a reaction to a set of abstract philosophical and theological problems; it was also an existential response to political turmoil and changing worldviews, of which the key features were grief at the contemporary state of affairs and a deeply-rooted pessimism about the perfectibility of human society. In this respect, the two subjects that seem to have had the greatest impact on Montaigne were the politics of the France of his day and Europe's encounter with the New World. The former showed Montaigne the corruption of his own civilization. The latter helped to convince him that that corruption was perhaps universal.

Montaigne's entire adult life was set against the backdrop of the French Wars of Religion, and he was well-situated to observe their effect. He was a confidant of both the Catholic King Henri III and the Protestant Henri of Navarre and had dealings with many of the elites of his day. He fought in the wars and frequently carried out negotiations between moderate and conservative Catholics and Protestants. He also participated in the legal and political life of the land, first as a judge in the Cour des Aides de Perigoux and later in the Parlements of Bordeaux and Paris; later still as Mayor of Bordeaux. All of these experiences contributed to the formation of Montaigne's scepticism.

The political history of France in the sixteenth century was dominated by a series of struggles, first with foreign powers and later between rival, internal factions.⁴⁸⁵ The period from roughly 1480 to 1560 which encompassed the reigns of Charles VII, Louis XII, Francis I, and Henri II was one of relative internal stability, peace, and prosperity, and indeed many of Montaigne's contemporaries looked back on this period as a “golden age” of French culture. The Italian wars of Charles VII and his successors and the subsequent struggles between the French crown and the Empire all but united France against a common foe. After 1560, however, the situation changed, and the next four decades witnessed a series of bloody internal conflicts between moderate and conservative Catholics and Protestants. As traditionally counted, there were eight separate civil wars in the period between 1562 and 1598, each ending with its own peace accord of which the most famous is the Edict of Nantes of 1598; in reality, however, the latter half of the sixteenth century was consumed by an all but continuous series of confrontations, almost 40 years of crisis.

The French Wars of Religion grew out of the Catholic aristocracy's attempt to halt by force the spread of Calvinism in France.⁴⁸⁶ The period from 1552 to 1562 witnessed the growth of French Protestantism, but the Protestant movement in France was relatively small at first and never attracted more than a small fraction of its population, partially because of the lack of royal support and partially because of the armed resistance of the majority of the Catholic nobility.⁴⁸⁷ The Edict of Nantes in 1598, the traditional end of the Wars of Religion, signaled a political truce only, however, and ultimately Protestants remained in the minority and were barely tolerated by the predominantly Catholic elite of French society.⁴⁸⁸ Traditionally,

⁴⁸⁵ Bernard Chevalier, “France from Charles VII to Henry IV”, in Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy eds., *Handbook of European History 1400-1600*, v. 1, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994

⁴⁸⁶ Robert M. Kingdon, “International Calvinism”, in Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy eds., *Handbook of European History 1400-1600*, v. 2.

⁴⁸⁷ Philip Benedict, “Settlements: France”, in Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy eds., *Handbook of European History 1400-1600*, v. 2.

⁴⁸⁸ Benedict, “Settlements: France”, pp. 417 and 448.

modern scholars have tended to regard the period from around 1500 to 1700 as one in which religious tolerance was steadily on the rise. Recent scholarship, however, has suggested that the reality was far more complicated.⁴⁸⁹ Indeed, it is possible that tolerance was on the decline in the period. Many early modern thinkers seem to have regarded the idea of tolerance not, as has been argued by some, as a means of preserving the public peace, but rather as a potential threat to the common good. Furthermore, religious tolerance seems to have been advocated more often by minority than by majority groups.⁴⁹⁰ Generally, where policies of religious toleration appeared, they seem to have been intended more as a short-term concession than as the expression of a higher ideal.⁴⁹¹

Another facet of the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation of course was the “Counter Reformation”, or “Catholic” or “Tridentine Reformation” as some have preferred to call it. Like the Protestant Reformation and the Wars of Religion, the Catholic Reformation was a gradual and evolving process, characterized by different attitudes and sentiments in different times and places. Some historians divide the Catholic Reformation into three main phases.⁴⁹² One of the common features of the Christian Humanism of the North of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries which in part gave rise to both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations was a hearkening back to the early days of Christianity which were seen by many as the golden age of the Church, and Catholic and later Protestant Reformers alike welcomed discussion and debate and were united in many of their criticisms of the Church, each desiring a return to the spiritual values of the early Church. By the middle of the

⁴⁸⁹ Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, ed., *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. i.

⁴⁹⁰ Grell, introduction to Grell and Scribner, ed. *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, pp. 1-7.

⁴⁹¹ Grell, Grell and Scribner, ed. *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, pp. 6-10.

⁴⁹² Elisabeth G. Gleason, “Catholic Reformation, Counter-reformation and Papal Reform in the Sixteenth Century”, in Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy eds., *Handbook of European History 1400-1600*, v. 2.

sixteenth century, however, things had changed, and both Catholics and newly emerging Protestants, each finding themselves involved in political as well as theological battles, became less tolerant of debate, and both groups began to develop and deploy various mechanisms in the attempt to assure uniformity of belief. After the Council of Trent the foci of the Catholic Church became organization, education, and missionary activity.

The Protestant and Catholic Reformations also sparked a European-wide legal and constitutional crisis.⁴⁹³ One of the most important concepts in the political thought of the day was that of the state, and this is the period in which most historians traditionally place the birth of the modern state. The emergence of international Calvinism contributed to the development of theories of armed resistance to that state. In Lutheran Germany, the Protestant Reformation led to a redefinition of secular and clerical authority and a reworking of traditional German law along the lines of old Roman civil law. Within the Catholic Church, the Reformation saw the emergence of a new constitutionalism which all-but put to rest traditional struggles between conciliarists and papal absolutists. The legal and constitutional traditions of Spain, England, France, and various Italian states also evolved during this period, although the role of Reformation and Counter-Reformation is more complicated in these cases. All of this, however, contributed to the confusion and chaos of the period.

Montaigne was a witness to all of these events and a participant in many of them. They shaped his thought and conditioned his outlook. They contributed to his scepticism. His basic reaction to all of this was shock and dismay, and he was appalled at what he perceived as the corruption of the age. Even in his grief he saw some signs of light, however, and his very indignation signals a belief in the possibility of the existence of something better than what he saw around him.

Montaigne's political response to the Protestant Reformation was similar to his spiritual response, and as he rejected at least some of the ideas of the Protestant

⁴⁹³ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, v. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Reformers on theological grounds, so too he rejected the turmoil that he perceived their politics to have created. In Montaigne's eyes, the Protestant Reformers had created a political and a social conflict out of theological debates, and the net result of the Protestant Reformation was the chaos of the Wars of Religion. This rejection of the Protestant Reformation on both theological and political grounds is nicely encapsulated by his claim that "Luther has left us as many divisions and altercations on the doubt of his opinions, and more, as he raised about the Holy Scriptures".⁴⁹⁴ For Montaigne, Luther's uncertainties had provoked violence, but Montaigne did not entirely reject violent opposition to the spread of Protestant doctrine. He saw the Protestant Reformation as an "effect of Providence" which allowed "its holy Church to be agitated, as we see it, by so many troubles and storms, to awaken pious souls by this contrast and bring them back from the idleness and sleepiness wherein such long tranquillity had plunged them".⁴⁹⁵ For Montaigne, the Protestant Reformation and the Wars of Religion were a test of faith, a divinely ordained means of awakening "pious souls", and if they were attended by much that was undesirable, they, nonetheless, produced some good. Indeed, in the end, he was half-convinced that the Church had profited by them. In his eyes the Protestant Reformation produced turmoil and confusion, but it also provided a useful challenge to the faithful.

Montaigne's allegiance to the Catholic cause is also expressed by his admiration for two of its leaders, François, Duke of Guise, and his brother, Charles de Guise, Cardinal of Lorraine. In one place, he praises the Duke, seeing in his confrontation with a would-be assassin the dignity and clemency of a true Christian prince.⁴⁹⁶ In this anecdote, Montaigne relates how the Duke, having been warned of a potential assassin, confronts the man and, discovering that the assassin's cause is politically and religiously motivated, sends him on his way as a lesson of the moral superiority of the Catholic Church. Ultimately, Montaigne uses this anecdote in support of the Stoic ideal

⁴⁹⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 13, "Of Experience", p. 1069.

⁴⁹⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 15, "That our desire is increased by difficulty", p. 615.

⁴⁹⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 24, "Various outcomes of the same plan", pp. 124-5.

of tranquillity in the face of adversity.⁴⁹⁷ Elsewhere, he compares the Cardinal to Seneca.⁴⁹⁸ In another place, he praises the Cardinal's Stoicism in his grief at the news of the deaths of his brothers, a story that Montaigne ultimately uses, however, to show the limits of Stoicism, arguing that it is not proof against the tribulations of the human spirit.⁴⁹⁹ In Montaigne's eyes, the troubles of his day produced at least a few men like these, whose actions here embodied for him some of humanity's best qualities. This is a glimpse of part of what Montaigne idealizes in man, whom he sees as being capable of nobility as well as savagery.

Montaigne is not oblivious to the excesses of his party, however, and in general he finds men like the Duke of Guise and his brother the Cardinal of Lorraine to be unrepresentative of the France of his time. Montaigne had a profound sense of the darkness of his age. In his eyes, all are responsible: "the corruption of the age is made by the particular contribution of each of us: some contribute treason, others injustice, irreligion, tyranny, avarice, cruelty, according to their greater power, the weaker ones, including myself, bring stupidity, vanity, and idleness".⁵⁰⁰ Elsewhere he writes, "we are so formed for agitation and ostentation that goodness, moderation, equability, constancy, and such quiet and obscure qualities are no longer felt".⁵⁰¹ Note, however, that the picture is not entirely dark, for even if they are not to be found in the current situation, Montaigne still believes in such things as "goodness, moderation, equability, and constancy". Nonetheless, these "quiet and obscure qualities" are not in the ascendant for Montaigne. Instead, he feels he lives "in a season in which we abound in incredible examples of [heinous violence], through the licenses of our civil wars; and nothing is seen in the ancient histories more extreme than that which we experience every day".⁵⁰² He says that he is unreconciled to this, however, and he "could hardly be

⁴⁹⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 24, "Various outcomes of the same plan", p. 125.

⁴⁹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 32, "Defense of Seneca and Plutarch", pp. 721-2.

⁴⁹⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 2, "Of sadness", pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 9, "Of vanity," p. 946.

⁵⁰¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 10, "Of husbanding your will," p. 1021

⁵⁰² Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 11, "Of cruelty," p. 432

persuaded, until I saw it, that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it; hack and cut off the limbs of another; free their spirits to invent unknown torments and new deaths, without enmity, without profit, and for the sole end of enjoying the pleasing spectacle of the pitiful gestures and movements, the lamentable groans and cries, of a man dying in anguish”.⁵⁰³ For Montaigne, this is “the extreme point that cruelty can attain”.⁵⁰⁴ Montaigne is disgusted and appalled by what he sees around him, but his very abhorrence is sure sign of his belief in an absolute ideal of good and evil, and if the age in which he lives is one in which evil reigns, it nonetheless offers opportunity for goodness to shine forth:

*“And there was never time and place where there was more certain and greater compensation offered to princes for goodness and justice. The first who councils himself to push into favor and credit by that path, I am much deceived if, like in a good tale, he will not outstrip his companions. Force, violence, can do something, but not always everything.”*⁵⁰⁵

As a jurist and a mayor, Montaigne himself had the opportunity to participate in and experience at first hand the trials of government in an age of political unrest, and these experiences also shaped his scepticism, leaving him with a profound sense of the uncertainty and instability of human law and government and the interactions that they seek to regulate. Indeed, Andre Tournon has argued that Montaigne's “systematic doubt” arose primarily out of his juridical experience.⁵⁰⁶ Tournon maintains that like the legal literature of Montaigne's day, the *Essais* abound in “paradoxes”, “contrasts”,

⁵⁰³ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 11, "Of cruelty," p. 432

⁵⁰⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 11, "Of cruelty," p. 432.

⁵⁰⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 17, "Of presumption," p. 646.

⁵⁰⁶ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 12.

“discussions without limit”, and a spirit of “perpetual research” that harkens back to Socrates. With others, Tournon claims that Montaigne's scepticism was not the result of a temporary crisis, but rather an essential and enduring feature of his thought.⁵⁰⁷ He argues that the legal literature of Montaigne's day fostered a belief in the contingency of thought, and developed a virtual “logic of incertitude”.⁵⁰⁸ He points out that the legal decisions presented in contemporary legal writings were presented as opinions that were based on interpretation and open to dispute.

He argues that the whole thrust of sixteenth-century legal writing was to challenge received authority, making everything subject to debate and reassessment⁵⁰⁹ and maintains that the idea of incertitude was central to Humanist jurisprudence. Finally, he considers Montaigne's juridical experience, describing how Montaigne's task as a judge consisted primarily in examining documents presented as evidence, determining their pertinence, validity, and force, and preparing written arguments for both sides of the case before ultimately issuing an opinion on the matter at hand.⁵¹⁰

Toumon argues that Montaigne's experience of the courts and seats of government shaped his thought and influenced the structure of the *Essais*. He calls Montaigne's understanding of the human condition juridical rather than metaphysical, maintaining that Montaigne focused on man's place in the cosmos and the things that prescribe his existence.⁵¹¹ For Tournon, Montaigne was a Pyrrhonist who was not always faithful to his Pyrrhonism,⁵¹² and Tournon sees Montaigne examining opinions and making judgments everywhere.⁵¹³ Nonetheless, he sees the *Essais* as a whole as a process of exploration that is by its very nature inconclusive and unconcluded. For

⁵⁰⁷ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 12.

⁵⁰⁸ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 163.

⁵⁰⁹ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, pp. 168-169.

⁵¹⁰ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 195.

⁵¹¹ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 273.

⁵¹² Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 259.

⁵¹³ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 287.

Tournon, the process of the *Essais* mirrors the juridical process of Montaigne's day, and he sees Montaigne as presenting a series of reflections, testimonies, and researches in his quest for self-knowledge. In his eyes, Montaigne's quest for self-knowledge was a search for ethical foundations, in Platonic terms for knowledge of the good. Tournon sees this as the meaning behind the Delphic injunction to self-knowledge and argues that ultimately Montaigne found it an impossible one to fulfill.⁵¹⁴

Tournon's reading of Montaigne has much to recommend it, and in general it offers valuable insight into the nature of Montaigne's thought; there are, however, at least two significant potential problems with it. The first is that Tournon perhaps places too much emphasis on Montaigne's experience of and indebtedness to the literary tradition of contemporary French law. The discursive approach that Tournon sees as the hallmark of that tradition is far older than the tradition itself and has its roots in medieval scholasticism, Christian theology, Roman law, Greek philosophy, western historical writing, and western literary traditions more generally. Montaigne's experience of the legal writings of his day may or may not have been extensive, but his broad reading tastes certainly afforded him ample opportunity to encounter literary models of balanced disputation. Then too, the style of the *Essais* themselves does not mirror the particular details of the legal literary style that Tournon describes to any great extent, a fact that detracts significantly from a wholehearted acceptance of his thesis. Nonetheless, the idea that Montaigne's scepticism was perhaps reinforced by his juridical experience, if not created by it, remains extremely attractive. A more serious objection to Tournon's reading of Montaigne is his apparent failure to understand that while Montaigne himself maintained the inconclusiveness of his quest for self-knowledge, he nonetheless had a probabilistic conception of what for him, as for Socrates, Plato, and Augustine, was the highest form of knowledge, the knowledge of the good. Montaigne himself had little to say about his immediate juridical or mayoral experiences, but his stance on law, morality, and government, detailed below, makes this final point clear, as we shall see.

⁵¹⁴ Tournon, *Montaigne; la glosse et l'essai*, p. 269.

Montaigne's study of man and society was not confined to the France of his day, however, for he was also a student of western history and was curious about the traditions and customs of non-western cultures as well; his remarks on the latter in particular offer important insight into his thought. Montaigne sought to understand the unity that he believed was hidden behind the diversity of custom.⁵¹⁵ In his reflections on non-western cultures he frequently juxtaposed images of these other cultures with ones from his own. Montaigne's attitude towards other cultures has often been described as relativistic. The truth of the matter, however, is that more often than not he is making comparisons in a continuous search for some abstract human ideal, and his comments almost always include a judgment, whether explicit or implied, and are almost never "value-free". He firmly believes that culture is contingent on the circumstances of its origin, but he maintains that all human society is fundamentally flawed, and he is always seeking after the ideal. He examines other cultures as he examines his own, and he pronounces moral judgments on both. Montaigne is aware that "not only each country but each city has its particular forms of civility", but he does not conclude from this that all customs, all visions of morality, are equally acceptable.⁵¹⁶ In his judgments, Montaigne sometimes rules in favor of his countrymen. This is not always the case, however, and part of his purpose in these juxtapositions is to comment on the flaws he sees in his own society. In this regard, as in most others, Montaigne is a moderate; he sees good and bad in all things.

An example of Montaigne's ambivalence towards other cultures can be seen in his treatment of the Moslem world. Some of his comments, like his reference to Turkish table manners⁵¹⁷ and his remarks on the Turkish use of feigned retreats as a battle tactic,⁵¹⁸ are indeed essentially value-free, but some are not. His reflections on

⁵¹⁵ Jean Céard, *La nature et les prodiges; l'insolite au XVIe siècle*, Geneva, Droz, 1996, pp. 376 and 387-388.

⁵¹⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 13, "Ceremony of interviews between kings", p. 48.

⁵¹⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 5, "On some verses of Virgil", p. 879.

⁵¹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 12, "Of constancy", p. 45.

Turkish horsemanship, for example, show open admiration.⁵¹⁹ So too do his thoughts on the courage of the Janissaries, the elite soldiery of the Ottoman Empire.⁵²⁰ He also in one place contrasts what he sees as the commendable conduct of Turkish soldiers in conquered cities with that of French soldiers.⁵²¹ In another place, he cites the Ottomans and “Muley Moloch, King of Fez”, as positive examples against “do-nothingness”.⁵²² Elsewhere, however, he uses the seraglio of the Grand Turk as an example of excess,⁵²³ and in another place he speaks unfavorably of the lechery of Mohammed II, the conqueror of Constantinople.⁵²⁴ Moreover, his opinion of Muslims in general seems on the whole to be less than favorable. He calls the Ottomans in particular, “a race not overly careful about observing promises and pacts”.⁵²⁵ He also has little sympathy for Islam, rejecting what he sees as its fatalism⁵²⁶ and vilifying what he calls the “monkey tricks of Apollonius and Mohammed”, likening both to the Protestant Reformers and other false prophets who lead men astray from the true faith.⁵²⁷

Montaigne's remarks on the Far East are more ambiguous, however, and on the whole less explicitly judgmental; nevertheless, it is hard not to read an at least slightly pejorative tone into his comments on eastern examples of suicide, self-mutilation, and sexual mores. His attitude, nonetheless, is unclear here. On the one hand, he speaks with admiration of the military and diplomatic practices of the Indonesian Kingdom of

⁵¹⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 48, “Of war horses,” p. 288, 1, 48, “Of war horses”, pp. 289-295.

⁵²⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 1, “Of the inconsistency of our actions”, p. 335.

⁵²¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, pp. 1042-1043.

⁵²² Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 21, “Against do-nothingness”, pp. 677-678.

⁵²³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 42, “Of the inequality that is between us”, p. 264.

⁵²⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 33, “The story of Spurlina,” p. 730.

⁵²⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 17, “Of presumption,” pp. 648-649.

⁵²⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 29, “Of virtue,” pp. 709-711.

⁵²⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 10, “Of husbanding your will,” p. 1013.

Temate, comparing them favorably to those of the ancient Florentines.⁵²⁸ On the other hand, his apparent rejection of the moral validity of suicide would seem to suggest a negative view of it in other traditions as well as in his own.⁵²⁹ His feelings about the sexual practices of India are uncertain.⁵³⁰ All in all, Montaigne seems to have had either little knowledge of or little interest in the Far East, and in any event he made scant use of anecdotal material on this subject; the few examples that are to be found in the *Essais* offer little insight into the attitudes of either him or his contemporaries towards the east or into Montaigne's thoughts on man in general.

The bulk of Montaigne's reflections on contemporary non-western cultures are devoted to New World societies. Like many Europeans of his day he was fascinated with the new lands and peoples beyond the sea, and he exercised that fascination in a number of places in the *Essais*. In his considerations of Mezoamerican and South American Indians, Montaigne grapples with the values and traditions that he examines in a way that he does not when speaking of those of either the Near or the Far East, in part perhaps because the peoples of the New World were so new to the European imagination and, because of that newness, so alien. As we shall see, however, Montaigne's attitude towards New World cultures was complicated, and ultimately his thoughts on them have more to say about himself and the Europe of his day than they do about the cultures themselves. Like many of his contemporaries, Montaigne found in the New World a mirror in which to examine himself and his own society. Some of the things he saw there he liked; some he did not. Montaigne was attracted by what he perceived as the "innocence" of the New World and appalled at its destruction by the Spanish, but even though he saw much that he admired across the sea, he did not embrace what he found there as an acceptable, alternative mode of living. Instead, he read a moral lesson for contemporary European society; a lesson taught by a more

⁵²⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 5, "Whether the governor of a besieged place should go out to parley," p. 26.

⁵²⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 14, "That the taste of good and evil depends in large part on the opinion we have of them," p. 52, II, 3, "A custom of the island of Cea," pp. 357-358, 360-361, II, 29, "Of virtue," pp. 707-708.

⁵³⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 5, "On some verses of Virgil", p. 860.

“primitive” society. Ultimately, Montaigne maintained what must be regarded as an unexamined and incompletely articulated linear conception of cultural evolution, and for him the peoples of the new world remained younger and less mature than their European counterparts. Montaigne did not necessarily equate age with wisdom, however, and he found good and bad in both worlds. He did not barbarize the New World, but he did not idealize it either.

This tension in Montaigne's discussion of transatlantic cultures is a common feature of contemporary European treatments of the New World. The discovery of new, previously unknown and unimagined lands and peoples across the sea challenged the European conception of the world not only intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually. The New World posed a challenge to Europe's idea of itself and its place in the world.⁵³¹ Its very conception as a “New World” made it alien and otherworldly, and for many Europeans it had visionary associations. For some a journey to the New World was a journey out of the world, a supernatural journey leading to revelation. It was a journey that could ennoble or destroy those who undertook it.⁵³² The New World was seen as a place where anything was possible. It was also seen, in contrast with “civilized” Europe, as a place of “barbarism”, however. Ultimately, the New World was both a European “discovery” but also a European “invention”, and Europe's encounter with it led to its eventual assimilation and transformation.⁵³³ Europe's literary exploration of the New World was largely anecdotal.⁵³⁴ The stories that travelers told of the New World were pathways for the imaginations of those who stayed at home, pathways along which they too could make this mystical and dangerous journey; they served as mediators between the two worlds, between the local and the universal. They were a tool both of exploration and of cultural conquest. Travelers from different

⁵³¹ Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 2.

⁵³² Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World*, pp. 3-4.

⁵³³ Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World*, pp. 5-11.

⁵³⁴ Steven Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 2.

nations with different social and religious backgrounds told different stories, but despite their differences almost all of these travelers shared a sense of the superiority of European culture. The New World remained a place of wonder,⁵³⁵ but it also became a world to be dominated. Ultimately, the “shock of discovery” left Europe's notions of history and civilization intact.⁵³⁶ With all of this in mind, it is no surprise that Montaigne and others would look to the experience of the New World for moral and spiritual instruction.

Montaigne's two most extended discussions of the New World appear in the essays “Of cannibals” and “Of coaches”. Of the two essays, the former has received by far the most scholarly attention, especially outside of literary circles where it is one of the best known of the *Essais*. This is perhaps understandable because in general it is a more complicated and interesting piece than the other, but it is also one of the most difficult of the *Essais* to approach on its own. Read in isolation it seems at times a panegyric on New World societies, at others a diatribe against the evils of contemporary European nations, and in other moments a dispassionate and relativistic comparison that concludes the incommensurability of culture. Methodologically, it could conceivably be regarded as a defense of either empiricism or rationalism, or as an example of Montaigne's scepticism. In a sense it is all of this, but, from my point of view, it is also something more, and ultimately, something else. When read in conjunction with the rest of the *Essais*, it becomes part of Montaigne's continuous exploration of the nature of man and of human society, an investigation that, here as elsewhere, makes use of both reason and experience and ultimately reveals Montaigne's fundamentally sceptical outlook. Montaigne juxtaposes images of the Old and the New and puts both Worlds in the balance of his judgment. His conclusion is the near-equality of their imperfection, an imperfection that is both implicitly and explicitly compared with the ideal that he seeks. The essay “Of cannibals” is one of

⁵³⁵ Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, pp. 2-14.

⁵³⁶ Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery*, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 1992, p. 6.

Montaigne's masterpieces, but its full flavor cannot be appreciated without the contrast of other morsels, and certain passages in "Of coaches" in particular enhance its experience. "Of cannibals" has often been read incompletely. Many have seen Montaigne's "relativism" and have made much of it.⁵³⁷ Some have gone so far as to see in Montaigne a precursor of modern anthropological attitudes.⁵³⁸ More subtle readers have spoken of his apparent relative lack of cultural prejudice.⁵³⁹ Others have maintained that Montaigne's treatment of the Brazilian cannibals is not an example of either relativism or tolerance, arguing that he idealizes what he sees as the "noble" aspects of their culture and "exorcises" what he considers execrable.⁵⁴⁰ Methodologically some have seen "Of cannibals" as a straightforward defense of empiricism.⁵⁴¹ Others have implied the inseparability of reason and judgment and have understood Montaigne as relying on both reason and experience,⁵⁴² but have failed to take his deeply-rooted scepticism into account.⁵⁴³ Others have seen both reason, experience, and scepticism in "Of cannibals" and have regarded Montaigne as

⁵³⁷ See Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World*, p. 31, Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 150, and Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*, pp. 109, 157.

⁵³⁸ Guy Mermier, "L'essai Des Cannibales de Montaigne," in Berven ed., *Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, v. 4, p. 110.

⁵³⁹ Steven Randall, "Dialectical Structure and Tactics in Montaigne's 'Of cannibals,'" in Berven ed., *Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, v. 5, p. 38.

⁵⁴⁰ Frank Lestringant, *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne*, Rosemary Morris tr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 110-111.

⁵⁴¹ Mermier, "L'essai Des Cannibales de Montaigne," p. 109.

⁵⁴² Caroline Locher, "Primary and Secondary Themes in Montaigne's '*Des cannibales*' (1,31)," in Berven ed., *Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, v. 2, p. 156.

⁵⁴³ Locher, "Primary and Secondary Themes in Montaigne's '*Des cannibales*' (1,31)," pp. 157, 161. Locher's understanding of the tension between epistemological optimism and pessimism in "Of cannibals" seems somewhat naive (p. 158), as does her understanding of reason, which she at one point didactically refers to as being useful in making judgments (p. 156), and her conception, especially as it concerns Montaigne, of "solid evidence." (p. 161). In general moreover, despite the epistemological thrust of her argument as a whole, she does little with the question of Montaigne's scepticism.

searching for truth, while not necessarily finding it.⁵⁴⁴ Montaigne does indeed play with many of these ideas in I, 31, the essay “Of cannibals”, but the conclusions he presents are, ultimately, more consistent than this survey might imply.

In “Of cannibals” Montaigne exercises his judgment on the culture of the Brazilian Indians as described for him in other contemporary accounts and compares what he sees there with what he sees at home, concluding that custom is relative to the culture that produces it, but finding, ultimately, that both societies fall short of an unrealized, and probably unrealizable, ideal.⁵⁴⁵ He says, “that there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism that which is not his custom, as in truth it seems we have no other criterion of truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs” of our country.⁵⁴⁶ He claims further that the “perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished customs in all things” is always to be found at home.⁵⁴⁷ He also says, “these nations, then, seem to me barbarous in this way; for having received very little human imprint, and being still very close to their original naturalness”.⁵⁴⁸ He finds their world younger than his own, claiming that the “laws of nature still rule them, very little corrupted by ours; but they live in such purity that I am sometimes displeased that they were unknown earlier, in a time when there were men able to judge them better than we”.⁵⁴⁹ He finds them uncorrupted by the ways of his own world, but not as entirely innocent as we shall see. He also desires to pass judgment on them, but

⁵⁴⁴ Randall, "Dialectical Structure and Tactics in Montaigne's 'Of cannibals,'" p. 38.

⁵⁴⁵ Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, Janet Whatley tr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 is probably the most important of Montaigne's sources here. Montaigne himself claims that his information on the Brazilians comes from one of his servants (see I, 31, p. 150), but this is generally regarded as a literary device the purpose of which is unclear. Steven Greenblatt has argued that Montaigne proceeded in this fashion to allow himself greater artistic freedom (see Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 148).

⁵⁴⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 31, "Of cannibals," p. 205.

⁵⁴⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 31, "Of cannibals," p. 205.

⁵⁴⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 31, "Of cannibals," p. 206.

⁵⁴⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 31, "Of cannibals," p. 206.

fears that the men of his day are insufficient to the task. Even here, and in the description of their society that follows, however, he is in fact making judgments. If he admires their world, it is not so much for its own sake, but for a quality of innocence that he fears his own has lost. He also posits a higher cultural level than either his own or theirs, a greater perspective from which both can at least potentially be evaluated. Further on, he makes more explicit and direct judgments as when he writes, "I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts [as they commit], but I am truly sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own".⁵⁵⁰ Here is the heart of the matter. Montaigne argues that "we may well call these people barbarians then, in regard to the rules of reason, but not in regard to ourselves, who surpass them in every sort of barbarity".⁵⁵¹ Montaigne passes sentence on both them and his countrymen, concluding that each falls short of an ideal that he does not articulate here.

At the end of the essay "Of coaches", Montaigne presents a less literary and more openly reflective consideration of the Old and New Worlds. There he treats the Spanish conquests of Mexico and South America, portraying the Spaniards as monstrous villains in this encounter between worlds and the Indians as heroes, but even here he has a complicated agenda, for he is not only glorifying the Brazilians, Aztecs, and Incas and vilifying the Spanish, traditional enemies of the French; he is also again comparing Old and New, both with one another and with a higher ideal. Again he starts with a description of the youth of this New World, saying "our world comes from finding another (and who will guarantee us that it is not the last of its brothers, since the Daemons, the Sibyls, and we ourselves have up to now been ignorant of this one?) no less great, full, and well-limbed than itself, yet so new and so infantile that it is still being taught its A B C; not fifty years ago it knew neither letters, nor weights and measures, nor clothes, nor wheat nor vines".⁵⁵² He says that "it was still quite naked at the breast, and lived only by means of its nursing mother", and he sees it as perhaps the

⁵⁵⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 31, "Of cannibals," p. 209.

⁵⁵¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 31, "Of cannibals," p. 210.

⁵⁵² Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6, "Of coaches," p. 908.

successor to his own world, even as he seems to have seen his as the heir of antiquity. He also sees it as the victim of his world, saying “I very much fear that we will have very greatly hastened its decline and its ruin by our contagion, and that we will have sold it our opinions and our arts very dear”.⁵⁵³ He sees little virtue in the conquest, however, saying that “it was an infant world; yet we have not whipped it and submitted it to our discipline by the advantage of our natural valor and strength, nor seduced it with our justice and goodness, nor subjugated it by our magnanimity”; if the world has been overthrown it was not defeated by a greater virtue, nobility, or merit. Montaigne goes on to praise the beauty of the cities of this new land and the “devoutness, observance of the laws, goodness, liberality, loyalty, and frankness” of its people—fine sentiments all, but still the projections of a conqueror who knows the conquered from the comfort of his library. He praises them lavishly, saying “as for boldness and courage, as for firmness, constancy, resoluteness against pains and hunger and death, I would not fear to oppose the examples that I could find among them to the most famous ancient examples that we have in the memories of our world on this side of the ocean”.⁵⁵⁴ His conception is admiring, but it is still a vision of the exotic, the alien, and even as he seeks to glorify this other world by comparing it to what he sees as the best his has to offer, he is still exploiting it and making it into something to serve his purpose rather than its own. He is partly day-dreaming here of a land of heroes. Heroes, however, need villains to provide a proper contrast.

The Spanish are the antagonists of Montaigne's story, and in his treatment of them he is at his most human. Here too, his description is a caricature, but it is a poignant and a telling one. He describes how, “coasting the sea in quest of their mines, certain Spanish made land in a fertile, pleasant, well-populated country, and made their accustomed admonitions to its people: that they were peaceful men, coming from distant voyages, sent on the part of the king of Castile, the greatest prince of the habitable world, to whom the Pope, representing God on earth, had given the

⁵⁵³ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6, "Of coaches," p. 909.

⁵⁵⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6, "Of coaches," p. 909.

principality of all the Indies; that if these people would be tributaries to him, they would be treated most benignly; they demanded of them food for their nourishment and gold needed for a certain medicine; admonished them, all of this notwithstanding, in the belief in a single God and the truth of our religion, which they advised them to accept, adding a few threats”.⁵⁵⁵ Montaigne drips with scornful irony here, as becomes clear with the response he puts into the mouth of the Brazilians: “the response was this: as for being peaceable, they did carry themselves like it, if they were; as for their king, since he was begging, he must be indigent and needy; and he who had given him this claim must be a man of dissension, to go and give another something that was not his, setting him in conflict with its ancient possessors”.⁵⁵⁶ Montaigne goes on to describe the atrocities committed by the Spanish in Mexico and Peru and much of the final part of the essay is devoted to further eulogies to the glories of the now lost New World civilizations.

Montaigne's rage at the Spaniards is multi-faceted, however. First and foremost, he is outraged at the barbarism of the conquest of the Americas and clearly sees it as an example of the worst that man has to offer. He also feels for the fall of an ancient, and in his mind, noble people. He also sees this as a moral lesson on the good and bad in man. Among the things that he is lamenting here, however, is the fact that in his mind the Spaniards have both failed a sort of test and squandered an opportunity. They have destroyed what they could not understand, and their actions are seen not only as signifying a shortcoming in themselves but also as an indictment of European society as a whole, but they have also failed, in Montaigne's eyes, in their parental duty to lead these noble, childish savages gently and truly into the fold of European Christendom. They have destroyed this new world and exposed the ugliness of their own because they have forgotten the classical and Christian values which for Montaigne are his world's only claim to superiority. Confronted with an opportunity to ennoble

⁵⁵⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6, "Of coaches," p. 911.

⁵⁵⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6, "Of coaches," p. 911.

themselves, they have not only been destroyed; they have contributed to the demise of two worlds and failed in their service to God:

*“We have these narratives from themselves, for they not only admit them, they boast of them and preach them. Would it be for testimony of their justice or their zeal for religion? Truly, those are ways too contrary and hostile for so holy an end. If they had proposed to extend our faith, they would have considered that it is not in the possession of land that it is amplified, but in the possession of men, and they would have been more than content with the murders brought about by the necessity of war; without adding to these an indiscriminate butchery, as of wild beasts, as universal as fire and sword could make it, after purposely sparing only as many as they wanted to make into miserable slaves for the working and service of their mines: with the result that many of the leaders were punished with death by order of the kings of Castile, who were justly shocked by the horror of their conduct; and almost all were disesteemed and hated. God justly permitted this great plunder to be absorbed by the sea in its transport, or by the intestine wars in which they devoured one another; and most of them were buried on the spot without any fruit of their victory”.*⁵⁵⁷

- Man and society.

Montaigne's thought was shaped by the great affairs of his age, but the precise nature of their impact has yet to be made clear. Montaigne's study of man made him sceptical of man's ability to understand himself and to order his affairs, but his ultimate assessment of the human condition was neither entirely pessimistic nor wholly relativistic. Although he believed that human knowledge and custom were influenced by Fortune and were therefore at least partially contingent, he also believed in the guiding power of Providence and maintained the existence of truth and moral absolutes, even if he regarded their full apprehension as impossible in this life; and although he did not believe in the perfectibility of earthly society, he did in fact believe

⁵⁵⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6, "Of coaches," p. 913.

in the possibility of its improvement. To get at this more fully, it is necessary to look at some of his more general reflections on the nature of man and society.

Some scholars have argued that Montaigne ultimately conceives man only in the particular and not in general. Frédéric Brahami's "nominalistic" reading of Montaigne perhaps suggests that he could not have done otherwise.⁵⁵⁸ Andre Tournon claims that Montaigne regarded the idea of man in general as a philosophical fantasy and dealt only with particular men.⁵⁵⁹ Michael Screech, on the other hand, maintains that Montaigne essentially has a "realist" rather than a "nominalist" conception of man, arguing that, following Aristotle, Montaigne extrapolated the general from the particular.⁵⁶⁰ While it is unfortunate that this issue has been clouded by a dangerous reliance on extremely problematic conceptions of "realism" and "nominalism", which become even more ambiguous in discussions of post-medieval philosophy than they are in discussions of medieval philosophy, the issue itself remains. Without entering the quagmire of a discussion of "post- medieval nominalism", because this is not the place to try it, let us see if we can come to grips with the question at hand. Stripping it of at least potentially flawed conceptual labels, as some of the scholars cited might have done, it comes down to the question of whether or not Montaigne believes it is possible to speak of man as having a collective nature that is irrespective of the unique personal and cultural details that define individual men. In the essay, "Of repentance", Montaigne tells us, "Others form man; I tell of him and represent a particular one, most ill-formed, whom if I had to make over I should really make very different from what he is", and he tells us further that the effort to do so is an attempt only, an apprenticeship, because his subject is unstable and constantly changing.⁵⁶¹ In the essay "Of books", he says that he seeks knowledge of man in general, whom he finds presented in all of his diversity in the writings of historians, and this might be his main opinion on the topic:

⁵⁵⁸ Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*.

⁵⁵⁹ Tournon, "L'humaine condition: Que sais-je? Qui suis-je?" p. 20.

⁵⁶⁰ Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, pp. 119 and 162-3.

⁵⁶¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 2, "Of repentance," pp. 804-805.

“The historians are my obverse. They are pleasant and easy; and at the same time, man in general, the knowledge of whom I seek, appears in them more alive and entire than in any other place -the diversity and truth of his inner conditions in mass and in detail, the variety of the means of his assembly, and the accidents that menace him.”⁵⁶²

It would seem from this that Montaigne, who follows the middle way in all things, is capable of conceiving man both in particular and in general. He seeks knowledge of man in general. He may ultimately be sceptical of his ability to discover this knowledge, but he is not sceptic enough to deny the possibility of it.

Geralde Nakam has argued that Montaigne's study of the past and of other societies convinced him of the contingent nature of moral values; that his experience of the events of the France of his day made him pessimistic about the ultimate fate of human society; and, finally, that his personal experience of government taught him compassion and tolerance.⁵⁶³ In general, Nakam's analysis of the circumstances that shaped the *Essais* is masterful, probably the most useful and detailed of such studies. Nonetheless, there are one or two issues of concern with respect to her reading of Montaigne. First, there is Nakam's assertion that Montaigne rejected the absolute primacy of any particular set of religious teachings and embraced Catholicism as a matter of custom only, a reading of the *Essais* that fails to take Montaigne's repeated claims of allegiance to Catholicism seriously enough. Generally, moreover, this ties in with Nakam's conviction of Montaigne's all but absolute cultural relativism, an interpretation of Montaigne that must be ultimately regarded as both inaccurate and ahistorical.⁵⁶⁴ Then too, Nakam's belief in Montaigne's tolerant liberalism, which she sees as deriving from his relativism, flies in the face of Montaigne's obvious appearance of conservatism.⁵⁶⁵ Further, Nakam's conclusion that for Montaigne human

⁵⁶² Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 10, "Of books," p. 416. See also note 153.

⁵⁶³ Geralde Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993.

⁵⁶⁴ Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, p. 432.

⁵⁶⁵ Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, pp. 156-157.

action is entirely constrained by historical circumstance, the very foundation of her entire reading of Montaigne and the ultimate principle from which her other claims derive, is fundamentally flawed.⁵⁶⁶ Finally, her analysis of Montaigne's epistemology is incomplete; for although she asserts the probabilistic nature of Montaigne's scepticism, she never really grapples with Montaigne's conception of probable knowledge or explores the relative roles of reason, faith, and experience in his thought.⁵⁶⁷

As I have said repeatedly, Montaigne is relativistic but not an absolute relativist; he is pessimistic about man's power to perfect himself but not completely cynical in this regard; he is sceptical but he nevertheless has a conception of truth. A believer in moderation in all things, he detests extremes and almost always follows the middle way. He seeks knowledge of this way in the understanding of self and society. The *Essais* are the product of that search, but they are also a defense of the path he has chosen to walk.

Perhaps the two most important of the *Essais* for an understanding of Montaigne's conception of custom are the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" and "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law". In the former, Montaigne considers man and his beliefs in general terms. In the latter, he focuses more narrowly on the idea of custom. In both he reflects on the ways in which Fortune shapes human affairs, but he also touches on Providence in his continuous search for absolutes. In the final analysis, Montaigne believes that man and society are shaped not only by circumstance, but also by human action, and ultimately he believes that everything is guided by the hand of a providential deity. He believes in Fortune, but he does not believe in Fate. He believes in the freedom of the will, but he also believes in Providence. To make his ultimate conception of man's place in the cosmos clear, however, we must first spend a little time with Montaigne's thoughts on custom.

⁵⁶⁶ Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, p. 256.

⁵⁶⁷ Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, p. 446.

In the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, Montaigne argues that man's only claim to greatness is the benevolence that his creator has shown to him, and part of his defense of Christianity is devoted to contrasting merely human custom with divine ordinance. Early on, he makes an extended comparison between man and the animals, speaking of man's presumption and inflated self- image,⁵⁶⁸ concluding that without God man is nothing. In a number of places he contrasts the “error of paganism” and its “ignorance of our sacred truth” with the true revelation of Christianity.⁵⁶⁹ It is in this regard that he speaks of the Moslem paradise as a seductive lie,⁵⁷⁰ comments on the “farce of ancient deifications”,⁵⁷¹ and paints a satirical picture of non-Christian religion in general.⁵⁷² Elsewhere, he considers human society, pointing out that “there is nothing in which the world is so varied as in customs and laws” and that “a thing is abominable here, which brings comendation elsewhere”.⁵⁷³ He does not, however, find all customs equally acceptable in the ideal. He says, “the confusion of worldly customs has gained this from me, that conduct and fancies different from mine do not so much displease me as instruct me, do not so much swell my pride as humble me when I compare them; and any choice other than that which comes expressly from the hand of God seems to me a choice of little advantage”, but he also says “I leave aside monstrous and unnatural ways of life”.⁵⁷⁴ Montaigne also explicitly addresses the question of the ultimate contingency of values:

“Moreover, if it is from ourselves that we derive the ruling of our conduct, into what confusion do we cast ourselves! For the most plausible advice that our reason

⁵⁶⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," pp. 452 and 486.

⁵⁶⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," p. 446.

⁵⁷⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," p. 518.

⁵⁷¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," p. 529.

⁵⁷² Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," p. 532.

⁵⁷³ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," p. 580.

⁵⁷⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," p. 516.

gives us in the matter is generally for each to obey the laws of his country, which is the advice of Socrates, inspired, he says, by divine counsel. And why should reason say that, unless that our duty has no other rule than a fortuitous one? Truth must have a universal and like face. If man knew any rectitude and justice that had body and real existence, he would not attach it to the condition of the customs of this country or that. It would not be from the fancy of the Persians or the Indians that virtue would take its form”.⁵⁷⁵

Montaigne directly considers the question of moral relativism and rejects it. He writes, “how could that ancient god more clearly accuse human knowledge of ignorance of the divine being, and teach men that religion was only a thing of their own invention, suitable to bind their society together, than by declaring, as he did, to those who sought instruction of his tripod, that the true cult for each was that which he found observed according to the practice of the place he was in?”⁵⁷⁶ When Montaigne speaks of “ignorance of the divine being”, of religion as a thing of man's invention, and of the contingency of custom, he is speaking largely of non-Christian society. He says, “O God, what an obligation do we not have to the benignity of our sovereign creator for having freed our belief from these vagabond and arbitrary devotions, and having based it on the eternal foundation of his holy word?”⁵⁷⁷ In Montaigne's eyes, the customs that man creates on his own are accidental and contingent; the ordinances of heaven, in contrast, are absolute. This is not to say, however, that Montaigne believes that Christian ideals have been actualized in western society, nor that all of his world's practices are divinely ordained. On the contrary, in the “Apology” and elsewhere, he maintains that his society has much in it that is arbitrary and clearly perceives that it has fallen short of the Christian ideal in a number of ways.

⁵⁷⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” pp. 578-579.

⁵⁷⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” p. 579.

⁵⁷⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, p. 579. The text in French is in note 467.

Montaigne tries to strike a certain level of balance between relativism and objectivity. It might be interesting to briefly consider his influence on one of the most complex French thinkers, Blaise Pascal. Pascal admitted that he had carefully read Montaigne's *Essais*. We can even point out some similarities between his observations and Montaigne's. That may be one of the reasons why Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*: "It is not in Montaigne, but in myself, that I find all that I see in him".⁵⁷⁸ Even though Pascal was not his follower, it is clear that the author of the *Pensées* read the *Essais*, as more than one scholar has proven.⁵⁷⁹ Montaigne's writings provided him the most varied observations and Pascal strongly recommended reading the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. That is one of the reasons we should not be surprised that Pascal devoted so many pages to talk about Montaigne in his *Conversation of Pascal with M. de Saci on Epictetus and Montaigne*.⁵⁸⁰ We can distinguish two different passages about Montaigne in this book, interrupted by Saci's opinion. In this book, the *Conversation with M. de Saci*, the separation between praise and criticism of Montaigne is not as well established as in the case of Epictetus, and the quotations are much freer.⁵⁸¹ Furthermore, it is noteworthy Pascal's effort to order and structure issues addressed by Montaigne by his proverbial dispersion.

Pascal is initially interested in two aspects of Montaigne's thought: his scepticism and his fideism. At the start, Pascal mentioned Montaigne's profession of Catholicism. According to Pascal, without the light of faith, reason leads to scepticism, hence the interest in recovering all the observations of Montaigne intended to demolish the building of our certainties, moral principles, the truths of science, justice of laws and many other things. This is what Pascal values the most about Montaigne: his critique of

⁵⁷⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, section II, "The misery of man without God", 64, Cambridge, Hackett, 2005.

⁵⁷⁹ See B. Croquette, *Pascal et Montaigne. Etude des réminiscences des Essais dans l'oeuvre de Pascal*, Droz, Geneve, 1974.

⁵⁸⁰ I have used the Spanish version of the book since it was easily available: Blas Pascal, *Conversación con el Sr. de Saci*, Ediciones Sigueme, Salamanca, 2006.

⁵⁸¹ M. Courcelle counted fifty three quotes, sixteen of them came from the *Apology*, Courcelle, *L'Entretien de Pascal et Sacy*, Paris, Vrin, 1960. See also A. Gounelle, *L'entretien de Pascal avec M. de Sacy*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1966, p. 62.

the arrogance and the ambitions of human reason, which is precisely why Pascal reproached Epictetus. Therefore, Pascal stops to describe the theoretical and practical implications of the sceptical attitude of putting everything into question and refrain from any claim.

Pascal notes that the doubt that Montaigne applies to everything also applies to himself, so that, finally, there is no certainty whatsoever, only questions. This leads to the suspension of judgment, a position that characterizes the Pyrrhonians. For this reason, Montaigne expressed himself through the use of questions and makes the expression “*Que sais je?*” his motto. With this attitude, he makes fun of all certainties, such as the justice of laws, a subject especially dear to Pascal and present in his *Pensées*. This shows the vanity of opinions and of human actions.

Moreover, Montaigne translates into his form of expression the very bottom of this thought. That is, his style is characterized not by the use of evidences or rational demonstrations, but by demonstrating the variety of opinions and “the contradictions of one mind” with one’s own example. His analysis of the common convictions of men leads to the conclusion that everything is debatable and uncertain. There is no law or custom that is observed by all human beings.

The author of the *Essais* mocks the apparent safety of those who trust in the laws, when in fact the number of laws multiply and complicate the processes. In examining the different perspectives that can be taken on any question, Montaigne wants to show that we do not know where the truth lies.

Although at first we may think that this scepticism can lead to religious indifference, according to Pascal, Montaigne is able to fight the heretics of his time and those who dare to say that God does not exist. This is because Montaigne challenges the authority of those, heretics and atheists, who speak of the Sovereign and Infinite Being, those who, ultimately, are nothing but finite beings. He remember the difficulties of knowing if the soul knows itself, and if it is possible to join the body, what body and spirit mean and, in another vein, what is the space or extension, or movement. Moreover, Montaigne addresses specific issues of human existence, such as illness, life,

death and evil. This is all to show that truth and God are inseparable. Consequently, man cannot judge about divine things, since he himself is unable to find the truth in the domain of nature.

Montaigne also extends the same uncertainty that undermines human existence with insurmountable obstacles to the various sciences, as shown by the examples he cites: the axioms and terms that geometry cannot define. He also refers to physics, medicine, history, politics, law and morality. Thus, Montaigne attacks the reason that is devoid of faith. He forces reason to descend from the heights where it is artificially installed, and even compared the alleged human intelligence to the wisdom that guides animals. In short, according to Pascal, the usefulness of reading Montaigne is to make reason get off the high “degree of superiority that it has been attributed to it” and he recognizes his joy at seeing “so invincibly battered the conceited reason with its own weapons”. This confuses the pride of those who boast of true justice outside the faith.

In spite of this reading of Montaigne, initially so positive, Pascal also noted some disadvantages of the philosophy of the author of the *Essais*.

Pascal recognizes that Montaigne, in fact, acts as a pagan, slipping on the issues and considering truth and good in their first appearance. For this reason, Montaigne follows the common directions and views, given the effort required to disprove them. In practice, in the moral framework, he acts like everyone else and follows the customs of the country. Therefore, the rule that applies in his actions is to ensure the comfort and tranquillity.

That is, according to Pascal, on the one hand Pyrrhonism is useful in undermining human pride and the kind of reason that intends to be God-like, on the other hand it is the moral attitude which takes Montaigne.⁵⁸² Theoretically, one can remain in indecision and suspend judgment, but in life, in practice, forces actions

⁵⁸² According to the *Pensées*, what best is in Montaigne can be accomplished only with difficulty. And what is wrong would have been corrected if he had noticed that he talked too much about himself (*Pensées*, B. 65). In fact, in his own time, there was some surprise by the attention that Montaigne devoted to describe himself, as the biographical tone was still rare in that time.

rendering it impossible to abstain. Sceptics follow the customs of their country because they find it comfortable; for example, they are faithful to their partner not by virtue, but to avoid the discomfort that infidelity would cause, following the law of least effort at all costs. Therefore, according to Pascal, there is a manifest contradiction in Montaigne, for although at first he declares his Catholicism, in fact he does not behave morally as such.

In conclusion, reading Montaigne is harmful to those who have a tendency to impiety and vices; Montaigne's Pyrrhonism leads, in practice, to Epicureanism. It must be given to Pascal that, indeed, Montaigne, even showing the vanity, weakness and inconstancy of the human condition, also recognizes a certain fullness, which is incompatible with the religious position of the author of the *Pensées*, with his tragic thought procedure that always poses all available options in terms of "all or nothing". There is no happy medium or traces of Epicureanism in the case of Pascal. Clearly, he places himself away from the defence of the ephemeral conducted by Montaigne and from his quiet installation and collusion with finitude.⁵⁸³

By experiencing the radical insufficiency of the mundane and human things, Pascal will have no choice but to recognize that the output is to seek God, as he states at the end of his *Conversation with M. de Saci*. The deep gap between the finite and the infinite can only be saved in accepting Christianity. As for Saint Augustine, a suffering and fighting spirit as Pascal, the access to the very essence of God will be in feeling the dependence on God in the depths of our being.⁵⁸⁴ No wonder, therefore, that in his *Conversation with M. de Saci*, Pascal, after having spoken of Epictetus and Montaigne, immediately goes to Saint Augustine, centre of Saci's intervention.

⁵⁸³ There is a deep rift between the comfortable fideism of Montaigne and Pascal's painful faith, as Unamuno called it. Pascal is always aware of the risk of believing that "God owes us nothing", see L. Kolakowski, *Dios no nos debe nada*, Herder, Madrid, 1984. See also Miguel de Unamuno, "La foi pascalienne", in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1923, p. 345.

⁵⁸⁴ The second part of the *Pensées* announces as the general topic "that man without faith cannot know the true good, nor justice", (*Pensées*, B. 425).

Going back to the question of moral relativism, in the essay “Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law”, Montaigne considers some of these issues more fully and also reflects on the dangers attendant on the effort to improve society. There he argues that we are ruled by custom. After a series of anecdotes about different customs from around the world, he calls custom more powerful than philosophy,⁵⁸⁵ saying, “in short, in my opinion, there is nothing that custom will not or cannot do; and with reason Pindar calls her, so I have been told, the queen and empress of the world”.⁵⁸⁶ He says, the “principal effect of its power is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly in us to get ourselves back out of its grip and return ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances”.⁵⁸⁷ He also says that when most of us encounter a true and absolute moral precept we pay it lip-service only and make no real effort to modify our behavior according to its teaching. After speaking of certain “barbarous” customs, he nonetheless maintains that it is good, at least to a degree, to obey the customs and laws of one's own culture, blaming much of the troubles of his own day on innovation, departure from tradition. He considers the Protestants in particular to be guilty of this dangerous innovation, but also criticizes some of their more fanatical opponents. He speaks of both as switching the places of virtue and vice in their efforts to reform society.⁵⁸⁸ He considers such innovation an example of vanity, saying that “it seems to me, to speak frankly, that it takes a lot of self-love and presumption to have such esteem for one's own opinions that to establish them one must overthrow the public peace and introduce so many inevitable evils, and such a horrible corruption of morals, as civil wars and political changes bring with them in a matter of such weight—and introduce them into one's own country”.⁵⁸⁹ He sees the Christian injunction of obedience to secular authority as one of the hallmarks of its

⁵⁸⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", pp. 108-115.

⁵⁸⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", p. 115.

⁵⁸⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", p. 115.

⁵⁸⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", pp. 116-120.

⁵⁸⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", p. 120.

“justice and utility”. He maintains that “there is a great difference between the cause of one who follows the forms and laws of his country and that of the one who undertakes to control and change them”.⁵⁹⁰ He finds the former position admirable in what he calls its moderacy. He writes, “whoever meddles with choosing and changing usurps the authority to judge, and he must be very sure that he sees the weakness of what he is casting out and the goodness of what he is introducing”. He maintains that “private fancy” has a “private jurisdiction” only, and that the desire to change public institutions, to innovate, is a dangerous one. He claims that it is not in man's power to reshape society, only God's, but that Fortune “sometimes presents us with a necessity so urgent that it is needful for the laws to make a place for it”.⁵⁹¹

Montaigne has at least some sort of idea of an absolute virtue and conceives human society as flawed. However, a seemingly conservative champion of tradition, he largely rejects innovation; in truth he is a moderate, who believes in reform from within. He believes that human society is fundamentally and inevitably mired by the human condition, but he also believes that it can be improved, at least to an extent. Before we can see how this works, however, we must first turn our attention to his thoughts on government and virtue.

Although he does not articulate an elaborate political theory, Montaigne nonetheless has a concept of good government, the central notion of which is the idea of justice based on public and private virtue. He also believes that there is a sort of contractual obligation to maintain that virtue between ruler and ruled.⁵⁹² Unfortunately, his study of man has taught him that virtue, and therefore good government, is not a hallmark of human society, an idea which is in keeping with his essentially Augustinian theological views. In short, man's condition since the Fall prevents him from creating a truly just society, and his affairs are largely constrained by the Fortune that God's

⁵⁹⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", p. 120.

⁵⁹¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law", p. 121.

⁵⁹² Marcel Tetel, "Montaigne and Machiavelli: Ethics, Politics and Humanism," in Berven ed., *Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, v. 2, pp. 142-146.

Providence has ordained to be his lot. Nevertheless, although Montaigne believes that man is influenced by Fortune, by chance and circumstance, he also believes that man can adapt to his situation, at least to a certain extent.⁵⁹³ Human society cannot be perfected, but it can be improved. The question of how that improvement is to be sought, however, is problematic, for Montaigne, as we have seen, rejects innovation except in the face of extreme necessity.

Montaigne's reflections on government are scattered throughout the *Essais*. The first thing that should be noted is that Montaigne is not an advocate of any particular type of government, but rather maintains that "the best and most excellent government for each nation is the one under which it has been maintained", and he explicitly rejects the notion that either monarchy, democracy, or indeed any type of government is intrinsically preferable. He also rejects philosophical discussions of the ideal government, calling "artificial descriptions" of government "ridiculous and unfit to put into practice".⁵⁹⁴ He rejects innovation, calling it a "plague",⁵⁹⁵ a "deadly drug,"⁵⁹⁶ and maintains that in the end, even when it is well-intentioned, it often leads to "injustice and tyranny".⁵⁹⁷ He also, however, says that he hates "every sort of tyranny, both in words and in acts".⁵⁹⁸ He also sees virtue as the key to justice and maintains that our rulers should be exemplars of it, saying that for those "who rule and command us, who hold the world in their hands, it is not enough to have a common understanding, to be able to do what we are able to do; they are far below us if they are not far above us".⁵⁹⁹ One of the cornerstones of virtue, for Montaigne, in both ruler and ruled, is truthfulness. In the case of the ruler in particular he maintains that keeping his word is

⁵⁹³ Tetel, "Montaigne and Machiavelli: Ethics, Politics and Humanism," p. 144.

⁵⁹⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 9, "Of vanity," p. 957.

⁵⁹⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 43, "Of sumptuary laws," p. 270.

⁵⁹⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 12, "Of physiognomy," p. 1043.

⁵⁹⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 9, "Of vanity", p. 958.

⁵⁹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 8, "Of the art of discussion," p. 931.

⁵⁹⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 8, "Of the art of discussion," p. 932.

essential.⁶⁰⁰ Referring to some of the followers of Machiavelli, he writes, “those, who in our time, in establishing the duties of a prince, have considered only the good of his affairs, and have preferred that to caring for his faith and conscience, would have something to say to a prince whose affairs Fortune had so arranged that he could establish them once and for all by a single breach and betrayal of his word”.⁶⁰¹ He claims, however, that this is not the way it happens, and that further breaches of faith inevitably follow the first.⁶⁰² For Montaigne, virtue, in both ruler and ruled, is essential to justice.

Montaigne's thoughts on virtue itself are also to be found in a number of places. His conception of it is ultimately both classical and Christian, and truth is at its core. Among the inscriptions on the rafters of his library was the phrase “αγατηρον αγαστον”, the “good is admirable”, taken from Plato.⁶⁰³ In the essay “Of Cato the Younger”, he says that although he does not consider himself exceptionally virtuous, he believes himself capable of recognizing, and admiring, virtue in others, saying that “crawling in the slime of the earth, I do not fail to observe, even in the clouds, the inimitable loftiness of certain heroic souls”.⁶⁰⁴ Paraphrasing Socrates, he also says, “the things that I know to be bad, like wrongdoing our neighbor and disobeying our superior, whether God or man, I carefully avoid”, and “those which I do not know to be either good or bad, I cannot fear”.⁶⁰⁵ He does not fully comprehend what virtue is and considers it an unattainable ideal, but he nonetheless believes in its existence and has something of an idea of what it consists of. He claims “that virtue is something other and nobler than the inclinations toward goodness that are born in us”⁶⁰⁶ and that “self-regulated and

⁶⁰⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 1, “The useful and the honorable,” p. 799.

⁶⁰¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 17, “Of presumption”, p. 648.

⁶⁰² Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 17, “Of presumption”, p. 648.

⁶⁰³ Montaigne, *Essais*, p. lxix.

⁶⁰⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 37, “Of Cato the Younger”, p. 229.

⁶⁰⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12, “Of physiognomy”, p. 1053.

⁶⁰⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 11, “Of cruelty”, p. 422.

wellborn souls follow the same path, and show the same countenance in their actions, as virtuous ones”.⁶⁰⁷ He also writes, however, that “virtue means something greater and more active than letting oneself, by a happy disposition, be led gently and peacefully in the footsteps of reason”.⁶⁰⁸ He argues that truth, or perhaps would it be better to say truthfulness, is the “first and fundamental part of virtue”.⁶⁰⁹ Indeed, Montaigne hates deception so much that he does not even approve of judges who trick criminals into confessing.⁶¹⁰ He calls lying an “accursed vice”, saying that “we are men, and hold together, only by our word”,⁶¹¹ and that “if we recognized the horror and gravity [of lying], we would persecute it with fire more justly than other crimes”. He maintains that “people ordinarily fool around chastising harmless faults in children very inappropriately, and torment them for thoughtless actions that leave neither imprint nor consequences”.⁶¹² He argues that “only lying, and a little below it obstinacy, seem to be the actions whose birth and progress one should combat insistently”.⁶¹³ Like many before him, he links truth with the good:

“If falsehood, like truth, had only one face, we would be in better shape. For we would take as certain the opposite of what the liar said. But the reverse of truth has a hundred thousand shapes and a limitless field. The Pythagoreans make out the good to be certain and finite, evil infinite and uncertain. A thousand paths miss the goal, one goes there”.⁶¹⁴

⁶⁰⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 11, “Of cruelty”, p. 422.

⁶⁰⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 11, “Of cruelty”, p. 422.

⁶⁰⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 17, “Of presumption”, p. 647.

⁶¹⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 1, “The useful and the honorable”, p. 791.

⁶¹¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 9, “Of liars”, p. 36.

⁶¹² Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 9, “Of liars”, p. 36.

⁶¹³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 9, “Of liars”, p. 36.

⁶¹⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 9, “Of liars”, p. 37.

Montaigne also admires valor and despises cruelty. Of the latter he says that “all that is beyond simple death seems to me pure cruelty”,⁶¹⁵ and “the horror I feel for cruelty throws me back more deeply into clemency than any model of clemency could attract me to it”.⁶¹⁶ With respect to the former, he conceives a valor that is “true, perfect, and philosophical”, a valor “much greater than ours and fuller, which is a strength and assurance of the soul, equally despising all sorts of adverse accidents, equable, uniform, and constant, of which ours is only a very feeble ray”.⁶¹⁷ He fears that this perfect and very Stoic seeming valor may be unattainable in this life.⁶¹⁸

In all things, however, Montaigne believes in moderation. Of valor he writes that it “has its limits like the other virtues, which transgressing we find ourselves in the train of vice; so that we may pass through valor to temerity, obstinacy, and madness, unless we know its limits well—and they are truly hard to discern near the borderlines”.⁶¹⁹ He also says that he likes “temperate and moderate natures” and that “immoderation, even in the direction of the good, if it does not offend me, astonishes me and gives me trouble to name it”.⁶²⁰ He claims that “the archer who overshoots the target misses as much as the one who does not reach it”.⁶²¹

Montaigne believes in virtue, justice, and moderation. He does not, however, embrace innovation and feels that Fortune limits our ability to live together in harmony.

⁶¹⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 27, “Cowardice, mother of cruelty”, p. 700.

⁶¹⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 8, “Of the art of discussion”, p. 922.

⁶¹⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 7, “Of honorary awards”, pp. 382-383.

⁶¹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 7, “Of honorary awards”, pp. 383.

⁶¹⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 15, “One is punished for defending a place obstinately without reason”, p. 68.

⁶²⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 30, “Of moderation”, p. 197.

⁶²¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 30, “Of moderation”, p. 198.

What remedy, then, if any, does he see for our situation? If our condition cannot be perfected in this lifetime, can it be improved, and if so, how?

- Know thyself.

The vagaries of Fortune and our inability to comprehend truth fully notwithstanding, Montaigne believes that we have the power to improve ourselves and our society through the pursuit of virtue. He does not believe that Fortune is all-powerful; he is not a determinist, but rather believes in the freedom, if limited efficacy, of the human will. He believes that through education and the pursuit of philosophy, which for him is at its best as a guide to conduct, we can approach if not reach the good. The key to all of this, in Montaigne's eyes, is self-knowledge, and the text of the *Essais* is ultimately the record of his search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the good.

Montaigne's conception of Fortune is both classical and Christian. He regards it as the power which, under the guidance of Providence, rules and shapes the events of the world. He does not, however, believe that Fortune is all-powerful, and he rejects determinism. He believes in chance, not in destiny, and he believes that man has the ability to shape his life, at least in part. It is in Montaigne's attitude towards Fortune that we see what is often described as his "Stoicism". Ultimately, however, this attribution of Stoicism to Montaigne indicates a misunderstanding both of Stoicism and of Montaigne, and although Montaigne may legitimately be called stoical, he should not be regarded as a Stoic, even in part. Part of the confusion lies in the fact that there was considerable overlap between so-called "schools of thought" in Hellenistic and Roman times, and none of them was as rigidly demarcated as is often supposed. The Stoic response to circumstance, which Montaigne like Augustine admired but did not accept fully, was not characteristic of Stoicism alone, but rather was a fairly commonplace idea in classical thought. As a philosophical conception it flowered in the Hellenistic period, but it had Hellenic roots, and it largely derives from the Greek conception of man's situation *vis-à-vis* Fate and the Gods. Most of the surviving philosophical discussions of it, however, come from Roman times, and in the time of Cicero and after it is largely

part of the stock-in-trade of ethical discussions and as such appears in the writings of authors from several different “schools”. Cicero considered himself an Academic sceptic, but although he rejected most of the teachings of Stoicism, he clearly admired the Stoic cultivation of equanimity. Lucretius the “Epicurean” also embraced it as, essentially, did the Pyrrhonian sceptic Sextus Empiricus. Indeed, in Diogenes Laertius, we find it to be one of the things that is to be admired about Pyrrho, the “founder” of the Pyrrhonic tradition, and about a number of other philosophers as well. This Stoicism was essentially a Greek and Roman virtue. It also had Judeo-Christian precursors, however, and even though it was ultimately rejected by Augustine and other early Christian writers, it exercised a significant influence on the development of Christian thought. In other words, Montaigne knew this Stoicism through a number of sources. He not only found it in “Stoics” like Horace and Seneca, but also in “Academics” like Cicero, “Epicureans” like Lucretius, historians like Diogenes Laertius, and in Christian writings as well. More importantly, he imbibed it as a cultural ideal. Montaigne has a certain Stoicism then, but he is never a Stoic, for there is little if any evidence to suggest that he ever seriously entertained other aspects of Stoic thought; rather he admired the Stoicism that he found in the Stoics, but also in others. He did not embrace the fatalistic tendencies of Stoicism, however.

Montaigne believed that circumstances affect our lives, and he cultivated a Stoic attitude, but he did not believe that our actions are pre-determined. In the essay “Of constancy”, he writes, “the law of resolution and constancy does not signify that we must not protect ourselves as much as is in our power from the evils and troubles that menace us; nor consequently that we should not fear being taken by surprise”.⁶²² He goes on to say that “On the contrary, all honest means of safeguarding ourselves from evils are not only permitted but laudable”, and “constancy's part is played principally in bearing troubles patiently where there is no remedy”.⁶²³ Circumstances threaten us, but we are not entirely powerless in the face of them. In another place he says, “Fortune

⁶²² Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 12, "Of constancy," p. 45.

⁶²³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 12, "Of constancy," p. 45.

does us neither good nor harm; she only offers us the material and the seed of them, which our soul, more powerful than she, turns and applies as it pleases, sole cause and mistress of its happy or unhappy condition”.⁶²⁴ Elsewhere, he says, “let us offer our offerings and vows to ourselves, not to Fortune: she has no power over our character, on the contrary, it drags her in its frain and molds her in its own form”.⁶²⁵ In still another place he argues that the wise man “disdains [human accidents] and tramples them underfoot, having a strong and solid soul, against which the arrows of Fortune, when they come to strike, must necessarily bounce off and be blunted, meeting a body on which they can make no impression”.⁶²⁶ Elsewhere he even more explicitly rejects the idea of fate, saying of *fatum* that “what we see happen, happens, but it could have happened otherwise, and God, in the register of the causes of events which he has in his foreknowledge, has also those which are called fortuitous, and the voluntary ones, which depend on the freedom he has given to our will; and he knows that we shall err, because we shall have willed to err”.⁶²⁷

Montaigne believes that we can contend with Fortune and that we can make the best of our earthly situation through the study of ourselves and of the good; that we can improve society by improving ourselves, partly through education, the principal function of which in his eyes is the cultivation by the young of the desire to know and achieve the good. In his essay “Of presumption”, he criticizes the state of education in his day, calling it inept, and saying that “its goal has been to make us not good or wise, but learned”, arguing that it teaches “the definitions, divisions, and partitions of virtue, like the surnames and branches of a genealogy, without any further concern to form between us and virtue any familiar relationship and intimate acquaintance”.⁶²⁸ He says

⁶²⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 14, "That the taste of good and evil depends in large part on the opinion we have of them," p. 67.

⁶²⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 50, "Of Democritus and Heraclitus," pp. 302-323.

⁶²⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 54, "Of vain subtleties," p. 312.

⁶²⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 29, "Of virtue," pp. 708-709.

⁶²⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 17, "Of presumption," p. 660.

that a “good education changes your judgment, and conduct, as happened to Polemon, that dissipated young Greek, who, having gone by chance to hear a lecture by Xenocrates, did not notice merely the eloquence and mastery of the teacher, or bring back to his house merely the knowledge of some fine matter, but reaped a more perceptible and solid fruit, which was the sudden change and amendment of his former life”.⁶²⁹ In the essay “Of the education of children”, he writes, “the gain from our study is to have become better and wise by it”.⁶³⁰ There he maintains that the tutor should teach the student to let “conscience” and “virtue” “shine forth in his speech”.⁶³¹ He further argues that through the study of man and philosophy the student will learn virtually everything that he needs to know.⁶³²

Montaigne believes that our troubles ultimately all derive from a failure to understand and pursue virtue, and he maintains that we can improve ourselves and our society through philosophy, theology, and the study of man. He says, “the sciences which regulate men's morals, like theology and philosophy, enter in everywhere”, and that “there is no action so private and secret that it escapes their cognizance and jurisdiction”.⁶³³ He believes that the teachings of philosophy and theology should govern our conduct, saying that “philosophy does not think it has badly employed its means when it has given to reason the sovereign mastery of our soul and the authority to hold our appetites in check”.⁶³⁴ He relates that Socrates maintained “that the principal function of wisdom was to distinguish the good from the bad”.⁶³⁵ Montaigne directs us to look to past ages for exemplars of virtue and wisdom, citing the valor of the Scipios

⁶²⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 17, "Of presumption," p. 660.

⁶³⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, "Of the education of children," p. 152.

⁶³¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, "Of the education of children," p. 152.

⁶³² Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, "Of the education of children," p. 158-159.

⁶³³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 30, "Of moderation," p. 198.

⁶³⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 33, "The story of Spurina," p. 728.

⁶³⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 2, "Of drunkenness," p. 340.

and the wisdom of Socrates. Following the precept of the Oracle at Delphi and the example of Socrates, he urges us to know ourselves and our limitations.⁶³⁶

For Montaigne, self-knowledge is ultimately the key and the whole of philosophy and wisdom. He says, "this great precept is often cited in Plato: 'Do thy job and know thyself', and that "each of its parts generally includes our whole duty, and likewise includes its companion".⁶³⁷ He argues that he "who would do his job would see that his first lesson is to know what he is and what is proper to him, and he who loves himself no longer takes another's business for his own: he loves and cultivates himself before anything else; he refuses superfluous occupations and useless thoughts and designs".⁶³⁸ For Montaigne, wisdom consists in knowing ourselves and knowing our limitations; knowing our place in the cosmos and pursuing the good insofar as we are able, even if we can never fully comprehend its nature in this life:

"It was a paradoxical commandment which that God at Delphi made of old: Look into yourself, know yourself, keep to yourself; bring back your mind and your will, which are spending themselves elsewhere, into themselves; you are running out, you are scattering yourself; concentrate yourself, resist yourself; you are being betrayed, dispersed, and stolen away from yourself. Do you not see that this world keeps its sight all concentrated inward and its eyes open to contemplate itself? It is always vanity for you, within and without; but it is less vanity when it is less extensive. Save for you, O man, said that god, each thing studies itself first, and, according to its needs, has limits to its labors and desires. There is not a single thing as empty and needy as you, who embrace the universe: you are the investigator without knowledge, the magistrate without jurisdiction, and all in all, the fool of the farce".⁶³⁹

⁶³⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 6, "Of practice," p. 380.

⁶³⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 3, "Our feelings reach out beyond us," p. 15.

⁶³⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I: 3, "Our feelings reach out beyond us," p. 15.

⁶³⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 9, "Of vanity," p. 1001.

Man is the “fool of the farce”, the “magistrate without jurisdiction”, and the “investigator without knowledge”, but he must nonetheless strive to know himself and understand his place. Montaigne claims that “the principal charge of each of us is his own conduct; and that is what we are here for”, to be the best that we can be.⁶⁴⁰ He says that “just as anyone who should forget to live a good and saintly life, and think he was quit of his duty by guiding and training others, would be a fool; even so he who abandons healthy and gay living of his own to serve others thereby, takes, to my taste, a bad and unnatural course”.⁶⁴¹ For Montaigne, our goal and our purpose is to be happy, happiness is to be found in virtue, and self-knowledge is the path to virtue.

Montaigne does not claim certainty, but in the *Essais* he assays his judgment on man and society, allowing his reason, his faith, and his experience to guide him in the quest for a probabilistic knowledge of the good. He writes, “I guarantee no certainty, unless it be to make known to what point, at this time, extends the knowledge of myself”.⁶⁴² He says, “I speak my mind freely on all things, even on those which perhaps exceed my capacity and which I by no means hold to be within my jurisdiction, and so the opinion I give of them is to declare the measure of my sight, not the measure of things”.⁶⁴³ Like Plato's *Timaeus*, he speaks as a man speaking to other men, of opinions and ideas, not of certain and fixed things. In the essay “Of experience”, the last of the *Essais*, he claims with an Aristotelian taste that “there is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge”, and that “we try all the ways that can lead to it”,

⁶⁴⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 10, "Of husbanding your will," p. 1007.

⁶⁴¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III: 10, "Of husbanding your will," p. 1007.

⁶⁴² Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 10, "Of books," p. 408.

⁶⁴³ Montaigne, *Essais*, II: 10, "Of books," p. 410.

saying that “when reason fails us, we use experience—which is a weaker and less dignified means”.⁶⁴⁴ He acknowledges that “each nation has many customs and usages that are not only unknown, but savage and miraculous, to some other nation”,⁶⁴⁵ but nonetheless maintains the belief in a higher law.⁶⁴⁶ As he tells us elsewhere, he seeks the cultivation of the rule of that law in society through education and study, urging an inward reform over outward innovation, saying that experience has taught him “that we ruin ourselves by impatience”.⁶⁴⁷ He argues that “must learn to endure what we cannot avoid”⁶⁴⁸ and, by implication, that we must strive where we can:

“It is an absolute perfection and almost divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside of ourselves because we do not know what it is like there. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the most elevated throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own ass”.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1065.

⁶⁴⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1081.

⁶⁴⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1070.

⁶⁴⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1088.

⁶⁴⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1089.

⁶⁴⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13, “Of experience”, p. 1115.

Chapter 5

Montaigne and the sceptical tradition

In the preceding chapters I have considered the extent of Montaigne's debt to ancient sceptical sources, the nature of his Christianity and his commitment to the primacy of faith over reason, and the relationship between his scepticism and his investigation of man and society. All that remains is to tie the conclusions of this study together, and to discuss some of its implications. Montaigne is widely regarded as the most significant of the sixteenth-century sceptics, and yet as we have seen, in the final analysis he turns out to be sceptical, like Socrates and Augustine, rather than an absolute sceptic, like Sextus Empiricus; in ancient sceptical terms, an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian; a student of man who believes in the possibility of truth, even if he despairs of its attainment in this life. This reading of Montaigne has important consequences for our understanding both of the author of the *Essais* and of the sceptical tradition itself. In what follows, I try to deal briefly with each of these issues.

- Montaigne's scepticism.

Michel de Montaigne was a sceptic who believed in the existence of truth. He sought that truth through the medium of the essay, and the *Essais* of Montaigne are both the fruit and the record of that search. The *Essais* are complex and must be read with subtlety. Montaigne's thought is complicated, but his vision is ultimately consistent and harmonious. In his search for truth, Montaigne considered the ideas of many of those who had gone before him. Sometimes he followed in their footsteps, and sometimes he did not. He also looked for truth in the study of man, ultimately finding unity in diversity. A student of paradox, Montaigne is a study in paradox, but ultimately there is meaning in the paradox of Montaigne; and if Montaigne speaks of probabilities rather than certainties, he nonetheless does so with assurance.

Montaigne may be read from many different perspectives. The *Essais* can be approached philosophically, rhetorically, historically. There is, however, no golden road into their heart. A student of perspective, Montaigne plays with perspective itself, and the search for his own perspective is one that must encompass a wide territory indeed, for Montaigne claims the world as his own. To read passages of the *Essais* in isolation, even to read individual essays without thinking of how they fit into the whole, is to read them incompletely. Montaigne deals in anecdotes, but to read him anecdotally is to misread him. The unity of the *Essais* can only be found in their totality. Montaigne wears many masks. We must look behind each of them if we are to catch a glimpse of his true face. In his search for the truth, Montaigne juxtaposes multiple perspectives, balancing them in the scales of his device as he asks, "*Que sçais je?*" In reading Montaigne we must persevere long enough to see not only the question but also the answer, even if ultimately our conclusions must remain no less tentative than his own.

Montaigne sought truth in the study of the ancients, in the pursuit of faith, and in the study of man. He walked the paths of the Academy with Socrates, Plato, and Cicero. He knelt in the temples of Job, Paul, and Augustine. He wandered the world, Old and New, with Plutarch and the historians. He listened, but although he heard, he spoke with his own voice, even if sometimes his words echoed some of those that came before. Like many before him, he spoke not of truth, but of the search for it. Montaigne was a sceptic and a Christian. Heir to a complicated tradition that defies simplistic labels like "Stoic", "Sceptic", and "Epicurean", he embodied his inheritance in a way that also precludes facile characterization. He was not a "Stoic", a "Sceptic", or an "Epicurean", either successively or all at once, but a seeker after truth searching in many places. In search of him, we must seek with him. We must look at Montaigne and the things he looked at, but we must not look for easy answers.

This study has dealt with Montaigne's potential debt to ancient sceptical sources, aspects of the Christian tradition, and elements of his study of man. In it I have tried to show that the scepticism of Montaigne has more affinity with the doubt of Socrates and Augustine than with the absolute scepticism of Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonians. By considering Montaigne's judgment of man, faith, and reason, his straightforward

and repeated rejection of the suspension of judgment advocated by the Pyrrhonians, I have tried to reveal the limits of his scepticism. I have not, however, attempted to deal with other aspects of his thought in any significant way. This study has dealt only with a cross-section of Montaigne's complicated intersection with the literary traditions to which he was heir. Nonetheless, it may suggest new ways of looking at other aspects of his thought. Montaigne read and borrowed from many more authors than have been considered here. Among the ancients, Horace, Lucretius, and Seneca are particularly important in this regard. Then too, Montaigne's considerable debt to Plutarch, whose *Moralia* perhaps provided the principal model for his *Essais*, has only been suggested here. There are also many Christian and other non-Christian authors, ancient, medieval, and early modern, whose texts have not been considered. Moreover, the conclusions of this study suggest that there may still be more to be learned from Montaigne's encounters with the ideas of those whose writings have been considered. Montaigne's potential debt to Plato in particular, a subject that has received relatively little attention among Montaigne scholars, may ultimately prove to be of singular importance. Much remains to be done, and if this study accomplishes nothing else, hopefully it will suggest new avenues of exploration to those more qualified to undertake them.

Among the broader issues that have been raised but largely unexplored here are many questions about the nature of the sceptical tradition to which Montaigne was both heir and contributor. This reconsideration of Montaigne's scepticism suggests the need for a reevaluation of our understanding of the tradition itself. By way of conclusion, I would like briefly to address this subject.

- Montaigne and the sceptical tradition.

The "sceptical crisis" of the early modern period played an important part in the methodological discussions of the time, and a proper understanding of its nature is crucial to our overall understanding of the historical development of early modern thought in general. The "sceptical crisis" has often been characterized as a revival of ancient scepticism caused by the rediscovery of ancient sources, particularly the

writings of Sextus Empiricus. Although some consideration has been given to the impact of the Protestant Reformation on its development, in general the role of other ancient and medieval sources, contemporary debates on theological and other subjects, and cultural and personal circumstances have received relatively little scholarly attention. Moreover, the scepticism of the early modern period has all-too often been portrayed in too-simplistic a fashion, as a radical, Pyrrhonian, or absolute scepticism that early modern thinkers individually either embraced or rejected totally, or found some way to accommodate. The reality was far more complicated, and the study of Montaigne's scepticism points to a number of areas where the standard account falls short. The reconsideration of Montaigne's scepticism suggests the necessity of a reevaluation of the nature of the ancient, medieval, and early-modern aspects of a sceptical tradition, which in all probability must ultimately be regarded as having been continuous throughout the pre-modern period.

Montaigne's principal sources for ancient sceptical ideas were the writings of Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius, and Montaigne's most important ancient sceptical model was the doubt of Socrates. Our understanding of ancient scepticism cannot be complete without a thorough grasp of the relevance of these figures to its evolution, and yet to date the contributions of Cicero and Diogenes Laertius only have been closely scrutinized. Sextus Empiricus and others, who, like Cicero, have been studied carefully in this context, were important as well, but the full story of ancient scepticism has yet to be told. Arcesilas and the Academic sceptics claimed Plato, Socrates, and a number of the Presocratics as their predecessors. Cicero accepted this claim. Sextus Empiricus did not. Modern scholars should not be too hasty to follow the latter, but instead should suspend judgment, at least until the claim has been more thoroughly explored.

The impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Montaigne's thought in general, and on his scepticism in particular, cannot be overstated, and yet all-too often the Judeo-Christian sceptical tradition is left more or less out of the picture. Montaigne's scepticism was shaped in part by his encounters with the Old Testament scepticism of *Wisdom*, *Job*, and *Ecclesiastes*, and also with the writings of St. Paul, Lactantius, and

St. Augustine, but relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between ancient scepticism and the sceptical ideas contained in these works. During the Middle Ages, powerful currents of scepticism permeated the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, and yet, although their existence has long been acknowledged, their potential debt to Greco-Roman antiquity and relevance to the subsequent development of early modern scepticism have been dismissed without serious investigation, despite the all-too-obvious similarities between the various traditions.

Montaigne and his contemporaries had access to a wide variety of sceptical models, but although their study of these models shaped the development of their thought, their ideas were also influenced by contemporary reality. Montaigne at least was familiar with the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism, between a scepticism that symbolized the state of the quest for truth and a scepticism that denied its existence. Like him, his contemporaries also had the possibility of articulating a diverse spectrum of opinions. The complexity of the “sceptical crisis” requires further analysis before the nature of early modern scepticism, and the impact of ancient sceptical ideas, theological concerns, and cultural circumstances on its development, can be fully understood.

Our understanding of the “sceptical crisis” needs to be reexamined. Its precise nature and the question of its continuity or discontinuity with earlier developments needs to be more thoroughly investigated. Only then can we begin to understand its full place in the story of early modern thought. The study of Montaigne's scepticism perhaps offers some suggestions as to how we might proceed. Looking at Montaigne in a new light, we need to be prepared to look at his contemporaries differently as well.

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Declaration

I composed this thesis, the work is my own. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

Name..... Date.....