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Montaigne and the Virtue of Moderation

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I begin by congratulating the Storeys on their splendid achievement. They have managed to write an eminently readable account of a "conversation" among four complex French thinkers. As a reader learns from the footnotes, their presentation of the unfolding argument is based on an enormous amount of scholarly research, but they never let the scholarship interfere with the smooth flow of their prose.

The great strength of the Storeys' book lies in the coherence of the line of thought they trace from Montaigne to Tocqueville concerning the way in which human beings ought to seek happiness. They begin by emphasizing how attractive the notion Montaigne developed of what they call "immanent contentment" is to explain how it became not merely influential, but dominant in the centuries which followed. However, because they are interested in showing how later thinkers received, criticized, and responded to Montaigne's novel conception, the Storeys tend to read and present Montaigne's thought through the eyes of later thinkers and readers. As a result, they do not present a completely accurate account of Montaigne's thought as he understood and presented it.

"Although he is remembered as a skeptical individualist who debunks the idea of a universal human good so as better to appreciate humanity's manifold variety," they write, "the practical consequence of his skepticism is this new . . . ideal of happiness." It consists in "*moderation through variation*: an arrangement of our dispositions, pursuits, and pleasures calculated to keep us interested, 'at home,' and present in the moment but also dispassionate, at ease, and in balance" (3, emphasis original). I can accept that as a general statement of Montaigne's chief recommendation to his readers. However, they go on to identify a "social dimension" of this ideal, which I am less able to accept as correct. "By presenting to others the variegated and balanced self," they claim, Montaigne leads his readers to hope they will receive the "complete, personal, *unmediated approbation*" he had received from his friend Étienne de La Boétie (3, emphasis original).

Montaigne celebrates the extraordinary friendship in which he claims that he and La Boétie shared "everything . . . wills, thoughts, judgments, goods,

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wives, children, honor, and life."[1] He claims that it was unprecedented, better than any of the three forms of friendship Aristotle describes or the homoerotic association celebrated by other ancient thinkers. But precisely because it is so rare, Montaigne does not think another such friendship will arise, if at all, for three hundred years. There is no evidence in the *Essays* or his biography that he actively sought another such friend. At age thirty-nine he resigned from his position at the Bordeaux Parlement where he had worked with La Boétie and retired to study himself by himself in the library he had built on his estate. It is such a solitary life that he recommends to his readers.

Yet Montaigne does not urge readers to retire into absolute, ascetic isolation from others. "We should have wife, children, goods, and above all health, if we can; but we must not bind ourselves to them so strongly that our happiness depends on them."[2] He recognizes that human beings have obligations to others. "The wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely"; but in externals a wise man "will follow accepted fashions and forms. Society in general can do without our thoughts; but [we must devote] our actions, our work, our fortunes, and our very life . . . to its service."[3]

Because we tend to lose ourselves in trying to please others in order to get ahead, Montaigne urges us to "reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat. Here our ordinary conversation must be between us and ourselves. . . . We have a soul that can be turned upon itself, [and] keep itself company." We do not have to "fear that in this solitude we shall stagnate in tedious idleness."[4] Montaigne acknowledges that "solitude seems more appropriate and reasonable to those who have given to the world their most active and flourishing years." But he urges all who can to "untie the bonds that are so powerful, and henceforth love this or that, but be wedded only to ourselves. . . . Why," he asks, "should we . . . enslave our contentment to the power of others?"[5]

Because "the humor most directly opposite to retirement is ambition," Montaigne urges readers to "abandon with the other pleasures that which comes from the approbation of others."[6] He certainly does not advise his readers to seek the "complete, personal, *unmediated approbation*" of others in order to form friendships of the kind he briefly enjoyed with La Boétie. On the contrary, he urges, "Retire into yourself, but first prepare to receive

[1]Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 1.28, 141. Citations to Montaigne's essays are by volume, essay, and page number.

[2]Ibid., 1.39, 177.

[3]Ibid., 1.23, 86.

[4]Ibid., 1.39, 177.

[5]Ibid., 179–80.

[6]Ibid., 182.

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yourself there; it would be madness to trust in yourself if you do not know how to govern yourself."[7]

The aim of such a retirement is to enjoy a life of peace and tranquility, but, Montaigne emphasizes, it is not easy to attain. "Those of us . . . who live a private life that is on display only to ourselves must have a pattern established within by which to test our actions. . . . There is no one but yourself who knows whether you are cowardly and cruel, or loyal or devout. Others do not see you, they guess at you by uncertain conjectures. . . . Therefore," he urges, "do not cling to their judgment; cling to your own."[8]

Although Montaigne emphasizes both the diversity and power of customs, he is not a moral relativist. On the contrary, he thinks that "there is no good deed that does not rejoice a wellborn nature. Indeed there is a sort of gratification in doing good which makes us rejoice in ourselves, and a generous pride that accompanies a good conscience." So he states proudly,

> If anyone should see right into [his] soul, [that viewer] would not find him guilty either of anyone's affliction or ruin, or of vengeance or envy, or of public offense against the laws, or of innovation and disturbance, or of failing in [his] word. . . . [He] has not put [his] hand either upon the property or into the purse of any Frenchman . . . ; nor [has he] used any man's work without paying his wages.[9]

In attributing to Montaigne the desire to lose his sense of himself as a separate being in perfect identity with another and to make himself lovable in the hope of receiving their "complete, personal, *unmediated approbation*," I think, the Storeys read Montaigne too much in light of Rousseau. Montaigne celebrates his friendship with La Boétie, but emphasizes that it arose from shared ideas; it did not involve or evolve out of a desire for approbation by the other. Montaigne is as harsh a critic of the desire to please others in order to gain their favor as Rousseau is, but unlike Rousseau Montaigne thinks the desire to look good in the eyes of others is natural. He sees it in the desire of the cannibals, living as close to nature as any human beings we know, to display their courage in war and under torture. "Nature herself . . . attaches to man some instinct for inhumanity," he observes. "No one takes his sport in seeing animals play with and caress one another, and no one fails to take it in seeing them tear apart and dismember one another."[10] Montaigne considers not insincerity, but cruelty to be the worst human vice. He appeals to nature in criticizing the mores of his contemporaries, but he does not want to return to nature or the merely pleasant sentiment of our existence.

Montaigne was trying to cure readers of what he considered to be "the commonest of human errors—if they dare to call an error something to which

[7]Ibid., 182–83.
[8]Ibid., 3.2, 613.
[9]Ibid., 612.
[10]Ibid., 2.11, 316.

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Nature herself leads us," that "of always gaping after future things," by imprinting in us "the fear, desire, and hope which project us toward the future and steal from us the feeling and consideration of what is, to busy us with what will be, even when we shall no longer be."[11] As the Storeys conclude, "by elaborating [a] new standard of human flourishing as an alternative to the heroic ideals of happiness he inherited from the classical and Christian traditions, . . . Montaigne promises that if we know how to attend to it *properly*, life simply . . . can be enough" (3, emphasis added). He did not claim that it would be easy or expect that most people would be able to do it.

[11]Ibid., 1.3, 8.

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