Montaigne and the Coherence of Eclecticism[1]

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Since the publication of Pierre Hadot's essays on ancient philosophy by Arnold Davidson in 1995,[2] Michel Foucault's late work on "the care of the self"[3] has appeared in a new light. We now know that Hadot's work was familiar to Foucault as early as the 1950s.[4] It is also clear that Foucault's notion of "techniques of the self" is very close to what Hadot calls "spiritual exercises." At the same time, there are important differences between the views of these two philosophers, and Hadot has often expressed his regret that Foucault's untimely death prevented them from exploring these differences.[5] One important point of disagreement was the status of eclecticism. In Foucault's interpretation of ancient philosophy, the "constitution of the self" implied a personal choice among disparate philosophical references: "Writing as a personal exercise done by the self and for the self, is an art of disparate truth."[6] In a 1989 article Hadot argued from a historical point of view that, so far as Stoicism and Epicureanism were concerned,

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eclecticism had no place in a mature practice of philosophy. Foucault's favorite example, Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius*, in which Stoic arguments were invoked along with Epicurean arguments, was a work for beginners. In a mature practice of Stoicism, one would stick to the arguments of the Stoic school, choose them for their coherence, and instead of trying to forge a spiritual identity for oneself through writing, one would "liberate oneself from one's individuality in order to raise oneself up to universality."[7] Hadot added that "it is only in the New Academy—in the person of Cicero, for instance—that a personal choice is made according to what reason considers as most likely at a given moment."[8] This discussion of Foucault may give the impression that Hadot was somewhat dismissive of eclecticism. Yet in a 2001 interview Hadot claimed that he had always admired Cicero's intellectual independence, and he proposed a reappraisal "of an attitude that has always had a bad reputation: eclecticism."[9]

Something very similar is a stake in the work of Alexander Nehamas, as Lanier Anderson and Joshua Landy showed in their study of his *Art of Living*. In the conception of philosophy as a "way of life" (Hadot) or "care of the self" (Foucault) or "self-fashioning" (Nehamas), a central issue is the relationship between theoretical coherence and the coherence of the person who theorizes. Elaborating on Nehamas's chapter on Montaigne, Anderson and Landy argue that there is a move in Montaigne away from doctrinal coherence and towards a coherence of the self. As they put it, "the harmonious whole Montaigne commends [. . .] is not a coherent body of fact or theory; it is the unified self of the theorizer."[10] Anderson and Landy show that this brings up all kinds of difficulties: can this unified self be other than a fiction? If that is the case, how can philosophy be a way of *life*? Nehamas's answer is very much in the spirit of the late Foucault: there is a coherence of the self in Montaigne, and this coherence is the product of writing as a philosophical activity. The self is fashioned through writing.

Because Montaigne writes in the ancient tradition of philosophy as a way of life, one may recall Hadot's suggestion that Foucault's notion of

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[7] Pierre Hadot, "Reflections on the Idea of the 'Cultivation of the Self,'" in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 210; "Réflexions sur la notion de 'culture de soi'" in *Michel Foucault philosophe* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 261–70.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "Qu'est-ce que l'éthique? Entretien avec Pierre Hadot," *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 387.

[10] R. Lanier Anderson and Joshua Landy, "Philosophy as Self-Fashioning: Alexander Nehamas's *Art of Living*," *Diacritics* 31 (2001): 32. See Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

"writing the self" is an intriguing but historically inaccurate description of ancient philosophical practice. But perhaps Hadot agrees with Foucault after all, since in his most recent interviews, he speaks favorably of eclecticism, a notion that is central to Foucault's analysis of self-fashioning through writing. The case of Montaigne is particularly interesting for these purposes, not only because the *Essays* seem to be the prototypical example of "writing the self," but also because eclecticism is both discussed and practiced throughout the *Essays*. I propose to take a fresh look at this issue by investigating the status of eclecticism in Montaigne's *Essays*. This must start with an examination of the philosophical tradition most closely associated with the practice of eclecticism, the Skeptical tradition.

A SKEPTICAL CRISIS?

In Richard Popkin's classic history of Skepticism, Montaigne is treated as a foundational figure.[11] According to Popkin, the Pyrrhonian Skepticism developed by Montaigne in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" is both the logical continuation and the radicalization of various forms of doubt that were present in Renaissance humanism. In that sense, Montaigne is both the continuator of Renaissance humanism and its terminator, who makes the way for modern thought. There is something appealing in this dramatic presentation, but the claims are so sweeping that they naturally invite the kind of Skeptical scrutiny Popkin so eloquently describes. Rather than testing the claim that Montaigne's Skepticism was "the womb of modern thought,"[12] I would like to show how Popkin arrived at this characterization of Montaigne and what this says about twentieth and twenty-first-century interpretations of Montaigne as a philosopher.

Popkin's notion of a Skeptical crisis, or *crise pyrrhonienne*,[13] is borrowed from Pierre Villey, who published a monumental study of the sources of Montaigne's *Essays* in 1908.[14] Popkin acknowledges his debt and in fact he explicitly relies on Villey for his account of the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" and of Montaigne's thought in general. According to Villey, who meticulously established which books Montaigne read and when he read

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[11] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[12] *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, 56.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Pierre Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1908).

them, Montaigne wrote the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" after reading the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus, a work that became widely known only after it was translated into Latin by Henri Estienne in 1562. Villey's "evolutionary thesis" is a three-stage narrative. The early Montaigne was, or tried to be a Stoic. He went through a Skeptical crisis after reading Sextus Empiricus, and he overcame that crisis by becoming an Epicurean of sorts, or "naturalist." Villey also claims that Montaigne's early essays are "impersonal" and lacking in originality, while the later essays and additions to the early essays are more "personal" and original.

When Popkin refers to Montaigne's "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" as "that amazing product of his own personal *crise pyrrhonienne*"[15] he is in a sense simply following Villey's interpretation of Montaigne. On the other hand, he implicitly makes two moves that are questionable. First, he focuses almost exclusively on the "Apology for Raymond Sebond." It may well be the case, as he claims, that "many sides of Montaigne meet"[16] in this essay but focusing on one (admitted long) essay in a much larger book necessarily gives us a narrow view. Second, Montaigne's *crise pyrrhonienne* is presented as an individual instance of a crisis that affected the intellectual world of the Renaissance as a whole. One could argue that the underlying logic (or at least the genealogy) of Popkin's argument is exactly the opposite: what we see in Popkin is a spectacular expansion of Villey's expression, *crise pyrrhonienne*, which was supposed to describe one episode in Montaigne's intellectual formation, to the entire intellectual landscape of early modern Europe.

Given the extent to which Popkin's account of Renaissance Skepticism relies on Villey's account of Montaigne's Skepticism, it is worth mentioning here that Villey's "evolutionary thesis" has been abundantly questioned by Montaigne scholars. In particular, Montaigne's allegiance to Pyrrhonian Skepticism is no longer taken for granted. In a recent article discussing the "Skeptical crisis" in Montaigne, Defaux claims that there was never any such thing.[17] Other scholars have stressed the importance of Academic (as

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[15] Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, 47.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Gérard Defaux, "Montaigne, la vie, les livres: naissance d'un philosophe sceptique et 'impremedité,'" *Modern Language Notes* 117 (2002): 780–807. Also see Philippe Desan, "Brève histoire de Montaigne dans ses couches," *Montaigne Studies* 7 (1995): 35–52. Recent studies of Montaigne's Skepticism include: Emmanuel Naya, *Essais de Michel Seigneur de Montaigne* (Paris: Ellipses, 2006); Zahi Zalloua, *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism* (Charlottesville: Rockwood Press, 2005); Marie-Luce Demonet, *A plaisir. Sémiotique et scepticisme chez Montaigne* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2002); Silvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irrésolution. Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer: trois itinéraires sceptiques*

opposed to Pyrrhonian) Skepticism in Montaigne. While the Pyrrhonians practiced the suspension of judgment (*epoche*) in order to achieve a state of indifference that brought inner tranquility, the Academics combined the suspension of judgment with an inquisitive ("zetetic") posture. The duty of the Academic Skeptic (as described for instance in Cicero's *Academica*) was to keep searching for truth even while knowing that truth was probably out of reach. In addition, the Academic Skeptic would exercise *libertas philosophandi* by picking and choosing among various philosophical schools and embracing some opinions on a provisional basis if they seemed more plausible. Some scholars have argued that this may in fact be a better description of Montaigne's intellectual profile and indeed of the role of Skepticism in the emergence of the new science and of eighteenth-century empiricism. According to José Maia Neto, features of Academic Skepticism, especially from Cicero's *Academica*, "are basic to the Skepticism revived in the late Renaissance by Montaigne and Charron; were related to the new science in the first half of the seventeenth century by Gassendi; were used in the anti-Cartesian reaction of the late seventeenth century by Rapin, Huet, Bayle and above all Fouchet; and were radicalized in the eighteenth century by Hume."[18] Neto also notices that even as he is explaining the main points of Pyrrhonian Skepticism in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" Montaigne draws constantly from Cicero's *Academica*. In particular, Montaigne's praise of the Skeptics' intellectual integrity is drawn from Cicero: "Why shall it not be granted similarly to these men to maintain their liberty, and to consider things without obligation and servitude?"[19] As Neto puts it, "Montaigne sees in the Academic's notion of *sustinere* the architectonic constitution of the intellect in its integrity."[20]

(Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2001); Jan Miernowski, *L'Ontologie de la contradiction sceptique. Pour l'étude de la métaphysique des Essais* (Paris: Champion, 1998); Ian MacLean, *Montaigne philosophe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996).

[18] José Maia Neto, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *JHI* 58 (1997): 199. Also see Jean-Charles Darmon, "Remarques sur la rhétorique 'probabiliste' de Gassendi: ses enjeux et ses effets dans l'histoire de la République des lettres," *Dix-septième siècle* 233 (2006): 665–700.

[19] "Apology for Raymond Sebond," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 2:12, 373. All citations from this edition will be referred by book number, followed by chapter and then page numbers in the manner shown here.

[20] José Maia Neto, "Epoche as Perfection: Montaigne's View of Ancient Skepticism," in *Skepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought: New Interpretations*, edited by José Maia Neto and Richard Henry Popkin (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004), 18.

MONTAIGNE'S PHILOSOPHICAL INCOHERENCE

Before entering the debate on the characterization of Montaigne's Skepticism or his allegiance to any philosophical doctrine, I would like to point out that this debate exists because readers of Montaigne usually find him philosophically incoherent. This was one of the major issues Villey had to confront when he tried to give a comprehensive account of the sources and evolution of Montaigne's *Essays*. For instance, in his chapter on Montaigne's method, Villey compares the 1580 and 1588 editions of the *Essays*. He notices that, on the one hand, Montaigne has not changed the views he expresses in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond." The 1588 additions to the "Apology" have one thing in common: they reinforce the Pyrrhonian stance taken in that essay. This leads Villey to conclude that "Montaigne would still endorse the *Apologie de Sebond*."[21] On the other hand, Villey insists, "another indubitable fact is that Montaigne is not a Pyrrhonian at all."[22] Montaigne makes all kinds of assertions, carefully but firmly. "How does one resolve this contradiction?"[23] Villey asks. Of course, no literary critic will ever shy away from such a challenge. Villey embraces it enthusiastically and asserts that "there is no contradiction."[24] He argues that between 1580 and 1588, Montaigne read Cicero's *Academica*. The more moderate form of Skepticism expressed in that work led him to revise the radical Skepticism he had embraced in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond." In 1588, Montaigne is still deeply critical of human reason, but he derives different conclusions from this critique. He is no longer looking for metaphysical knowledge. He has become a relativist and he focuses on facts.[25]

It is remarkable that approximately one century after Villey, recent studies of Montaigne's Skepticism present the issue in very similar terms. In her article on Montaigne and Skepticism in the *Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, Ann Hartle begins by contrasting the Skeptical stance found in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" with some "decidedly non-skeptical figures of his thought"[26] (the fact that he does make judgments, his profession of Catholic faith, his apparent credulity regarding fabulous stories).

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[21] Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, 2:311.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, 2:312.
[26] Ann Hartle, "Montaigne and Skepticism," *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 189.

Here is how Hartle summarizes the problem: "Either Montaigne is an inconsistent thinker, incorporating contradictory and incompatible philosophical views within an ultimately incoherent and ill-defined literary work, or he is an original philosopher, transcending the boundaries of the classical-Christian tradition."[27] For Hartle, Montaigne is of course the latter, and she tries to show the consistency of his thought, as well as his originality as a philosopher. She describes Montaigne's thought as a dialectical process with a Skeptical moment.

My purpose here is not to discuss these interpretations in any detail. It is simply to show that Villey's approach and Hartle's approach have the same underlying logic. They both want to take Montaigne seriously as a philosopher, and they assume he professes a coherent doctrine. After reading the *Essays* carefully, they find all sorts of contradictions. Villey's solution is to postulate an evolution in Montaigne's thinking: the contradictory theses correspond to different moments in Montaigne's intellectual evolution. Hartle's solution is to assume that a Hegelian-style dialectic is at work in Montaigne's thought. The Skeptical theses of the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" are the negative moment in a dialectical process that culminates in the re-affirmation of the Christian faith. In both Villey and Hartle, the desire to show Montaigne's coherence is very much tied to a desire to ascertain his "originality" as an author. Inconsistent thinkers cannot be original because they simply repeat what they have read here and there. Only consistent thinkers are original because they have absorbed external influences and developed a vision that is uniquely theirs.

I would like to question these assumptions. Is it fair to say that the choice is between reading the *Essays* as "incoherent and ill-defined" literature, and reading the *Essays* as coherent philosophy? And what does it mean to be an "original philosopher?" Let us begin with a well-known fact. Not only in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" but also in many places in the *Essays*, Montaigne criticizes all forms of organized knowledge: legal, medical, and philosophical. This critique often takes the form of an opposition between life and knowledge, and Montaigne argues that only life and the pursuit of virtue are really important. In some contexts, the opposition is between words and deeds, as in the classic *topos* of Athens vs. Sparta. The Athenians speak well but the Spartans live righteously: "There it was a continual exercise of the tongue, here a continual exercise of the soul."[28] Elsewhere in the same essay Montaigne praises the legendary lawgiver Ly-

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[27] Hartle, "Montaigne and Skepticism," 191.
[28] "Of pedantry," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 1:25, 105.

curgus for giving a very small place to doctrinal knowledge in his design of an educational system for Sparta. The focus was on moral education.[29] In the ''Apology for Raymond Sebond,'' Montaigne famously contrasts the wisdom of university deans with that of artisans and plowmen, and insists that doctrinal knowledge is necessary to life only to the extent that it can provide money and fame. Otherwise, and particularly when it comes to handling the real business of life and knowing how to face death, it is useless.[30] Also in the ''Apology,'' Montaigne alludes to an ancient philosophical tradition according to which philosophical writing is a less-than-serious endeavor:

> Chrysippus said that what Plato and Aristotle had written about logic they had written as a game and for exercise, and could not believe that they had spoken seriously of such an empty matter. Plutarch says the same of metaphysics. Epicurus would have said it also of rhetoric, grammar, poetry, mathematics, and all the sciences except physics. And Socrates also of all except only that which treats of morals and life.[31]

What is remarkable in this passage is that it draws from all the main philosophical schools in order to highlight a feature they all share. Chrysippus, the founder of Stoicism, Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism, Plutarch, an Academic Skeptic, Plato and Aristotle all agree that writing can be useful but philosophy is, first and foremost, an oral practice. As a result, it is a mistake to take philosophical writings too seriously. What is really important in the practice of philosophy takes place in a conversation between master and disciple, or in a conversation the philosopher has with himself (N.B.: the gendered language is a reflection of Montaigne's conception of philosophy as conversation between men—even though his favorite reader and interlocutor happened to be a woman, Marie de Gournay). Points of doctrine presented in written form can be useful, of course, but doctrinal coherence is not an end in itself. The purpose of philosophy, to quote Montaigne again, is ''a continual exercise of the soul.''[32] Philosophers exercise their souls as athletes exercise their bodies in order to achieve spiritual health, knowing of course that perfect wisdom is out of reach and philoso-

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[29] ''Of pedantry,'' 1:25, 104.
[30] ''Apology for Raymond Sebond,'' 2:12, 359.
[31] ''Apology for Raymond Sebond,'' 2:12, 376.
[32] ''Of pedantry,'' 1:25, 105.

phers, as lovers of wisdom, can only strive for what they love. In that sense it is both naïve and misguided to try to pin down philosophers and ask them what they "really" believe or what they personally subscribe to (aside from their basic commitment to the pursuit of wisdom). Montaigne quotes Cicero on this point: "They who inquire what we personally think about each matter are more curious than is necessary."[33]

From the passages I have quoted, one may get the impression that in this ancient conception of philosophy, to which Montaigne subscribes, philosophical discourse is devalued. This is not the case at all. Philosophical discourse does play a fundamental role, but its importance is tied to the fact that it has practical consequences: converting the student to philosophical life, or helping the philosopher continue leading a philosophical life. In this conception of philosophy as spiritual exercise, philosophical notions are meaningful to the extent that they are lived and internalized. For Montaigne, Socrates and Aristippus are perfect and inimitable examples of this because their "habituation to virtue" is such that "it has passed into their nature," and has become "the very essence of their soul, its natural and ordinary gait."[34]

The practice of philosophy as spiritual exercise does not bar the use of concepts. It does not forbid attempts to generalize or draw conclusions. Far from it: discussing ideas is what philosophers do. However, the discussion is only a means to an end, which is the shaping of a soul that has "strength and beauty."[35] In that sense, organized knowledge does not have much value in and of itself, but it can be very useful as a pretext for discussion. According to Montaigne, philosophers "did not think it inappropriate to exercise and amuse their minds on things in which there was no solid profit."[36] Similarly, if the purpose is to store up knowledge, reading is ultimately a futile activity, but reading can be a very good way of training one's mind: "Books have served me not so much for instruction as for exercise."[37]

ECLECTICISM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT

This presentation so far may lead one to think that philosophical schools do not matter. They do. All ancient philosophers pledge allegiance to a

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[33] "Apology for Raymond Sebond," 2:12, 376 (Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, v).

[34] "Of cruelty," 2:11, 310.

[35] "Of the art of discussion," 3:8, 718.

[36] "Of cruelty," 2:12, 377.

[37] "Of physiognomy," 3:12, 795.

particular school, which provides a vocabulary, a set of concepts and teaching methods, and a tradition of thought. This applies to the Skeptics, including the Pyrrhonian Skeptics. What is different about the Skeptics is that they do philosophy by discussing the thoughts of other, non-Skeptical philosophers. Academic Skeptics, in particular, practice what one could call a serious and reasoned form of eclecticism.[38] In our modern conception of philosophy, eclecticism has a bad name, and is usually associated with intellectual laziness or mental confusion. Yet when Montaigne endeavors to name his two favorite authors, he mentions Seneca and Plutarch, who are striking examples of an eclectic way of thinking.[39] Seneca is a Stoic philosopher, but in his *Letters to Lucilius*, he is not afraid of quoting Epicurus and using Epicurean arguments. Montaigne describes Seneca's opinions as "Stoic and Epicurean."[40] As to Plutarch, Daniel Babut has demonstrated that he writes in the tradition of Academic Skepticism.[41] Babut's study of Plutarch is particularly illuminating for our purposes because the standard scholarship on Plutarch resembles the standard scholarship on Montaigne. Faced with the main features of Plutarch's thought (his profession of Skepticism, his admiration for Plato, and his profession of religious belief), scholars concluded that Plutarch changed his mind over time, or that he didn't mean what he said, or that he was a weak and confused thinker. Yet, as Babut shows, these difficulties disappear if one agrees to consider Plutarch's eclecticism as a serious philosophical endeavor.

Is Montaigne a Skeptic? If so, is he an Academic or a Pyrrhonian Skeptic? As we have just seen, the issue of allegiance is a particularly ambiguous one for the Skeptics, since the Academic Skeptics define themselves by their refusal to pledge allegiance to any school, and the Pyrrhonians claim they are neither Pyrrhonian nor anti-Pyrrhonian. In the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," Montaigne endorses the distinction made by Sextus Empiricus between three classes of philosophers: the dogmatists, the Academic Skeptics (who are dogmatic in a way because they affirm that nothing can be known), and the Pyrrhonians who are the real Skeptics because they refuse

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[38] See *The Question of "Eclecticism"*, edited by John M. Dillon and A. A. Long, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), and Ilsetraut Hadot, "Du bon et du mauvais usage du terme 'éclectisme' dans l'histoire de la philosophie antique," *Herméneutique et ontologie. Mélanges en hommage à Pierre Aubenque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), 147–62.

[39] "Of books," 2:10, 300.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Daniel Babut, "Du scepticisme au dépassement de la raison: philosophie et foi religieuse chez Plutarque," in *Parerga. Choix d'articles de Daniel Babut* (1974–1994) (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient méditerranéen, 1994), 549–81.

to say whether knowledge is possible.[42] Yet, as we have seen before, this favorable presentation of the Pyrrhonian classification relies on numerous references to the main proponent of Academic Skepticism, Cicero. In addition, Montaigne's practice of eclecticism seems very close to what we see in Cicero's *Academica* or Plutarch's *Moralia*. Rather than choosing between the Academics and the Pyrrhonians, Montaigne appears to be more interested in suggesting, somewhat facetiously, that deep down all philosophers are Skeptics, including "the prince of dogmatists," Aristotle: "We see him often deliberately covering himself with such thick and inextricable obscurity that we cannot pick out anything from his opinion. It is in fact a Pyrrhonism in an affirmative form."[43]

The practice of eclecticism is closely related to another point that Montaigne makes over and over: philosophizing is a way of exercising one's judgment (*judicium* or *judicandi potestas*, to use Cicero's vocabulary). Having good judgment is in fact the only thing Montaigne claims to be proud of, but as he puts it facetiously again, this will not win praise from anybody: "The only thing that makes me think something of myself is the thing in which no man ever thought himself deficient: my recommendation is vulgar, common and popular, for who ever thought he lacked sense?"[44]

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPORTANCE OF STYLE

As we have just seen, Montaigne's "incoherence" is a consequence of his following the philosophical method of Cicero and Plutarch, but there are aspects of his "incoherence" that go beyond the method of any particular school and simply come from Montaigne's focus on philosophy as practice and exercise, as opposed to system-building. As Pierre Hadot has shown, using Wittgenstein's vocabulary, ancient philosophy must be understood as a series of language games with specific rules.[45] In particular, one must pay attention to the "literary" aspects of philosophical discourse: the genre, the style, the addressee, the context, and so on. In the case of Montaigne's *Essays*, it seems clear that each essay has its own logic, which is a logic of question and answer: the coherence of each essay comes from the question

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[42] "Apology for Raymond Sebond," 2:12, 371. Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.1.1–4.
[43] "Apology for Raymond Sebond," 2:12, 376.
[44] "Of presumption," 2:17, 498.
[45] Pierre Hadot, *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage* (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 11.

or questions it discusses. However it would be futile to look for an over-arching coherence in the whole work. As Hadot puts it regarding ancient philosophy in general, "each *logos* is a 'system,' but the totality of *logoi* written by a given author does not constitute a system."[46] Some of Montaigne's essays are written for a particular addressee. The essay "Of vanity" belongs to a specific philosophical genre: the examination of conscience. The essay "That to philosophize is to learn to die" is a *meditatio mortis*. The choice of the essay as a genre is in itself philosophically significant, and looking at it in the perspective of philosophy as a way of life may help resolve some of the difficulties scholars had in describing the relationship between Montaigne's *Essays* and earlier forms of gnomic literature such as Plutarch's *Moralia* or Erasmus's *Adages*. Villey noticed the similarities between the *Essays* and earlier humanist collections of *sententiae*, but he emphasized the fact that these collections of moral *topoi* seemed extremely dull and impersonal to the modern reader.[47] He went on to describe Montaigne's literary enterprise as a gradual assertion of originality with respect to these humanist and ancient models. There is no doubt that the *Essays* have a voice that is more personal than anything present in Plutarch or Erasmus. However, Villey's approach overlooks crucial aspects of the ancient and humanist practices of "writing the self." In his analysis of the genre of *hypomnemata* (the art of collecting moral sentences for one's own use) Foucault emphasizes the very *personal* nature of this practice. At the same time, he insists that there is a fundamental difference between this way of writing the self and the "narratives of the self" that can be found in later Christian literature. As Foucault puts it, "it is not a matter of pursuing the unsayable, nor of revealing the hidden, nor of saying the unsaid, but on the contrary of capturing the already-said, or reassembling what one could hear or read, and this for an end than is nothing less than the constitution of the self."[48] What seems paradoxical or even impossible to Villey's post-Romantic understanding of literary originality is clear to Foucault: the practice of *hypomnemata* is both impersonal and very personal. The *topoi* one collects belong to everyone, but they are meant to be appropriated in a uniquely personal fashion. This must be kept in mind in any attempt to analyze Montaigne's voice in the *Essays*.

Each essay is a conversation of Montaigne with himself. There are several layers of text. Therefore, asking what Montaigne's position is on this

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[46] Pierre Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 105.
[47] Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, 2:7–37.
[48] Michel Foucault, "Writing the Self," *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 237.

or that issue is asking the wrong question. As Montaigne puts it in "Of the art of discussion," what you say is less important than how you say it: "We are concerned with the manner, not the matter, of speaking. My humor is to consider the form as much as the substance, the advocate as much as the cause, as Alcibiades ordered we should do."[49] This has sometimes been interpreted as a formalist position,[50] but it is exactly the opposite. What Montaigne means is that "being right" or "saying something true" is useless if those who say the truth do not understand the truth of what they are saying. We must find out *how* they say it in order to find out "how [the truth] is lodged in its author."[51] In the art of conversation, the ultimate test is not a test of truth but a test of wisdom: one wants to find out whether the interlocutor is foolish or wise. This is how one should understand Montaigne's way of reading: "I amuse myself reading authors without any care for their learning, looking for their style, not their subject."[52] It does not mean an indifference to ideas. The "literary" test that Montaigne applies to authors is ultimately a philosophical test. Looking at the "style" or the "manner" is the only way of deciding whether a particular statement is rooted in genuine wisdom.

We can see here that in Montaigne (as in any author in the tradition of philosophy as a way of life) philosophical discourse cannot and should not be separated from its literary form. This appears very clearly in Montaigne's interpretation of other philosophers. In the passage I quoted earlier on Aristotle's obscurity, Montaigne draws philosophical consequences from a stylistic remark: Aristotle is obscure because he does not want to be seen as endorsing any position too clearly. Similarly, Montaigne understands Plutarch's choice of a digressive and allusive style as a choice of philosophical method:

> There are in Plutarch many extensive discussions, well worth knowing, for in my judgment he is the master workman in that field; but there are a thousand that he has only just touched on; he merely points out with his finger where we are to go, if we like, and sometimes is content to make only a stab at the heart of the subject. We must snatch these bits out of there and display them

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[49] "Of the art of discussion," 3:8, 708.
[50] See Jean-Yves Pouilloux, *Montaigne. L'éveil de la pensée* (Paris: Champion, 1995).
[51] "Of the art of discussion," 3:8, 715. See Pierre Force, "Innovation as Spiritual Exercise: Montaigne and Pascal," *JHI* 66 (2005): 17–35.
[52] "Of the art of discussion," 3:8, 708.

properly. Just as that remark of his that the inhabitants of Asia served one single man because they could not pronounce one single syllable, which is "No," may have given the matter and the impulsion to La Boétie for his *Voluntary Servitude*.[53]

Montaigne expresses some ambivalence with respect to Plutarch's allusive style. He begins by expressing his frustration as a reader: "It is a pity that men of understanding are fond of brevity; doubtless their reputation gains by it, but we lose by it."[54] He immediately adds, however, that Plutarch's practice is deliberate: "Plutarch would rather we praised him for his judgment than for his knowledge; he would rather leave us wanting more of him than satiated."[55] Plutarch's allusive style is a sign of his good judgment. Even more importantly, it is a test of the reader's judgment. The reader is challenged to complete the thoughts Plutarch has only outlined or mentioned in passing. La Boétie has met that challenge and shown his good judgment by writing an entire discourse based on a single line by Plutarch.

Of course, what Montaigne says of Plutarch's writing applies to his own. Montaigne's style is deliberately digressive and allusive: "I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness."[56] The title of a given essay is often a pretext to talk about something else: "The titles of my chapters do not always embrace their matter; often they only denote it by some sign."[57] This is consistent with the best philosophical tradition: "I have run my eyes over a certain dialogue of Plato, a fantastic motley of two parts, the beginning part about love, all the rest about rhetoric."[58] The *Phaedrus*, like most of Plato's dialogues, is digressive, and Montaigne suggests that a digressive style is the best suited to the practice of philosophy:

> I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, flighty, daemonic. There are works of Plutarch in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of the subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in foreign matter. See his movements in "The Daemon of Socrates." Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem.[59]

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[53] "Of the education of children," 1:26, 115.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] "Of vanity," 3:9, 761.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

This style of philosophical writing is both an invitation and a challenge. It is seductive because it does not bore the reader by dwelling on a single subject. Speaking of his reader's attention, Montaigne says: "it is all to the good if I chance to arrest it by my embroilment."[60] At the same time this style is puzzling and potentially confusing, but this is a test of the reader's ability to continue and appropriate the thoughts: "It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room."[61] This is why Montaigne demands his reader's full and undivided attention for each essay:

> Because such frequent breaks into chapters as I used at the beginning seemed to me to disrupt attention before it was aroused, making it disdain to settle and collect for so little, I have begun to make them longer, requiring fixed purpose and assigned leisure. In such an occupation, if you will not give a man a single hour, you will not give him anything. And you do nothing for a man for whom you do nothing except while doing something else. Besides, perhaps I have some personal obligation to speak only by halves, to speak confusedly, to speak discordantly.[62]

Notwithstanding the "besides," the two things mentioned in this passage are closely connected: Montaigne's "incoherence" demands a very careful and committed reader. Reading as spiritual exercise requires what the Stoics call *prosoche*, i.e. a soul that is fully awake and vigilant.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN FRIENDS

Ultimately, what the style brings into focus is the author himself, the author as a person. In the "art of conversation," which is also an art of reading, paying attention to the "manner" is a way of getting to know who the interlocutor or the author is as a person:

> He who speaks true can speak as foolishly as he who speaks false; for we are concerned with the manner, not the matter, of speaking. My humor is to consider the form as much as the substance, the advocate as much as the cause, as Alcibiades ordered we should do.

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[60] "Of vanity," 3:9, 762.
[61] "Of vanity," 3:9, 761.
[62] "Of vanity," 3:9, 762.

> And every day I amuse myself reading authors without any care for their learning, looking for their style, not their subject. Just as I seek the company of some famous mind, not to have him teach me, but to come to know him.[63]

This should not be confused with biographical criticism as it is traditionally understood. Indeed, a very common error in standard Montaigne scholarship is to discuss the author of the *Essays* in terms of individual psychology. This can be seen in both Villey and Popkin, who discuss Montaigne's *crise pyrrhonienne* as a traumatic experience. According to this view, reading Sextus Empiricus would have thrown Montaigne into a state of deep anxiety and caused "extreme trauma," to use Popkin's expression. This makes little sense if one recalls that the Pyrrhonian practice of suspending judgment was precisely meant to achieve *ataraxia*, or complete tranquility of the soul. Discussing Montaigne's Skepticism as "his own personal *crise pyrrhonienne*" psychologizes what is a set of spiritual exercises borrowed from the Pyrrhonian school. When Montaigne writes that no human custom is universal, not even the prohibition of incest, one is indeed tempted to see him as depressed or having lost hope in humanity.[64] Yet in this passage Montaigne is not expressing a personal opinion about the prohibition of incest. He is simply rehearsing a Pyrrhonian argument (one of Sextus Empiricus's ten "tropes") that is meant to help suspend judgment.[65]

In biographical criticism, one looks at the author's life in order to make sense of the text. Montaigne's interest in an author's life goes in the opposite direction: from the text to the person. For Montaigne, getting to know the author means being in a position to assess the author's intellectual qualities, particularly the author's judgment. The ideal context for making that determination is a private conversation between friends. This explains Montaigne's intense curiosity for the biography of authors and their private sayings. It makes him claim that Cicero is more interesting in his *Letters to Atticus* than in his public speeches because the letters give us a much better sense of the nature of his soul. What Brutus said in conversations with his friends (known to us through his biography by Plutarch) is more interesting than his lost treatise on virtue would ever be because it is a much better example of his virtue.[66] For Montaigne, it is in little details and in unstudied

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[63] "Of the art of discussion," 3:8, 708.
[64] "Apology for Raymond Sebond," 2:12, 437.
[65] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1:152.
[66] "Of books," 2:10, 302.

behavior that the true nature of someone's soul appears: "I know my men even by their silence and their smiles, and perhaps find out more about them at table than in the council chamber. Hippomachus used to say shrewdly that he knew good wrestlers by seeing them just walk in the street."[67] The focus on the person is apparent in Montaigne's way of reading, even when the biographical information is scare. In "Of the art of discussion," the assessment of Tacitus's history is ultimately an assessment of Tacitus's character, and especially his judgment. While generally praising Tacitus, Montaigne criticizes him for saying that he did not mean to brag when he reported that he had held "a certain honorable office at Rome."[68] Reluctance to talk about oneself shows that one is "a little mean-spirited."[69] On the contrary, "a stout and lofty judgment" shows as much frankness "about itself as about a third party."[70] Consistent with this assertion, Montaigne presents his own judgment as one that passes over "common rules of civility in favor of truth and liberty."[71]

CONCLUSION: PHILOSOPHY AND INTIMACY

Let us go back to the beginning of our discussion. Anderson and Landy, in their account of Nehamas's *Art of Living*, argue that there is a move in Montaigne away from theoretical coherence and toward a coherence of the theorizer. They assert that Montaigne's project is "to present his *own* character as an integrated personality."[72] The coherence of Montaigne's character is *aesthetic* in nature because the sort of unification proper to self-fashioning "has features normally associated with artworks."[73] In order to clarify their point, Anderson and Landy borrow the concept of "postulated author" from Nehamas. Distinct from the traditional notion of authorial intent, the "postulated author" is a regulative ideal designed to give a coherent account of all the features of a given text. Montaigne's life of writing, which is an experiment in the art of living, "requires us as readers to postulate an author with an interesting, admirable, and deeply coherent

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[67] "Of three kinds of association," 3:3, 625.
[68] "Of the art of discussion," 3:8, 720.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Anderson and Landy, "Philosophy as Self-Fashioning. Alexander Nehamas's *Art of Living*," 32.
[73] Ibid., 34.

character."[74] In other words (and this is valid for all philosophers who practice the art of living), "as the philosopher's readers, we feel satisfied that we have attributed the correct meaning to her (possibly ironic) expressions only when we can tell a unified story about who she was and how her features fit together."[75]

This displacement of coherence from the text to the person is characteristic of Foucault's intellectual trajectory. In his famous essay, "What is an author?" Foucault argued that invoking the figure of the author was a way of limiting and circumscribing the potential meanings of a text and the uses it could have for a reader.[76] As Nehamas points out, in the late Foucault, the author comes back as a liberating and empowering figure: if my life can be a work of art, if I can be the author of my own life, then I can decide how my disparate readings and experiences will cohere into a self.[77] In the case of Montaigne's reception, the figure of the author did have a stifling effect. The search for an overall coherence in Montaigne's philosophical opinions did make many interpreters blind to the concrete aspects of his philosophical practice. Is it the case, however, that Montaigne was trying to construct a "self" through the practice of eclecticism?

The Foucault-Hadot debate on the care of the self should be illuminating here. Hadot voiced reservations about aspects of Foucault's interpretation of ancient philosophy. In particular, he disagreed with what he saw as an excessive emphasis on aesthetics as opposed to ethics and physics. In that sense, when Anderson and Landy talk about an aesthetic coherence in the character that Montaigne presents to himself and his readers, they open themselves up to the same criticism that Hadot directed against Foucault. According to Hadot, Foucault's privileging of the aesthetic dimension of the art of living was an anachronistic projection of modern categories, and his take on ancient philosophy was "a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style."[78]

There is some truth to Hadot's critique, yet it is not entirely fair. Foucault did discuss the ethical dimensions of the care of the self, for instance in a 1984 interview on the practice of freedom, in which he described individual freedom in ancient Greece as an issue of *ethos*. As he puts it, "*ethos*

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[74] Ibid., 36.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101–20.

[77] *The Art of Living*, 179.

[78] Pierre Hadot, "Reflections on the Idea of the 'Cultivation of the Self,'" in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.

was one's way of being and one's way of behaving."[79] He adds that "someone's *ethos* can be seen in their attire, in their manner, their gait, the calm they display in responding to events, etc. For them, this is freedom in its concrete form."[80] Foucault's language here could certainly be seen as one example of what Hadot calls his Dandyism, but more profoundly, it shows that in the ancient conception of *ethos*, ethics and aesthetics could not be separated. As we shall see now, the concept of *ethos* is crucial in understanding the sort of coherence that is on display in Montaigne's *Essays*.

Anderson and Landy argue that "the philosopher of the art of living *pressures us*"[81] to tell "a unified story about who she was and how her features fit together."[82] The result of this pressure can be seen in the reception of Foucault's work in recent years: there has been an urge to tell a unified story about Foucault's character, sometimes in a deliberately hagiographic fashion.[83] The process here is similar to what Louis Marin described regarding the biography of Pascal by his sister Gilberte: faced with a work that is fragmentary, unfinished, and ambiguous, the reader is compelled to construct a life that is exemplary and complete.[84] Yet it seems clear (if one may briefly indulge in speculation about authorial intent) that this is not the kind of coherence that Foucault had in mind. As we have seen before, Foucault insists that the practice of *hypomnemata* (notes made by the philosopher for his own use) is to be distinguished from the narratives of spiritual experience that can be found later in Christian literature.[85] The moral coherence that emerges from "writing the self" is not the narrative coherence that can be found in biographies and autobiographies.

In Montaigne's case, the urge "to tell a unified story about who he was and how his features fit together" can of course be seen in Villey's work, which tells the story of the composition of the *Essays* as one of "conquest of personality."[86] Plausible or not, such constructions overlook the type of coherence that is on display in the *Essays* themselves.

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[79] Michel Foucault, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté," in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 4:714.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Anderson and Landy, "Philosophy as Self-Fashioning. Alexander Nehamas's *Art of Living*," 38.

[82] Ibid., 37.

[83] See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Toward a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[84] See Louis Marin, *Pascal et Port-Royal* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 11–70; Pierre Force, "Ecriture fragmentaire et hagiographie: le rôle des textes liminaires dans la réception des *Pensées* de Pascal," *Littératures* 55 (2007): 19–31.

[85] Michel Foucault, "Writing the Self," *Foucault and his Interlocutors,* 237.

[86] Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, 2:91.

In several places in the *Essays*, Montaigne claims to have what Anderson and Landy call a "well-integrated self." In "On repentance," he asserts: "I scarcely make a motion that is hidden and out of sight of my reason, and that is not guided by the consent of nearly all parts of me, without division, without internal sedition."[87] Similarly, in "Of presumption," he claims that he aspires to be admired for "order, consistency, and tranquility of opinions and conduct."[88] He goes on to quote Cicero: "Certainly, if anything is becoming, it is uniformity in our whole lives and in our individual actions."[89] Yet what Cicero calls "uniformity in our whole lives" (*aequabilitas universae vitae*) is something less than the perfect integration of one's soul that is described in Plato's *Republic*. Moreover, when Montaigne makes a claim about being whole and undivided, it is always in the context of a description of his own judgment (an important part of the soul, but not the entire soul). In the first passage I have just quoted from "On repentance," the wholeheartedness comes from the fact that each action is prompted by Montaigne's judgment, and his judgment "takes all the blame or all the praise for it."[90] In the second passage (ending with the quote from Cicero), the discussion is about Montaigne's "capacity for sifting truth"[91] which he claims to owe principally to himself.

How is judgment related to the coherence on one's character? The reference to Cicero is helpful here. As a proponent of eclecticism, or Academic Skepticism, Cicero describes the *ethos* of the eclectic philosopher. This type of philosopher shows "uniformity" in his "whole life" not by always professing the same doctrines, not by achieving Socratic-like integration of his personality, but by having an ironclad commitment to his own intellectual freedom. The coherence is not in the doctrine, it is in the attitude: "Aristippus said that the chief fruit he had gathered from philosophy was that he spoke freely and openly to everyone."[92] Being true to oneself means that personal freedom and intellectual integrity take precedence over doctrinal coherence. For Montaigne, that is the main lesson of Skepticism. Again quoting Cicero, he says of Skeptical philosophers that "the integrity of their judgment (*integra judicandi potestas*) makes them freer and more independent."[93] As he puts it elsewhere, even more briefly, "my feelings change;

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[87] "Of repentance," 3:2, 616.
[88] "Of presumption," 2:17, 499 (Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.31).
[89] Ibid.
[90] "Of repentance," 616.
[91] "Of presumption," 2:17, 499
[92] "Of presumption," 2:17, 492.
[93] "Hoc liberiores et solutiores quod integra illis est judicandi potestas" (*Academica*, 2:3) quoted in "Apology for Raymond Sebond," 2:12, 373. My translation.

my judgment no.''[94] By judgment, Montaigne does not mean the results or productions of one's intellectual activity but its very source.

In the rhetorical tradition, the word *ethos* has a technical sense that is consistent with Foucault's description of *ethos* in general, but more specific in that it focuses on the relationship between speakers and their audiences: *ethos* is the way the speaker presents himself to the audience.[95] Through verbal and physical cues, the speaker points to who he is as a person in order to gain the audience's trust. These cues do not need to add up to a full and complete portrait of the speaker, but they must be coherent enough to achieve their purpose, which is a practical one: making sure that we listen, making sure that we open ourselves up to what the speaker has to say. Helgeson argues that asking whether such and such early modern author had a "self" is not a particularly useful approach, and he proposes to "decouple the investigation of the first-person stance from the problem of 'selfhood.'"[96] As he puts it, "there might be other kinds of models, models of 'outwardness,' derived for example from rhetorical theory, models that might [. . .] constitute alternatives to this talk about the 'self.'"[97] In the case of Montaigne, the rhetorical concept of *ethos* is a useful model because it captures the coherence of the one who says "I" without having to engage in speculation about a depth-structured self.

Montaigne's *ethos* as author of the *Essays* is fundamentally tied to his practice of eclecticism. Pascal gave an especially perceptive account of this when he said that Montaigne's "muddle" was the expression of his desire "to cut a good figure [*il cherchait le bon air*]."[98] The translation is slightly misleading. Pascal does not exactly mean that Montaigne sought to "look good," but rather that he was looking for the right countenance, the right demeanor, or, to borrow a word from Cavell in a different metaphorical register, the right "pitch."[99] Montaigne's love of digression, the freedom he shows in jumping from one author to another who says something entirely different, is both a reflection of natural tendencies and a studied attitude whose main significance has to be apprehended indirectly. It is about having

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[94] "Of presumption," 2:17, 500.

[95] See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 6.2.8–19.

[96] James Helgeson, "Early Modernity Without the 'Self': Notes on Anachronism and the First Person," *Seventeenth Century French Studies* 29 (2007): 38.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966), fragment 780.

[99] Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

a style that says something about oneself; a disjointed style that points to a unified personality, or rather something constant and reliable in one's personality: in this case, an unshakeable commitment to *libertas philosophandi*. According to Naya, the display of an *ethos* is a distinguishing characteristic of Skepticism. Other ancient philosophies, to the extent that they engaged in apodictic reasoning, did not develop an *ethos* because "reason itself does not have a particular face, tone, or pitch."[100] Naya's statement would require abundant qualification, but one thing is certain: a distinctive *ethos* is on display in the *Essays*, and it is the *ethos* of Ciceronian eclecticism.

The "air" that Pascal describes points to a fundamental openness, to a desire and willingness to engage in conversation. A certain air invites conversation as opposed to moral or physical violence[101]: conversation with oneself and others. As Pascal suggested, someone who writes in this way comes across not as an "author" who takes pride in his book, but as a "man" with whom we can talk.[102] The ultimate purpose of conversation is the reconciliation of differences (with oneself and with others), but this reconciliation is never a final product. It is always in the making. In the ancient tradition, the practice of philosophy usually takes place in a pedagogical or therapeutic relationship. In Montaigne, it is a conversation between equals in the welcoming setting of a private home.[103] All the details Montaigne gives us about his physical characteristics, his inclinations, his tastes and distastes, are not aimed at fashioning a "self" in the sense that they would add up to a more or less coherent image or persona. More precisely, they point to a certain way of relating to oneself and others, a way that could be defined as open, trusting, and intimate. Writing about himself candidly and openly, presenting himself in a private setting, is Montaigne's way of drawing the reader into a conversation: "An open way of speaking opens up another man's speech and draws it out, as do wine and love."[104]

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[100] Emmanuel Naya, " 'I Am No Philosopher': Montaigne's Suspension of Philosophical *Ethos*," in *Revelations of Character: Ethos, Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy in Montaigne*, ed. Corinne Noirot-Maguire and Valerie M. Dionne (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 135.

[101] See David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[102] *Pensées*, fragment 675.

[103] See Marc Fumaroli, "Les *Essais* de Montaigne: l'éloquence du for intérieur," *La Diplomatie de l'esprit* (Paris: Hermann, 1994), 125–61.

[104] "Of the useful and the honorable," 3:1, 602.