

## The Transformation of Virtue in Montaigne's *Essays*

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MONTAIGNE BEGINS "OF CRUELTY" with a distinction between virtue and goodness: virtue is "other and nobler than the inclinations toward goodness that are born in us."<sup>1</sup> This is because virtue entails struggle and difficulty, whereas the inclinations are easy to follow. Virtue, then, requires the presence of vicious or evil inclinations that must be mastered and overcome. There is no merit without difficulty. But the matter cannot be left this way because Montaigne thinks of Socrates, the most perfect soul he knows, and he cannot imagine any struggle or difficulty in Socrates's practice of virtue. The same is true of Cato. Here we are at the extreme of virtue where virtue has become natural and has passed beyond the level of ordinary virtue, the essence of which seemed to be struggle. Montaigne describes himself as good or innocent rather than as virtuous: he is incapable of struggle within himself (VS427, F311). Goodness and innocence, when compared to the difficulty of virtue, look weak and imperfect, so that even the terms 'good' and 'innocent' are almost terms of contempt in common usage (VS426, F310).

Just as goodness seems weak, so also the essay is a weak mode of writing when compared with traditional modes of philosophical expression. There are no arguments in the essays and no conclusions in the traditional, strong sense. Montaigne often speaks of the essays as almost contemptible. His ways of being, his *mœurs*, are revealed in a form that is perfectly suited to them. Montaigne must justify his self-revelation because he has no great deeds to tell.

In this paper I will consider the puzzling fact of the self-revelation of this weak man. I will approach both the content and the form of the *Essays* from the perspective set out in the very first words: "This book was written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one. I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory. My powers are inadequate for such a purpose." He concludes "To the Reader" with the consistent admonition: "Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book: it is not reasonable that you employ your leisure on a subject so frivolous and vain" (VS3, F2). From the very beginning, he presents himself as weak: "my powers are inadequate." His weakness, then, is initially set out in terms of two related philosophical issues: final cause and the distinction between public and private.

"To the Reader" is clearly intended as a response to Aristotle: all four Aristotelian causes are brought in, only to be weakened. For Aristotle, the public realm is the master-end, the place of human fulfillment through the exercise of the moral virtues. The public realm is the space of appearances where individuals distinguish themselves by their noble deeds. The most complete manifestation of virtue is the excellent ruler who displays all of the virtues, including practical wisdom or prudence. A public space for the appearance of virtue depends upon a private realm in which the necessities of life are taken care of. The domestic and private, therefore, is the realm of necessity which makes possible the freedom that is the condition for public, political life. Freedom is this freedom from necessity, the freedom to participate fully in the activities of the citizen, activities that constitute human perfection.

Montaigne's end is domestic and private, a weaker end than public service or glory, an end compatible with his "forces." In keeping with his domestic and private end, Montaigne presents himself in his "ordinary" and natural way, as he is "without striving." He does not hide his shortcomings but rather portrays his defects and imperfections. Thus, the posture in which he comes forward to the reader is one between the "studied posture" of the world of public appearance and the nakedness of "the sweet freedom of nature's first laws." The *Essays* are the emergence of this middle, private condition of men into the public realm. They precisely *are* this emergence because he has no heroic deeds to tell.

In presenting himself as he is "without striving," Montaigne is deliberately distancing himself from the principle of final cause as the means for explaining human action. He does not deny that there have been some few men who have directed all of their actions to the same end and have thus achieved the perfection of virtue. Perhaps a dozen or so philosophers have attained this consistency of life, while most men seem to act at random, following the inclination of the moment, moved by the winds of circumstance (VS332, F240). Montaigne seems to differ from this common sort of men only by the fact that his inclinations are consistently good (as he tells us in "Of Cruelty"). It is possible to look at the lives of the few philosophers and see by the appearances that they have directed all of their actions to a single end. But Montaigne's consistency cannot be captured in any rule of any school of philosophy. His actions display an extraordinary freedom and license (VS795, F603).

The essay form matches this appearance of randomness and absence of final cause. It wanders through digressions, hardly keeping to the topic. There seems to be no conclusion at which it is aiming. Here it might be helpful to borrow a distinction from Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Hobbes distinguishes between

two modes of thinking: regulated and unregulated. Regulated thought is a chain of thinking that is given its order by a fixed end. When thought begins to wander, as it always does, the desire for the end brings it back on track. Unregulated thought, on the other hand, is not guided or ordered by desire for an end. There is nothing to bring it back to its path. Nevertheless, unregulated thought does produce a chain of images: one image calls forth another but the sequence of images or thoughts is difficult, if not impossible, to explain.<sup>2</sup> The *Essays* would seem to be some version of unregulated thought. Hobbes's distinction helps us to identify that appearance of randomness as the result of the absence of desire for an end. Just as Montaigne's actions are "without striving," so too his essays display a mode of thought without striving.

These descriptions reveal a decidedly un-Aristotelian understanding of action and thought. The principle of final cause entails the notion that action and thought are actualizations of human potentialities. The potentialities inherent in any species are given by nature and are fixed: the actualization of the highest human potentialities—those for moral action and for thought—constitutes human perfection. Actualization means attaining the end and thus completing or perfecting the form. Hence there are two types of human perfection, the philosopher and the virtuous man who has attained the virtues sufficient for ruling the city. The private realm cannot be the locus of human perfection because it is tied to nothing more than necessity and labor, i.e., to the needs of the body and of life itself. Montaigne's shift from the public to the private is thus a radical break with the classical-medieval tradition that has its roots in Aristotle's account of the intellectual and moral virtues and of human perfection as such.

The distinction between goodness and virtue is drawn most fully and explicitly in "Of Cruelty" where Montaigne describes himself as good and innocent rather than virtuous. As we have seen, he first makes this distinction in terms of what appears to be the essence of virtue, struggle with and mastery over evil inclinations and appetites. He is incapable of struggling within himself and so he is fortunate in having simply been born with no vicious inclinations. His goodness is attributed to his father, his family, his nurse, his earliest education: he is uncertain of its precise cause and origin, but the origin is domestic and private. And goodness actually turns out to be remarkably similar to extreme or perfect virtue in which there is also no longer any struggle with evil or vicious inclinations.

Montaigne's goodness is manifested in what might be called a negative way. He says that virtue is more "active" than goodness: goodness is more apt to avoid evil than to do good (VS422, F306). More specifically, his goodness

is experienced as a horror of vice. Avoidance of evil and horror of vice can be contrasted with the desire for the good that drives the pursuit of virtue in the Aristotelian account of moral perfection. Montaigne has held most vices in horror, he says, since the nursery. His instincts and inclinations are, in some way, inherited, and they are stronger than any countervailing forces, including his own reason (VS427, F311-12).

It is noteworthy that the distinction between goodness and virtue occurs in "Of Cruelty" because it is there that Montaigne identifies cruelty as the "extreme of all vice." It is his goodness and innocence, which he here describes as "extreme softness," that makes him hate cruelty. Horror of vice expresses itself most clearly as hatred of cruelty. Now this claim—that cruelty is the extreme of all vice—amounts to the first step in Montaigne's re-ordering of the vices. For within the classical-Christian tradition, while cruelty is indeed a vice, it is not held to be the extreme of all vice. Montaigne's goodness is distinguished from virtue and has a domestic and private origin. Nevertheless it has an important effect on the ranking of the vices and therefore also on the ranking of the opposing virtues. In this way, goodness emerges into the arena of public life and discourse.

### **The *Essays* and the Tradition**

At the beginning of "Of Drunkenness" Montaigne says that "confusion about the order and measurement of sins is dangerous. . . . Even our teachers often rank sins badly, in my opinion" (VS340, F244-45). If we read the *Essays* with this in mind, we find that, although Montaigne does preserve the classical-Christian catalog of the virtues and vices, he re-orders these virtues and vices in a significant way. I will focus on the two instances of this re-ordering that, in some way, set the limits of the virtues and vices. Montaigne says that cruelty is the extreme of all vice and that truth is the first and fundamental part of virtue. This assertion suggests that the vices are to be ranked in relation to cruelty and that the virtues are to be ranked in relation to truth.

In order to appreciate the significance of Montaigne's re-ordering, it may be useful to consider the place of truth and of cruelty in the traditional account of the virtues and vices. Here I will rely on St. Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the virtues and vices as the expression of the classical-Christian tradition that Montaigne would have in mind when he refers to "our teachers." Aquinas's most extensive discussion of the virtues and vices is found in the second part of his *Summa Theologica*. The *Summa* is divided into three parts: the first treats of God as he is in himself and as he is the beginning of all things; the second treats of the rational creature's movement toward God; the

third treats of Christ, who as man is our way to God. The second part is in turn divided into two parts. The first part of the second part deals with “the last end,” human acts, habits, law, and grace. The second part of the second part deals with the virtues and concludes with Aquinas’s treatment of the acts which pertain to certain states of life. It is important to see this context for Aquinas’s discussion of the virtues: the virtues are an essential aspect of the rational creature’s movement toward God who is the beginning and end of all things and of human beings in a unique way. That is, the virtues are understood in terms of the Aristotelian teaching concerning final cause.

The second part of the second part begins with forty-six questions on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Aquinas proceeds by treating first the virtue itself, then the corresponding gifts of the Holy Ghost, then the vices opposed to the virtue, and finally the precepts from Scripture that are related to the virtue. The discussion of the theological virtues is followed by his treatment of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Thus he preserves the classical structure of the four natural, cardinal virtues as the framework for his discussion of the virtues and vices: all of the virtues and vices are treated in relation to the cardinal virtues.

Aquinas discusses truth and lying under the virtue of justice. Truth is itself a virtue but it is a part of justice. Aquinas explains how this is so: truth, he says, regards “the moral debt, in so far as, out of equity, one man owes another a manifestation of the truth.” In response to the objection that by telling the truth one man does not give another man his due, Aquinas replies: “Since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society. Now it would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth to one another.”<sup>3</sup> The vices opposed to truth are lying, dissimulation or hypocrisy, boasting, and its opposite which is irony (a kind of dissimulation of one’s own good qualities).

Aquinas discusses cruelty under the virtue of temperance, i.e., as a vice opposed to temperance. Specifically, cruelty is opposed to clemency which is the part of temperance that pertains to inflicting punishment. The fact that clemency has to do with punishment suggests that it should be properly treated under justice rather than temperance, and that cruelty, therefore, should be treated under justice, i.e., as excess of punishment. But Aquinas defends the place that he gives to cruelty, the place under temperance and opposed to clemency. In the *sed contra*, he quotes Seneca’s *De Clementia* ii.4: “the opposite of clemency is cruelty, which is nothing else but hardness of heart in exacting punishment.” Cruelty takes its name from *cruditas* (rawness) which indi-

cates a disagreeable and bitter taste. Since “clemency denotes a certain smoothness or sweetness of soul whereby one is inclined to mitigate punishment,” cruelty is opposed to clemency. In his reply to the first objection, he explains further why he opposes cruelty to clemency (which is a part of temperance) rather than to justice. “Just as it belongs to equity to mitigate punishment according to reason, while the sweetness of soul which inclines one to this belongs to clemency: so too, excess in punishing, as regards the external action, belongs to injustice; but as regards the hardness of heart, which makes one ready to increase punishment, belongs to cruelty” (*Summa*, Q.159, A1).

The second article of question 159 addresses the question “whether cruelty differs from savagery or brutality.” In the *sed contra* Aquinas again quotes from Seneca’s *De Clementia* ii.4: “a man who is angry without being hurt, or with one who has not offended him, is not said to be cruel, but to be brutal or savage.” He also distinguishes cruelty from savagery and brutality. He begins by pointing out that the names ‘savagery’ and ‘brutality’ are taken from a likeness to wild beasts. Wild beasts attack man so that they might feed on his body; they are not acting from some motive of justice “the consideration of which belongs to reason alone.” Therefore, savagery or brutality, properly speaking, “applies to those who in inflicting punishment have not in view a default of the person punished, but merely the pleasure they derive from a man’s torture.” That kind of pleasure, Aquinas says, “is not human but bestial.” It results from either evil custom or a corrupt nature. Cruelty, however, “not only regards the default of the person punished, but exceeds in the mode of punishing: wherefore cruelty differs from savagery or brutality, as human wickedness differs from bestiality.” In the reply to the first objection, he opposes savagery and brutality, not to clemency but to “a more excellent virtue, which the Philosopher calls *heroic* or *god-like*,” referring to book 7 of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, where he mentions “heroic and divine” excellence as the opposite of brutishness. That is, Aquinas opposes savagery or brutality to the gift of the Holy Ghost, piety: the brutal is the opposite of the divine.

Like Aquinas, Montaigne sees truth as essential for the possibility of society. “In truth, lying is an accursed vice. We are men and hold together only by our word” (VS36, F23). “Since mutual understanding is brought about solely by way of words, he who breaks his word betrays human society. It is the only instrument by means of which our wills and thoughts communicate, it is the interpreter of our soul. If it fails us, we have no more hold on each other, no more knowledge of each other. If it deceives us, it breaks up all our relations and dissolves all the bonds of our society” (VS666-67, F505).

But Montaigne goes further than Aquinas. He does not subordinate truth to justice but gives it a foundational role: truth is “the first and fundamental

part of virtue" (VS647, F491), and "the first stage in the corruption of morals is the banishment of truth" (VS666, F505). This refusal to subordinate truth to justice suggests that truth, not justice, is the social bond.

Indeed, Montaigne is highly skeptical about the very possibility of human justice. He often points to the inequity of judicial decisions and of the laws themselves. He also has little confidence in human prudence, emphasizing the irresistible power of fortune in human affairs. In his own practice as negotiator between princes, he refuses to lie, preferring to fail in his mission than to dissimulate and betray (VS791-92, F600). By calling into question the possibility of justice and prudence, Montaigne calls into question the traditional structure of the moral life that is grounded in the cardinal virtues.

Aquinas limits the discussion of cruelty to the sphere of punishment. Cruelty thus occurs in the administration of justice, as an excess of punishment. But in opposing cruelty to clemency rather than to justice, Aquinas focuses on that aspect of cruelty that he calls "hardness of heart." On the other hand, by the way he distinguishes cruelty from savagery, he maintains the connection between cruelty and justice. Montaigne does often speak about cruelty with reference to punishment, but he does not limit cruelty to excess of punishment. He would seem to agree with Aquinas in locating the essence of cruelty in hardness of heart, the essence that shows itself in Aquinas's opposing cruelty to clemency. However, by not limiting cruelty to excess of punishment, Montaigne does not make the same distinction that Aquinas makes between cruelty and savagery. That is, Aquinas, by keeping cruelty connected to justice, is able to relegate the pleasure of watching a man's torture to the bestial. Cruelty remains human *because* it retains a relation to justice and reason, whereas the pleasure of watching a man suffer "is not human but bestial."

In "Of Cruelty," Montaigne turns to the topic of cruelty in the administration of justice: "Even the executions of the law, however reasonable they may be, I cannot witness with a steady gaze." He then expresses his own view: "As for me, even in justice, all that goes beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty, and especially for us who ought to have some concern about sending souls away in a good state; which cannot happen when we have agitated them and made them desperate by unbearable tortures" (VS431, F314). If the authorities wish to make the criminal an example of the severity of punishment by doing horrible things to his body, then "these inhuman excesses should be exercised against the shell, not against the living core" (VS432, F315).

But Montaigne is not willing to say that these inhuman excesses are savage or bestial: "Savages do not shock me as much by roasting and eating the bodies of the dead as do those who torment them and persecute them living" (VS430,

F314). In "Of Cannibals" Montaigne recounts the story of the way the cannibals treat their prisoner: they kill him with their swords, then roast and eat him. Montaigne says, "I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own." He thinks there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead (VS209, F155). In "Of Cruelty" he refers to the examples of cruelty that he sees every day in the conduct of the civil wars. The ancient historians show us nothing more extreme than his own experience shows him: "I could hardly be convinced, until I saw it, that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it . . . without enmity, without profit, and for the sole purpose of enjoying the pleasing spectacle. . . . For that is the uttermost point that cruelty can attain" (VS432, F315-16). He then quotes Seneca: "That man should kill man not in anger, not in fear, but only to watch the sight" (*Epistles* xc). Aquinas attributes the pleasure of watching a man's torture to savagery, not to cruelty. For Montaigne, this pleasure is not displaced onto the bestial and savage: it is a *human* possibility.

### Transforming Virtue

The origin of Montaigne's goodness is domestic and private. This goodness, however, results in a re-ordering of the traditional virtues and vices. When the private emerges into the public, the public sphere is transformed according to a new measure of the human good. This transformation might be described as a shift from a hierarchical to a social notion of virtue. Hierarchical elements of the traditional notion of virtue are put aside in favor of what is common. That is why he can say: "I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff" (VS805, F611).

If we consider Montaigne's distinction between goodness and virtue and his break with the traditional account of the virtues, several aspects of this transformation emerge. First, Montaigne's skepticism concerning justice and prudence marks a significant break with the tradition of the four cardinal virtues as the structure of moral life. Justice and prudence are the virtues that are most proper to rulers. Aristotle, for example, regards superiority in prudence or practical wisdom as the chief justification for the rule of one human being over another. Prudence is necessary for the practice of justice for it involves the ability to determine the best way toward the end of political life. Montaigne's skepticism, then, amounts to a questioning of the traditional hierarchy that justifies rule. This hierarchy is replaced by truth as the social bond and by the sympathy that is the source of Montaigne's hatred of cruelty.



Second, Montaigne's portrait of perfect virtue includes the heroic, lofty, and noble virtue of Cato, manifested so clearly in his act of suicide in defiance of the tyranny of Caesar. Montaigne goes so far in his admiration for this extraordinary virtue that he believes that Cato would not have wanted to be deprived of this opportunity for the practice of heroic virtue. "And if his goodness, which made him embrace the public advantage more than his own, did not hold me in check, I should easily fall into this opinion, that he was grateful to fortune for having put his virtue to so beautiful a test" (VS424, F309). The distinction between virtue and goodness is here presented as the contrast between one's own advantage—in this case the perfection of one's own virtue—and the common advantage.

Third, virtue is initially presented as the overcoming of vicious inclinations and appetites after a difficult struggle. That is, virtue appears as mastery. In both extreme perfect virtue and in Montaigne's own goodness there is no element of struggle and mastery. Thus, the virtues and vices are re-ordered in accordance with a model of moral action in which there is no mastery. In particular, the justification for the rule of the strong over the weak is called into question. We can begin to see, then, the meaning of Montaigne's association of goodness with weakness.

Fourth, Montaigne undermines the view that 'savages' and animals are lower on the hierarchy of being than the civilized and learned. The way in which the animals are brought into "Of Cruelty" shows this rejection of natural mastery. Montaigne says that he agrees with the opinions of those who try to show the close resemblance of the animals to us. "Truly I beat down a lot of our presumption and willingly resign that imaginary kingship that people give us over the other creatures" (VS435, F318). This renunciation of kingship reveals a rejection of the traditional idea of hierarchy in which the higher is naturally suited to rule over the lower.

Now we can also begin to see more clearly the significance of the difference between Montaigne and Aquinas on the question of cruelty. Aquinas describes the pleasure at seeing another man suffer as savage and bestial, not as cruel. Montaigne calls this the extreme limit of cruelty, which in turn is the extreme of all vice. Thus, he denies that the savages are beneath us. The way in which Montaigne includes the savages and the animals in his sympathy emphasizes union and society rather than hierarchical division.

What, then, are we to make of the essay form itself? How is it appropriate to this emergence of the private and to this transformation of virtue? Montaigne often insists that the essay is a new mode of expression. The unregulated thought of the essay mode is consistent with Montaigne's repeated

claims that he does not presume to instruct or “form” others, but only to tell what he is. The *Essays* are precisely the emergence of the private into the public because they are the self-revelation of a private man, a common man, who has no great deeds to tell and who makes no claims to rule. They are, at the same time, the self-communication of the author to the reader. In “To the Reader” Montaigne says that his domestic and private goal is to give his relatives and friends the means to nourish the knowledge they have of him. And in “Of Three Kinds of Association” he writes, “My essential form is suited to communication and revelation. I am all in the open and in full view, born for company and friendship” (VS823, F625). The friendship that he shared with La Boétie is characterized as “perfect and entire communication” (VS396, F287-88). The *Essays*, then, manifest the truth that is the social bond and the sympathy that results in his hatred of cruelty.

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*Notes*

1. References to the French text of the *Essais* are to the edition of Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, 3 vols, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992) [VS]. The English translation is that of Donald Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1943) [F]. Here VS422, F306.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), ch. 3.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of Part Two, Q109.A3. Reply to Obj.1.