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The Esoteric Quality of Montaigne's *Essays*: The Essay as a Philosophic Response to Extreme
Forms of Skepticism

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Chapter One: Emerson, Montaigne, and the Philosophical Relevance of Literature

According to Judith Shklar (1990, 611) not only is Montaigne Emerson's hero, but Emerson is the American thinker in whom one finds the greatest understanding and appreciation of Montaigne's *Essays* (see also Shklar 1989). The kinship between Montaigne and Emerson extends beyond the latter's appreciation of the former. Both essayists address the topics of skepticism and the relationship between skepticism and how one ought to live. In doing so, both Emerson and Montaigne speak to the philosophical importance of literature and how one should understand the relationship between literature and philosophy.

Emerson lays out his understanding of skepticism by presenting Montaigne as the "wise" skeptic (Emerson 1910, 7). Emerson asks one to consider if "we [shall] say that Montaigne has spoken wisely and given the right and permanent expression of the human mind on the conduct of life" (Emerson 1910, 7). The question of how one ought to live is central to both Emerson and Montaigne. In particular, Emerson uses Montaigne to raise the question of how one should understand the relationship between the skepticism embodied by Montaigne and how one ought to live. In turn, he asks his readers to consider the relationship between [wise] skepticism and the proper conduct of their own life. As for how one is to go about answering this question, Emerson follows the example of Montaigne and points to the essay and the art of essaying.

As an American essayist writing within the transcendental movement that permeated intellectual life in the nineteenth century, Emerson chooses to essay his thoughts for the purpose of creating his own, nonconformist view of the world. His purpose for writing, is parallel to Montaigne's. Neither Montaigne nor Emerson writes to persuade their audience about objective

truth; rather they essay to create their personal understandings of their own experiences and, in turn, to understand themselves as individuals better than they once had.

The assessment of the relationship between the thought of Montaigne and Emerson makes clear that both writers have the goal of increasing the likelihood of human and social reform. This common concern speaks to the inherent philosophic quality of both authors. According to scholar, Lee Trepanier (2020, 5), “From an initial position of censorship and subordination to a revival of equal status, to philosophical reason, literature has been viewed by modern and postmodern philosophers as being more in touch with reality than the ‘artificiality,’ of science” and by doing so it can “point to ways to reorganize society in a more just and humane way.” While a single act of essaying clearly cannot bring about reform in society, the act has the ability to bring about reform to the soul and ultimately change the ways in which one thinks. Self-knowledge, to both essayists, lays the framework for human reform and bettering human nature’s world view.¹ In order to achieve this betterment, skepticism is a requirement for

¹ Human nature inevitably focuses on external matters, contributing to man’s lacking, “unity, and lies broken in heaps,” to him being “disunited with himself” (Barkalow 2014, 137). Emerson looks to Montaigne’s work as a guide on how man can become reunited with himself by looking inward. While modern reformists aim to better the external matters of the society we live in, it is clear that “Emerson is critical of the nature of their reform as they miss the proper object of genuine reform—the individual soul” (Barkalow 2014, 138). Emerson calls for education as the means for which human reform is possible, however, when diverging opinions and conformity become apparent in a learning environment, “this consequence of skepticism contributes to the breakdown of man. It becomes possible to combat this when one recognizes that “what we do not call education is more precious than what we call education” (Barkalow 2014, 139). The education that Emerson invokes is a type of moral education, where skepticism can be thoughtfully and appropriately exercised, which speaks to Montaigne’s influence on Emerson. Reading Montaigne through an Emersonian perspective, allows the reader to take into consideration how these texts influence the way in which we perceive the world. Essaying provides one with the educational value that Emerson speaks so highly of, in hopes of creating a reform in the ways that we reject or conform to public opinion.

a good essayist to perform his/her work properly. An understanding of Emerson's view of the relationship between the essay and skepticism in Montaigne provides one with a testable hypothesis for a reading of Montaigne's *Essays* and for understanding the relationship between the essay and skepticism/philosophy more generally.

Emerson provides insight into his understanding of the relationship between skepticism and how one ought to live in his account of human nature as a penny. He contends that humans are composed of two natures resembling that of a coin toss and that "Life is a pinching of this penny--heads or tails" (Emerson 1910, 3). Each face of the coin is part of the whole, which to Emerson reflects the human being. Emerson writes that the individual,

never tire[s] of this game, because there is still a slight shudder of astonishment at the exhibition of the other face, at the contrast of the two faces...Each man is born with a predisposition to one of the other of these sides of nature; and it will easily happen that men will be found devoted to one or the other (Emerson 1910, 3).

Emerson's concern that people will devote themselves to one side of the coin and not the other suggests that Emerson is concerned by the lack of harmony that characterizes the human condition. For Emerson, human nature is composed of two sides—the nihilist on one end and the dogmatist on the other. Whereas the nihilist may believe there is no truth, and the dogmatist holds a strict belief that one on their side holds truth, Emerson argues that neither thinks properly and, consequently, cannot live properly. According to Emerson, only the "wise" skeptic is able to live properly—by neither accepting nor rejecting, but instead questioning each position to form his/her own view.² Although there will always be converging

² Emerson's "wise" skepticism can be viewed as an alternative to the skepticism he associates with David Hume. Robert Richardson (1995) argues that Emerson follows key Scottish thinkers (Adam Smith, Thomas Brown, Thomas Reid, and especially Dugald Stewart) in struggling with Hume's perceived extreme skepticism. Worried that Hume's skepticism leads to nihilism, Emerson and these Scottish thinkers employ the concept of the moral sense as a source of human

and diverging direction in which human thought can go, Emerson attempts to reconcile these concerns through a form of “wise” skepticism and the act of essaying—holding Montaigne in high regard on the matter. Moreover, while reading Emerson, it is understood that the thought embodied by the skeptic, is not the thought process that individuals may entirely want, but the one human nature needs in order to live happily and construct a realistic philosophical view of life.

On what this skeptical philosophic view looks like, Emerson contends that the “right ground of the skeptic” is one that is “of considerations, of self-containing; not at all of unbelief; not at all of universal denying, nor of universal doubting, --doubting event that he doubts; least of all, of scoffing and profligate jeering at all that is stable and good” (Emerson 1910, 4). The skeptic does not, therefore, identify himself with any strict perception of the world; he does not follow any specific dogma, nor does he disbelieve of any truth—he simply admits to not knowing and allows himself to ask what he can and cannot know. In his *Essays*, especially the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne grapples with the question of how one ought to live. Similar to the dichotomy between the nihilist and the dogmatist that Emerson presents, Montaigne presents the dichotomy of the particular and the universal; i.e. to refer to the particular is to refer to the experiences that human have access to, whereas the universal experience, otherwise known as the “general,” is experiences that are simply meant for the divine, and not for human nature.³ While one cannot experience the universal/general, essaying

meaning (see Von Cromphout 1999, 17). For an alternative view suggesting that Emerson’s and Hume actually have quite a bit in common see Buell (2003) and Dolan (2009).

³ In Montaigne’s essay entitled, *Of Prayers*, he writes, “I may be wrong, I do not know; but since by a particular favor of divine goodness a certain form of prayer has been prescribed and dictated to us word for word by the mouth of God, it has always seemed to me that its use should be more ordinary with us than it is” (Montaigne 1958, 229). In this essay, Montaigne critiques how the individual feels as though they have a connection to God through speaking prayers out loud.

can bring us closer to the general through an analysis of our particular experiences. For instance, Montaigne seems to write about various, even random, topics in a single essay—encompassing his thoughts towards a particular experience or thought on other’s experiences. Through the act of essaying, Montaigne brings balance to the two sides of Emerson’s “coin” i.e., when writing, the individual is able to find what experiences have in common with one another, and by the end of this reflection, one may recognize that one may have been wrong about the latent, general concept. Essaying allows Montaigne to question and to come to terms with the world by exercising his skepticism in a healthy way that improves his own life. Emerson recognizes this possibility when he writes, “The abstractionist and the materialist thus mutually exasperating each other, and the scoffer expressing the worst of materialism” whereas, the skeptic, “finds both wrong by being in extremes” (Emerson 1910, 3). In rejecting the extremes of nihilism and dogmatism, Emerson finds in the skepticism of Montaigne the philosophy man needs in order to lead a happy life. In order to achieve this, man must thoughtfully question his own experiences and what they mean in a skeptical manner. Given the problem of particular experience and its consequences for understanding anything outside of our own experience, it seems to that the only path to knowledge, no matter how limited, lies within each person and the key to this has to be the essay.

Recognition of this way of thinking is the fundamental reason for why Emerson holds Montaigne out as the representative skeptic. He writes, “But though we are natural conservers

Further, he writes of how, “We pray out of habit and custom or to speak more correctly, we read or pronounce our prayers. All in all, it is only an act” (Montaigne 1958, 231). Montaigne critiques the particular’s relationship to the universal and how pointless our outward attempts to become one with the universal are. Fundamentally, Montaigne lends credence to the act of essaying, i.e., by turning ourselves inward, whether it is prayer or essaying, we cannot gain full access to the Divine, but we can gain a limited sense of it through knowing our worth and purpose as individuals.

and causationists, and reject a sour, dumpish unbelief, the skeptical class, which Montaigne represents, have reason, and every man, at some time belongs to it” (Emerson 1910, 8). Emerson’s use of “every man” in this passage is important because it allows one to connect this to the title of his text, *Representative Man*. The various examples provided in the text represent different aspects or qualities of all humans. In this sense, they are representative, and Emerson’s emphasis on representation speaks to an underlying democratic sensibility. Thus, when looking at his public speaking, the creation of *The Dial*, and his choice to write predominantly in the essay format, one is presented with evidence suggesting that for Emerson and possibly other essayists there is a connection between the essay, as a mode of writing, and larger, democratic principles of political theory.⁴

This is not to say, however, that an understanding of Montaigne is the same thing as an understanding of Emerson and vice versa. Montaigne and Emerson differ in their views toward faith, yet both recognize that faith plays a role in placing limits on skepticism and protection from extreme lines of thought. While Montaigne does not believe that we are ever going to reach an understanding the Divine fully, as living individuals who practice religious beliefs, Emerson attributes himself to a more robust sense of religion—that of the moral sense.⁵ Emerson believes that the individual can gain more access to the Divine through our experience and our intuitive sense of right and wrong. In contrast, Montaigne would reject the idea of the moral sense as a constituent element of human self-understanding. Alan Levine

⁴ This possibility is further warranted by the fact that both Emerson and Montaigne address key concepts of political theory in their work. Emerson, for example, speaks to the nature of equality and the evil of slavery in his Anti-Slavery writings while Montaigne is long recognized as one of the key figures on the topic of religious toleration.

⁵ The moral sense can be understood as a moral faculty that serves as a source of moral authority.

discusses Montaigne's use of "self-knowledge," and while some truths are out of our earthly grasp, he claims that Montaigne recognizes "that human beings can possess the essence of moral truth and that they cannot know anything at all" (Levine 2001, 5). Emerson, as a later essayist, does more than simply uncover what Montaigne invokes within his essays.⁶ Emerson's reliance on the moral sense in addition to his skepticism changes how one should think about skepticism. By marrying the moral sense to skepticism, Emerson suggests that skepticism by itself is not capable of providing moral evaluations. In contrast, Montaigne's reliance on skepticism alone suggests that inherent to his understanding of skepticism is a moral quality. Alan Levine speaks to this in his account of Montaigne's moral skepticism. According to Levine, the moral skeptic assumes a more tolerant viewpoint than other by "being able to give a non-transcendent reason why one should not follow one's will wherever it may take one" (Levine 2001, 15). What differentiates Emerson from Montaigne is the former's reliance on something transcendent (the moral sense) to give meaning to life whereas the latter recovers the ancient (Platonic) understanding of moral skepticism (see Levine 2001, 145-50).⁷ For Montaigne and the ancients, morality and skepticism are intertwined and cannot be divorced. Consequently, the act of

⁶ Before his collection of essays, Montaigne writes in his note, *To the Reader*, that within his book, "[he] has set [himself] no goal but a domestic and private one" without a thought of, "serving you (the reader) or [his] own glory" (Montaigne 1958, 2). This note written in 1580, was produced after he had written the essays in his collection. He recognizes that his purpose was not to appease the public with his work, but to write with the intention of uncovering who he is as an individual. Through essaying, his moral sense becomes restored, as he recognizes that although his thoughts may not be in the, "world's favor," his turning inward allows him to find fulfillment in what he observes through the particular.

⁷ According to this view, the Socratic word for inquiry (*Skepsis*) requires one to question an argument's logical connections and relations to the world of the most comprehensive questions regarding human experience (see Plato *Gorgias* 487e & *Laws* 636d; Xenophon *Oeconomicus* vi 13).

essaying is itself a moral act. As such, essaying would seem to serve a fundamentally philosophic purpose.

On the Relationship between Literature and Philosophy

Taking up the relationship between literature and philosophy, Martha Nussbaum argues that it is necessary to bring literature back into the philosophic fold by showing that the novel provides philosophic insights not available to traditional philosophic treatises. She concludes the opening of *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990, 3) with the following observation: "Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth." In advancing this thesis, Nussbaum seeks to recover the ancient sensibility that philosophy and literature engaged in a common enterprise. Based on her reading of the tension between philosophy and the poets found in Plato's *Republic* and her interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Nussbaum maintains that philosophers and poets (broadly understood) were engaged in a common "educational and communicative activity" focused on improving the human soul (Nussbaum 1990, 16). Lee Trepanier (2020, 8) characterizes Nussbaum's objective in terms of the ability of literature to help "citizens develop the capacity for sympathy and empathy for others, leading to values of solidarity and tolerance with are required for democratic self-governance." In order to recover and develop these building blocks of democratic governance, Nussbaum reminds her reader that it is necessary to understand the central place of form to larger, ethical questions.

In order to recapture this understanding, Nussbaum points to ancient philosophy. The ancients, in Nussbaum's reading, believed that "some of the most interesting and urgent questions about literary form itself could not be well pursued unless one asked about the intimate connections between formal structures and the content they express" (Nussbaum 1990, 22).

Thus, Aristotle places greater importance on poetry than history. He writes: “For this reason too poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history, since poetry speaks more of things that are universal, and history things that are particular. It is what is universal, the sorts of things that a certain sort of person turns out to say or do as a result of what is likely or necessary that poetry aims at” (*Poetics*, 1451b 5-10). Accordingly, poetry and other forms of literature speak to the nature of universal things because they have the effect of transporting the reader from one’s “confined and . . . parochial” experience to one where the reader must reflect and feel “what might otherwise be too distant a feeling” (Nussbaum 1990, 47). Nussbaum’s primary objective in writing *Love’s Knowledge* is to bring literature back into the philosophic fold, but in doing so she points to a large number of future research projects.⁸

While Nussbaum’s argument for the philosophical value of the novel is persuasive, her argument is limited to the novel. She does not take up the philosophic value of other literary forms. This thesis extends Nussbaum’s argument for the philosophic value of literature by looking at a literary form not considered by Nussbaum—the essay. The essay, as a literary form, originates with Montaigne (1533-1592). The word “essay” comes from the French word *essayer* meaning “to attempt” or “to try” (Levine 2001, 26). Unlike a philosophic treatise, or even a novel, the essay is meant to serve as a way to confront truths, allowing the reader and writer of the essay to have their own perspective (Levine 2011, 228). By placing these perspectives in dialectic opposition, Montaigne “provokes introspection” on the part of the reader by forcing the reader to consider their position on certain questions and the reasons for why one holds a particular position (Levine 2001, 5). To the extent that essaying has the effect of returning

⁸ See also Nussbaum 2000; and for a complimentary, but slightly different perspective see Booth 1988.

readers to their selves, Montaigne's fundamental philosophic contribution can be said to consist of his idea "of an evanescent self"; that is, a conception of the self that that is forever evolving and changing points of views and decisions (Levine 2011, 251). In his understanding of a self that perpetually evolves and changes, Montaigne provides his reader with insight into his second philosophic contribution—skepticism.

At the heart of this project is a concern with the relationship between the essay and philosophy. To get at this relationship, an initial focus of Montaigne's understanding of the relationship between the essay and skepticism is necessary. The centrality of this relationship has already been suggested by the account of Emerson's Montaigne as the representative skeptic in *Representative Man*. Primarily, what will be discussed in greater detail is the manner and extent to which the essay and the act of essaying facilitate the philosophically important goal of developing a healthy form of skepticism that avoids the extremes of nihilism and dogmatism. As such, to a considerable degree, this project builds on the research of Levine (2001 and 2011). According to Levine (2001, 2), Montaigne finds the primary source of intolerance in the "unruliness of or imbalance" of the human mind. My concern with the extremes of nihilism and dogmatism raises the possibility that these are the primary sources of the "unruliness" and "imbalance." To get at Montaigne's understanding of these relationships, the second chapter of this thesis provides a close textual reading of Montaigne's longest essay, *The Apology for Raymond Sebond*. The *Apology* presents Montaigne's most comprehensive account of the limits of human reason (Fontana 2008, 12). Thus, in beginning my study with the *Apology*, I am able to establish Montaigne's skeptical foundation. This is important because the key to reading and interpreting the "moral and political" program of a skeptic like Montaigne is to find his starting point, or the thing he does "not doubt" (Levine 2011, 251). Equipped with this understanding, I

test for the presence of Montaigne's skeptical foundation in his account of faith. The possibility of testing in this way is suggested by Fontana (2008, 12), who contends that when one is able to connect the *Apology* to the "variety of social and ethical issues" found in Montaigne's other essays, one gains insight into his "eminently practical scope." In other words, by testing the relationship between Montaigne's skepticism and what he says on other topics one is provided with a clear sense of his understanding of the relationship between philosophy or ethics on the one hand and particular literary form, the essay, on the other.

Montaigne's *Essays* present a unique interpretive challenge. In large measure, the challenge is a consequence of the fact that the *Essays* appears to lack unity (Levine 2011, 228-229). Montaigne's style presents one with another set of issues. Rejecting the conventional seriousness of philosophic expression, Montaigne's writing is "freewheeling, unsystematic, irreverent, and fun. In short, it is likely that many 'serious' scholars have ignored him for precisely the reasons he has been loved by his readers" (Levine 2001 26). Combining these two sets of difficulties, the response of Montaigne's contemporaries to his *Essays* is instructive. According to Fontana (2008, 3), they harbored "the uneasy feeling that the writer's real intention eluded them, thus promoting the tenacious legend of his ambiguity and duplicity" (see also Gauna 1989). If correct, what is needed when interpreting Montaigne is a methodological approach that allows one to come to terms with his esoteric or hidden teaching.

Such an approach is provided by Leo Strauss in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1988). Strauss' method requires three things from the reader: 1) that they suspend all personal judgment, 2) only understand terms and phrases as the author defines them, and 3) do not rely on external information to understand the primary text. In addition, students employing the Straussian method should grasp the difference between an author's exoteric (direct) and esoteric

(indirect) meaning and understand why philosophers sometimes choose to write covertly (see also Melzer 2014). Strauss believes an indirect dialogue affords the author a few things: protection from persecution, a way to express knowledge without exposing it as opinion, and an access to students interested in philosophical education. For Strauss, philosophical education is not about forcing students one way or the other but guiding them toward the truth step-by-step. This approach to reading Montaigne is suggested by Levine (2011, 230) who, in speaking to the dialectic quality of Montaigne's *Essays*, contends that Montaigne aims "to initiate a reflective thought process in the reader, with the latter [the reader] being what proves the claim of the former [the text]."

Where Levine's account of the philosophic importance of the essay is understood in the shadow of Nietzsche and his challenge for the justification of moral preferences, this project considers the implication of Montaigne's understanding of the philosophic importance of the essay in a different direction. In particular, I contrast Montaigne's understandings of the essay as a means of generating a healthy form of skepticism as a necessary condition for reforming the self with the understanding(s) of the essay's philosophic importance as understood by Sir Francis Bacon. The first step in this direction is to determine the nature of Montaigne's understanding of the essay's philosophic importance.

Chapter Two: Montaigne on Skepticism, Faith, and the Purpose of the Essay

Montaigne began writing his *Essays* in 1572, and over the twenty years leading up to his death managed to write three books, collectively making up about one thousand pages. Addressing various topics, the *Essays* are characterized by a lack of organization. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to the ordering of the essays and the essays themselves can be characterized by their lack of organization. Montaigne often shifts his perspective within the same essay leading him to contradict what was previously said in the same essay as well what was said in a previous essay. In the twenty years Montaigne devoted to writing his essays, he never actually removed anything he had written. He only made additions to what was contained. In doing so, Montaigne is able to develop his thought by laying out all of the permutations his thinking goes through on a particular topic. Thus, it really cannot be said that Montaigne's *Essays* are inconsistent or random as the purpose of essaying for Montaigne focuses on the development of the self. As argued in this chapter, key to accomplishing this task is the development of the appropriate, or to use Emerson's phrase a "wise" skepticism.

Montaigne provides his understanding of skepticism in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (hereafter *Apology*). In his *Apology*, Montaigne develops a humanistic approach towards Christianity.⁹ He recognizes the absolute importance of the "divine and miraculous metamorphosis," brought about through a devout faith in the Divine. At the same time,

⁹ Humanism is the set of philosophic principles relating to the improvement of the human condition on earth. A humanist is one who does not merely base an argument solely from the revelations from a supernatural source, but one who aids in the progression of human understanding on earth. Montaigne questions the value of the opinion's individuals acquire and offers his solution in how to improve the intolerance permeated his own life in 16th century Europe. Within *Montaigne's Politics: Authority and Governance in the Essais*, Biancamaria Fontana defines Montaigne's character as "humanistic" (Fontana 2008, 2).

Montaigne is able to ascertain the flaws of all believers, and non-believers. Both, according to Montaigne, adhere to the opposite of God's intended image; an intolerant, and opinionated world (Montaigne 1958, 457). Not only is Montaigne writing during a time of religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants, but he is also writing at the time where religious thinkers, like Sebond, are attacked by advocates of science and philosophy on the grounds that only through the application of reason is knowledge possible, and thereafter, human happiness and the perfection of man. Through a defense of Sebond against two primary criticisms, Montaigne seeks to reveal the true foundation of Christianity while at the same time revealing the limits of human understanding. It is necessary, first, to identify Montaigne's thoughts on reason. As indicated in the previous chapter, the key to interpreting a skeptic like Montaigne is identifying what he does not doubt. This allows one to test for the role played by Montaigne's skepticism in other essays and on other topics. Here, the focus is on Montaigne's understanding of faith as an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and faith should reveal Montaigne's thoughts on human nature. This, in turn, provides one with insight into Montaigne's thoughts on the limitations and possibilities of human life and his reply to the philosophic question of how one ought to live. Montaigne's skepticism extends beyond the self and informs his argument for religious tolerance. Thus, while the essay and essaying primarily serve the purpose of self-cultivation, Montaigne indicates that one of the consequences of essaying is that better self-understanding may potentially serve a larger, social good.

In order to grasp a full understanding of Montaigne's skepticism, the first part of this chapter lays out Montaigne's understanding of reason, knowledge, and faith. Throughout the *Apology*, it is clear that Montaigne does not denounce a particular way of thinking as wrong, but merely points out where they are inconsistent with other ways of thinking. He does this by

expressing their incorrectness—mainly within their own self-knowledge. For instance, he speaks of the atheist who “by the reason of their judgement, that what is said about hell and future punishments is fiction. But when the chance to test this is offered as old age or illnesses bring them near death, the terror of it fills them with a new belief through horror at their coming condition” (Montaigne 1958, 325). Here, while Montaigne does not reject atheism, he is clear that the atheist’s lack of faith has the effect of disregarding a complete acknowledgement of one’s true self, which Montaigne believes should be held in high regard. The second section of the chapter assesses Montaigne’s understanding of the relationship between these concepts while the third section considers the implication of these relationships for Montaigne’s views on human nature. Cumulatively, these two sections provide how Montaigne takes a skeptical position regarding human nature and our capacity for knowledge. As shown in the final two sections, this skepticism informs both Montaigne’s argument for religious toleration and his understanding of how the act of essaying fosters both self-understanding and tolerance.

Montaigne’s Defense of Sebond

At the beginning of the *Apology*, Montaigne levels each argument made against Sebond’s *Natural Theology*, within his “Defense” of each. He begins with the first criticism made against Sebond which is, “Christians do themselves harm in trying to support their belief by human reasons, since it is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace” (Montaigne 1958, 321). Here, Montaigne is critical of those who try to place the foundation of Christianity on both faith and reason. Like Sebond, Montaigne holds the position that faith alone is the true foundation of Christianity and while there is merit in bringing reason to bear on religious matters, the value lies not in what reason reveals about religion, but in what religion reveals about the limits of human reason. In his defense, Montaigne contends that “faith alone

embraces vividly and surely the high mysteries of our religion,” but that this way of thinking is, “not a very fine and laudable enterprise” to rely on (Montaigne 1958, 321). Human nature is made in God’s image; therefore, Montaigne believes it to be inevitable that we are always bound to use reason as a “human tool” (Montaigne 1958, 321). To understand faith is to question and interpret Scripture in one’s own way. Montaigne’s analysis of the first criticism aligns with a relativist approach, i.e., applying reason to spiritual belief is dependent on the reader’s interpretation. According to Montaigne, it is possible, within limits, for an individual to apply reason in search of truth. However, in accepting the limits of reason and human knowledge, the individual must overcome certain aspects of human nature, especially human vanity.¹⁰

Montaigne also warns that while we should accompany our faith with reason, we must also have the “reservation, not to think that it is on us that faith depends, or that our efforts and arguments can attain a knowledge so supernatural and divine” (Montaigne 1958, 322). Despite being a Christian himself, Montaigne rejects the practice of other Christians during this time who “accord to piety only the services that flatter [their] passions” and who, consequently, are bound to the confines of “hostility . . . avarice and rebellion” when they should, according to their dogma, be filled with “goodness and moderation” (Montaigne 1958, 324). It is clear that while Montaigne remains a devout Catholic, he rejects the hostile nature between the Protestant and

¹⁰ Montaigne describes vanity from St. Augustine’s perspective, who defines it as a “mental for. . . weighing down the soul, while the earthly tabernacle oppresses the much pondering mind” (Montaigne 1958, 330). In other words, vanity oppresses the mind to see what is true, and as a result, pride may “cast man aside from the common ways, that makes him embrace novelties and prefer to be the leader of an erring troop that has strayed from the path of perdition” (Montaigne 1958, 368). In short, human nature is ultimately corrupted in how we perceive ourselves. Our vanity and pride distances us from truth and exceed our ability to reason properly. A fuller treatment of the negative consequences of vanity and their implication for human understanding is provided below. Further, the discussion of essaying speaks to how one might employ essaying to combat these problems.

Catholic sects of Christianity and calls for reform in those who apply reason to spiritual matters. While it is in God's image to do so, human nature applies reason beyond its limits and, with that being said, an interpretation of religion becomes dogma where it should be purely individualistic.

Montaigne's perceives knowledge as only possessing truth when perfected by God. In his second defense of Sebond, against the criticism of those who say that Sebond's argument is "weak and unfit to prove what he proposes," Montaigne becomes skeptical, not of Sebond's arguments, but of those who refute his arguments and believe they are correct (Montaigne 1958, 327). He writes of how people are "prone to apply the meaning of other men's writings to suit opinions they have previously determined in their minds" (Montaigne 1958, 327). In other words, people interpret works, especially the Bible, not in light of what the works themselves say or reveal, but in light of the ideas and opinions we already have. People impose meaning on texts and this not only leads to misinterpretation, but more importantly for Montaigne, explains why religion has strayed from its proper foundations. One sees this in Montaigne's thoughts on the relationship between the individual and the Bible. Whereas the *Bible* instructs one to believe he or she is created to live within God's image, Montaigne is skeptical of human nature's ability to do so.¹¹ To Montaigne, the ability to reason is inherent within human nature, yet when limits are not placed on our ability to do so, human nature becomes unhappy, corrupt, and at war. Human vanity, for instance, is what corrupts man's sense of knowledge. Montaigne employs this idea in the section, "Man is No Better than Animals," where he argues that it is due to human vanity that we perceive humankind as having dominance over animals. Given human nature's innate capacity to reason, it is by our vanity, "that man equals himself to God, attributes himself to

¹¹ "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27).

divine characteristics, picks himself out and separates himself from the horde of other creatures” (Montaigne 1958, 331). In theory he believes that animals should have “superiority” over humans, as he describes man as “one of the most vulnerable and frail of all creatures” (Montaigne 1958, 330 & 333). According to Montaigne, the current state of nature is a result of man’s incorrectness, equating his reason to the truths that only the Divine has access to. While humans are apt to reason for themselves, Montaigne’s skepticism on human nature is informed when human nature promotes their reason too far and subsequently furthers one’s pride in believing they are capable of all knowledge. Not only do we set ourselves apart from God’s creatures, but we liken ourselves to God, in thinking we are more powerful than a beast. In holding the position that man is superior to animals, man inverts what the Bible teaches about the fallen man, and imperfect in the image of God. Consequently, man begins to view himself in Divine terms, and rather than being created in God’s image, man begins to create God in his own image. Vanity does not allow one to exercise true judgement but allows one to make assumptions on what is true out of pride, and without reasoning. Moreover, it is human nature that corrupts itself by misusing the gift reason to heighten its capacity to having higher powers over beasts. More importantly, man does something similar to those who do not share the same opinion as he does.

In his defense of Sebond, Montaigne expresses his perspective as a skeptic to those who refute Sebond and dogmatic theology itself. As a skeptic, he essays to seek an inward solution to the problems he assesses within the Church and within those who may find their opinions to matter more than others. Recognizing man’s inability to live out what the Bible teaches, he suggests that vanity is at the root of the problems occurring during the time of the Reformation. In the next section of this chapter, an evaluation of Montaigne’s place in philosophy is crucial to

how the act of essaying plays a crucial role in his defense of Sebond. By laying out the issues he finds within human nature, Montaigne begins to come to terms with how he can provide counsel to those living through the Protestant Reformation and bring about tolerance through the judgement that those like Sebond are confronted with.

Montaigne's Critique of Philosophy

In addition to his defense of Sebond, Montaigne dismantles the thought process of those who claim they are most knowledgeable and most apt to critique Sebond: philosophers. Within the section entitled, "Man's Knowledge Cannot Make Him Happy," Montaigne points to ignorance, as opposed to knowledge, as the foundation of happiness. Although he suggests that learning is, "necessary for life," he contends that, "a greater number of excellent men will be found among the ignorant than among the learned" (Montaigne 19548, 359). When one accepts ignorance as an inherent human characteristic, Montaigne believes that we consequently acquire tranquility through simplicity—simple happiness and pursued knowledge that we accumulate living a humble, tolerant life. Most philosophers, according to Montaigne, are incorrect given their reason in forming their arguments on life is informed by their memories. He writes, quoting Euripides, "philosophy gives to keep in our memory only past happiness, and to efface from it the troubles we have suffered; as if the science of forgetfulness were in our power," and views this as problematic to human knowledge, given that "memory sets before us, not what we choose, but what it pleases" (Montaigne 1958, 365). To Montaigne, the fundamental problem with philosophy, and philosophic dogma for that matter, has to do with philosophers writing out of experience and memories. Not having any practical idea of what is to come out of the "irresolution, uncertainty, grief, superstition, . . . war, falsehood, disloyalty, detraction, and curiosity" that will occur within the world; the philosopher's passions become stirred, without

actually proving any truth on what is to come (Montaigne 1958, 358). Instead of informing one's reason, as they aim to do, philosophers undermine one's self-knowledge in order to conform with a specific philosophic theory. Further, the philosopher, with the exception of Socrates, vainly assumes that experience and knowledge is universal. Montaigne's primary limitation on human reason is recognizing that reason is not likely to be universal in nature because the foundation of knowledge and individual experience cannot be generalized. Neither is it the case that one actually has a firm grasp of an experience given the fact that one's senses can be deceived. Consistent with the ideals of enlightenment philosophy, Montaigne emphasizes that in order to live happily, one must accept the unknown for what it is. Those who cannot accept this have "so much propensity to madness" and shift into "sickness of thought" (Montaigne 1958, 363).

Despite his skepticism, Montaigne's foundation for thinking relies on faith as the basis for improving the human condition. In order to have faith in God, one must accept ignorance as an inherent quality of human nature; i.e. accepting that no one has the answers to certain complex, spiritual and philosophical concepts.¹² All one can know about God is present in His Word, and His first law suggesting "pure obedience; it was a naked and simple commandment about which man had nothing to know or discuss" (Montaigne 1958, 359). The first temptation, by the devil, according to Genesis 3:5, was "For God knows that when you eat of [the fruit in the garden] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil;" and since this notion is proven false by the events that follow within the Bible it is evident that "ignorance is so recommended by our religion as quality suitable for belief and religion" (Montaigne 1958, 360). Here, the following passages indicate that philosophers of Montaigne's time apply reason incorrectly, where the Bible is actually straightforward in what it requires. Montaigne presumes

¹² Some of these concepts may include a definition of who God is, which religion is correct, etc.

that acceptance of one's ignorance is a requirement for one to maintain their faith, while considering reason as appropriate and consistent with the teaching of Christianity when limited to our position within God's creation. In "The Senses are Inadequate," Montaigne gives the example of the blind man, "understanding so little what he lacks, that he uses and employs as we do words appropriate to sight and applies them in a manner all private and his own" (Montaigne 1958, 445). Here, Montaigne contends that human nature's senses and perceptions lead one to believe something to be true. The senses do not facilitate knowledge, but lack of them helps one judge and perceive something in a different way from one who can make use of all the senses.

Both the Old and New Testaments contain stories that facilitate one's understanding of the relationship between the soul and the self. Reading Scripture affords the faithful a sense of solace as they may find in the text and understanding of how the Word of God applies to their own situation. Consistent with the lessons contained within the Bible, faith often sheds light on those who are struck with physical blindness as those who will gain insight from God, and different than the average individual (Psalm 146:8). The blind man is not deceived from experience, but he judges by character and virtue. Knowledge is derived within the blind man himself, as opposed to his senses or opinions he conforms to and accepts his ignorance of being unable to see in order to form an enlightened vision of the individual based on morality.

Montaigne suggests that the virtue of the blind man is both consistent with Christianity and identifies human nature's innate ability to reason through their senses as having a corruptive aspect to knowledge, i.e., not containing any truth for the blind man, as he perceives life differently than the average individual. Montaigne believes that there is truth, however, only through the Divine can it be perfected and proven to be true. Given that the senses are the "masters of [one's] knowledge; they are uncertain and deceivable in all circumstances. It is there

that we must fight it out...using stubbornness, heedlessness and impudence” (Montaigne 1958, 447). Seeking to correct human nature’s approach to knowledge, Montaigne calls for self-introspection to battle the outward passions that govern aspects of our life through religious and philosophic dogma.

To understand Montaigne’s concern with dogmatism it is helpful to consider the context in which he was writing. In particular, it is necessary to consider the suffering caused by the battle between Catholics and Protestants over religious dogma.¹³ The tensions between Protestants and Catholics call into question the natural law doctrines informing each perspective. Each sect of Christianity had their own way of practice, yet both went against their practice, violating the principles of Christian scripture of maintaining peace within God’s Image on earth.¹⁴ With this context in mind and placing it alongside the argument made in Montaigne’s *Apology*, it is clear that Montaigne does not accept dogma as pertaining to any real truth. This is

¹³ Montaigne’s essays are a result of his role in the parliament of Bordeaux throughout his life, and his witnessing of the religious upheaval beginning when Protestant Henri de Navarre became an heir to the French throne, inflicting conflict between the current Catholic King Henri III, and Henri de Guise, the leader of the conservative Catholic League, and Navarre. Within her essay, “Montaigne’s Politics: Authority and Governance in the *Essays*,” Biancamaria Fontina clarifies the time-frame Montaigne was writing, and the effect this timing had on his *Essays*. Her work, encompassing Montaigne’s career within the parliament in Bordeaux and as a writer, highlights the importance of Montaigne’s thought during the religious persecution taking place at the time. Fontina writes of Montaigne, being a Catholic as recognizing this religious sect of Christianity as having an “increasingly intolerant and aggressive role,” prompting him to act as a “go-between among...the parliament of Bordeaux, the town council, the king’s officials, the military commanders, and their counterparts on the Protestant side” who were participatory within the religious battle (Fontana 2008, 7). Further, Fontina adds how, “the *Essais* are difficult to classify in political terms, since they do not speak with the voice of a particular ideology or faction” but instead speak to, “the broad philosophical question of the relation between reality and appearance, or truth and falsity...and the practical consequences of deception” (Fontana 2008, 7 & 23).

¹⁴ “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.” (Colossians 3:15).

evident when he states within his essay “Man Can Have No Knowledge,” that “There is nothing subject to more continual agitation than the laws” (Montaigne 1958, 438). While Montaigne writes of our human reason as evoking us to follow the laws of the country we live in, it is clear that “Truth must have one face, the same and universal. If man knew any rectitude and justice that had one body and real existence, he would not tie it down to the condition of the customs of this country or that” (Montaigne 1958, 437). His primary concerns stem from one’s idea of the law versus another’s, i.e., what one may view just, another may view unjust. While law is necessary for a country’s preservation and efficiency, Montaigne writes that the dogma of natural law will always, “paint justice in as many colors, and refashion it into as many faces, as there are changes of passion in those men [who enforce this law as truth]” (Montaigne 1958, 437). Given human nature’s altering passions, it is clear that natural law does not contain much truth at all, and therefore Montaigne does not trust it as governing. To Montaigne, the antithesis of accepting ignorance of the unknown to enhance one’s faith is natural law, as he sees it effecting Protestants and Catholics by different means--thus producing religious intolerance and war in the future.¹⁵

Accepting the limits of reason and human knowledge, the individual must overcome certain aspects of human nature, especially vanity. When recognizing these limits, one extends the same way of life to others which ultimately serves as the foundation of tolerance. Montaigne understands the “opinion,” of knowledge through a skeptical lens, calling it the “plague of man” (Montaigne 1958, 360). According to Montaigne, the knowledge we acquire from learning should enrich our lives on earth, and complete human nature—without corrupting it. In the section, “Man Has No Knowledge,” it is clear that an acceptance of our ignorance is the key to

¹⁵ The Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which ensued after Montaigne’s death, was the result of the rise in tensions between Protestants and Catholics within Northern Europe.

improving the human condition. He writes, “Ignorance that knows itself, that judges itself, and condemns itself, is not complete ignorance: to be that it must be ignorant of itself” (Montaigne 1958, 372). Accepting a Pyrrhonian perspective, he develops why they may seem to be correct in their beliefs. Their extreme skepticism, dealing with suspending their judgement and refusal to take part in controversial matters, is pivotal towards Montaigne’s argument for ignorance. As previously noted, it is clear those who remain ignorant of certain concepts and maintain a simple life are the happiest. This is due to their lack of judgement and desire to be correct. According to Montaigne, the Pyrrhonians

take all things without adherence or consent, leads them to their Atarxy, which is a peaceful and sedate condition of life, exempt from the agitations we receive through the impression of the opinion and knowledge we have of things...They dispute in a very mild manner. They do not fear contradiction in their discussion (Montaigne 1958, 373).

Ignorance is not sufficient for human nature to function, therefore there will always be conceptions to argue over. When dealing with these philosophical concerns, Montaigne accepts the manner of the Pyrrhonian’s judgement. Specifically, Montaigne does so because of their ability to control the pernicious effects of vanity and by forming an indifferent attitude towards the outcome of an argument. By shedding light on the Pyrrhonian’s proper exercise of judgement, it is clear that Montaigne views their way as relating to true faith.¹⁶ Through his faith

¹⁶ The following verses from the Bible point to why Montaigne supports the Pyrrhonist belief system: “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion (Proverbs 18:2); “The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God; happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves” (Romans 14:22). The former expresses the correct belief that Christians should carry in suspending all judgement for the betterment of the individual and to live in accordance with Biblical teaching. The latter presents the notion of keeping our judgements towards ourselves and others, in the private atmosphere between ourselves and with God in prayer.

and Catholic beliefs, Montaigne is not a Pyrrhonist, but argues that their line of thought is tolerant and consistent with divine teachings.

Human nature prevents man from coming to full agreement on the correctness of knowledge. According to Montaigne, “even the most gifted and ablest scholars, [can come to agreement] on even that the sky is over our head” and that “it is easy to see by the confusion that our judgement gives to our own selves, and the uncertainty that each man feels within himself, that it has a very insecure seat...How many times we change our notions” (Montaigne 1958, 423)! To facilitate an understanding of Montaigne’s thought, scholar Alan Levine (2001) lays out his assessment of Montaigne’s solution to the inadequacies of human knowledge, in his book entitled *Sensual Philosophy*. He writes that Montaigne’s “solution to the unruliness of the human mind is to make people more content with the human condition as it is...He aims to focus on the self in order to combat itself” (Levine 2001, 4-5). The major implication of this, according to Levine, is that it is neither the political nor economic systems that fuel intolerance. Rather, the true source of intolerance is found in “half-baked intellectuals and fanatics” who have in common an unruliness of the mind (Levine 2001, 3). To combat this, Levine points to Montaigne’s understanding of introspection, especially within the section entitled, “Man Can Have No Knowledge” and as Montaigne continuously does throughout the *Apology*. Montaigne speaks of himself in this section, understanding that he too falls prey to the fundamental incorrectness of his own thoughts in adapting a position similar to others. He writes:

Many times (as I sometimes do deliberately), having undertaken as exercise and sport to maintain an opinion contrary to my own, my mind, applying itself and turning in that direction, attaches me to it so firmly that I can no longer find the reason for my former opinion, and I abandon it. I draw myself along in almost any direction I lean, whatever it may be, and carry myself away by my own weight (Montaigne 1958, 426).

Montaigne develops a similar habit to those philosophers that he seems disagree with in their approaches. It is the “diversity of our passions” that leads one to level our virtues (Montaigne 1958, 427). Human nature can have no real perception of truth through our knowledge, as this is a position that only God obtains; i.e. no one will ever live exactly how another person does, nor will he/she perceive life the same way. If faith informs human nature that one lives in God’s image, it can be said that our differences are not particularly bad but are only applicable to ourselves. Levine speaks to Montaigne’s resemblance to Socrates, in how they both write in agreement that, “knowledge of ignorance strips away many of the causes—metaphysical and religious truth claims—that cause intolerance and persecution” (Levine 2001, 6). Here, Levine points to ignorance as the common threat of humanity. When one casts aside pride and recognizes this in oneself, it becomes possible to tolerate others. Moreover, while disputes that one may have over his/her knowledge are inevitable to the human condition, Montaigne invokes individuals to combat this tendency with a view toward self-knowledge as the foundation for peace. Consistent with a humanist approach to religious tolerance, Montaigne sheds light on human nature, as having the ability to improve itself, through faith and self-awareness.

Montaigne on the Purpose of the Essay

In recognizing the proper solutions to the ills of human nature that Montaigne assesses within the *Apology*, one must analyze the form in which he is writing—the essay. Montaigne is established as the inventor of the essay form as a genre as he coined the term “*essayer*” meaning “to attempt” or “to try.”¹⁷ The key to understanding a skeptic, according to Levine, is the

¹⁷ Montaigne’s use of *essayer* is an extension of the original Latin verb (*exagium*) the French word derived from. In the Latin, *exagium* can be understood in terms of weighing, sifting, and winnowing. To weigh is what one must do when differentiating the pros and cons of a particular choice. This includes consideration of what is good versus bad, right versus wrong. As such, the notion of weighing seems to have an inherently skeptical quality to it. This skepticism,

understand his “starting point, or the thing he does not doubt,” which to Montaigne is the conception of the “evanescent self,” i.e., the constant changing state of an individual (Levine 2011, 265). Levine describes Montaigne’s differentiation of the essay from a treatise or tract, “calling the latter claim to present truth, whereas Montaigne claims no such thing for his essay. He merely claims to ‘try’ to ‘grapple’ with issues (Levine 2011, 228). In the *Apology*, Montaigne does not merely discuss what is true or false within human nature, but rather acknowledges how human nature may be incorrect in exercising their thought, by “exploring topics from every conceivable angle” (Levine 2011, 228). Given human nature’s inherent capability to change opinions, or conform to them for that matter, Montaigne points to the act of essaying to find oneself and provide their own truths in a healthy way.

While Montaigne remains true to his beliefs in one sense, he exercises self-reproach even discussing where he may err in his thought. He writes, “I do nothing but come and go. My judgement does not always go forward; it floats, it strays” (Montaigne 1958, 426). Montaigne discusses a number of ills in human thought, pertaining to reason, faith, knowledge, and ignorance. His analysis implies that tolerance is contingent upon our ability to think for ourselves. This requires, according to Montaigne, “abandoning and renouncing one’s own means” in order to be able to fully grasp the concept of our relationship to God and our place within His image (Montaigne 1958, 457). If there is no true way to combat these inherent ills within human nature, Montaigne suggests individuals to have a greater sense of self-knowledge,

consequently, allows one to compare and contrast with moral weights of various ideas, beliefs, and arguments. One is thus able to apply the results of this weighing and apply them to one’s own life. In contrast, the idea of the essay as simply an opportunity to try something out, seems to place less of a burden on the writer. Here, the writer attempts something primarily as a response to curiosity or is just being playful. Both of these seem to lack the moral seriousness that is a key part of Montaigne’s view of the essay.

which is illuminated through the act of essaying. Through essaying one finds, “everything and nothing” which to Montaigne is “what we are, the best he thinks we can genuinely do, and it supplies with a never-ending source of wonder and delight” (Levine 2011, 248). Significantly, self-knowledge aids in the improvement of human nature, yet it is impossible to comply with Montaigne’s thought when vanity and reason are unlimited. Essaying, in the way recommended by Montaigne, provides limits on vanity and reason. By keeping these bound, Montaigne lays out a solution to the worst parts of life.¹⁸

To Montaigne, the root of intolerance is filled with the vast accumulation of opinions within a majority of people, which trigger the self to conform to them, and alienate one from any sense of self-knowledge. Within, “Man Can Have No Knowledge,” Montaigne writes of the “common herd,” as human nature having the tendency to, “incessantly receive more and more different impressions, the last one always effacing the preceding one” (Montaigne 1958, 429). The origin of dogma is grounded upon a group identity, which causes Montaigne’s disbelief of

¹⁸ Judith Shklar’s interpretation of Montaigne places his concern with cruelty at the center of both his moral and political teaching. At the core of Montaigne’s thought is recognition of the distinction between the sin of pride and other sins. According to Shklar (2006, 81), “Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God; pride, as the rejection of God, must always be the worst one, which gives rise to all others. Cruelty, as the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear, however, is wrong done entirely to *another creature*.” The problem with cruelty, according to both Shklar and Montaigne, is that it has been placed ahead of pride in importance which effectively closes off any appeal to religion, God, and morality. Shklar (2006, 81) writes, “By putting it [cruelty] irrevocably first—with nothing above it, and with nothing to excuse or forgive acts of cruelty—one closes off any appeal to any order than that of actuality.” For politics, this separation has the effect of opening the “door to Machiavellism to a degree that was impossible and intolerable for Montaigne” (2006, 92). In other words, a politics without a moral foundation that concerns itself only with the prudent exercise of power is not good for politics or for humanity. Perhaps the clearest example of this for Montaigne is the treatment of indigenous populations in the New World by Spain (2006, 84). In response to this political reality, Montaigne encourages his readers to focus on what lies within their control—their own selves. According to Shklar (2006, 92), our “ability to control our personal life, even if only in isolation, was greater than our collective existence where Fortune ruled.”

any specific dogma in particular. Montaigne contends, “We must not believe every man, says the maxim, because any man may say anything;” therefore, the only force that has the power to expel this truth that dogmatists aim to reach is the “divine and miraculous metamorphosis” brought upon by the Divine (Montaigne 1958, 430 & 457). Montaigne’s essays are combative toward the nature of typical philosophic dogma, as he often leads open-ended questions explicitly unanswered throughout the *Apology*. He does this, “not simply to persuade the reader about their truths. That is the aim of the dogmatist, someone with certainty of their convictions. Rather, the aim of Montaigne’s writing . . . is to move you to find your own truth, your own self” (Levine 2011, 229). Montaigne is clear that philosophic and religious dogma results in cruelty amongst the human condition in the form of intolerant positions and inflation in a majority’s passions (see Shklar 1989). Essaying allows one to engage with the substantial issues Montaigne proposes within his text, along with the unanswered questions he asks directed towards the reader, i.e., all of such questions, specifically surrounded by the ultimate skeptical one of “What do I know?” Essaying is facilitative to a more tolerant way of life, by allowing one to focus on the self, to combat the self, and ultimately focus on becoming the author of one’s own truth for the self’s purpose.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the *Apology*, Montaigne seeks to better human nature, and the problems that are inherently associated within us, in order to further a more tolerant way of life. Human reason and knowledge must be limited within the scope of our faith, given that general truth is not accessible to all—it is simply a Divine quality to hold such knowledge. Accepting our own ignorance allows us to combat human vanity. It does so because the skepticism that leads to this recognition forces man to look inward and self-evaluate. It is the move inward and

away from external concerns that makes possible human progress according to Montaigne.

Levine remarks on the self-knowing self as

happy and content “at home.” Unlike conceptions of the self which envision the good as the satisfaction of material desires or willing one’s will, in Montaigne’s conception, the self has no interest in violating others. Moreover, since what the self finds in itself is a kind of ultimate emptiness, the self has nothing to force. And finally, Montaigne argues that self-aware people feel each other’s pain (Levine 2001, 7).

Montaigne’s work within the *Apology*, is reflective of his own purpose for healthily combatting extreme skepticism, while also encouraging of the reader to take part in self-reflection, to deepen one’s understanding of the self, to make one more aware when being asked their opinion on a present issue, and to have empathy for humankind as a whole. Unlike Emerson, Montaigne uses his curiosity as a skeptic to better himself as an individual, without relying solely on the moral sense. Seemingly accordant with his Catholic beliefs, Montaigne’s efforts to promote self-knowledge move future essayists to exercise their skepticism in a healthy way, while also moving spiritually as they grow more in tune with themselves and their purpose within God’s image—to form their own earthly, governing truth, that is simply exclusive to the self. As one can see, the act of essaying is a moral act brought about through skepticism.

As one can see, Montaigne’s thoughts throughout the *Apology* are consistent with improving the human condition. By establishing a connection between reason, knowledge, and faith, one can understand Montaigne’s position as a humanist. Through his defense of Sebond and the sections that follow, Montaigne provides human nature with the tool to acquire tolerance—self-knowledge and the act of essaying. He seeks to correct the incorrect notions that humankind promotes as true, in order to improve one’s experience on earth. While we cannot control the passions and opinions of others, Montaigne contends that we can control our own—in order to live happily and peacefully as the Divine intends.

Chapter 3: Bacon, Montaigne, and the Philosophic Purpose of the Essay

Montaigne uses the essay to explore the limits of human understanding. In particular, the essay and essaying allow individuals to explore the limits of both their own experience and understanding. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Montaigne's skeptical stance has everything to do with the improvement of oneself. As Montaigne demonstrates in his own writing, the act of essaying is a tool one can use to combat extreme forms of skepticism, with the intent of acquiring a more tolerant mindset than before. The act of essay writing, therefore, is essential to Montaigne's humanist project.

In order to gain additional insight on human nature's capacity to learn and the role of the essay, one may turn to Francis Bacon and his intellectual project. As a statesperson and lawyer, Bacon used essays to promote his philosophic enterprise. At the heart of this enterprise is a radical reformulation of what constitutes knowledge and the best means of acquiring knowledge. Unlike his Scholastic predecessors, Bacon seeks to place learning and knowledge on a scientific foundation in order to produce a body of knowledge that improves the condition of mankind. Through an analysis of his major works, including his *The Advancement of Learning* and his letters, this chapter pursues the question of what the role of the essay and essaying are in Bacon's larger intellectual enterprise. As demonstrated below, it is clear that Bacon's purpose as a philosopher is incomplete without an understanding of his purpose as a rhetorician.

In this chapter, I analyze Bacon's depiction of improving the human condition. In his *Advice to Fulke Greville* and *Letter to Lord Burghley*, Bacon seems to offer his advice—which in turn unfolds into his own, personal, project for learning. In his *Advancement of Learning*, he addresses King James I, and offers his way in which human knowledge can be expanded and our

way of learning, corrected. Then, in a comparative analysis of Montaigne and Bacon a clear distinction of how the two philosophers differ in their approach to the philosophic purpose of the essay, the acquirement of knowledge, and the betterment of human nature will be established.

The foundation of Bacon's goal in improving human nature's capacity for knowledge is an understanding of his evaluation of learning at his time. While he does not limit what we should and should not learn, Bacon is critical of the state of learning because it "stifled genuine science and retarded human progress—bound political power to theological power" (Weinberger 2001, x). For Bacon, this way of learning goes wrong because of the marriage of politics and religion. Bacon notes, that this problem should have been resolved by Christianity as it provides a clear distinction between what is created in the image of God (mankind) and nature. According to Bacon, the former's connection to the divine render knowledge of man and the human soul beyond study. In contrast, the study of nature has no such limitation. The problem, as Bacon sees it, is that the blending of philosophy and theology leads to an understanding of nature that is largely removed from study. Consequently, nature cannot be turned to the benefit of mankind.

For Bacon, both philosophy and religion should be studied separately. He mentions this in the first book of *The Advancement of Learning* when he contends that "the true dignity and value of learning" can only be realized when one recognizes that there are

two principal duties and services, besides ornament and illustration, which philosophy and human learning do perform to faith and religion. The one because they are an effectual inducement to the exaltation of the glory of God. The other, because they minister a singular help and preservative against unbelief and error (Bacon 2002, 153).

Philosophic and scientific thought, therefore, are grounded in the intent to speak to the glory of God. This distinguishes Bacon from the schoolmen who give primacy to the glory of God at the expense of scientific progress. The positive correlation between knowledge and religion envisioned by Bacon, does not limit nor preclude the scientific study of nature. Rather,

by contending that religion and nature should be studied separately, Bacon argues that an individual's purpose is heightened—becoming more apt than before to study, learn, and draw conclusions. Freed from the limits of scholastic religion, Bacon transforms religion from a potential source of human corruption into a source of human benefit. Bacon's key to doing this is to limit the study of religion to its proper sphere and object.

Besides locating philosophy and religion to their proper spheres of inquiry, Bacon contends that it is also necessary to change how one approaches the acquisition of knowledge. In his, *Advice to Fulke Greville on his Studies*, Bacon lays out his idea of proper discourse. Bacon writes “and though you get nothing else by this idle discourse, yet you shall learn this, that if you will have your friend perform what you require, you must require nothing above his strength” (Bacon 2002, 102). Given that our ability to acquire knowledge is one gifted to us by God, Bacon is not fond of “idleness,” in learning or time wasted on topics unimportant to us or studied in vain. Nor, according to Bacon, should one sample from different bodies of knowledge. He offers this advice then proceeds in his advice Greville, writing, “he that hath such abridgements of all the arts shall have a general notion of all kinds of knowledge. But he shall be like a man of many trades, that thrives less than he that seriously follows one” (Bacon 2002, 102). According to his instructions, it is better for one to learn a single topic thoroughly as opposed to multiple in order to properly “thrive” and succeed. Bacon's intellectual project, therefore, rejects the scholastic emphasis on what we currently refer to as the well-rounded liberal arts education. Instead, Bacon argues for the important role of experts who can apply their knowledge to improving the human condition. To learn and contribute to Bacon's project, one must separate the studies of religion and science, engage in discourse with a purpose, and be

selective as to the topics we choose to learn. By doing so, experts drive Bacon's scientific project.

Bacon's concern with improving the condition of mankind through the application of science is evident in his *Letter to Lord Burghley*. There, Bacon identifies the development and application of knowledge as the proper ends of government. Sharing his views with the chief advisor to the Queen, Bacon writes of his "ordinary course of study and meditation [which are] more painful than most parts of action are" while noting that he is "tied by all [his] duties, both of a good patriot, and of an unworthy kinsman, and of an obliged servant to employ whatsoever [he is] to do [Lord Burghley] service" (Bacon 2002, 20). Here, Bacon reveals that the purpose of knowledge is to serve the sovereign to contribute to the good of the community. In the same vein, this notion is central to Bacon's intellectual project. Knowledge should be put to use, in order for it to be deemed important. In Book One of his *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon references the King of England in a similar way as he did with Lord Burghley, writing:

Nay the same Salomon the king, although he excelled in the glory of treasure and magnificent buildings . . . yet he maketh no claim to any of those glories, but only to the glory of inquisition of truth; for so he saith expressly, "The glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the glory of the king is to find it out (Bacon 2002, 151).

Acknowledging the King of England, Bacon calls for the King to live and rule as Salomon did. Bacon's interpretation of Salomon suggests an important distinction regarding the purpose of knowledge. Most people, according to Bacon, seek knowledge for the following reasons: "upon a natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite; sometimes to entertain their minds with variety and delight; sometimes for ornament and reputation; and sometimes to enable them to victory of wit and contradiction; and most times for lucre and profession" (Bacon 2002, 147). All of these, Bacon suggests, are superficial justifications for the importance of knowledge. Genuine knowledge, in contrast, is "a gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men" (Bacon 2002, 147). In

order to move past the limitations of the state of learning confronted by Bacon and implement Bacon's larger project, it is necessary to persuade the public that such a change is necessary. Thus, Bacon must rely on rhetoric to move both public and elite opinion in order to reap the benefits of his intellectual project.

The way in which knowledge is conveyed is contingent on one's moral character. Bacon notes that knowledge is "subject to the laws of heaven and earth, which are the subject of philosophy and therefore the true knowledge of the nature and state of the soul, must come by the same inspiration that gave the substance" (Bacon 2002, 215). Proper philosophic inquiry, deals with the laws of heaven and earth, and any work that does not deal with either, to Bacon, is useless and anything that is physical can and should be studied. Anything dealing with the soul, however, is not fair to make judgements on as no one has any tangible, truthful, believe of how one's soul is formed. It is quintessential to Bacon's project that the laws of God and man are separate. While Christian beliefs may sway one to believe otherwise, the Bible is clear that we can try to prepare ourselves to understand our soul, but faith is ultimately what combines our soul and our physical self—which does not hold any value of truth to others and therefore is rendered unimportant to Bacon. Nature, broadly defined, is subject to the scientific method whereas the soul is not. Thus, the soul needs to be regulated by something like religion, but time should not be wasted in the idle study of the soul.

The Second Book of Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* outlines the fundamental role rhetoric plays in his innovative plan for learning going forward. To understand this role, it is necessary to remember that Bacon distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge. The first respects the faculties of the mind, or "understanding and reason," and the other "will, appetite, and affection whereof the former produceth position or decree, the latter action or execution"

(Bacon 2002, 217). While the first of these concerns his understanding and reason, connected to position or decree, and the second concerns human will and sentiment being connected to action, “the imagination is an agent or the nuncius in both provinces, both the judicial and the ministerial” (Bacon 2002, 217). To Bacon, religion controls one’s consideration and facilitates judgement. In affirming or denying, one consults both his/her reason and will in order to properly make a decision, or in this case accept a specific truth or not. According to Bacon, concrete knowledge is possible, and it is what is invisible and imagined that distorts understanding. Searching for a way to make the soul accessible, human nature mistakenly elevates the importance of human imagination. Bacon writes, “in the matters of faith and religion, raise our imagination above our reason, which is the cause why religion sought ever access to the mind by similitudes” (Bacon 2002, 218). Here, Bacon points to religion as having imaginative qualities, i.e., providing religious teaching through “parables, visions and dreams” (Bacon 2002, 218). While Bacon is an advocate for the physical, present world, he does not deny or reject human nature’s faith in these perhaps imaginative scriptural teachings as providing comfort and the feeling that the soul is safe. For religious purposes imagination is permissible, however for Bacon’s project for learning, the imagination must be regulated. While imagination, can be a “recommendation,” to reason, Bacon holds that reason governs the imagination, and rhetoric is the tool one uses to control and limit the imagination.

These two types of knowledge play a role in Bacon’s analysis of rhetoric as he writes, “for the imaginative or insinuating reason, which is the subject of rhetoric, we think it best to refer it to the arts of reason . . . human philosophy which respecteth the faculties of the mind of man hath two parts, rational and moral” (Bacon 2002, 218). Rational knowledge to Bacon is the type which is filled with, “the most wits and the least delight,” and prefer the type “drenched in

flesh and blood, civil history, morality, policy, about the which men's affections, praises, and fortunes do turn and are conversant" (Bacon 2002, 218). Here, Bacon identifies the fundamental role that writing plays in acquiring knowledge.

As much as Bacon is critical of the imagination, he almost always seems to be so when discussing religion and how it has let the imagination dominate when reason should be in charge. Those who write in an imaginative way, through parables for instance in Biblical teachings, link all truth that comes from this to imagination. Bacon's intention is that human nature will recognize that we can have concrete knowledge, through reason, with rhetoric playing a crucial role in our ability to acquire knowledge. In laying out his understanding, Bacon suggests that scientific reasoning and the proper rhetoric are the keys to achieving excellence in learning, through the courses of "preparation and suggestion" (Bacon 2002, 223). The key to making inferences is to prepare, which Bacon notes, "seemeth scarcely a part of knowledge, consisting rather of diligence than of any artificial erudition" (Bacon 2002, 223). Here, it is evident that Bacon supports the use of hypotheses in his new program of learning, and by testing our assumptions one can come closer to truths than before. To explain this notion, Bacon uses his example of Aristotle and his rebuttal of the Sophists as he writes,

And herein Aristotle wittily but hurtfully doth deride the sophists near his time, saying 'they did as if one that professed the art of show making should not teach how to make up a show, but only exhibit the readiness a number of shoes of all fashions and sizes.' But yet a man might reply, that if a shoe-maker should have no shoes in his shop, but only work he has bespoken, he should be weakly customed (Bacon 2002, 223)

The problem with Sophist's teachings is that there was no explanation to their preparation; in other words, they would make inferences but not be able to fully explain them properly. This explaining, Bacon states, we get through, "suggestion," or by testing different ideas in order to find the correct one. One can suggest an idea is true based on one's own preparation but can

only determine it universally true through scientific testing. Coincidentally, Bacon gives an explanation for his reasoning behind keeping the study of the human soul illicit throughout his project—as it cannot be tested empirically.

To Bacon, the relationship between morality and reason is reinforced through the form in which it is presented—through rhetoric. Conducive to his explanation of how to engross oneself in philosophic inquiry, Bacon seeks to advise writers of his time to make changes in their habits. He gives his advice, writing “Neither is the nature of man so unfortunately built as that those powers and arts should have force to disturb reason, and not to establish and advance it” (Bacon 2002, 238). By nature, man is capable of rationality and reason, however one’s reason is limited by what one can observe on earth, and what we can thoughtfully explain. He explains the ends to which logic, morality and rhetoric attempt to meet, as he writes:

the end of logic is to teach a form of argument to secure reason, and not to entrap it; the end of Morality is to procure the affections to obey reason, and not to obey it; the end of rhetoric is to fill the imagination to second reason, and not to oppress it: for these abuses of arts come in but ex obliquo for caution (Bacon 2002, 238).

Here, Bacon states while reason may be limited and one’s morality solidifies one’s judgement on things, imagination is a guide, and our will gets us to act on what one learns. Rhetoric is designed for human action to be directed in a particular way, while reason cannot be disturbed as it contains scientific truth. Imagination, “seconds reason” as Bacon notes because it is directly involved in one’s ability to “prepare” and “suggest.” Consequently, the way in which one writes has the ability to provide the proper change to get at Bacon’s ideal end, i.e., extending and providing knowledge that will be useful and beneficial to the public. It is clear, therefore, that Bacon speaks to writing as provoking change.

One of the then current issues that Bacon found with rhetoric during his time, was the use of grammar, or “the measure, sound, and elevation or accent, and the sweetness and harshness of

[words]” (Bacon 2002, 232). He rejects poesy, “as we consider it in respect of the verse and not of the argument,” and instead focuses on examining, “the power and nature of words as they are the footsteps and prints of reason: which kind of analogy between words and reason is handled *spurism*, brokenly, though not entirely” (Bacon 2002, 232). *Spurism*, or the strict adherence to language and the purity of it, is one of the aspects of rhetoric that Bacon thinks writing must improve upon. He writes of the one who delivers knowledge through writing must want to, “deliver it in such form as may best be believed, and not as may be best examined,” keeping in mind that “present satisfaction” from one’s audience is a better expectation to hope for rather than “expectant inquiry” (Bacon 2002, 233). Here, Bacon is clear that while there is some value in the way we articulate language, the main importance that he is getting at is within the mode of writing that he suggests. How language is transmitted must evolve, and to do this, it is clear that this essay is the mode of writing that would best serve Bacon’s fundamental goal of rhetoric. Change is determined by how the public thinks in order to be in a position to implement his program, it may be the case that Bacon does not view the essay and essaying as having any inherent philosophic purpose. Rather, the essay is just one of many possible modes of writing that serve very specific purposes, that will serve as a catalyst to those who wish to learn more about a given topic.

According to Bacon, the classification of the intellection arts is four-fold, and based on their respective ends: first is the art of inquiry or invention, which is to invent that which is sought or propounded (Classification 1); second is the art of examination of memory, which is to judge what is invented (Classification 2); the third is the art of custody of memory, which is to retain that which is judged (Classification 3); and lastly, the art of elocution or tradition, which is to deliver what is retained (Classification 4) (Bacon 2002, 219). Rhetoric is the key factor in

accomplishing and maintaining this classification that Bacon aims for. Bacon suggests the aphorism as a method to deliver knowledge in a cohesive way. Laying out the effects of this method, he contends “no man can suffice nor in reason attempt to write Aphorisms, but he that is sound and ground,” given that writing a reasonable aphorism requires, “illustration [be] cut off; recitals of examples [be] cut off; discourse of connection and order [be] cut off; descriptions of practice [be] cut off; so there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorisms but some good quantity of observation” (Bacon 2002, 234). It is apparent that Bacon’s notion of the aphorism as the “pith and heart of sciences,” stems from his understanding that the method of delivery ought to be brought about in a succinct way, i.e., Bacon’s plan for the evolution of human knowledge requires one to state exactly what one is trying to say in a concise manner. Inadvertently, essaying is as important to Bacon as he claims the aphorism to be, even though he never references the essay exactly. More expansive than an aphorism, the form of the essay aims to accomplish all of the goals in which the aphorism does. To further this point, Bacon writes, “But knowledge that is delivered as a thread to be spun on, ought to be delivered and intimated, if it were possible, in the same method wherein it was invented, and so it is possible of knowledge induced” (Bacon 2002, 233-34). For Bacon, invention (Classification 1) is done through his inductive scientific method. The same inductive process is key to judgment (Classification 2 above). This means that Bacon’s understanding of method in terms of it as a means of studying and interpreting natural phenomena should have a place in the fourth classification where he locates writing. If he intends on persuading people to accept his Method, it should be an aspect of every part of inquiry as this reinforces his idea—and if this line of thinking is correct, his essay should all be characterized by the use of inductive reasoning.

If Bacon is correct, and rhetoric has the potential to enable a change in learning, one must write persuasively, as Bacon does to the King and to the statesmen, while also making sure that the form is concise enough to grasp one's attention and accessible enough through the proper dialect. While writing an essay allows one to explore persuasive writing, the form also facilitates persuasion as well. Bacon holds there "remain two appendixes touching the tradition of knowledge, the one Critical, the other pedantical" (Bacon 2002, 241). According to Bacon, these are the components of learning. The "pedantical" holds truth that has already been discovered, while the "critical," is what still has to be uncovered through reason. The purpose of man is to acquire knowledge, to which Bacon affirms, "For all knowledge is either delivered by teachers, or attained by men's proper endeavours: and therefore, as the principal part of tradition of knowledge concerneth chiefly writing of books, so the relative part thereof concerneth reading of books" (Bacon 2002, 241). It is clear that human nature acquires knowledge through teachings in school or through books, however, to further this project one turns to the essay. While Bacon makes note of the aphorism as a medium for an audience to gain knowledge, being so short and open ended they can only create wonder for a learner. The next medium, therefore, would be an essay, to which one can gain a bit more knowledge, become inspired, and turn to the reading of books for even more information. The development and transmission of knowledge for public use, is therefore done through increments and succession from one mode of rhetoric to another. This succession would only be possible through a recognition of the essay as a proper method.

Comparative Analysis

In this section of the chapter, I will use a comparative analysis of essays written by Montaigne and Bacon that address the same or a similar topic to show how their respective

understandings of the purpose of the essay play out in practice. Evidently, Bacon and Montaigne share a common enterprise—to uncover the limits and extent to which human knowledge and understanding is possible. Here, I will be comparing the following essays: 1) Montaigne’s “On Ceremonies in the Interview of Kings” with Bacon’s “On Ceremonies and Respects,” 2) Montaigne’s “On Friendship” with Bacon’s essay of the same title, 3) Montaigne’s “Glory” with Bacon’s “Vain Glory,” and 4) Montaigne’s “Books” with Bacon’s “Studies.” Through analyzing the two authors, each author has their own understanding of the essay and the role of essaying in philosophy. For Bacon, the essay serves as an auxiliary tool of philosophy in order to persuade his audience. Montaigne on the other hand uses the essay as a form of Socratic inquiry to oneself, in order to better the self alone. By aligning Montaigne and Bacon together, one will find that each philosopher’s purpose for the essay is different, yet equally important when determining the act of essaying in higher education and in life.

Bacon and Montaigne on Ceremonies

Bacon and Montaigne have contrasting opinions on the purpose of ruling and ceremonies. In “Of Ceremonies and Respects,” Bacon gives advice directly to monarchs and speaks of “the praise and commendation of men” (Bacon 2002, 441). He lays out the purpose of ceremony, and the consequences of not using them. To Bacon, one that holds a ceremony should have a respect for himself, and those who do not, “teach[es] others not to use them again and so diminisheth respect to himself” (Bacon 2002, 441). He notes that the tedious dwelling on ceremony, however, “diminish[es] the faith and credit of him who speaks” (Bacon 2002, 442). Therefore, for those who maintain office of any sort, Bacon’s recommendation to statesmen is to hold ceremony but so it be with demonstration that a man doth it upon regard and not upon facility. It is a good precept generally in seconding another, yet to add something of one’s own” (Bacon

2002, 442). Here, Bacon states that while it is good to apply oneself, as Bacon does in his essays to the monarchy, it needs to be done through demonstration and not just through, “cheap” display, copied by another. Throughout this essay, Bacon speaks toward the monarch and is able to give his unsolicited advice as he pleases through the form in which he writes—the essay. He concludes this essay writing “A wise man will make more opportunities than he finds. Men’s behavior should be like their apparel, not too straight or point device, but free for exercise and motion” (Bacon 2002, 442). Bacon is able to dictate his own behavior through his writing in an essay format, without exterior opinions. He is able to liken himself, to someone like the King, and even go so far as offer such advice. Consequently, he seems to be using the essay as an additional means for persuading the public. Similar to the rituals of ceremony, essaying gives Bacon the opportunity to support and advance his larger argument. It advances philosophy without necessarily serving any inherent philosophic purpose, serving a rhetorical role and seeks primarily to persuade people to be open to the possibility of the types of reforms Bacon recommends.

In “Ceremony of Interviews between Kings,” Montaigne touches upon the relationship between ceremony and the topic of vanity. Ordinary rules dictate that it is a discourtesy, both toward an equal and more so toward a superior, to fail to be at home when you have been notified that another was coming (Montaigne 1958, 32). Engrained in the act of ceremony lies the vain etiquette that goes along with it. Such vanity is defined in what Montaigne describes in the widespread respectable and civil notion for a king to wait at home in order to receive his visitors when they arrive. Unlike kings of his time, Montaigne often forgets “both of these vain formalities, just as[he] cut[s] off all ceremony on [his] house” and while taking into consideration how this rejection of practice may offend others he writes, “It is better for me to

offend him once than myself every day; that would be perpetual slavery” (Montaigne 1958, 32). The problem with manners and etiquette is the formality by which they are presented, and how they breed arrogant and vain behavior amongst men. Such ceremonial practices, as Montaigne discusses are exercises in vanity (Montaigne 1958, 32). In identifying the possible value in such rules, Montaigne writes that one should learn the, “knowledge of social dexterity” which he compares to “grace and beauty” because “it acts as a moderator at the first approaches of sociability and familiarity, and consequently opens the door for us to learning by examples of others, and to bring forth and displaying our own example if it has anything instructive and communicable about it” (Montaigne 1958, 33). Montaigne indicates some irony here, as he mentions *if* there is anything of value within ceremony. Recalling from Montaigne’s *Apology*, one can see how the essay is designed to address human vanity. With a proper degree of skepticism will one understand the limits of their own knowledge and, consequently, limit human vanity. The problem with ceremony is that it appeals to vanity and reinforces it. This suggests that Bacon’s argument for the proper use of ceremony is very much an exercise in vanity from the perspective of Montaigne. However, through addressing the King, Bacon is able to hold and provide advice in his own way without the formalities of ceremony that Montaigne rejects. In this way, Bacon’s way of ceremony in the form of an essay bolsters Montaigne’s argument for ceremony, with the essay as the tool to provide council in the proper way.

Although one can find similarities between Bacon and Montaigne in their use of the essay, there remains a key difference between the two. Bacon uses the essay for purposes that are external to the individual. He tries to persuade the monarch to believe that what he is contending is correct. However, Montaigne on the other hand, appeals to self-understanding of the individual. Whereas Bacon’s purpose for writing is external, Montaigne seeks the

gratification of turning inward and becoming a better person in the long run. This speaks to a fundamental difference between the two with regard to the nature and purpose of philosophy. Like almost all modern philosophers, Bacon sees philosophy as a tool for social and political reform. The triumph of experience and reason will result in man's ability to control and make use of nature to make our lives more comfortable and longer. In contrast, a reading of Montaigne suggests that philosophy plays a fundamentally private role in the human condition. Here, Montaigne echoes the words of Socrates who contends that it is necessary "if someone who really fights for the just is going to preserve himself even for a short time, it is necessary for him to lead a private rather than a public life" (*Apology* 32a).

Bacon and Montaigne on Friendship

Bacon differentiates his advice and counsel to the King from others in his essay, "Of Friendship." In order to prove himself as a credible statesman, Bacon presents his advice to the King as he believes a true friend should. Given the social nature of man, he writes, "whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a God" (Bacon 2002, 391). To both Bacon and Montaigne, friendship fills the void of solitude, and without it "the world is but a wilderness" (Bacon 2002, 391). Bacon lays out his understanding of friendship by providing the reasoning for why friendship is so important, while Montaigne defines true friendship by eliminating what many perceive it to be. By contrasting both authors' views, one can see how each authors' view of friendship is essential when understanding their philosophic projects and their way of essaying.

In "Of Friendship," Bacon discusses the three "fruits," or values, of friendship. As opposed to being trapped in solitude, Bacon contends that the first fruit of friendship allows for one to feel, "ease and discharge of the fulness and swellings of the hear, which passions of all

kinds do cause and induceth” (Bacon 2002, 391). Friendship has the effect of emotionally opening up one’s heart, and to share with someone “griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession” (Bacon 2002, 391). Although friendship “redoubleth joys and cutteth griefs in halves, Bacon mentions counsel as an important part of friendship; i.e. the giving and taking of advice. This interaction is one that Bacon conveys frequently, especially in his essays. Not only does he write for the sake of convincing and persuading the public, but they are also an effort to persuade the crown as well. When seeking Bacon’s idea of the philosophic purpose of the essay, he does not clearly state what he believes this purpose to be, but his intent is within the first part of his *Advancement of Learning*. In the beginning of Part One, Bacon makes the correlation between a tribute of duty and affection to the King, so as counselor, he writes:

I hope I shall not live to be wanting, according to my most humble duty, and the good pleasure of your Majesty’s employments: for the latter I thought it more respective to make choice of some oblation which might rather refer to the propriety and excellency of your individual person, than to the business of your crown and state (Bacon 2002, 120).

Friendship, as defined in his first fruit, sheds light on the right to give counsel—even if it is unsolicited. He is able to give this advice in his essays to the King, not as a flatterer, but as a friend whom the King can take seriously. Under the guise of an essay, Bacon is able to put himself in the best position for acceptance from the monarch.

The second fruit of friendship concerns “healthful and sovereign” human understandings whereas the first deals with human affection (Bacon 2002, 393). Counsel is once again spoken about, where he mentions that human nature craves discourse and communication. To Bacon, our solitude is driven away by this aspect of friendship. Although he speaks of “counsel from a friend,” as the completing element of the second fruit, he makes the distinction between friendship and flattery, writing “So as there is as much difference between the council that a

friend giveth and that a man giveth himself, as there is between the counsel of a friend and of a flatterer” (Bacon 2002, 94). Therefore, Bacon speaks of choosing friends who will provide good council—not flattery. However, the most relevant flatterer is a man’s self. The purpose of having and maintaining friendships is to “use the liberty of a friend” to counter “the flattery of a man’s self” (Bacon 2002, 394). Bacon’s idea here can be connected towards his actions. It is apparent that what Bacon is really concerned with here is the faithful counsel he can provide the crown, and in order to accomplish this he speaks of counsel associated with business and not counsel associated with manners. He writes that a friend who is acquainted with “a man’s estate will beware by furthering any present business, how he dasheth upon other inconvenience ... rest not upon scattered counsels; they will rather distract nor mislead than settle and direct” (Bacon 2002, 395). Therefore, Bacon is telling his audience including the King to not accept all friendships, but instead choose wisely. By doing so, Bacon indirectly forms a case for himself in providing friendship over flattery to the monarch. The third fruit that Bacon encompasses the bearing a part in all actions and occasions and expanding the human universe and experience. He states that the bond that one has in a true friendship carries on and “‘a friend is another [man’s self];’ for that a friend is far more than [a man’s self]” (Bacon 2002, 395). Thus, the purpose for friendship is to have an effect on one’s life and to offer something special that no one could do alone. This gratification is one that Bacon hopes that the King wants and will accept in his essays.

Whereas Bacon lays out the principal reasons behind maintaining friendships, Montaigne lays out his understanding of what people associate friendship with as opposed to what true friendship really is in “Of Friendship.” Using the example of a painter, Montaigne shows that friendship and the art of a painter differs. There is the first part, which a painter must choose the

best spot, the middle of each wall, and put a picture there that you have labored over; the second part is filling in the empty space around the picture with grotesques (Montaigne 1958, 135).

Montaigne notes that such grotesques and their relation to the center, can mimic the relationship between oneself and the people around us. In other words, friendships are specific and we must be sure to differentiate them as such to understand what true friendship is. His primary goal in eliminating what is construed as friendship, and what is not, is to hold each of the traditional understandings of friendship up to critical scrutiny and find potential mistakes in the common views of friendship. Writing in essay format allows him to work through his skepticism on such views and to find what consists of true friendship to Montaigne, as an individual. Pertaining to the first mistaken understanding of friendship, of a father and son, Montaigne holds “From children toward fathers it is rather respect. Friendship feeds off of communication which cannot exist between them because of their too great inequality” (Montaigne 1958, 136). Similarly, Montaigne writes that brotherhood and friendship cannot exist as there are too many natural obligations in that relationship without room for free will. He mentions that friendships with women are impossible as they become romantic, and instances of pedophilia do not lead to friendship as they are purely physical (Montaigne 1958, 137-138). To Montaigne, friendship does not lie in these forms and “in the friendship [he] speak[s] of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again” (Montaigne 1958, 141).

Unlike Bacon’s propositions, the concept of benefits from a friendship are not of major concern to Montaigne. He reveals the following secret about his account of friendship: “The secret I have sworn to reveal to no other man; I can impart without perjury to the one who is not another man: he is myself” (Montaigne 1958, 142). He speaks of “doubling himself,” or, in

other words, Montaigne as one reads him through his essays versus who he is as an individual—the essay and the essayer. Both Bacon and Montaigne’s perceptions of friendship are reflective in their styles of writing in essay form. Montaigne’s greatest friendship is with himself, and it is within his essays that he tries not to persuade, but to gain a deeper understanding of himself to better himself. Overall, each argument for friendship furthers each author’s unique project. For Bacon, friendship can be viewed as a ploy to connect himself to others in the hopes of persuading them to adopt his position, whereas Montaigne is focused on the issue of friendship solely on the effect it has on the self. Together, they bolster each other when defining the philosophic purpose for essay writing—to persuade and to gain a deeper understanding of oneself.

Bacon and Montaigne on Glory and Vain Glory

A similar differentiation is made amongst each author’s concern over vanity and glory in Bacon’s “Of Vain Glory” and Montaigne’s “Of Glory.” Bacon identifies two potential concerns with glory, and they have to do with glory causing faction and violence (Bacon 2002, 443-444). Despite these concerns, Bacon contends that glory is useful, in that “there is use of this quality in civil affairs. Where there is an opinion and fame to be created, either of virtue or greatness, these men are good trumpeters” (Bacon 2002, 444). Such civil affairs that Bacon speaks to can be directed to himself and his personal mission. In this essay, it is clear that Bacon anticipates potential objections to his project, and his motives when writing. He speaks of military commanders and soldiers, and those like himself who pursue the, “Fame of learning,” (Bacon 2002, 444) and connects this notion with an intent of advancing the political community. Vain glory is what one turns to in order to, “perpetuate man’s memory; and virtue was never so beholding to human nature, as it received his due at second hand” (Bacon 2002, 444). Critics

could object that what Bacon is up to is merely a project rooted in one man's vanity, but rather than rejecting the idea that he is vain, he makes the argument that all great service to the city has its roots in vanity. He suggests this through his example of soldiers who defend the state and expand its authority through conquest. Both of these and especially the latter contribute to the glory of the community and the crown. To the extent that Bacon is correct, he cuts off this potential criticism at the knees. Further, Bacon seems to either that people will consistently act virtuously in power, so reassurance through glory must be given to people. Bacon implies here that virtue can only have its positive consequences when an outside party evaluates the actions of another. Thus, when the focus of evaluation is external to the self as is the case for glory, people will adhere to the requirements of virtue. Absent this mechanism, Bacon is not optimistic.

On the other hand, Montaigne begins his essay, "Of Glory," by making a distinction between a concept itself and the name for such concept, in giving the example of God himself and the name of God. He concludes, that "it is to God alone that glory and honor belong," and since human nature is "imperfect and continually in need of betterment, it is this betterment that we should work for" (Montaigne 1958, 468). Here, it is clear that Montaigne and Bacon differ on the topic of glory. To Bacon, people must be rewarded in order to be virtuous, whereas Montaigne believes that this glory would put people on the same level as God and heighten one's vanity. The difference between Bacon and Montaigne's concern over glory has to do with how they each view the act of essaying as a contributing factor to their own philosophies. This distinction is made clear in Montaigne's, "Of Glory," as he writes "Flattery poisons a prince in the same way that pandering corrupts "the chastity of women" (Montaigne 1958, 469). Although Bacon poses as a "friend," to the monarchy as opposed to a "flatterer," his fundamental purpose

in his essays is to win favor with the crown—which may have to do with why he makes an argument for glory.

In contrast to Bacon, Montaigne's believes that glory corrupts the proper understanding of virtue, which is "a very vain and frivolous thing if it derives its recommendation for glory" (Montaigne 1958, 471). Bacon's suggestion on glory is embrace it and give reward to those in power for the good of the community. While Bacon finds such external judgments important, whereas Montaigne finds "external appearances [to be] marvelously uncertain and doubtful; and there is no witness so sure as each man to himself" (Montaigne 1958, 474). He does recognize Bacon's point about virtue and the benefits of glory, but he writes "the actions of virtue are too noble in themselves to seek any other reward than from their own worth, and especially to seek it in the vanity of human judgments" (Montaigne 1958, 477). While Bacon's concern with glory pertains to the impact of those in power on the public, Montaigne is focused on the negative impact that glory has on oneself. Therefore, as opposed to Bacon, Montaigne's key to combat vanity is through the act of essaying. He writes that philosophy "has not been able to find a way to tranquility that is suitable to all" so he urges "everyone to seek it individually" through the act of writing an essay (Montaigne 1958, 471). As he demonstrates in his writing, the best guide one can have towards virtuous behavior is the guide of oneself. Through exercising one's thought, privately on paper, the act of "doubling" oneself can free an individual from "the windy confusion of rumors, reports, and popular opinions" that glory brings about (Montaigne 1958, 473). Thus, in Montaigne's hands, essaying serves as a key to how individuals may combat those "ordinary vices" like vanity that plague the routine aspects of daily life and, more importantly, open the door to cruelty (see Shklar 1984).

Bacon and Montaigne on Books and Studies

Throughout each of his essays, it is clear that Bacon is trying his best to persuade the crown to take his advice. In Bacon's "Of Studies," he limits those who may offer counsel, to only those that are learned. Although Bacon describes one who spends too much time on studies as, "sloth," it is clear that those who are learned make "judgement wholly by their [studies] rules" (Bacon 2002, 339). Studies, therefore, have the effect of being perfected by experience and vice versa. For Bacon, knowledge only has value in terms of what it can generate for the common good of society. His idea on studying, however, has implications for what he says about council in that only people who have the wisdom that Bacon speaks of can offer counsel appropriately. In writing this, Bacon tries to raise his own credibility to the King—which could have the effect of either furthering or diminishing his key ideas in, "Of Friendship," i.e., that friendship is the gateway to the best council. Unlike Montaigne, Bacon's studies are not at all about cultivation of the self, rather, they are about furthering one's agenda and success.

Bacon lays out his purpose for reading, which he does "not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider" (Bacon 2002, 439). Here, Bacon's purpose for reading is similar to Montaigne's approach, linking it to improving one's mind, and providing knowledge. Further, in his "Of Studies," Bacon makes note of the fact that "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man" (Bacon 2002, 439). Writing, to Bacon has the effect of perfecting someone's knowledge on a specific subject. In light of his position regarding aphorism in *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon contends that rhetoric is important, and more specifically, essaying is important to gain access to the broader knowledge an aphorism implies. To the extent that Bacon values exactness or precision, it is possible to view the aphorism as the most precise formulation of a much larger idea or concept. The similarity found here between this essay and *Advancement* suggests the

following possibility: that as one moves from developing an argument in philosophical form it is necessary to essay as one moves from treatise to aphorism. Thus, the essay may also serve as a medium for knowledge to be transcribed correctly or more precisely. This possibility is important for both Bacon and Montaigne when discussing their essays on “Studies” and “Of Books.”

There is a clear connection between Bacon’s ideas in “Of Studies,” and the larger argument made in his *Advancement of Learning*. Study has a threefold purpose having to do with delight which is associated with private and retiring, ornament which is associated with discourse, and ability which is connected with judgment and disposition of business (Bacon 2002, 439). In his essay, “Of Books,” Montaigne claims that he reads “only to give [himself] pleasure by honest amusement; or if [he] studies, [he] seek only the learning that treats of the knowledge of [himself] and instructs [him] in how to die well and live well” (Montaigne 1958, 297). Evidently, Montaigne has a very different opinion from Bacon with regards to the topic of study. In *The Advancement of Learning*, Bacon seems critical of the first two statements within his purposes for study, while Montaigne would find the last to breed the consequence of vanity. Montaigne certainly aligns with the first two statements, and to the extent of the third category, Montaigne and Bacon have a contrasting understanding. However, one aspect that Bacon and Montaigne both have in common on the topic of study and books, is that they both want, “books that make use of learning, not those that build it up” (Montaigne 1958, 301). While both read and write with the intent to learn, they differ in how they understand “business” as it is written in *Advancement*. For Montaigne, it has to do with cultivating the best self, while Bacon wants books to facilitate the development of judgment that will be put to use for those great enterprises that make both men and nations great.

In “Of Books,” Montaigne states the Socratic definition of wisdom from Plato’s *Apology*, writing “Knowledge and truth can lodge in us without judgment, and judgment also without them; indeed, the recognition of ignorance is one of the fairest and surest testimonies of judgment that I find” (Montaigne 1958, 297).¹⁹ Here, lies a significant difference in Bacon and Montaigne’s thoughts on study and reading. Montaigne claims that skepticism, or such “ignorance,” is a gift and points to the problem of vanity as one who claims to possess knowledge when he/she does not. Following the example of Socrates, Montaigne takes the position that it is better to recognize the limitations of one’s knowledge. Bacon, on the other hand, believes that the lack of knowledge prior to his project is a consequence of knowledge’s improper foundation and he seeks to articulate a solution to this problem in the *Advancement*. By simply putting knowledge on his experimental foundation that focuses on experience rather than reason, the limits that shackle human knowledge will fall away and advancement in the way that we learn is possible. Through following Montaigne’s guide toward essaying, Bacon can come to grasp a solution for knowledge’s proper foundation. Montaigne contends that within an essay, he writes in a way “by which I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself” (Montaigne 1958, 296). Considering Bacon’s rhetorical and persuasive techniques, one can see that Bacon could use the advice of Montaigne to further his own philosophy.

Conclusion

Without consciously making note of it, Bacon has a considerable amount of appreciation for essaying and the essay itself. Acknowledging how the public’s ideas of religion provide an obstacle for gaining the concrete knowledge he intends on providing, he points to rhetoric as the

¹⁹ For the Socratic understanding of wisdom in *The Apology* see 20e-23c where Socrates recounts his experience with the Oracle at Delphi and his response to the Oracle by engaging those reputed to be wise—politicians, poets, and manual artisans.

gateway for people to gain a new perspective on learning. While he turns to the aphorism as holding value in the *Advancement*, he is mindful of the fact that the format he is writing in has the capacity to educate the public in an effective way. While he writes in the format of the essay to persuade the monarch, there is a reason for it being persuasive. Essays provide those who read them, with short and concise information that is able to encourage the growth and expansion of learning that Bacon speaks of.

When considering the view of Bacon and Montaigne, one is led to the conclusion that their respective positions on the philosophic purpose of the essay are informed by differing views on the nature and purpose of philosophy. In contrast to Bacon's view that the essay serves as a rhetorical assistant to the philosopher and the philosopher's efforts to make philosophy serve the public interest, Montaigne views the act of essaying as serving the private purpose of making oneself a better person. As such, Bacon can be seen as operating from an inherently modern view of philosophy whereas Montaigne has more in common with ancient philosophy's concern with the moral development of the individual.²⁰ This difference is most evident when comparing their respective thoughts on glory and ceremony. In Montaigne's analysis, glory and ceremony have vanity in common. Thus, rather than offering solutions to the problem of human vanity, an emphasis on glory and the very nature of ceremony only serve to make this problem worse. When viewed in light of the argument of the previous chapter, this means that both move man further and further away from faith and the life that is consistent with the word of God. All of

²⁰ My understanding of the distinction between ancient and modern philosophy is informed by my understanding of the thought of Leo Strauss. For a general introduction to this distinction, look at the Preface to the first edition of *History of Political Thought* (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). The distinctions identified here are further developed in Strauss' (1965) *Natural Right and History*. How all of this informs the political thought of an individual thinker is best explored by Strauss in his *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958).

this is a consequence of the fact that vanity serves as a primary reason for why man is no longer able to think properly. Montaigne's understanding stands in opposition to that Bacon who views both the desire for glory and ceremony as means of advancing the good of the public. The former allows men like Bacon to reconsider the nature of knowledge and to make the case for radically changing how we think about learning, knowledge, and the purpose of both. Ceremony, in turn, provides those seeking to influence the direction of a nation like Bacon was the opportunity to advise those with access to political power. This, understanding, in turn, informs what Bacon has to say about the nature of friendship as he uses his essay on this topic to present himself as a friend to the Crown. All of Bacon's efforts can thus be understood in terms advancing his philosophic agenda. Montaigne, in contrast, defines friendship in terms of a "doubled" self where you are your own best friend. From this, Montaigne is able show how the essay is vital to the project of self-cultivation. Insulated from the intrusive eye of the public, the essay provides one with a safe place to admit to one's ignorance. Recognition of this, according to Montaigne, is a first step in the continued process of grappling with the meaning of one's own experiences and the world more generally. Essaying provides a way for one to exercise one's skepticism on a topic he/she finds the need to scrutinize. By doing so, the opportunity for one to seek out an individual purpose or a passion for a subject is within reach.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Considering the perspectives of Emerson, Montaigne, and Bacon, it is clear that each philosopher views the essay as serving different philosophic purposes. For Emerson, the essay is a tool to advance his agenda of reforming the public. Like Montaigne, Emerson focuses on moral development but does so by combining the private activity of reading with the public activity of speaking. For Bacon, the essay serves as a means of persuading others (especially elites) to instill a new way of learning amongst the public. For both Emerson and Bacon, the essay can be seen as means of pursuing larger, social reforms with the caveat that for Emerson personal reform at the moral level is seen as a prerequisite for social reform (Barkalow 2014). Of the three writers considered here, it is in Montaigne where one finds the most philosophic purpose of the essay. According to Montaigne, it is through the process of essaying that individuals are presented with both the means and opportunity of bettering oneself. Whereas Bacon and Emerson use the act of essaying as a tool to persuade, Montaigne uses the act of essaying to explore the “evanescent self” and come to terms with the topics he is most skeptical of (Levine 2011, 251). Recognizing that the self is ever evolving, Montaigne views the act of essaying as a dialectic way to manage and ground our thinking. By doing so, one has the opportunity to accept and learn more in the future, instead of continuing to dwell in skepticism.

As one thinks about the implications of these perspectives, one can find valuable direction in Nussbaum (1990), who argues that literature must be brought back to the philosophic fold. Focusing on the novel, Nussbaum contends that literature has a direct influence on one’s worldview. Novels have a transportive effect, expanding the individual outside of themselves in

order to gain insight. This project consciously set out to extend Nussbaum's analysis of the philosophic role of literature by considering a literary style, the essay, not taken up by Nussbaum. As to how the argument and analysis presented here accomplishes this goal, the answer depends on which thinker you look at.

For Montaigne, the act of essaying turns the focus of the individual inward and focuses it on the self. In Nussbaum's thought, the novel expands our horizons and brings the reader into contact with ideas, cultures, and times beyond the reader's limited experience. This opens to attentive readers the opportunity to consider things beyond themselves. In terms of how readers are to do this and what readers should hope to do with this, Nussbaum provides little guidance. Montaigne's essays, in contrast, offers insight into these questions. For Montaigne, the essay and essaying allow one to hold experience up to critical scrutiny and draw distinctions on how one ought to live. Essaying itself represents an exercise in skepticism and Montaigne, like Emerson, holds that there is a skeptical mean residing somewhere between dogma and nihilism. The ability to find this mean, Montaigne suggests, is a key, on the one hand, to bettering oneself, and, on the other hand, to live a more content life.

Montaigne's understanding of the philosophic purpose of the essay finds a clear alternative in Bacon's understanding of the role played by the essay. As shown in Chapter Three, Bacon treats the essay as the auxiliary of philosophy. This is to say, that the essay serves an almost exclusively rhetorical function in Bacon's thought as its purpose is to persuade others to buy into Bacon's larger philosophic project laid out primarily in his *The Advancement of Learning*. At the heart of Bacon's intellectual project is a radical reconceptualization of human learning and knowledge and central to this project is the objective that human learning must be put to use for the betterment of the human condition. Thus, whereas Montaigne seeks reform at

the level of the individual (Emerson does as well), Bacon's primary concern is with large scale social reform.

When thinking about what explains the differences between Montaigne and Bacon concerning the philosophic purpose of the essay, Chapter Three suggests that the answer may lie in each thinker's respective view of the nature and purpose of philosophy. Montaigne, like many of the ancient writers he is fond of, takes the position that the primary purpose of philosophy concerns the cultivation of the human soul. It is only through a properly cultivated soul that one is able to lead a happy life and part of this process includes critical consideration of the sources of one's happiness. The clearest example of this provided may be found in the analysis of religion provided in the second chapter of this thesis where Montaigne is shown as providing an argument for the restoration of faith as the foundation of happiness. In contrast, Bacon is well established as a modern philosopher; a central tenet of modern thought is faith in the capacity of human reason and/or science to alleviate suffering and improve the human condition. Thus, for Bacon, the purpose of philosophy lies external to the individual and, as such, it makes sense that the essay would serve a different philosophic purpose given his different understanding of the purpose of philosophy.

That the relationship between the essay and philosophy is conditional finds preliminary support in the thought of David Hume. If given the opportunity to extend this project, a next step would be to consider Hume who, in his "My Own Life," says he was "seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments" (Hume 1987, xxxii-xxxiii). Appearing only in the second volume of his *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Hume's "On Essay-Writing" suggests a possible fusion of the perspective of Montaigne and Bacon. Unlike Bacon, who uses the act of essaying for rhetorical

and persuasive means to further his own agenda, Hume shares in common with Montaigne the contention that the essay serves the purpose of self-education. In his essay, Hume makes a distinction between the “learned and the conversable” as they apply to “the operations of the mind” (Hume 1987, 533). Those who are learned, “have chosen for their portion the higher and the more difficult operations of the mind” whereas those who are conversable “join to a sociable disposition, and a taste of pleasure, an inclination to the easier and more gentle exercises of the understanding, to obvious reflections on human affairs” (Hume 1987, 533). Hume worries about this distinction, calling the separation of the learned from the conversable “the great Defect of the last Age, and must have had a very bad Influence both on Books and Company” (Hume 1987, 534). Hume goes further, arguing that “history, poetry, politics, and the more obvious principles at least of philosophy,” are not presented in the proper format (Hume 1987, 534). Unable and perhaps unwilling to present itself in an accessible way, the learned deny access to their insights to the conversable world. This lack of connection, according to Hume, results in learning being “a great Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company” (Hume 1987, 534). Given this line of thought, Hume would be critical of Montaigne for limiting philosophy to the private sphere. Limited to this sphere, any possibility of social benefit is removed and in taking this position Hume moves in the direction of Bacon. Thus, it is possible to view Hume as arguing that philosophy has both a private and public purpose.

In order to realize the twofold purpose of philosophy, Hume must move away from Montaigne’s emphasis on the private toward Bacon. He does not go so far as the doggedly take the position that philosophy has the potentiality to fundamentally improve the human condition,

however. Instead, Hume takes the position that the essay has had the effect of bridging the gap between the learned and conversable worlds. Hume writes:

‘Tis with great Pleasure I observe, That Men of Letters, in this Age, have lost, in a great Measure, that Shyness and Bashfulness of Temper, which kept them at a Distance from Mankind; and, at the same Time, That Men of the World are proud of borrowing from Books their most agreeable Topics of Conversation. ‘Tis to be hop’d, that this League betwixt the learned and conversible Worlds, which is so happily begun, will be still farther improv’d to their mutual Advantage, and to that End, I know nothing more advantageous that such *Essays* as these with which I endeavor to entertain the Public (Hume 1987, 535).

No longer “totally barbarous,” the learned are now able to make their learning accessible to the people. The conversable world, consequently, is able to improve the topics of their conversations by grounding them on knowledge. The synergy between the two results, according to Hume, is a mutual advantage that brings together Montaigne’s concern with cultivation of the self and Bacon’s emphasis on improving the condition of man. Thus, Hume sees himself as a “Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation” (Hume 1987, 535). Here, Hume envisions his “constant Duty” in terms of promoting “a good Correspondence betwixt these two States, which have so great a Dependence on each other” (Hume 1987, 535).

It is thus possible to see that Hume understands the purpose of the essay as improving discourse. The ability of the essay to facilitate an improved discourse points to an alternative to a discourse characterized by “gossiping stories and idle remarks” that results in a life that is both “unentertaining” and “unprofitable” (Hume 1987, 534). Learning gives one the opportunity to engage in good conversation and in emphasizing conversation Hume differentiates most from Montaigne. For Montaigne, the act of essaying has the effect of holding things up to critical scrutiny or skepticism. One way to think about this is in terms of dialectic.²¹ This is to say, the

²¹ The topic of dialectic is something that emerged late in this project. Going forward, it would be interesting to think about the essay in terms of its dialectical purpose. Here, I am using the

essayist uses skepticism to dialectically investigate one's opinions and experiences with an eye to revealing the underlying truth. For Montaigne, this is a purely private act. In contrast, Hume's emphasis on conversation has the potential to replicate the dialectical quality Montaigne associates with essaying. As for why Hume emphasizes the benefits of conversations informed by essay, the answer lies in his insistence that man is, by nature, a social animal (Hume 1987, 37).²²

term dialectical to describe a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides. That Montaigne's understanding of the essay has an inherent connection to dialectical reasoning is suggested by both his emphasis on skepticism and his frequent recourse to Plato who can be thought of as offering the most classic version of dialectics. Going forward, one would want to consider the various ways dialectical reasoning has been employed in philosophy (Hegel and Marx immediately come to mind) and how essayists have used the various forms of dialectical reasoning in their essays.

²² Hume's emphasis on conversation is also influenced by his time spent in France where he became enamored with the salon culture (see Zaretsky and Scott 2010). With regard to the attraction of Paris and its salon culture, Hume writes that "there is a real satisfaction in living in Paris, from the great number of sensible, knowing, and polite company with which the city abounds above all places in the universe" (Hume 1987, xxxix). Understanding this helps one to make sense of what Hume says about "Women of Sense and Education" in his "Of Essay-Writing" (Hume 1987, 536). There, Hume identifies these women as "the Sovereigns of the learned world, as well as of the conversable; and no polite writer pretends to venture upon the public, without the approbation of some celebrated judges of that sex" (Hume 1987, 536).

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