MONTAIGNE’S RADICAL CONSERVATISM

Ann Hartle

Why do conservatives hold the views that they do? Why do they tend to oppose abortion, gay marriage, government control of the economy, politically correct speech and speech codes? Why do they tend to favor traditional liberal education, economic freedom, the public practice and expression of religious faith? Is conservatism a coherent political philosophy, or is it simply an ad hoc set of reactions to the excesses of liberalism? The Essays of Michel de Montaigne are perhaps the first articulation of a coherent conservative political philosophy, one that can give us insight into the fundamental differences between liberalism and conservatism.

As the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott says, “Montaigne has no illusions about human power.” Oakeshott describes the momentous changes that were taking place during Montaigne’s lifetime: “During the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, governments all over Europe were, in varying degrees, acquiring a power to control the activities and destinies of their subjects such as their predecessors had never enjoyed.” Now “the tireless, inquisitive, roving hand of government was beginning to be able to reach everywhere, accustoming the subject to the notion that nothing should be beyond its grasp.” According to Oakeshott, “The most significant of all these changes was… the gradual disappearance of the intermediate authorities which had formerly stood between a then weak central government and the subjects, leaving them naked before a power which in its magnitude was becoming comparable to a force of nature.”

At the same time, the standards of premodern political life were being called into question by early modern political philosophers. For premodern politics, the most basic principle, the standard by which a political entity must be judged, is “the common good.” The common good is not simply a good that we as individuals all want—for example, food and shelter—but a good that can only be pursued and enjoyed in common. For Plato, Aristotle, and the medieval tradition, that good is moral virtue, especially justice. Cities

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in which rule was exercised for the common good were judged to be just, while those in which rule was exercised for the benefit of the rulers were judged to be unjust. The human good, at least in this world, could be achieved only in the political realm. Early modern political philosophers such as Machiavelli reject the common good as the goal of politics, judging it to be an impossible standard, never actually achieved in practice.

Montaigne also rejects the standard of the common good. His mistrust of the use of power explains why he sees the principle of the common good as “the pretext of reason” for the actions of vicious men: it is possible to justify all kinds of evil, violence, and cruelty in the name of the common good (VS802, F609–10). Therefore, Montaigne says, “since philosophy has not been able to find a way to the good that is good in common, let each one seek it in his particularity!” (VS622, F471). This freedom of the individual to pursue the good in his own way is one of the fundamental principles of modern politics.

The common good was, in principle, the check on the power of government, for the ruler was to be held to the standard of moral virtue. And the promotion of moral virtue required the strong authority of the family and of religion. With the disappearance of the standard of the common good, based on realism concerning the human propensity for evil, the best that could be sought in the public realm is the limitation of evil. In her “Méditation sur l’obéissance et la liberté,” Simone Weil concludes that the formula of “the least evil” is the only one applicable in the political realm. The struggle between those who command and those who obey is inevitable and can only be suppressed by constraint. Therefore, the limitation of violence is the best that can be done by those who love liberty.

But given the expansion of the power of government and the elimination of intermediate authorities, as described by Oakeshott, the limitation of that power becomes extremely difficult. So, for example, Hobbes concludes that it is impossible to impose limits on the sovereign without incurring the risk of civil war. Montaigne says of the power of the prince: “It is difficult for a power so unmeasured to observe measure” (VS917, F700).

As Hannah Arendt explains, for the ancient and, in some ways, even for the medieval world, only two spheres of human association existed: the private realm of the household and the public realm of political life. Modern society comes into existence when the private realm emerges into the public. Arendt describes the emergence of society largely in terms of economic considerations: whereas economics had been confined to household management—Aristotle treats it in book 1 of the Politics where he discusses the household as the unit of the city—in the modern world, it becomes a public matter. That, of course, seems obvious and even natural to us when the most pressing political issue in presidential campaigns is now the economy, but this was not the case in the premodern world. For Montaigne, society includes the freedom of economic activities, but it also involves the preservation of those intermediate forms of association, such as family and church, that were threatened by the expanding power of government.

To say that society is a new kind of association is not to say that men did not engage in activities that we regard as social or that they were not “sociable.” It is to say that society did not exist as a recognized third mode of association with boundaries and freedoms of its own. The private realm of the household had been seen in premodern times as imperfect and incomplete because the most
significant human goods could be pursued only in the political realm. The invention of society entails nothing less than the relocation of the good to the social rather than the political sphere of life.

Montaigne is the first to give a full account of this new form of association and, through the publication of his *Essays*, to bring it into existence. Montaigne tells us, in the very first words of his preface to the reader, that his “end” in this work is “domestic and private” (VS3, F2). Society, as Arendt shows, is the domestic and private brought out into the public. And that is precisely the action of the *Essays*: Montaigne writes about himself, a merely private man with no great deeds to boast of, revealing in public the hidden, intimate details of his private life. That is what makes the *Essays* a new and unprecedented work that, by the standards of traditional philosophy, looks decidedly unphilosophical.

Montaigne “invents” society as the limit on the power of government. The meaning of “invention” in the sixteenth century was “discovery,” but discovery, in this sense, entailed the act of bringing something to light and thereby actually bringing it into existence: if it were not brought into the light, it would not have a recognizable identity. It could not come into existence on its own, naturally, without human intervention. The new is what was always there, but hidden. For Montaigne, society is implicit or intimated in the domestic and private.

The very simple but radical act of bringing the private out into the public invents society. This is Montaigne’s radically conservative act. It is radical because it goes against the very deeply engrained custom of keeping the private hidden, against the sense of shame that causes us to hide in our most private actions, and thus it transforms the modes of human association. It is conservative because it rests upon what was always already there, the domestic and private. That is, it presupposes and rests on the prepolitical and prereflective basis of familial arrangements.

Montaigne lived through the civil wars of sixteenth-century France. Although he was a Catholic and remained loyal to the Catholic side, he was trusted by princes of both factions and was called upon to negotiate between them. He also reluctantly served two terms as mayor of Bordeaux by virtue of the vote of the magistrates and at the insistence of the king. When he was thirty-nine years old, he had retired from his judicial position in the Parlement of Bordeaux to his family chateau and to his library, where he found the solitude to allow his mind to entertain itself in idleness and freedom. But he soon found that the mind alone with itself generated and produced out of itself only “chimeras and fantastic monsters.” He decided to put these in writing so that, in time, he might make his mind “ashamed of itself” (VS3, F21). Thus the essay form was born, a new mode of philosophy that brings philosophy out of the isolated mind and makes it sociable.

David Hume in his essay “Of essay-writing” argues that this form brings together what he calls the learned and the conversible worlds. “The separation of the learned from the conversible world,” he says, “seems to have been the great defect of the last age, and must have had a very bad influence both on books and company.” The social world suffers because, without the influence of philosophy, conversation is reduced to stories and gossip. But philosophy itself also suffers from this separation. Cut off from the world, philosophy becomes barbarous because it lacks “that liberty and facility of thought and expression which can only be acquired by conversation.” Philosophy, Hume says, “went to wrack by this moaping recluse method of study, and became as chimerical in her conclusions as
she was unintelligible in her stile and manner of delivery.” Most important, philosophy suffers because experience, upon which philosophy rests, is to be found only “in common life and conversation.”

Thus, Pascal describes Montaigne’s style as “totally composed of thoughts born out of the ordinary conversations of life.” That is why the Socrates of Montaigne’s invention is not the Socrates who ascends to the Forms but the Socrates who descends to the most lowly opinions of the most ordinary men. As Erich Auerbach claims, Montaigne was the first author who wrote for the nonspecialized but educated reader: “By the success of the *Essays* the educated public first revealed its existence.” That is, Montaigne actually discovers and brings this public into existence in the modern world. The *Essays*, then, include all men—the learned and the simple—in the conversation that they initiate.

Michael Oakeshott sees the *Essays* as the clearest example of what he calls “the conversation of mankind.” This conversation, he says, “is not only the greatest but also the most hardly sustained of all the accomplishments of mankind. Men have never been wanting who have had this understanding of human activity and intercourse, but few have embraced it without reserve and without misgiving, and on this account it is proper to mention the most notable of those who have done so: Michel de Montaigne.” That Montaigne embraced this activity “without reserve and without misgiving” is a manifestation of his generous sociability.

Montaigne makes his mind ashamed of itself by overcoming the conceit and the pride of the philosopher that he alone is most fully human on account of his superior intellect and that his mind, alone with itself, can determine the truth. As Hume says, philosophy, without the experience found in society, became “chimerical” in her conclusions. Whereas the mind alone with itself generates chimeras and fantastic monsters, the mind brought down into the social realm is grounded in the testimony and stories and opinions of other men. Reason is “essay’d,” or tested, in the court of experience and is subjected to and corrected by experience. But this also means that the philosopher’s mind is enlarged. The philosopher’s prejudice that only what is familiar to him could be real and true is overcome in the openness to the possible that comes with trust in the testimony of others. The essay brings the philosopher down to his common humanity, to the human condition he shares with all men. To paraphrase Hume: Montaigne is a philosopher, but in the midst of all his philosophy, he is still a man.

The invention of society requires a radical transformation of philosophy itself. Philosophy must give up its claim to set the standard for what it means to be human, a standard that rests on the superior wisdom of the philosopher and that makes the philosopher divine. Montaigne describes himself as “a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher” (VS546, F409). When he is seized by the desire to tell his thoughts and his conduct, he calls on the help of ancient philosophy so he might go out a bit more decently in public. He discovers to his astonishment that his thoughts and conduct conform by accident to many of the teachings and examples of ancient philosophy. In other words, his thoughts and conduct have not been formed by philosophy: he simply uses ancient philosophy to express publicly what he is. Unpremeditated and accidental philosophy does not claim any special authority: it is philosophy made social, and it is the way in which the philosopher participates in society.

The invention of society also requires that the “great,” that is, those who claim the right
to rule, become sociable. Just as the philosopher must be reminded that he is still a man, so also the prince must be brought down from his lofty throne to recognize his common humanity. “On the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting on our own rump” (VS1115, F857). Montaigne actually begins the essay “Of the Disadvantage of Greatness” by mentioning what he takes to be the advantage of greatness: the great man can “step down” whenever he chooses (VS916, F699). The disadvantage of greatness, on the other hand, is that it is very difficult for the sovereign to share in the most pleasant form of human association, the “essaying” of oneself with other men. The prince can only test himself if he “steps down.” Essaying can only occur in a condition in which the master gives up his conventional and customary power in order to depend upon only his natural abilities. In other words, the prince must be able to separate himself from his power and become a mere man just like every other man in order to participate in society. Of his own role as mayor of Bordeaux, Montaigne says that “the Mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a very clear separation.” The judgment of the prince must be above his power. He must see his princely power as “an extraneous accident” and “know how to reveal himself” like any other man (VS1012, F774).

Although Montaigne does not explicitly discuss representative government, this separation of the man from the prince is the formula for representative government. The ruler does not rule in his own name but represents those whom he rules. Benjamin Constant claims that representative government is “a discovery of the moderns.” According to Francis Slade, “Rule detached from its natural embodiment is the core of modern political philosophy.” Thus, “the principle of ancient constitutions is the regime; that of modern, representation.” Whereas “a regime is rule embodied in those who rule,” representation is “the separation of rule from human beings.” The principle of rule as representation is intended to serve as a check on the power of the prince by removing the personal passions and desires of the man from his role as ruler to the greatest extent possible. At the same time, the socialization of the prince makes him more human: he is a man just like any other.

For Montaigne, society not only limits the power of the prince but also subordinates violence and force to the everyday life of the domestic and private. “When I see both Caesar and Alexander, in the thick of their great tasks, so fully enjoying natural and therefore necessary and just pleasures, I do not say that that is relaxing their souls, I say that it is toughening them, subordinating these violent occupations and laborious thoughts, by the vigor of their spirits, to the practice of everyday life: wise men, had they believed that this [the violent] was their ordinary occupation, the other [the everyday] the extraordinary” (VS1108, F850). If the violent is what is really ordinary, then it would seem that the mastery and subjection of the weak by the strong is the ordinary or natural condition of man and that political power is simply that mastery and subjection made legitimate. Montaigne's invention of society, then, is the overcoming and reversal of that condition: the good that is found in the social realm subjects the strong and violent to itself.

The good of society is the enjoyment of the free association of men, freed from both the shame of the private and the domination of the political. In his discussion of “the totalitarian temptation,” Roger Scruton describes a totalitarian government as “one that does not respect or acknowledge
the distinction between civil society and State. Under totalitarian rule society is itself a creation of the State, rather than the other way round."15 Society serves as the limit on the power of government by preserving the intermediate sources of authority that the state has a tendency to try to crush. In The Social Contract, for example, Rousseau’s aim is to place “each citizen in a position of perfect independence from all others and of excessive dependence upon the city.”16 Montaigne, however, insists on the independence and authority of the family and the Church. He sets out a vision of liberal education that forms the character and the mind of the free individual, including the character that is necessary for friendship and for the free expression of opinion. Not only does society serve as the limit on political power, it is also the sphere in which the human good is found, where those activities that are “good in themselves” are pursued.

Marriage. Montaigne’s views on marriage show clearly that he does not regard marriage as merely a matter of personal choice or as a contract entered into by two individuals. “We do not marry for ourselves, whatever we say; we marry just as much for our posterity, for our family. The practice and benefit of marriage concerns our race very far beyond us.” Marriage “needs more solid and stable foundations” than sexual attraction or our own personal choices. (VS850, F646). This view of marriage also means that he sees the family and society in general as a bond that transcends the here and now and includes the unborn. “We embrace both those who have been and those who are not yet” (VS976, F746).

Economic freedom. Montaigne’s insistence on the independence of the social from the political can be seen clearly in his stance toward economic freedom and the importance that economic freedom has for the authority of the family. In spite of the conservative title of his essay “Of Custom, and Not Easily Changing an Accepted Law,” Montaigne actually suggests a radical reform of the French legal system. The French, he says, are burdened with laws that “bind the people in all of their domestic affairs.” He offers instead the “ingenious opinion” of Isocrates, who advised his king “to make the trades and negotiations of his subjects free, gratuitous, and lucrative” (VS117, F84–85).

C. S. Lewis takes Montaigne as his example of “the freeborn mind”: “In adult life it is the man who needs, and asks, nothing of government who can criticize its acts and snap his fingers at its ideology. Read Montaigne; that’s the voice of a man with his legs under his own table, eating the mutton and turnips raised on his own land. Who will talk like that when the State is everyone’s schoolmaster and employer?”17 Lewis is here especially concerned with the role of economic independence in providing an education for one’s children that is not controlled by the state.

Liberal education. In “Of the Education of Children,” Montaigne says that the entire purpose of education is the formation of the judgment of the pupil especially through the study of history and philosophy. Like Montaigne’s own education, the education he proposes would teach the pupil to be “wholly incapable of submitting to force and violence.” Montaigne’s friend, Étienne de La Boétie, wrote a book on politics, Voluntary Servitude, that addresses this relationship between education and freedom. He argues that even among peoples who are subjected to tyranny, there are always some men who despise and want to shake off the yoke of servitude. That is why tyrants, who are aware “that books and learning more than anything else give men the sense and understanding to know one another and to hate tyranny,” want no learned men among their subjects.18
Liberal education is not for the purpose of producing good subjects for the regime, but free men of independent judgment.

The education that Montaigne recommends includes the study of history so that the young man might form his independent judgment. The histories teach us to know men in their individuality. Men who love freedom must be able to recognize each other. La Boétie says that the mutual recognition of freedom-loving men is made almost impossible under the tyrant, because freedom of speech is prohibited. 19

*Freedom of speech.* A character of a certain kind is required for the practice of freedom of speech, and Montaigne’s character comes through especially clearly in his description of himself with respect to this practice. He does not at all hate opinions contrary to his own. He enters into discussion and argument with great freedom and ease: “No propositions astonish me, no belief offends me, whatever contrast it offers with my own…..When someone opposes me, he arouses my attention, not my anger” (VS924, F705). Montaigne associates the inability to converse in this manner with a tyrannical disposition: “It is always a tyrannical ill humor to be unable to endure a way of thinking different from your own” (VS928, F709). In fact, in what may be the only instance in the Essays where he refers to himself as perfect, he says with respect to bantering and joking: “I am perfect in forbearance, for I endure retaliation, not only sharp but even indiscreet, without being disturbed” (VS938, F717).

Truth is the social bond that is possible for free individuals: free speech is the way in which diverse minds can be bound to each other. Society is brought about through self-communication. The only way we can know each other is through the words in which we communicate our thoughts and wills, that is, our judgments.

*Friendship.* Montaigne is one of the few modern political philosophers who regard friendship as a philosophical topic. Hobbes and Rousseau, for example, are primarily concerned with preventing the development of factions. But Montaigne sees friendship as a greater good than citizenship. In “Of Friendship” many of the friendships of antiquity are presented as examples of opposition to tyranny. Describing the friendship of Caius Blossius and Tiberius Gracchus, who were condemned for conspiracy by the Roman consuls, Montaigne says that “they were friends more than citizens, friends [to each other] more than friends or enemies of their country.” As Montaigne’s friend La Boétie reminds us, tyrants have no friends and cannot tolerate the friendships of their subjects because they are always suspicious of conspiracies. La Boétie argues that friendship requires a character that is not motivated by fear. Friendship occurs only between honorable people, for it arises only from mutual esteem. “What renders a friend assured of the other is the knowledge of his integrity.” 20

*Religion.* Although Montaigne opposed the Reformation on both metaphysical and political grounds, he also opposed the use of violence in matters of conscience, including the execution of heretics. His essay “Of Freedom of Conscience” suggests that he acknowledged that the religious wars of his day placed severe limits on what was possible in matters of religious unity. In the end it seems he bowed to necessity and accepted the practice of religious toleration, but he held that division of religion weakened the social bond.

Montaigne is, I believe, the only early modern political philosopher who defends the Catholic Church in its universality, the only one who does not recommend that it be subordinated to the state or that it merely
be tolerated as one among many religions within the state. The Church transcends the limits of the political and stands as an independent authority and, therefore, as a limit on the power of the state.

Montaigne’s father had sent him to the poorest village in his neighborhood to be nursed and had him held over the baptismal font by villagers of the lowest condition in order to attach him and oblige him to them (VS1100, F844). For Montaigne, the spiritual power of the Church is inextricably linked to the transformation of the relation between the nobility and the people. It is, after all, his baptism that unites him to the poorest of the poor. Eamon Duffy insists on “the social homogeneity of late medieval religion.”21 As he demonstrates, “rich and poor, simple and sophisticate could kneel side by side, using the same prayers and sharing the same hopes.” In spite of the differences of sophistication about the faith, “they did not have a different religion.”22

In his essay “The Nature and Meaning of Sociality,” Oakeshott argues that “God is the only principle of sociability which will explain the facts of life. Society becomes possible [only] by religion.” Thus, Oakeshott interprets “God is love” to mean “God is the only principle of sociality.”23 The Church offers the possibility of union among men that transcends natural and social inequality and is based on a foundation of truth. The foundation of Montaigne’s new form of society is truth. Not only does Christianity claim to be true; it holds that truth to be accessible to all men, to the most simple peasant woman as to the most learned theologian. Thus, the pride of the philosopher (that he is among the few who possess the truth) is overcome in the submission of the philosopher to the “old ways” of the simple.

The Church is “that great common way” (VS520, F387). The distinction between the learned and the common herd does not obtain within the Church, for there “we are all the vulgar” (VS570, F429). As Roger Scruton observes: “When religious faith declines it becomes difficult for intellectuals to believe that they really belong to the same community as ordinary people.”24

Montaigne considers all men his compatriots. “I embrace a Pole as I do a Frenchman, setting this national bond after the universal and common one” (VS973, F743). The universal and common bond has its source in a universal and common city. Rome is “the only common and universal city. The sovereign magistrate who commands there is acknowledged equally elsewhere. It is the metropolitan city of all Christian nations; the Spaniard and the Frenchman, every man is at home there. To be one of the princes of that state one need only be of Christendom, wherever it may be” (VS997, F763). In his Travel Journal, Montaigne makes a similar claim: Rome is “the most universal city in the world, a place where strangeness and differences of nationality are considered least; for by its nature it is a city pieced together out of foreigners; everyone is as if at home. Its ruler embraces Christendom with his authority; his princely jurisdiction is binding on foreigners in their own homes just as here. At his own election and that of all the princes and grandees of his court the consideration of their origin has no weight.”25 The Church is the society in which origins do not matter. It offers the only possibility for a multicultural society.

In his “Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” T. S. Eliot describes the conditions for the kind of common culture that Montaigne presupposes: “While we believe that the same religion may inform a variety of cultures, we may ask whether any culture could come into being, or maintain itself, without a religious basis. We may go further
and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people.”26 The situation that Eliot describes is one in which “the culture of an artist or a philosopher is distinct from that of a mine worker or a field labourer; the culture of a poet will be somewhat different from that of a politician; but in a healthy society these are all parts of the same culture.”27

Freedom and force. The prejudice of the ruling class and of the intellectual elites is that the “common people” are naturally servile and stupid, and need the guidance of the more intelligent and better educated. Montaigne does not share that prejudice and seeks to overcome it at every turn. In his Travel Journal, he writes that in “free nations . . . even those of the lowest class have something lordly in their manner.”28 The common people are elevated by the exercise of freedom.

While conservatives seek the good in the social realm, contemporary liberals seek the good in politics and believe that only political power can attain the good. Liberals think they are rationally justified in using force to accomplish their goals. Thus, they turn social issues into political issues and are willing to use the power of government to pursue their chimeras.

Society is the realm of freedom, where diverse human beings can pursue the good, each in his own way, in peace. But it is not enough to place institutional limits on the power of the state and to put in place safeguards for the freedom of individuals. It takes a character of a certain kind to make a free society possible, and that character can only be formed by and within the intermediate institutions that the state seeks to crush.

The conservative character might be described as “neither master nor slave”—that is, the character that does not seek to dominate others but, at the same time, will not submit to force. Rousseau says in the Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality: “It is very difficult to reduce to obedience one who does not seek command.”29 In order to be free, in order not to be a slave, one must first renounce the desire to be a master. The desire to rule and the willingness to serve are two sides of the same coin. The master-slave is within each man. Freedom is the condition of being “neither master nor slave.” Montaigne’s love of freedom expresses itself in his hatred of “every sort of tyranny, both in words and acts.” When he says, “I am disgusted with mastery both active and passive,” he explains what he means through the example of Otanes, who had the right to pretend to the throne of Persia but who abandoned that right to his companions provided that he and his family be allowed to live in the empire “outside of all subjection and mastery” except that of the ancient laws. Otanes could not support either commanding or being commanded. Montaigne says that Otanes took the course of action he himself would willingly have taken (VS917, F700).

The man who is neither master nor slave, then, must also be courageous, willing to fight for his freedom. Courage requires what the Greeks called thumos, or spiritedness. As Harvey Mansfield shows in his discussion of “manliness,” modern political philosophy seeks to curb spiritedness severely because it sees it as the greatest threat to political stability and peace: the spirited man cannot be controlled as easily as the fearful, servile type.30 Montaigne is an exception to this tendency. He is willing to die for his country—indeed he fought in the civil wars and risked all he had for his king. But he does not seek
his own good in his public role. His hatred of tyranny expresses itself especially in his open speaking, whether to the princes for whom he negotiates, in his conversation, or in the Essays.

Montaigne’s invention of society is an act of generosity, and his conservatism is based on the virtue of generosity. Generosity is the virtue that replaces the classical virtue of magnanimity, or greatness of soul. Montaigne says, “If my heart is not great enough, it is compensatingly open” (VS917, F700). Generosity is the openness of heart that reveals and communicates itself to others and invites a similar response from others. That is precisely what the Essays do. Although society is the sphere in which each seeks the good in his own way, it is also the place where the good is found in the associations of the family, friendship, and church. Generosity is openness to human diversity and trust in the goodness of ordinary men. The conservative possesses and enjoys the good that is society. That is, he enjoys what we already have. One of the most delightful features of the Essays is the way in which Montaigne is always astonished at the familiar, ordinary, and common things. The most common human actions are miracles to him. This is the hallmark of the conservative character: to find joy in the everyday, in life itself.

Because society is the realm of freedom, it is also the realm of imperfection. Conservatives accept imperfection because they are content to possess and enjoy what we already have in society. They do not despise the good because it is imperfect. Society is the space for the give-and-take of imperfect human beings. This requires an attitude of overlooking injuries and insults, of forgiving each other our trespasses.

Liberals cannot be content with imperfection. They despise “what is” because it is not “what ought to be.” They disdain the present for an imagined future. The chimeras and fantastic monsters of liberal rationality—the mind alone with itself—are ideals of perfection. Montaigne writes the Essays in order to make his mind ashamed of its fantastic monsters. Conservative rationality submits reason to experience and thus to society. Therefore, it is not based on the enthusiasms of the mind alone with itself but rather on trust in the prereflective knowledge that is grounded in the familiarity of everyday life. Everyday life is miraculous because it subjects the violent impulses to itself. The Essays of Montaigne are the revelation of the miracle of ordinary life.

2 Ibid., 49.
29
Francis Slade, “Zeno’s City” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Maritain Association, Notre Dame University, South Bend, IN, October 2007), 1.

Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 16.

15 Roger Scruton, A Political Philosophy (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 147.


19 Ibid., 135 (Schaefer 206).

20 Ibid., 160 (Schaefer 220).


23 Scruton, A Political Philosophy, 112.

24 Montaigne, Œuvres complètes, ed. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 1236 (F961). References to the English translation of the Travel Journal are to The Complete Works of Montaigne, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1943), and will be cited as (F, CW). This passage is from (F, CW 961).


26 Ibid., 198.

27 Montaigne, Œuvres complètes, 1289 (F, CW 1002).

28 Montaigne, Œuvres complètes, 1289 (F, CW 1002).


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