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[210]

Montaigne's Significance in the History of Ethics.

A parallel may be drawn between the rebirth of science in the 15th and 16th centuries and the turning point that occurred in the history of Greek thought with Socrates. The Greek philosophers before him had immersed themselves in the contemplation of the world, of external nature, which the Greeks called the heavens. Socrates now insisted that if man is to have a knowledge that can help him in life and become the soul of his action, he must first and foremost know himself. The human, the nature, tasks and duties of man, were for Socrates the essential object of thought, and he thereby became the founder of ethics, the doctrine of the conditions and aims of human action. In relation to the earlier thinkers he stood, then, as the one who brought philosophy down from the heavens to the houses and dwellings of men. This image can be used also of the thinkers of the Renaissance. But the heavens then signify not, as with the Greeks, external nature, the universe, but the supernatural world, in which the medieval Church had taught men to see the true goal of life, in relation to which earthly life itself was a nothing. Worldly life had no independent significance, no essential tasks to solve; it was a short time of probation, which was concluded by an absolute decision. The rebirth of art and science was a
[211] sign that men were beginning once more to turn back from the heavens to the human world. They drew strength above all from the contemplation and appropriation of ancient culture, in which they found the purely human life mirrored, the "natural man," whom the Church condemned. Nature as a whole became the object of enthusiastic contemplation, and the flowering natural science soon gave this contemplation a firm and unshakable foundation. Men no longer felt strangers in the universe; there arose a confidence and a trust in life that made a striving toward the solution of purely human tasks possible. But this trust showed itself, as a consequence of the whole character of the age, in an immediate, tumultuous way, as burning enthusiasm, not with clear self-possession. Man's essence is still seen as interwoven in the connection of nature, and is not grasped in its whole depth and inwardness. But Nature stands as the infinite, all-embracing, in which all finite oppositions are lost, above all the opposition of antiquity between form and matter, the opposition of the Middle Ages between mind and nature.

As regards ethics in particular, it now brought forward, on the one hand, what the Church called the natural man, with his drives and moods, his thoughts and powers, as the real foundation for enjoyment and action (Montaigne, Macchiavelli) or in order to show that he has in himself the principle of moral action and need not wait for the reward in a beyond (Pomponatius); on the other hand, liberation is found in devotion to and enthusiastic self-sacrifice for the infinite content of ideas that now dawns upon consciousness (Giordano Bruno). Naturally these two sides cannot be separated; they stand in inner connection with one another; this follows already from the preceding remarks, and it will become evident above all in the following portrayal of one of the thinkers of the Renaissance mentioned.

Montaigne is a typical representative of the skepticism that, in times full of strong *[212]* oppositions of mind, often arises in clear, unprejudiced minds, which do not feel the need of a positive view, if only for the reason that one would then have to take the field for such a view and thus become oneself one of the many contending parties. This Montaigne would avoid at any price. He lived in France (1533—1592) in the time of the wars of religion and was here a witness to how each of the contending parties not only believed that it had right on its side, but was sure that it possessed the one saving truth, so sure that it would bring its opponents over to its side with fire and sword. Montaigne's sound and independent nature — he has been called the most original mind of the 16th century — developed by a sensible and natural education, by travel and by extensive reading, especially of classical authors, could not but feel itself prompted to inquire into the essence of human knowledge and conviction, which could allow of such diversity and strife. Yet one must not here expect to find methodical investigations. Thinking is for him rather a kind of play or pastime; he lets his thoughts go as they will, and in turn gives his readers them just as unbound and disordered as he himself got them[*)]. Hence he does not promise his readers learning either; the only thing they will come to know from his book is himself: C'est icy un livre de bonne foy, lecteur. Il t'advertit dez l'entré, que je ne m'y suis proposé aulcune fin, que domestique et privée". (L'aucteur au lecteur),

But even this is significant. To give oneself up thus to one's own thoughts and to rock oneself in one's own fancies is a modern trait, a testimony that the individual *[213]* has already freed himself from the traditional presuppositions and, without troubling himself about any authority, confidently dares to surrender himself to the currents of

[*)] "Je n'ay pas aultre sergeant de bande à renger mes pieces que la fortune: à mesme que mes resveries se presentent, je les entasse". Essais de Michel de Montaigne liv. II chap. 10.

his own inner life and let them lead him on voyages of discovery to new, unknown regions. This gives us reason already to ask about Montaigne's relation to the teaching of the Church.

In his youth Montaigne had, at his father's request, translated a work by Raimundus of Sabunde (who lived in the 15th century), a natural theology that sought in nature and reason proofs of the doctrines of the Church. Later he heard that from various quarters objections had been raised against this argument, and in the longest chapter among his "Essays" (liv. II chap. 12) he then sought to meet these objections. But he does this in a manner that, despite the sustained irony, betrays his real view.

On the one hand it had been held that the doctrines of faith were too holy and exalted to be supported by human grounds; on the other hand it had declared the grounds employed to be weak and useless.

Toward the first opponents he shows himself seemingly very benevolent. Very well, he says. Faith ought to be enough in itself. But — if our faith were really genuine, inspired from heaven, then our life would surely look different; all relations would be transformed in accordance with the holy demands, and Christians would not so often be put to shame in their conduct by Turks and heathens. Nor would the wars of religion, with all their ignoble passions, have been able to split us; human affect and interest would not have held the floor in these holy matters. All this is proof enough that we always take religion in our own way, with our human hands, and that
[214] supernatural inspiration gives way to tradition, custom and habit. We are Christians for similar reasons as we are French or German.

Already here Montaigne has forgotten Raimundus, whom he was to defend. But he loses sight of him entirely as soon as he takes up the second objection, that the proofs fall short. These opponents he will crush completely by showing them the impotence and nothingness of human knowledge. But instead of the conclusion one would expect from this, that man must blindly surrender to the divine authority, it shines clearly through that Montaigne himself accepts the skeptical results, and that for him they form a limit not only against philosophical but also against theological dogmatism. He raises the Divine so high above man's sight and power[*)], not in order to worship it the more inwardly, but in order to turn away from it with irony.

Montaigne sets the teachings of the various philosophical schools against one another; he shows the unreliability of the senses; he gathers traits from the life of animals to establish that man possesses no essential advantage over them; — in short,

[*)] C'est aux chrestiens une occasion de croire, que de rencontrer chose incroyable. Liv. II. chap 10.

he has the whole customary arsenal of skepticism at his disposal, and he uses it with virtuosity. But what ought especially to interest us is to see how he knows how to concentrate the skeptical arguments in a way that betrays a genuine philosophical thinker behind the playful ironist. Our reason, he says, cannot show us the truth; for in order that we might be sure that it really was the truth it showed us, we should need another reason, which could vouch for the truth of the first, and for this second one again a third, and so on to infinity. All our knowledge ultimately stems from the *[215]* senses[*)], but neither can they teach us what is true. For they apprehend the thing only as it appears to them by virtue of their constitution[**)]. The thing itself eludes us constantly, and we have no standard by which to judge the relation between its real essence and our sensation of it. In a similar way Montaigne shows that, since the imagination cannot go beyond our own essence, we necessarily think of the Deity in human forms. Although men have thus themselves fashioned their gods, they nevertheless become afraid of them, just as children become afraid of the face of their playmate which they have themselves painted or blackened. — There lies at the base of this an intimation of the thought which Kant and Feuerbach in more recent times have carried through so energetically in the domain of the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of religion, that the seen is always conditioned by the sight and is not known except in its relation to it.

Montaigne draws from this both theoretical and, above all, practical consequences. Since opinion stands against opinion among the learned, — since there is nothing so absurd that some people or other has not taken it up into its religion, — since the good and the right is different among the different nations, so that what is sin on this side of the mountains is virtue on the other, — there is nothing for it but to admit one's ignorance. It is a proof of madness and of the very highest degree of ignorance to regard oneself as certain of anything. All our inquiry can only serve to develop and confirm the ignorance that is innate in us. Indeed, one cannot even be sure of one's doubt and ignorance; one should therefore not say: I doubt! — but: what do I know? — From this it follows that one may well excuse those who err in their religious ideas; *[216]* for since these ideas concern something that lies beyond the range of human grounds, one who is not enlightened by divine grace may easily go astray; — but that, on the other hand, it is indefensible to set oneself against the existing state of things because one believes oneself to have found something that is better. That bespeaks

[*)] Toute cognoissance s'achemine en nous par les sens; se sont nos maistres (ibid).

[**)] Les sens ne comprennent pas le subject estrangier, ains seulement leurs propres passions (ibid).

great self-love and partiality. I loathe the new, says Montaigne, in whatever shape it presents itself. Not because the existing laws are in themselves always reasonable. The validity of laws rests not on their being just, but precisely on their being laws: c'est le fondement mystique de leur auctorité! The origin of laws often derives from folly and self-interest, but custom gives them firmness and makes them seem just. Therefore it is dangerous to follow them back to their origin. It is with them as with a mighty river, which at its source is only an insignificant spring. Thus the power of laws grows from a chance beginning in the course of time.

Custom is the mistress of the world. This holds not only of the juridical laws but also of the moral ones. Conscience feels itself bound to what it is accustomed to respect, and cannot free itself from it without repentance and rancor. Cannibals, who regard it as a duty of piety to eat their aged parents, would be shocked to see the departed buried in the earth as food for the worms. The wise man must indeed inwardly free his soul, as much as possible withdraw from the crowd in order to judge things without prejudice (retirer son ame de la presse et la tenir en liberté et puissance de juger librement des choses. Liv. I chap. 22); — but outwardly he must follow the existing laws and customs. In contrast to the many conflicting opinions he
[217] surrenders himself immediately and naively to Nature, which never errs, so long as one does not falsify it by wanting to interpret its wisdom; but against this precisely ignorance and indifference secure him: "Oh! que c'est un doulx et mol chevet, et sain, que l'ignorance et l'incuriosité, à reposer une teste bien faicte!" (liv. III chap. 13). From external occupations he withdraws into his own self and follows it into its innermost secret passages, its darkest folds. But this way to peace cannot then naturally be common to all; each must seek it for himself, according to his nature.

This thoroughgoing skepticism, which does not even in its own thought find a firm ground, but constantly keeps to the form of the question, is nevertheless not Montaigne's last word. Pascal already saw this, when in the masterly characterization of Montaigne found in his "Pensées" he sets it as the latter's aim to find a morality founded on reason, without the light of faith. Montaigne is a moralist, not merely because he psychologically portrays the nature of man, but also because he really expresses a coherent ethical view. But of what kind can this be, when he takes up a skeptical position toward every positive principle?

We have already reached the point where skepticism in Montaigne passes over into a positive view. He asserts ignorance, to be sure, and makes Que sais-je? his principle; but ignorance is for him only a means of grasping Nature. Men have, he

says, by their reasonings distorted the true and original nature, whose traces are found only in the uncultivated and in the animals. Nature has thereby lost its firm and universal character and has received a particular form in each individual. Virtue consists not in the dominion of thought or of reason, but in letting nature develop according to its own law, so that reason merely cuts off the false excrescences. The drives follow their own natural course, and reason cannot directly hinder them in this. Montaigne therefore says that if he possesses any virtue, it is an innocence that *[218]* he owes to fortune rather than to reason. When Nature of itself brings the ethical harmony with it, it follows of itself that enjoyment does not stand in opposition to virtue, but precisely through virtue attains its highest and purest form. By nature we strive for nothing but enjoyment. But the lower enjoyment does not deserve this name; it is merely momentary and full of anxiety and want. The higher enjoyment consists in virtue itself, which one must therefore not, with the Stoics, imagine as dark and austere, enthroned upon a steep cliff in a lonely desert full of dangers. Nor is it the case that virtue itself is mild and smiling, but the way to it dark and arduous; then no one would possess it, since no one manages to traverse the whole way. The way must correspond to the goal to which it leads. Virtue dwells on a fair and flowering height, from which it sees all things beneath it, and one reaches it by shady and flower-decked paths, with Nature as guide, happiness and enjoyment as companions.

This doctrine recalls Epicureanism. But Montaigne himself has already remarked that it is only a false opinion that Epicureanism should fall short in firmness and severity of Stoicism (liv. II chap. 11). If one applies this to his own doctrine, it may be expressed thus: that much labor and much exertion are required for true nature to unfold in man. What makes the Stoics stand further from Montaigne is the ascetic element in them and their disdain for the immediately natural and human, which Montaigne precisely seeks to coax forth and to protect. The greatness of the mind, he says, consists not so much in striving upward and forward as in ordering and limiting itself. Nothing is so fair and right as to be a man in a good and proper way, no science so difficult as to understand how to lead one's life in the right way, and the worst sickness is contempt for our own being[*)]. Nature is a good guide, and no more good *[219]* than wise and just. Hence Montaigne nevertheless admires "the loftiness of heroic souls." It is indeed his principle that each shall be measured by his own ell, according to his own nature (sur son propre modele). His own weakness does not make him

[*)] Entre nous — siger han i Anledning af de kristelige Asketer — ce sont choses que j'ay tousjours veues de singulier accord, les opinions supercelestes, et les moeurs soubterraines. Liv. III chap. 13.

blind to the strength of others; although he himself creeps on the ground, he can still see the high flight of others, and he does not regard it as any small matter to preserve the moral power of judgment sound in an age like his, in which virtue does not seem to be anything but "un jargon de college," and in which most strive to disparage every great and noble action by subtly tracing it back to base motives, so as to be able to draw it down into their own sphere. Those "heroic souls" are models which Nature selects in order to show to what height human virtue and power can attain (liv. I chap. 36).

In the morality to which Nature leads us, enjoyment thus attains its noblest form by becoming one with virtue. It reconciles at the same time another opposition, between egoism and devotion to others. By engaging in public affairs and concerning oneself with the affairs of others, one easily loses something of one's own being. Most give themselves up immediately, and therefore do not belong to themselves. Even sensual pleasure one must not give oneself wholly up to; it hides pain at the bottom. One must not immerse oneself in the world, but only touch it, glide over its surface. The greatest thing in the world is to understand how to belong to oneself. One must not bind oneself to anything but one's own nature (n'espouser que soi-mesme). From
[220] this it does not follow that one is to be an egoist and not care about others; on the contrary, he who does not live for others does not live for himself either. Regard for oneself includes regard for others; both follow from the same nature.

Montaigne does not wish to set forth a slack and effeminate doctrine of enjoyment. This is seen not only from what has gone before, but also from the role the thought of death plays in him. No one, he says, could rejoice in life if he feared death, any more than the condemned criminal on the way to the place of execution can rejoice in the fair regions he passes through. Most people therefore seek the expedient of trying to forget it, but this expedient is bestial, is brutal stupidity. And besides, what good does it do? One goes and comes, dances and laughs, as if death did not exist; and when it then robs us of one of our nearest, this carelessness is changed into the deepest despair and dejection. Truly, even if this bestial thoughtlessness were possible in a sensible man, it would still be bought too dear. One must in good time learn to fight this inevitable enemy, to face it undaunted. Its most terrible weapon is the strange and suddenly threatening. Let us then rob it of this by making ourselves familiar with it, accustoming ourselves to it by always having it in mind, by presenting it to our imagination in all possible shapes. Let us do as the ancient Egyptians, who at their merriest feasts had mummies of dead men brought in to serve as a reminder to the

guests. Since it is uncertain where death awaits us, let us await it everywhere. To think about death is to think about freedom; he who has learned to die has learned to cease to be a slave; there is nothing evil in life for him who has understood that the deprivation of life is not an evil. One must not attach oneself so firmly to life, nor to any enjoyment or deed in life, that one cannot part from it without sorrow. Life is in itself neither a good nor an evil; it depends on how one has used it; one may have *[221]* lived much in a short time. "Je veux, qu'on agisse et qu'on alonge les offices de la vie, tant qu'on peult, et que la mort me trouve plantant mes choulx, mais nonchalant d'elle et encore plus de mon jardin imparfaict". Besides, how our life is only a vanishing nothing when we compare it with eternity, or even merely with the age of the stars, the mountains, the rivers and the trees! What right have we to ascribe to ourselves a being in this brief moment, which is only a little flash in the infinite course of an eternal night, so short an interruption of our lasting and natural state, since death takes up everything that lies before and after this moment, indeed even a good part of it itself? With right, therefore, Nature says to us: "Go out of this world as you came into it. The passage you made from death to life, without passion and without terror, you shall now make again from life to death. Your death is a link in the order of the universe, in the life of the world"[*)].

The character that man develops in the course of his life springs of necessity from his original nature. Conscious reason can, as we have already heard, according to Montaigne act only indirectly, by warding off and purifying; the positive fullness of life arises from the bosom of Nature. Yet there is one positive feeling that reason can bring about, and which arises when the effect of the infinitely changing natural drive comes into conflict with the rational insight into what is right. This inner disharmony is felt as repentance. Thereby an inner tribunal is set up in us, which no one can flee, even if he appears toward others ever so calm and sure with regard to his actions. Even if our deeds look brilliant to others, they are for ourselves only like clear rays that leap up from an impure and muddy ground. But although repentance is a positive feeling, it has its limit where reason has its; the very passion that is one with our *[222]* own being, and which by habit and practice has taken still deeper root, it cannot change. In this sense repentance is impossible. It is only illusion or hypocrisy when one believes that one can truly become, or have become, another. It may happen at most, as Pythagoras thought, that men receive a new soul when they approach the gods to receive their oracles; but this new soul is only assumed and vanishes again

[*)] Liv. I chap. 19: Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir.

after a short time. Everyone has in himself a form peculiar to him, governing his being (une forme sienne, une forme maitresse), which cannot be changed, but withstands every external influence and transforms it in its own way. Therefore the attempts to reform and improve the world reach only the shells, never the kernel itself. As for myself, says Montaigne, I can wish that I were another man; I can condemn and abhor my general nature (ma forme universelle) and pray God for a complete reformation of my being; but this I do not call repentance, any more than I call it repentance to be dissatisfied at not being an angel or a Cato. Because I imagine higher and more perfect natures than my own, my faculties are not therefore improved, any more than my arm or my understanding becomes stronger because I can form an idea of another in whom they are stronger. In that case our most innocent actions too would become an object of repentance, because we easily see that, on the assumption of a perfect nature, they too would have been carried out with greater perfection and dignity[*)].

Thus: real repentance, repentance in the strictest sense, would lead to my becom-
[223] ing another; but another I cannot become so long as I am myself. It is this contradiction in the concept of repentance on which Montaigne bases his denial of its reality. It is seen clearly here what role the principle of immanence plays here in him, although he cannot formulate it philosophically. In contrast to the orthodox view of the corruption of human nature and the necessity of an absolute rebirth, he asserts the unity and immutability of human nature and its connection with Nature as a whole. When actions have been performed, they enter as necessary links in the great process of the universe, in the infinite series of causes and effects; and it is in vain to grieve over them. Fancy cannot with all its strength make a single point within this great process into nothing. — Such a view would, as e.g. Schopenhauer's doctrine shows, be able to lead to pessimism; if one namely assumes that the fundamental essence (la forme maistresse) is evil. But Montaigne hesitates not a moment over whether to give Heraclitus or Democritus the right: I do not believe, he says, that there is so much misfortune among us as there is vanity, or so much wickedness; as there is folly!

Pascal has portrayed Montaigne as skeptic and moralist, and on the whole as the one who presents "the natural man." But he has not carried the portrayal further in such a way that the ultimate foundation of Montaigne's view of life came to light, the point on which everything finally turns, and by which Montaigne reaches beyond the merely popular and moral and indicates a whole philosophical view of the world. This was, in and of itself, bound to have less interest for Pascal, who himself took up

[*)] Liv. III chap. 2: Du repentir.

an avowedly practical standpoint. Pascal admires Montaigne's dialectical carrying through of skepticism and accepts it in the service of paradox; but he rejects his morality as paganism, indeed in the last instance as cowardice. Whether one can *[224]* really charge with cowardice a view of life that makes it an essential task to practice the thought of death and to have it as its confidant in everything one undertakes is another matter; in his burning passion for the Gospel Pascal had to regard as too low everything that did not go up absolutely in this supernatural power. That is also why he stops at the moral and religious consideration and does not advance to the metaphysical. It likewise follows of itself that the metaphysical lies rather hidden in a causeur such as Montaigne. But after all that we have heard in what precedes, it cannot be doubtful that behind his skepticism and his eudaemonism there rises an infinite background, to which he constantly points, directly or indirectly. It is the idea of Nature in her loftiness and infinity, which in its great chain also encloses human life as a single link. Sainte-Beuve, in his Port-Royal (3e éd. II p. 412), where on the occasion of Pascal he comes to deal with Montaigne, has pointed out how Montaigne, through his concept of nature, joins the fundamental thought of the great metaphysical systems, especially Hobbes and Spinoza. The opposite of dualism, trust in human nature and its powers, had necessarily to lead a clear and lively mind to the foundation on which the whole modern world view rests, even if he has not expressed this in a philosophical formula.

The concept of nature already earlier made certain connections between Montaigne's skepticism and his morality intelligible to us. But this concept plays a leading role with him in small matters as in great. If the talk is, e.g., of illness, he will have nothing to do with the physicians; they only botch Nature and hinder her in her own proper development; — like every other being, illness too has its determinate time to develop and to complete its life, and it is in vain to intervene here. One must *[225]* let Nature rule; she understands things better than we. One must acquiesce in the order of Nature. Like the harmony of the world, our life is composed of opposites, of different tones, which all belong in the great coherence, sickness and death as well as health and life. — If the talk is of education, it is likewise a matter of letting Nature have her free course: nature peut tout et fait tout! — Finally, by means of the concept of nature he does away with his skepticism itself. The only way, he says, in which one can secure oneself against measuring things with a false yardstick is to go beyond the relative comparisons and to set before one's eyes "our mother Nature in all her majesty"; she shows us a thoroughgoing and constant manifoldness, within which we

discover ourselves and everything that we call great; it is thereby that we first get the right concept of the magnitude of things. Without such an absolute standard everyone regards his own religion and his own country's constitution as the only right ones and calls everything else barbarism, whereas it ought rather to be called barbarism to narrow the power of "our great and mighty mother Nature" by drawing arbitrary and accidental boundaries and barriers. Besides, it is also impossible; Nature mocks our arts and triumphs over our ingenious inventions[*]. — And with this concept of nature Montaigne's concept of God is, finally, in close connection. "Of all human opinions about religion", he says (liv. II chap. 12), "that seems to me to have the most probability and justification which recognized God as an incomprehensible power, the source and sustainer of all things, absolute goodness and perfection, who accepts and
[226] approves the honor and the worship which men, each in his own way, rendered him, under whatever form, under whatever name and in whatever manner it happened." We see from this how close a connection there is between Montaigne's world view and his humane and tolerant intellectual bent. Toleration is grounded with him not merely on skepticism, but the presupposition that the eternal and infinite Nature underlies and reveals itself in all things and all men must necessarily lead to the recognition that no one is cut off from the eternal and the divine, and that this can come to light in countless forms, each of which has a right to develop with freedom.

Montaigne was not, as Pascal in his Jansenist zeal believed, an apostle of cowardice and sensuality, but a noble and healthy nature. He mirrors himself in his writing, both in his good and his bad sides, with amiable naïveté. What inwardness dwelt in him is seen, among other things, from the way in which he depicts his friendship with Etienne de la Boétie[*] (liv. I chap. 27). This relation consisted, he says, in a complete mutual absorption of the one's will in the other's, so that no one kept anything for
[227] himself, and each knew the other's innermost motives[**]. "When I compare the whole

[*] Ce n'est pas raison que l'art gaigne le poinct d'honneur sur nostre grande et puissante mere nature. Nous avons tant rechargé la beauté et la richesse par nos inventions, que nous l'avons du tout estouffee: si est ce que partout ou sa pureté reluict, elle faict une merveilleuse honte à nos vaines et frivoles entreprises. Liv. I chap. 30: Des cannibales.

[*] Nos ames ont charié si uniement ensemble; elles se sont considerees d'une si ardente affection, et de pareille affection, descouvertes jusques au fin fond des entrailles l'un de l'aultre, que non seulement je cognoissois la sienne comme la mienne, mais je me feusse certainement plus volontiers fié à luy de moy, qu'à moy.

[**] Etienne de la Boëtie (1530—1563), member of the Parliament of Bordeaux, is known especially for his "Discours sur la servitude volontaire", also called "Contre un", which he wrote in his eighteenth year (par maniere d'exercitation seulement, says Montaigne), and in which with glowing enthusiasm, though in a rhetorical style strongly reminiscent of the ancients, he proclaims the doctrine of the
[227] natural freedom of all and shows that it is humanity's own fault when it is oppressed, for the oppressor

rest of my life with the four years in which it was granted me to enjoy his dear company and intercourse, it stands before me only as a fog, as a long and tedious night". Friendship was on the whole the ethical relation that suited Montaigne most; here he gave himself up entirely without fearing to lose himself. — How healthy a nature he was one sees from the remark that prosperity always puts him in a serious and thoughtful mood. "I am more devout in prosperity than in adversity. Fortune serves me for discipline and education, as misfortunes and chastisements do for others; good luck is to me a special spur to moderation and modesty". (Liv. III chap. 9).

Of necessity we had to return to the person himself, after apparently having left him in order to present his view of life. In Montaigne less than in anyone else could the two be portrayed each by itself. But if we take the whole phenomenon, it is a characteristic type of the Renaissance that we have before us here. Full-blooded and sensual, and yet in his way directed toward the infinite, moving everything, and yet resting and enjoying in the midst of the whirl of movement, delighting in antiquity and yet with the thought of the future in his lap. In his own time Montaigne was understood only by a few[*)]. Justus Lipsius called him the French Thales, Cardinal du Perron called his book le bréviaire des honnétes gens. In the seventeenth century Montaigne stood for Pascal and the Jansenists as the great heathen who more clearly *[228]* than anyone else has expressed the natural, i.e. the sinful man's, principles. Only in the eighteenth century could he find kindred minds. Voltaire descends from him by his fine and supple irony and sharp criticism. Rousseau expresses what Montaigne only hints at, the necessity of leaving the refined life of culture (Montaigne's "nature sophistiquée et raffinée") and returning to genuine, original Nature. Diderot, finally, unites both elements in himself and is therefore perhaps the later author who bears the greatest resemblance to Montaigne.

We have tried to find a system in Montaigne's Essays; and with the system there must necessarily follow a criticism. As we have sought to show, Montaigne's main thought is the same that presses forward in the whole thinking of the Renaissance, the idea of Nature. This idea appears with him in a peculiar form. It forms the general background, the last presupposition of his skepticism; it is likewise the positive power that he sees at work in everything, and for which he everywhere seeks to prepare

is only one against the many and would have no power if these did not themselves submit to him. Montaigne calls him the greatest man of the century; later it has been thought that the beautiful chapter in which Montaigne speaks of his departed friend has made the latter more famous than his own writings would have done.

[*)] See *Nisard*: Précis de l'histoire de la littérature française. p. 211 f.

a place. But there is nevertheless, especially when we consider him as an ethicist, a decisive defect in his conception of the concept of nature. He sees the natural as an immediately dissolving stream, as a kind of vegetating, which is hindered and distorted by conscious thinking and acting. From this follows in turn that man's thinking and acting receive only a negative or indirect significance, instead of these functions, just as much as any other, having to have their place and significance within Nature. The principle of human action must be found precisely by investigating what application of these functions follows from man's true nature. They thus do not stand outside the stream of infinite Nature, but are themselves forms of it. If this consideration is carried through, the active element in the concept of nature steps
[229] forth more clearly; in place of the immediate flowing there now steps the conscious devotion and the energetic development of the task indicated in the idea of Nature. From this side we find the matter in part conceived in Giordano Bruno, Montaigne's younger contemporary, when, like Plato, he sees the natural drive as the expression of an ideal unrest, which does not allow man to rest until he has acquired harmony and reconciliation through the labor of thought and will and through devotion to the infinite with his whole personality[*)]. In Bruno there is therefore found no such opposition as in Montaigne between finite thinking and will, which can accomplish nothing, and the view of infinite Nature. Montaigne's skepticism, which seen from another side is one of his chief merits, in that it frees us from the presuppositions of faith in authority, has nevertheless precisely its ground in the fact that the idea of Nature with him, however much it is the basis of everything, stands as a distant and mystical power and is not drawn forth to concrete realization in reality.

But it is of course a one-sided way of looking at things to see Montaigne as a philosophical ethicist. He comes into his own only when one sees him in his whole
[230] literary-historical significance, and this rests on the fact that he does not address himself to the learned and the solitary thinkers, but that in a style so light, clear and

[*)]From this there follows, of course, also a different conception of the decisive ethical problems. Thus Bruno in particular maintains the reality of repentance, which Montaigne in a naturalistic fashion denied. But Bruno conceives repentance in such a way that he does not give up the principle of immanence. He assumes no absolute evil, no corruption of human nature. But without strife and struggle, without contradiction and resistance the true and the good cannot prevail: and evil is the negative power that raises the contradiction and makes the struggle necessary. This negative power must be sublated; the soul wins itself through contrition. Repentance is thus a sign of the ideal nature of the soul: it is like a shining spark that strikes out of the hard flint and bears witness to its kinship with the sun. — It is clear that what is of principle and justified in Montaigne's polemic is not denied by Bruno's conception; for that polemic was directed against repentance as a complete transformation of nature.

lively as had not yet been heard in a modern language, he directed his speech to everyone who would hear him, if for no other reason, then at least to amuse himself in so agreeable a company as Montaigne's Essays are.

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