

## **Montaigne in American Political Theory: Two Generations**

*John Christian Laursen & Kevin Pham*

Americans have been integrating Montaigne into their political theory since colonial times. Famous thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Judith Butler have drawn on his ideas.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these authors, dozens or maybe even hundreds of other authors have also theorized with Montaigne, and a full review of all of them would require volumes. Our plan in this article is much more limited: to review the work of a handful of influential thinkers that we assign to two overlapping generations, one in the decades before and just after the turn of the century from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, and the other in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Let us first point out that the two generations we are reviewing here have been drawn somewhat arbitrarily from a large number of thinkers. We cannot defend the choice more than by saying that these particular thinkers have been influential (or we expect them to be) and have come up with provocative ideas worthy of our attention in American political theory.

### **The first generation: Shklar, Rorty, Schaefer, Flathman, and liberalism**

What we are calling the first generation of American political theorists to be considered here was especially concerned to use Montaigne and ideas they drew from him for the definition and articulation of political liberalism. Judith Shklar borrowed the title of her 1984 book, *Ordinary Vices*, from Montaigne's "Of Cannibals".<sup>2</sup> As she put it, "in spirit he is on every one of its pages" (1). The book is not an in-depth analysis of Montaigne's thought, but rather draws on him and a wide variety of writers from the realms of philosophy, literature,

---

<sup>1</sup> For approaches to the ways in which these figures have used his ideas, see the articles in this issue by Daniel R. Brunstetter, William Engel, Douglas Thompson, and Zahi Zallua.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1. Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

and politics to make the argument that in liberal democracy the vices of hypocrisy, lying, betrayal, and misanthropy may be of value in living a liberal politics, but that cruelty was and is a bad thing which liberals must oppose. One of her definitions of liberalism is “putting cruelty first” (7ff). She builds the case from Montaigne’s claim that he has a gut feeling against it: “L’horreur de la cruauté me rejette plus avant en la clemence qu’aucun patron de clemence ne me scauroit attirer” (III, 8, 406 V).<sup>3</sup> That is the foundation of one sort of liberalism, too. She builds on his arguments, but goes beyond them.

Among the many paradoxes that Shklar explores is the observation that those who put honesty and truth first, and cannot abide hypocrisy, see hypocrisy and deception everywhere, and that can lead to cruelty (47). But hypocrisy can help us avoid cruelty. Liberal democracy may in fact thrive on hypocrisy, because “the politics of persuasion require... a certain amount of dissimulation on the part of all speakers” (48). Politeness is after all, a form of hypocrisy. Shklar observes that too much truth is politically dangerous because it may provoke hostility, so “liberal democracy cannot afford public sincerity” (78).

In Shklar’s analysis, the vice of snobbery is the “habit of making inequality hurt” (87). Montaigne certainly was a snob, and if that was not wholly clear when Shklar was writing, Philippe Desan’s biography makes it clear that he was.<sup>4</sup> He spent a lot of time and effort securing for himself the status of nobility, with all of its privileges and diminution of others, so it would have been appropriate for her to mention it in her discussion of snobbery, but she does not. She concludes that snobbery “is impossible to approve” but that it must be endured “as an inescapable by-product of diversity itself” (248).

Shklar’s analysis of Montaigne’s attitude toward truth in politics suggests that his preference for trusting other people and speaking openly subjects him to the risk of betrayal and treachery (166). But this is another area where liberals just have to get used to it. You cannot force people to be loyal: if it is not earned, it cannot be forced (177). Similarly, the vice of misanthropy has its uses and can be “politically valuable” if, for example, it promotes a healthy distrust and curbs wild ambitions (192). There is a calm misanthropy that can even be called a liberal misanthropy, as opposed to a violent and cruel misanthropy (214).

Shklar later observed that “Montaigne was no liberal”.<sup>5</sup> And she does not accept all of his assumptions and values. But we are like him in this sense: the “plural moral world has imposed Montaigne’s burdens on us”, she writes (248). She repeats the point that Montaigne “has been so much the hero of these essays” (228). Liberalism is a political ideology she supports on the basis

---

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. by P. Villey and V.-L. Saulnier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Desan, *Montaigne: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear” in Nancy Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 23.

of arguments drawn out of Montaigne. He has helped her construct a political theory for her own times.

Shklar's interpretation of Montaigne had progeny. Richard Rorty borrowed his "definition of liberal from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think cruelty is the worst thing we do".<sup>6</sup> One of Rorty's contributions to liberal political theory is the concept of the "liberal ironist". Ironist means "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires" and has "abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and space" (xv). With some modifications to reflect an earlier vocabulary, this could have come right out of Montaigne. Remarkably, Rorty does not mention Montaigne. But we have seen from our review of Shklar's theory that Rorty's adoption of this definition from her is the adoption of a Montaignean idea. Rorty's work can qualify as one of the directions that Montaigne's ideas have taken in self-described liberal American political theory.<sup>7</sup>

In 1990 David Schaefer brought out a sustained argument for the case that Montaigne was very much a liberal.<sup>8</sup> In fact, he wrote that Montaigne was "one of the first philosophical advocates of the modern liberal regime" and that his work is "an almost comprehensive catalogue of the fundamental tenets of classical political liberalism" (375-376). In Schaefer's analysis, Montaigne uses skepticism to undermine the ancient philosophers and the church, but then goes on to argue for his own dogmatic purposes. These include individual security under law, freedom of worship and choice of lifestyle, protection of property and exchange by contract, and respect for individualism and diversity. This means rejection of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli. Schaefer draws on the work of dozens of American political theorists who draw in turn on the work of Leo Strauss for a genealogy of modern liberalism that places Machiavelli at its origins, and he inserts Montaigne into Strauss's genealogy as the mediator who originated the "modifications of Machiavelli's doctrine that gave rise to modern liberalism" (395). In his interpretation, Montaigne anticipates the work of Hobbes and Locke.

Passages that do not fit Schaefer's interpretation are neatly explained as cryptic writing and irony. Montaigne's assertion that skepticism might actually affirm faith is actually a "Trojan Horse" for undermining it (82). The ultimate principle of interpretation is that Montaigne wrote so that "men of understanding" would recognize his grand project and lesser readers would be persuaded and massaged into absorbing attitudes that would promote Montaigne's project (37-38, 132, 144-145, 150, 370).

Schaefer believes that his "attestation of the value of learning [and] his express wish that philosophy should uncover the structure and mode of

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xv. Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

<sup>7</sup> See the article by Emiliano Ferrari in this issue.

<sup>8</sup> David Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

operation of the heavens, the causes of our sense perceptions, and the nature of our bodily constitution” means that Montaigne admired the early modern sciences and was a forerunner of the scientific method and scientific progress (131). Never mind that Montaigne says a great deal against the sciences and knowledge: Schaefer acknowledges Montaigne’s “peculiarly backhanded way of expressing his thoughts on science”, but explains it as part of his rhetorical strategy for addressing the dual audiences of “men of understanding” and the vulgar (131-132).

With reference to Montaigne’s anti-monarchical remarks, egalitarian comments, pride in his Roman citizenship, and other evidence, Schaefer asserts that Montaigne was a surreptitious republican (171). The tradition of republicanism has not been especially liberal, but Schaefer thinks a modern liberal republicanism can be extracted from the traditional materials and republicans can be taught to value individualism and philosophy (175).

For Schaefer, Montaigne’s skepticism was only a propaedeutic to dogmatic liberalism, and that he was even more of a dogmatist than Plato (149-150). Anything that Montaigne says that undercuts this interpretation can be dismissed as irony or cryptic writing. But readers may ask how to be sure that the dogmatic liberalism is not the irony and cryptic writing. If we can appeal to “men of understanding” to explain away elements of Montaigne’s thought that do not fit the interpretation, what is to stop other people from explaining away the liberalism by appeal to men of understanding who realize that *that* is an irony or protective covering?

In order to dismiss Montaigne’s eulogies of skepticism and defend his claim that the French writer is a dogmatist, Schaefer finds “more than a hint of ridicule” in Montaigne’s description of Pyrrhonism as “a perpetual confession of ignorance, a judgment without leaning or inclination, on any occasion whatsoever” (83). But this reads like a good-faith characterization of the Pyrrhonists, something they could have agreed with. When Montaigne later tells stories about Pyrrho having to be saved from walking off of a cliff “without any expression of disbelief” in those stories, Schaefer argues that Montaigne reveals “his own ultimate rejection” of skepticism (117). But making fun of the false Pyrrho does not necessarily tell us anything about Montaigne’s view of the true Pyrrho. One of the authors of this article, perhaps belonging to the generation we are discussing, argued the case that Montaigne was a skeptic, but without concluding that this implied any exclusive or particular politics: “where Montaigne is a conservative, he is a skeptical conservative; where he is a liberal, he is a skeptical liberal; and where he is a radical, he is a skeptical radical”.<sup>9</sup> But these labels have to be understood *mutatis mutandis* since they are anachronistic in the context of Montaigne’s times.

Schaefer criticizes another scholar for claiming that “for Montaigne, Pyrrho was the model of the sage” because that author “does not sufficiently

---

<sup>9</sup> John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 143.

acknowledge the distinction between Montaigne's putative skepticism and the doctrines of classical skepticism" (43n) and fails to "appreciate the skeptical character of classical philosophy as a whole" (83n). When Montaigne says favorable things about "Pyrrhonians" he is really saying them about "true philosophers" such that "much of his ostensible exposition of Pyrrhonism is actually a description of *the philosophical way of life in general*" (84), which was (with footnote to Leo Strauss) "strictly speaking a *quest* for wisdom" (83). Almost anybody else would take this to mean that Montaigne was a skeptic, but Schaefer's Montaigne is a dogmatist mostly because he thinks that the philosophical doubts of Aristotle and Plato can be made public (85-6). Schaefer thinks that skeptics prudently keep their doubts to themselves.

Schaefer relies on several of Montaigne's assertions as keys to interpreting him. Montaigne says that he never makes an unintentional mistake (2), that his chapter titles provide clues to the meaning of each chapter, that he disguises and alters passages from other writers (297), and that Mannerist painting reflects his own way of writing (40). But why must we accept these statements of method as the truth? Couldn't they be irony and disguise, too? Schaefer's interpretation serves the purpose of reminding us that Montaigne's rhetoric and style makes it possible to find almost any intentions in his texts. Once we decide that Montaigne was not altogether sincere, then we can find anything in his work by simply blocking out inconsistent arguments as irony or disguise. So a similar book could be written that would argue that Montaigne was a conservative or radical or a proponent of almost any other political position.

Schaefer's interpretation goes too far when it claims that Montaigne wants to reduce human ambitions to hedonism (261, 274, 308, 332-334). He goes too far when he claims that Montaigne's "political ambition" surpasses "that of his ancient philosophic predecessors" and proves that he "aspires to become a kind of super-ruler of generations of human beings, extending into the indefinite (if not infinite) future, thereby achieving a glory rivaling or surpassing that of the greatest founder-lawgivers" (395-6). At this point, the reader might wonder if this is a parody, and begin to read Schaefer as trying to appeal to men of understanding, who will surely understand that such a characterization of Montaigne is overblown. At the very least, literary and intellectual ambitions are being confused with political action. In his biography of Montaigne of 2016 Philippe Desan is right to observe that this sort of claim that Montaigne anticipates us, which recently has meant calling him the first blogger and a precursor of Twitter and Facebook, is reading Montaigne completely outside of his own world (630).

Schaefer is right that modern liberalism is usually taken to include principles such as the rule of law, some element of egalitarianism, some respect for individualism, toleration of differences, and so forth. But Schaefer's case that Montaigne is trying to promote the full spectrum of such liberalism comes to grief upon a reading of Philippe Desan's biography, which is described as "a portrait of Montaigne in politics" (xv). There, we read, as mentioned above, that Montaigne spent a great deal of effort during much of his life making the case for the nobility of his own house, and thus special

privileges and legal status for himself and his heirs (esp. 20ff, 207, 222ff, etc.). He was a servant of princes and a courtier (249, 277), and defended the chivalric ideal and aristocratic mores at least as late as after 1585 (284). He had little confidence in the rule of law: he knew that any good judge can decide any case any way he chooses.<sup>10</sup> And “Montaigne’s actions often contradict his declarations regarding liberty and toleration in the *Essais*” (94). This is just a sampling of Montaigne’s ideas which do not square with Schaefer’s image of a liberal crusader.

Richard Flathman’s *Freedom and Its Conditions* (2003) was the culmination of many years of work on political concepts such as authority and freedom.<sup>11</sup> The book brings out the richness of the possible uses of Montaigne’s ideas in juxtaposition with those of Nietzsche, Foucault, and Stuart Hampshire. Flathman starts from the common-sense idea that freedom and discipline are opposed to each other, but works toward the idea that they are mutually dependent. As he points out, “there was no such thing as liberalism in Montaigne’s time”, but “his distinctive championing of self-made or self-enacted individualities” is a basis for “characterizing him as a precursor of liberalism” (5). Montaigne’s work becomes part of the case that “there is no general, certainly no categorical incompatibility between freedom on the one hand and discipline and resistance on the other” (6). He is interpreted to hold that “competition and conflict... are marks of a free society” (7).

In making his case, Flathman notes that Montaigne drew a great deal from Sextus Empiricus, and that the ancient Greek skeptic characterized skepticism as both a discipline and an ability (38-39). “Echoing Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne argues that reason is and must remain inadequate as a basis for moral life”, he observes (43). One must discipline oneself against the idea that one can know the right thing to do at all times by means of reason. Flathman argues that “Montaigne emerges not merely as skeptical and pessimistic, but as something of a misanthrope” (45). Luckily, “misanthropy is not necessarily a defect”, he writes, unconsciously echoing Shklar (46). It can be part of self-discipline, and together with “a modified Pyrrhonian skepticism” it can play a role in making people’s “lives enjoyable and themselves worthy of their own self-esteem” (46). It was by the cultivation of certain self-disciplining abilities that Montaigne “accomplished this considerable feat” for himself and could recommend them to others (46). Among other things, this includes drawing “back from what threatens to become not only dogmatic and determinist rather than Pyrrhonic skepticism but disdainful and despairing pessimism” (51). On the one hand, we should respect the laws, but on the other, we should not be “like the animals, slavishly subjected to the common laws” (52). Montaigne “insists that there are dimension or domains of life that

<sup>10</sup> See Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*, 95, 109ff, 118ff.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Flathman, *Freedom and its Conditions: Discipline, Autonomy and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text. An important previous work on this concept was his *The Philosophy and Politics of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), which did not discuss Montaigne.

depend more on us than on the circumstances”, and they are where we can exercise our freedom (54).

By recognizing “an ineliminable plurality of judgments and hence of dispositions, tendencies, and orientations” Montaigne disciplines himself to be “a self that recognizes and combats its weaknesses and deficiencies but that does so in the name of and for the sake of enhancing itself” (55). One should not be too other-regarding, even with the highest of intentions, because in the long run that can be “deflecting, diminishing, and finally corrupting” to one’s own self (57). Flathman even concludes that Montaigne would not have opposed the “forms of bodily self-discipline studied and endorsed by Foucault” (59). In various respects, “Montaigne must teach himself, discipline himself, [...] attend to himself, [...] [and] make the study of himself” his discipline (63). These forms of self-discipline, “in some meaningful sense adopted and maintained by the agent herself are more compatible with and contributive to her freedoms than those that are adopted and imposed on her by other agents” (163). One of the best examples of this is Montaigne’s self-discipline in “enacting himself by writing essays” (164).

In contrast with the other thinkers Flathman reviews, “Montaigne puts greater emphasis on the indispensability of moral and political commonalities” as a context for our individualities (166). We must discipline ourselves to conform in some ways with others in order to be able to differentiate ourselves in other ways (166). If we may coin a phrase here, “no commonalities, no individualities”, which might well be a useful slogan for modern liberalism to keep in mind.

We have now reviewed some of the work of one historian of political ideas (Shklar),<sup>12</sup> one member of the Straussian school of political theorists (Schaefer), and two scholars who approached Montaigne from training in analytic philosophy (Rorty and Flathman). We present them as a fairly wide spectrum of the first of our generations of interpreters of Montaigne in American political theory.

### **The second generation: Brunstetter, Thompson, Levine, Bowker, and the relationship between self and other**

What we are calling the second generation is especially concerned with how Montaigne helps us conceptualize the “self” and “other,” and to explore the political implications of these concepts for thinking about conflict and tolerance. Daniel Brunstetter writes that contemporary leaders have called undesirable groups “the opposite of ‘civilization’ and ‘scum,’ and that these are not neutral words but are part of a ‘civilizational discourse’”.<sup>13</sup> Such words

---

<sup>12</sup> Shklar made her name with books on Rousseau and Hegel, but as she notes in *Ordinary Vices*, “I have not written intellectual history” (228) here, but rather drew on Montaigne for her own theorizing.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel R. Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and His Legacy in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2. Hereafter cited by the letters TM and

help explain how modern liberals are able to rationalize paradoxical behavior: upholding universal claims (equal rights, dignity, and respect) while at the same time acting towards Others – those who are perceived as radically different – in ways that appear to violate those universal claims (torture, “just wars,” repudiation of certain cultural practices, and tacit discrimination) (TM 4). Such are the tensions that Brunstetter explores in *Tensions of Modernity*.

Brunstetter begins by examining the debates in Valladolid (1550-1551) about the political status of the Amerindians during the Spanish conquest of the New World. While Sepúlveda claimed that the Amerindians were inferior and barbaric, and therefore a “just war” could be waged against them (TM 57), Las Casas criticized Spanish cruelty and defended the Amerindians against Spanish violence, but ultimately on the grounds that the Amerindians would potentially convert to Christianity (67). However, it is Montaigne, their contemporary, whom Brunstetter praises as an alternative and perhaps our best hope for thinking through the tensions of modernity.

Montaigne knew the same facts as Sepúlveda and Las Casas about the Amerindians, but he arrives at a conclusion opposite of Sepúlveda and more radical than Las Casas. Contrary to Sepúlveda, who, following Aristotle, views the Amerindians as “natural slaves,” Montaigne sees them as superior “natural men” who could also be cruel (87). For Montaigne, the Amerindians show that human beings are products of culture, always in motion between good and evil.<sup>14</sup> Thus, contrary to Las Casas’s belief in the universal truth of Christianity (86), the Amerindians indicate to Montaigne that human beings do not have teleological directions or purposes. Brunstetter’s Montaigne blurs the line between barbarism and civilization in ways Las Casas does not. This blurring invites us to ask about our own barbarism and complicates the justification of the use of force against Others.

Brunstetter’s later work on the just war tradition rarely mentions Montaigne. However, in his own words, “Montaigne is at the heart of my thinking on just war.”<sup>15</sup> He reads the just war tradition and enters its debates as a skeptic. We should be skeptical of ‘authorities’ of just war thinking, in contrast to scholars who point to Aquinas, Augustine, or Vattel as authorities of the just war tradition, or to founding principles such as that just war thinking originated in Christianity. For Brunstetter, there is no single and correct version of just war theory. Rather, a myriad of different theories and notable disagreements across various eras “are the very substance of the tradition, its marrow.”<sup>16</sup>

In this vein, Brunstetter, with Megan Braun, explores contemporary

---

page number in parentheses in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel R. Brunstetter, “Old World Philosophy in a New World: From Natural Slave to Natural Man,” in *Old Worlds, New Worlds. European Cultural Encounters, c.1000 - c.1750*, ed. L. Bailey, L. Digglemann, and K.M. Phillips (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009) 101-120, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Personal conversation, October 28, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel R. Brunstetter and Cian O’Driscoll, eds. *Just War Thinkers: From Cicero to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 252.

challenges, deploying the Montaignean tactic of juxtaposing the pros and cons of the use of drone technology in war, while also challenging governments' defense of drones and doubting their faith in technology.<sup>17</sup> Employing a form of skepticism reminiscent of Montaigne, they challenge the U.S. government's claims that drones represent the epitome of proportionate weaponry, arguing instead that we should doubt the veracity of such statements of authority when assessing the ethical use of drones.<sup>18</sup> And in a Montaignean spirit of perspective taking and debate, Brunstetter presents diverse uses of just war language by U.S. presidents during numerous presidential debates.<sup>19</sup>

For Brunstetter, Montaigne's musings are perhaps best understood "not as a systematic political possibility, but an individual possibility" providing "insight into how we as individuals can challenge the predominant political paradigms that govern encounters with the Other" (TM 32). Brunstetter notes that Montaigne's activities as a mediator between warring Protestants and Catholics in France must have provided him with opportunities to put into practice his ideas about how to productively encounter the Other (31). Douglas Thompson takes this point further.

For Thompson, the *Essais* are not mere musings but an "integral part and product" of Montaigne's political life as a mediator between Protestants and Catholics.<sup>20</sup> Thompson suggests that the *Essais* are partially inspired by "political advice books for courtiers and princes" in the late Renaissance (21) and are thus "meant to inculcate in readers the values, skills, and capacities required for negotiating civil peace across volatile lines of conflict" (11). Montaigne delivered, by hand, copies of his "handbook" to political actors such as Henry III and other notables of the court (21). Thompson thinks we ought to use this handbook, today, to resolve conflicts through fruitful Montaignean engagement with, for example, anti-immigrant activists and refugee communities (167).

Thompson's Montaigne advocates tolerance, understood not as a moral or legal principle as is typically understood in political theory, but rather as a set of political capacities. It is a mode of engagement with the Other, an activity that exercises mental and corporeal skills, enabling one to meet with and talk productively with potentially hostile political opponents.

Tolerance has been framed by philosophers such as John Rawls and Rainer Forst as a principle of providing justifications and normative reasons to others. This is what is typically meant by "public reason." However,

---

<sup>17</sup> Daniel R. Brunstetter and Megan Braun, "The Implications of drones on the just war tradition," *Ethics & International Affairs* 25 (2011): 337-358.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel R. Brunstetter and Megan Braun, "Rethinking the Criterion For Assessing CIA Targeted Killings: Drones, Proportionality and Jus ad Vim," *Journal of Military Ethics* 12-4 (2013): 304-324.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel R. Brunstetter, "Trends in just war thinking during the US presidential debates 2000-12: genocide prevention and the renewed salience of last resort," *Review of International Studies* 40 (2014): 77-99.

<sup>20</sup> Douglas I. Thompson, *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2. Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

Thompson thinks this view of tolerance “inevitably carries us into the mindset of law and rule” (87) and is therefore not very useful in actual conflicts that involve “not only ‘reasons’ but fears, strong in-group/out-group emotions, strategic considerations, misperceptions, and so forth” (90). Montaigne is useful because he “embraces tolerance’s somatic elements and takes the involvement of the body to be as essential as that of the mind” (90). Thompson shows that exercising one’s capacities, endurance, and joy in ways that Montaigne does would help one engage productively with opponents. Thus, Montaigne’s “public reason” (which actually appears to be the first recorded use of the term) is different, indicating an activity of interacting with others in order to “restore, maintain, or enhance the health of the basic customary and institutional arrangements that make the negotiation of public goods possible” (157). Whereas the Habermasian Forst is concerned with *how* we talk to political opponents, Montaigne is concerned *that* we talk to them, and “showing up” requires a set of capacities, strengths, and active postures different from mere “civility” (3).

Montaigne’s habit of arguing different sides of any issue allows him to be a good counsel to political actors by bringing out multiple sides of complex cases (27). On whether one should act according to morality or prudence during political conflict, Montaigne argues for both, giving no settled, one-size-fits-all answer (109). As we read Montaigne going back and forth between different perspectives, Thompson argues that we should view this inner dialogue as encouragement to actual dialogue, as “an extension of his corporeal activity of shuttling back and forth between different sides in conflict as a political negotiator” (42). Montaigne’s habit of arguing different sides induces us to do the same, allowing us to be flexible and to avoid dogmatism (32-35).

Montaigne’s frankness, personal tone, and honesty won him trust from Protestants and Catholics and allowed him free passage between the warring parties (38, 123). Montaigne described these qualities as “fundamental parts of his character” (80). One can acquire them through practice. Montaigne is so accustomed to engaging in robust dialogue with frankness and “lack of upset that it is second nature to him in negotiations” (82). Montaigne exercises his frankness through “uncivil” conversation, which is preferable to the “civil” conversation advocated by some of today’s political theorists. Montaigne loves not calm, polite chats but rather “dispute, oppositional dialogue, and confrontation with different opinions, forcefully stated” (68). Montaigne prefers a “strong virile fellowship and familiarity, a friendship that delights in the sharpness and vigor of its intercourse” (68). He does not like discussions that “descend into bare hostility” (69) and says we should reject *ad hominem* attacks. Yet, it seems that Montaigne, who is Catholic, is able to meet and have robust discussions with Protestants because he is already well liked by them. How might someone today get a purported ‘enemy’ to be receptive to dialogue? For Thompson, the answer seems to be: “be like Montaigne”. It may be possible for anyone to become more like Montaigne by reading the *Essais*, but questions remain. Will frankness be appreciated in all cultures? Must there be a minimum amount of preexisting trust for ‘uncivil’ discussions

to be possible or productive?

While Shklar argued that fear of political cruelty may motivate people to agree to the principle of tolerant non-interference with others, Thompson's Montaigne finds "fear of cruelty to be insufficient" (12). Joy and pleasure are required to motivate people to leave their private domains to initiate the interactions and relationships needed for securing peace (12). For Thompson's Montaigne, "learning to endure and to take pleasure in deep human plurality occurs not only through reading ancient books... but also in actual encounters with different customs, opinions, and practices in dialogue with real people" (59).

Montaignean conflict resolution is found in instances of Arabs and Jews negotiating governance between their communities in Mandate Palestine in 1947-48 (160), and of courageous Mohawk negotiators moving between Mohawk activists and Canadian soldiers in 19<sup>th</sup> century (165). Logically, Thompson's Montaigne would firmly oppose any argument that rejects, apriori, the legitimacy of allowing "oppressors" to be heard, or insists that "the enemy ought to be defeated rather than engaged through dialogue." This might displease elements of the left, but it would be applauded by liberals.

While Thompson views Montaigne's *Essais* as supporting a *practice* of toleration, Alan Levine views the *Essais* as justifying a *theory* of toleration.<sup>21</sup> Levine thinks that contemporary liberal societies, lest they become weakened, need stronger theoretical justifications for toleration because existing justifications are problematic. Fortunately, Levine thinks, Montaigne provides the most convincing justification for toleration that does not fall into old traps.

First, Montaigne does not appeal to natural and divine rights to justify toleration (11, 133). Second, the argument that aspects of our short-term self-interest ought to be restricted in order to secure our overall long-term self-interest (such as Hobbes's view) is not convincing because it defines self-interest too narrowly as acquisition (12). Third, against those like Rorty, Levine's Montaigne does not justify toleration on the basis of custom but on a deeper conception of the self (13). Fourth, we might think that total "moral skepticism should lead to toleration" but this would make the views of an intolerant person just as valid as a tolerant person. Thus, moral skeptics must give a non-transcendent reason why one should not follow one's will where it may take one, and Montaigne's conception of the self does just that (14). Lastly, Levine's Montaigne does not base his theory of toleration on a gut sense that people are naturally tolerant, as he avoids assumptions about human nature (15).

For Levine, Montaigne shows that self-interest and toleration are not in tension as is typically thought. Rather, self-interest, properly understood, *demand*s toleration (8). Here, toleration is not viewed as an externally enforced limitation on one's will (9). Rather, toleration arises from a desire to not

---

<sup>21</sup> Alan Levine, *Sensual Philosophy: Toleration, Skepticism, and Montaigne's Politics of the Self* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001). Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

impose one's self on others because one is preoccupied with *proper* self-interest, meaning appreciation of the fact that exploring our own complex inner selves is the most exciting and pleasurable activity we can engage in (150). Whereas Thompson's Montaigne emphasizes the pleasure of engaging diverse people out in the world, Levine's Montaigne has us turn inward, emphasizing the pleasure of engaging the diversity of wills, desires, and opinions within one's own self.

Self-exploration is exploring and fighting "through opinions and customs that we've internalized" and taming "the anxieties, fears, and longings" that cause us to flee from our natural condition (28). Doing so "provides one with a never-ending source of wonder and delight" (28) and allows us to achieve a tranquility which Levine calls "sophisticated simplicity" (121). For Levine's Montaigne, this way of life is better than the "natural habit" exemplified by the Amerindians who are happy because they live according to custom but are ultimately vulnerable to outside influences because they lack critical self-awareness (111). True self-interest leads to a separation of the public and private because we need a private sphere, or as Montaigne says, "an *arrière boutique*, of independent thought and judgment" (26) to practice self-awareness. Montaigne's conception of self has no interest in violating others; the self is ultimately empty so it has "little to force" (29, 151). Moreover, self-aware people are aware of their own weaknesses, which make them empathetic to the weaknesses of others (7).

We need to 'essay' ourselves, Levine's Montaigne claims, because intolerance arises from an unruly mind. The solution is to make everyone more content with the human condition as it is, by making them more self-aware and self-knowledgeable (4, 155). Montaigne does this by first using skepticism to swat down claims to knowledge. If one does not know anything then it is ridiculous to persecute others who are different. Yet, although humans cannot possess moral truth, they certainly possess at least one kind of knowledge: experiential and phenomenological knowledge of their own selves.

So far, three authors of this "second generation" have admired Montaigne. They think that if more people read Montaigne's *Essays*, we might more quickly attain a healthy liberal democratic society in which individuals are better able to deal with Others constructively. Such a liberal society would be justified by a more solid theory, one that does not rely on transcendent divine 'rights' or on post-modern subjective relativism but on the middle road of skepticism and self-knowledge.

However, there is at least one recent political theorist who views Montaigne as a potential threat to a healthy liberal democratic society. Matthew Bowker thinks the goal of any liberal society should be to foster the development of healthy "selves." The self is "an ideal, a potential and complex human achievement."<sup>22</sup> A self thinks, analyzes, is a wishing and willing agent,

---

<sup>22</sup> Matthew H. Bowker, *Ideologies of the Self: Trauma, Failure, Deprivation, and the Abandonment of the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 153. Hereafter cited by page number in parentheses in the text.

acts creatively and not compliantly or compulsively, and is a subject and not an object. Development of individual selves leads to greater tolerance because, Bowker thinks, “individuals who experience themselves as selves or subjects are likely to recognize others as selves or subjects deserving of respect” (114). However, as seen in Brunstetter’s early work, it is also the case that some individuals who have experienced themselves as selves have withheld recognition of the selfhood of others and even of their status as human beings.

According to Bowker, the world is, unfortunately, “full of not-selves,” and, he thinks, “ideologies of experience are an important part of the reason why” (17). He aims to make sense of an eclectic set of discourses and attitudes which he calls “ideologies of experience” that he thinks work against the development of the self. Ideologies of experience emphasize the importance of trauma, failure, and deprivation, and, in doing so, promote the abandonment of the self. They “endorse immediate identification with and incorporation of experience’s objects, the splitting of experience from thinking, the repetition and transmission of experience in unthought forms, and the over-reliance upon the psychic mechanisms of projection and introjection” (2). Michael Diamond, in blurbing his book, says that Bowker has found an idea of profound significance because Bowker’s concept of an ideology of experience may hold a key insight into how we are taught to “mistrust our own capacity for reality testing and knowing good from bad,” and that, “stripped of critical thinking we forfeit the essence of citizenship in a democratic society”.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, Bowker thinks, Montaigne endorses an “ideology of experience” which ultimately discourages individuals and groups from creating, resisting, and changing our experience, urging us instead to embrace failure and self-abandonment. Though Montaigne is best known as a champion of individual experience, “it is not the experience that belongs to the individual that Montaigne truly celebrates. Rather, the individual’s experience is false if she refuses to recognize the exteriority and superiority of the objects that shape our experience, such as Fortune, and, more importantly, Nature” (51). Montaigne tells us that nature will always reign superior and Bowker takes this to mean that Montaigne urges us to give ourselves up to the superiority of nature and thus forget the self’s capacities for reason. The capacity for “resisting reason,” Bowker writes, “becomes, for Montaigne, a central virtue” (53). Here, it seems that one can go the other way and ask, “what if nature really is superior, and we should identify with it?” Another interpretation may be that Montaigne simply asks us to use our reason, but to be humble about it and aware of its limits. He encourages us to improve our minds (I, 25, 53; I, 26, 57 V) and argues that it is a “tresbelle et treslouable entreprise, d’accommoder encore au service de nostre foy, les utils naturels et humains, que Dieu nous a donnez” (II, 12, 177 V). If Montaigne’s message is to use reason humbly, rather than to abandon it, then Bowker is not justified in arguing that Montaigne promotes an ideology of experience.

Bowker’s Montaigne pursues the “truth of our utter foolishness, our inev-

---

<sup>23</sup> Back cover of Bowker, *Ideologies of Experience*.

itable nothingness” (52), thus discouraging self-development. Levine also agrees that Montaigne finds the self to contain inevitable nothingness. However, Levine says that Montaigne “finds the self, paradoxically, to contain” both “everything and nothing” (6). Therefore, Levine’s Montaigne sees the self as being full of rich wills, impulses, and desires, with never-ending layers. At the same time, these things are unsteady and “dissolve under the analytical gaze” and so the self is ultimately empty (7). Levine emphasizes the self’s ‘everything’ and can make the case for joyfully exploring it, while Bowker chooses to emphasize the self’s ‘nothingness.’

When Montaigne praises Mexican parents who tell their newborns that they have come into the world to “endure, suffer, and be silent”, Bowker takes this to mean that a child is born *in order to* suffer and endure (53). “This odd philosophy may be applied to the life of the individual, as well as to political communities” and is not a healthy ideology for the self, Bowker thinks (53). Against other critical interpretations of Montaigne, Bowker argues that it is possible to understand the *Essais* “as an attempt – an *essai* – to buttress the experiential devaluation of the self, to explore, indulge, and even insist upon the self’s failure in order to secure a more self-effacing relationship to experience’s objects.” (54). Montaigne’s “well-known idiosyncrasies, his willingness to portray his ‘personality,’ his self-contradictions, factual errors, and repeated failures to arrive at reasoned treatments of his subjects” (55) may be more than marks of charm and wit. Bowker thinks they represent a “ritual of intellectual failure, consciously or unconsciously intended to realize the futility of thinking about or resisting the overwhelming forces imagined to drive experience” (55).

If asked to think of a quintessential American value, many people will think of “freedom”. Perhaps it is no surprise that Montaigne, who laid some of the deep background for the ideology of freedom that later became what we call “liberalism,” has been used by American political theorists to explore, develop, and renew aspects of this ideology. Shklar holds that liberals, like Montaigne, must oppose cruelty. Rorty advocates a Montaignean attitude of liberal irony. Schaefer thinks Montaigne’s skepticism indicates a dogmatic liberalism, although Laursen argues that Montaignean skepticism does not necessarily wed one to liberalism. For Flathman, Montaignean self-discipline can lead to greater freedom. Brunstetter shows that calling Others ‘barbarians’ makes liberal tolerance difficult, while Montaigne relativizes the idea of barbarism in order to make tolerance easier. Thompson shows that Montaigne helps us *practice* tolerance by encouraging us to talk to Others. Levine shows that Montaigne also provides a better *theory* of tolerance, saying that it is rooted in self-interest and self-exploration. According to Bowker, Montaigne might actually discourage the self from developing. These authors have used Montaigne in diverse ways to shed new light on what it means to be against cruelty, to be ironic, to be free, disciplined, tolerant, and to be an independent self, in other words, to be a liberal.