

8 Montaigne and the truth of the schools

In this chapter I shall address two questions: what did Montaigne have to say about the truth claims and pretensions to knowledge of the philosophy of his day? And how does this relate to his own project in writing the *Essays*? Truth is, of course, a notoriously difficult term. For some it resides in the relationship of propositions to reality. If there is a correspondence between the two, then the conditions for the proposition being truthful are satisfied; as Montaigne says, "If you say 'it is fine weather' and you are speaking the truth, then it is fine weather."¹ But you may wish to specify how this correspondence is achieved: in other words, you may wish to associate truth with verifiability, and account for how it comes to be known to be true. Lorraine Daston has pointed out that this version of truth can vary over time, depending on which of several different "epistemological virtues" it is linked to, such as certainty, objectivity, universality, applicability (the "pragmatic" version of truth), or correlation with a whole body of beliefs (what came to be known as the "coherence" theory of truth).² Montaigne himself, from his wide reading in ancient writings, touches on all these criteria, and associates them with what he sees as the aim of philosophy, which is to seek truth, knowledge, and certainty;³ he shows himself moreover to be very sensitive to the relationship of authoritative statements and truth, by warning us to dissociate hermeneutic questions ("is this a correct account of what a certain philosopher said?") from philosophical ones ("how valid is this proposition?");⁴ and as a writer about the self, he evinces an understandable preoccupation with truth-telling and sincerity. We can therefore expect his reaction to the philosophy of his day in all these regards to be thoughtful; it is also, as we shall see, relatively well-informed.

He earns his place in histories of thought, however, not so much for his critique of these issues but rather for his popularization of skepticism, principally in the longest chapter of the *Essays* entitled "Apology for Raymond Sebond".⁵ Raymond de Sabunde or Sebon(d) (d. 1436) was the author of a work of natural theology, which set out to prove the existence of God and the truth of the Christian religion by natural reasoning alone. Montaigne translated the text into French at the request of his father, and felt it incumbent upon him to defend it from the attacks of those who doubted either that Sebond had employed the right arguments or that his project was in any way achievable.⁶ Montaigne used the recently translated works of the ancient Pyrrhonist skeptic Sextus Empiricus⁷ to launch a broad attack on those who doubted the value of Sebond's text, ending with an exposition of radical relativism in which the essayist explicitly cuts the ground from under his own feet as a defender of natural theology by calling into doubt all the sources of human knowledge. In this chapter he accepts Sextus Empiricus' division of philosophers into those who believe they know (the dogmatists), those who claim not to know (the academics), and those who are still seeking knowledge (the Pyrrhonists or skeptics).⁸ Montaigne avers that the dogmatic philosophy dominant in his day is Aristotelianism, and directs his most savage criticisms at this philosophical target, accusing Aristotle himself of deliberate word-spinning and obscurantism, and claiming sarcastically that if one does not know one's Aristotle, one can know nothing about oneself.⁹

While the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" is without doubt important, it cannot be said to encompass all of Montaigne's aims in writing. His innovative study of himself, his discussion of religious, political, social, and cultural issues, his reflections on both individual and collective human conduct, his humanist practice of reading and writing are all features not captured by that unusually technical and structured chapter of the *Essays*. In these other aspects of his work, Montaigne shows himself to be programmatically unphilosophical. He sets out to write not impersonally but personally, not comprehensively but partially and inconsistently, not supra-temporally but consciously immersed in the passage of time;¹⁰ he relies on an unsystematic mixture of anecdote, quotation, and moral reflection, into which in the course of the last twelve years of his life he interpolated intermittently yet more thoughts

and quotations; his text rarely takes on the character of a sustained argument that is explicit about its own forms of validation. He is even willing knowingly to breach the rule of non-contradiction, and yet claim not to breach truth-conditions: "so, all in all, [it may indeed happen that I] contradict myself now and then, but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict".¹¹ It is safe to say that no professional philosopher of the late Renaissance would have recognized what Montaigne wrote as a contribution to his subject, except in the loose sense that it consisted in reflections on ethics, politics, and natural philosophy. One of the reasons for quoting the *Essays* at some length in this chapter is to give a flavour of their author's very unphilosophical manner of expression and textual development, and to show how informal the link is between Montaigne's writing and the philosophy of his day. The essayist does, however, come to acknowledge that he has come to make common cause with the very philosophy he professes so much to despise, as we shall see.

Montaigne famously declares that although he was schooled in ancient literature by humanist teachers, he never engaged in the technical study of any of the university disciplines:

For to sum up, I know that there is such a thing as medicine, jurisprudence, four parts in mathematics, and roughly what they aim at. And perhaps I also know the service that the [university disciplines] in general aim to contribute to life. But as for plunging in deeper, or gnawing my nails over the study of Aristotle, monarch of modern learning, or stubbornly pursuing some part of knowledge, I have never done it; nor is there any [one of the arts disciplines] of which I could sketch even the outlines. There is not a child halfway through school who cannot claim to be more learned than I, who have not even the equipment to examine him on his first lesson, at least [in terms of] that lesson. And if they force me to, I am constrained, rather ineptly, to draw from it some matter of universal scope, on which I test the boy's judgment: a lesson as strange to them as theirs is to me. I have not had regular dealings with any solid book, except Plutarch and Seneca.¹²

There are good reasons for doubting this claim, given the technical knowledge of the law on display in the *Essays*, which Montaigne may have acquired at the University of Toulouse;¹³ a plausible motive for the author's silence about this period of his life is that he wanted as a writer to give himself the airs of a gentleman scholar, not a crabbed and dusty pedant.¹⁴ It is even the case that he rarely, if ever,

admits to his long practice as a magistrate. But whether he underwent a university education or not, he does not disguise the fact that he is aware of what is going on in the intellectual world about him; he refers to some of the most contentious publications of his day (by figures such as Copernicus, Paracelsus, and Machiavelli); he employs the vocabulary of contemporary philosophy, and engages in sharply focused critiques of the higher disciplines of law and medicine.¹⁵

The account I shall give here of Renaissance philosophy as this was taught in institutions around Europe is selective; it is intended to reveal Montaigne's awareness and critique of it, and suggest what role this critique plays in his project in writing the *Essays*.¹⁶ The basic philosophy course (*cursus artium*) taught in most European universities in Montaigne's time consisted principally in a training in grammar and logic, set in the context of an Aristotelian classification of knowledge. This separated speculative thinking ("sciences") from goal-oriented disciplines ("arts"), setting the former above the latter, and establishing a clear hierarchy inside both domains. "Science" is said by some sources to be characterized by "the most secure and certain knowledge" (*scientia*), "indubitable evidence," and "precise reasoning."¹⁷ It is pertinent to examine these features in turn. The "certainty" of the knowledge is not primarily a subjective mental disposition, but rather its objective fixedness or reliability, in contrast to the conjectural knowledge of the arts (this being *opinio* as opposed to *scientia*). The highest discipline in the sciences is metaphysics, because its subject matter is the most universal and most certain, followed by physics, psychology, mathematics, and logic (looked upon in this instance not as an instrument but as a science). Among the arts, ethics, politics, law, and medicine take precedence as practical disciplines. Certain disciplines provide the premises necessary to the other disciplines; Montaigne himself notes this, but gives it a negative slant by suggesting that the whole edifice of knowledge has thereby no validation outside itself:

It is very easy, on accepted foundations, to build what you please; for according to the law and ordering of this beginning, the rest of the parts of the building are easily done, without [having to go back on what you have said]. By this path we find our reason well-founded, and we argue with great ease. For our masters occupy and win beforehand as much room in

our belief as they need in order to conclude afterward whatever they wish, in the manner of geometricians with their axioms, the consent and approval that we lend them, giving us the wherewithal to drag us left and right, and to spin us around at their will. Whoever is believed in his presuppositions, he is our master and our God; he will plant his foundations so broad and easy, that by them he will be able to raise us, if he wants, up to the clouds.

In the trade and business of human knowledge, we have taken for ready money the statement of Pythagoras, that each expert is to be believed in his craft. The [dialectician] refers to the grammarian for the meaning of words; the rhetorician borrows from the [dialectician] the subjects of his arguments; the poet from the musician his measures; the geometrician from the arithmetician his proportions; the metaphysicians take as their foundations the conjectures of physics. For each science has its presupposed principles, by which the human judgment is [circumscribed] on all sides. If you happen to [attack] this barrier in which lies the principal error, they have this maxim in their mouth, that there is no arguing [with] people who deny first principles.¹⁸

What he shows here is his polemical intention to characterize principles as mere presuppositions; this is somewhat unfair, for he declares in this very passage that the principles of metaphysics are taken from natural philosophy's account of reality.

The "indubitable evidence" of the sciences include the products of *experientia* (that which constitutes a common body of knowledge derived from the senses), which can be presupposed;¹⁹ this is consistent both with the thoroughgoing sense epistemology of Aristotelians, expressed in the maxim *nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu* (there is nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the senses), and with their correspondence theory of truth usually expressed through the formula *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (the correspondence of the thing and the intellect), or an attenuated version of this, in which the correspondence is between rational discourse and perceptions (the sense impressions received by the mind), not with the thing itself.²⁰ In this, Montaigne follows the Aristotelian line; he never departs from the claim that the senses "act as the proper and primary judges for us,"²¹ and one of his most important chapters ("Of Experience") is all about the value of common, everyday experience. His agreement is however qualified by his long demonstration in the "Apology" of the unreliability

and incompleteness of our senses inspired by Sextus Empiricus and other ancient sources. Evidence from the animal world is adduced to show that man cannot detect what some animals are able to detect around them; man is shown to be unable visually to judge size, to be misled by his sense of touch, taste, and hearing, to be subject to illnesses of the senses (as when those suffering from jaundice see things as yellow), and to be unable to agree from one individual to another on the impressions left on the senses by given objects. This is shown to lead to circularity: "to judge the appearances we receive of objects, we would need an [instrument of judgement]; to verify this instrument, we need a [proof]; to verify this [proof], an instrument: there we are in a circle."²² The epistemological virtue of certainty, insofar as this resides in the senses, is thus radically challenged by Montaigne.

The third criterion of scientific knowledge (which embodies the same epistemological virtue, but in a different location), "precise reasoning," also comes under attack. Like his near-contemporary Francis Bacon, Montaigne sees human reason, as well as the senses, as a source of error;²³ it is a "two-edged and dangerous sword," "an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable and adaptable to all biases and all measures," a "miserable foundation for our rules [. . .] which is apt to represent to us a very false picture of things."²⁴ He associates this attack on the faculty of reason and reasoning with some of the favourite targets of the skeptics. In this attack, pride of place is given to the syllogism,²⁵ of which he gives the standard parodic example: "ham makes us drink; drinking quenches our thirst; therefore ham quenches thirst."²⁶ He also undermines the truth-claim of the syllogism in the example of the liar paradox ("if you say 'I lie' and if you are speaking the truth, then you lie"²⁷), as well as mischievously pointing out that it is a form of reasoning we share with animals such as the fox and the dog.²⁸

His attack on scientific definition is even more savage. This is connected to the attack on the syllogism, in that the middle proposition of the first figure of the syllogism (its highest form) includes a cause, and the essential property of scientific knowledge in an Aristotelian scheme is that it is causal: as the scholastic tag has it, *scire est rem per causas cognoscere* (knowledge is comprehension of things by their causes).²⁹ Playing on the words "cause/causer/chose" (*cause* in

French means both "cause," and "case" and in the form of a verb means "to chat"), Montaigne writes:

I see ordinarily that men, when facts are put before them, are more ready to [pass their time] by inquiring into their reasons than by inquiring into their truth. They leave aside the [things themselves] (*choses*) and amuse themselves treating the causes (*causes*). [What funny prattling causifiers (*causeurs*)]. The knowledge of causes belongs only to Him who has the guidance of things, not to us who have only the enduring of them, and who have the perfectly full use of them according to our nature, without penetrating to their origin and essence. Nor is wine [more agreeable] to the man who knows its primary principles. On the contrary, both the body and the soul disturb and alter the right they have to enjoyment of the world by mixing with it the [authority of science].³⁰

"Scientific" definition by *genus* and *differentia* also embodies causal knowledge, most usually in its formal and material modes. Again Montaigne is consistently savage in his attack on this, and resolute in his defence of man's access to knowledge of phenomena through experience which does not need to have recourse to scientific definition: "[this] logical and Aristotelian [ordering of material] is not to the point. I want a man to begin with the conclusion. I understand well enough what death and pleasure are: let him not waste his time anatomizing them";³¹ or again:

Our disputes are purely verbal. I ask what is "nature", "pleasure," "circle", "substitution." The question is one of words, and is answered in the same way. "A stone is a body." But you pressed on: "And what is a body" – "Substance" – "And what is substance" and so on, you would finally drive the respondent to the end of his lexicon. We exchange one word for another word, often more unknown. I know better what is man than I know what is animal, or mortal, or rational.³²

Through this standard scholastic definition of the species man by *genus* (animal) and *differentia* (mortal, rational), Montaigne attacks here both the redundancy of the definition and its association with word-spinning and obscurantism. This attack is found again in a passage on the medical use of the concept of occult properties used as an explanatory device, where he ends up by concluding that "the greatest part, and I believe, more than two-thirds of the medicinal virtues, consists in the quintessence or occult property of simples, [about which we can be informed in no other way than by] use;

for quintessence is nothing else than a quality of which we cannot by our reason find out the cause."³³ Montaigne replaces definition with a form of intuition which arises from our being in the world, and does not need a detour through philosophical language to imprint the intentional object on the intellect. He may not ask, as subsequent philosophers have done, whether such a form of intuition is at all possible without recourse to some form of language: but he does point to language's inexorable circularity, giving the example of the law's attempt (and failure) to enshrine intention in words:

Why is it that our [normal mode of speech], so easy for any other use, becomes obscure and unintelligible in contracts and wills, and that a man who expresses himself so clearly, whatever he says or writes, finds in this field no way of speaking his mind that does not fall into doubt and contradiction? Unless it is that the princes of this art [i.e. that of writing contracts and wills], applying themselves with particular attention to picking out [legal formulas] and contriving [technical] phrases, have so weighed every syllable, so minutely examined every sort of combination, that here they are at last entangled and embroiled in the endless number of figures and in such minutes [distinctions] that they can no longer fall under any rule or prescription or any certain interpretation . . . by subdividing these subtleties they teach men to increase their doubts; they start us extending and diversifying the difficulties, they lengthen them, they scatter them.³⁴

While rejecting or modifying some parts of traditional "scientific" logic, Montaigne makes direct use of others; if, as we shall see, he develops the notion of logical difference in his own idiosyncratic way, he none the less exploits the traditional logic of opposition which is connected to it. According to this there are four versions of opposition: correlative opposites (double/half; father/son); contraries, either admitting intermediate terms (black/grey/white) or not (odd/even); privative opposites (sight/blindness); finally contradictories which relate only to propositions ("Peter is nice"/ "Peter is not nice"). This last gives rise to the "square of contraries" and the categories of sub-contraries which can be used to check the logical correctness of propositions; contradictories can only be resolved by time (Peter is nice in the morning, but not nice in the evening), the relation to the subject (Peter is nice to his wife, but not to his cat), or the relation to the object (Peter nice in comparison to John, but not

nice in comparison to Mary).³⁵ Montaigne is a thinker who is struck by the diversity and inconsistency in the world around him and in himself, and needs these logical tools to express his perception of this, even if they are not present in the form of technical language or analysis, as these examples show:

I give my soul now one face, now another, according to which directions I turn it. If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me, by some twist or in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly and prodigal: all this I see in myself [in some respect] and according to how I turn; and whoever studies himself really attentively, finds in himself, [indeed] even in his judgement, this gyration and discord. I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word. "Distinguo" is the most universal member of my logic.³⁶

This is the record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and when it so befalls, [contrary] ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects.³⁷

The *distinguo* to which Montaigne refers here is the logical technique of relating terms and separating the most general classes (*genera generalissima*) from lesser classes (*genera subalterna*) and species;³⁸ in these and other passages, he applies it however not to scientific classification but rather to the particulars of experience (inter alia, his own subjective experience). In doing so, he attacks another of the epistemological virtues he associates with traditional philosophy, namely universality.

The issue of truth as proposition arises most acutely for him in the issue of honesty to oneself and others. Here the logical falsity of a proposition is distinguished from its moral falsity. A Renaissance example is afforded by the "true" proposition "Jesus is the Messiah" uttered by a Christian and a Jew respectively. In the case of the Christian, who believes the "true" proposition to be indeed true, it possesses both *convenientia rei* (correspondence to reality, or factual truth), and *convenientia menti* (correspondence to an intentional mental state, or coincidence with truth-telling and sincerity); a Jew does not believe that Jesus is the Messiah, so although the proposition in his mouth "Jesus is not the Messiah" has *convenientia*

menti, it does not have *convenientia rei*. If the Christian were to lie and assert this proposition, it would possess neither *convenientia rei* nor *convenientia menti*; and if the Jew were to propose that Jesus was the Messiah, his utterance would have *convenientia rei*, but not *convenientia menti*.³⁹ This form of analysis makes it possible to distinguish between sincerity or lying on the one hand and factual truth on the other. Montaigne is very interested in making this distinction, since his whole project of self-description appeals to the "principle of charity"⁴⁰ in the readers, who, for the text to have the right illocutionary force (that of uninhibited truth-telling), must accept that Montaigne never lies to them; "This book was written in good faith, reader"⁴¹ is after all the first injunction Montaigne makes to his public. He later adduces social and political reasons for the need for language to record correctly the intentions of the speaker; but he accepts at the same time that there are political reasons for princes to lie and betray trust.⁴² He shows himself to be aware of the fact that the language of sincerity, being rhetorical and therefore reproducible by a speaker without a moral commitment to truth-telling, can always misrepresent, as "truth and falsehood are alike in face, similar in bearing, taste, and movement; we look upon them with the same eye."⁴³ In these passages and in the essays "Of Liars" and "Of the Useful and the Honorable," he reveals his grimly realistic awareness of this aspect of human linguistic behaviour, which leads him to be one of the few of his generation to describe Machiavelli's recommendation of unscrupulous and deceitful political behaviour as "solid."⁴⁴

I have so far spoken about truth in respect of propositions. Like the schools of his day, Montaigne characterizes truth as double: that is, it is a property of things, or their objective thingness (*veritas simplex*, that which is the object of *experientia*), and a property of propositions about things (*veritas complex*).⁴⁵ Objective truth is opposed not to falsity or lying (which are both properties of propositions) but to non-existence (such as the chimera) or fictional existence (the *ens rationis*⁴⁶). Montaigne knows about these, and indeed relates them to the productivity of the human spirit, not only as seen in imaginative literature, but also in philosophical speculation, whose origin is said by Plato, as he recalls, to be poetic;⁴⁷ he is aware of ancient theories about plural and possible worlds,⁴⁸ and he places a positive value on thought experiments:

So in the study I am making of our behaviour and motives, fabulous testimonies, provided that they are possible, serve like true ones. Whether they happened or no, in Paris or Rome, to John or Peter, they exemplify, at all events, some human potentiality, and thus their telling imparts useful information to me.⁴⁹

The instances of his use of the word *vérité* in the meaning of objective existence reveal that Montaigne associates this (perhaps surprisingly for a relativist) with unity, consistency, universality, and uniformity.⁵⁰ But in respect of *veritas simplex*, he also frequently denies that men have access to things themselves: they only have access to the representation of things in their perception and understanding of them: "now since our condition accommodates things to itself and transforms them according to itself, we no longer know what things are in truth; for nothing comes to us except falsified and altered by our senses".⁵¹ This attack on yet another epistemological virtue, the objectivity of knowledge, was certainly conceded by some Aristotelians,⁵² but Montaigne's further point, that man is the measure of all things, was not, for philosophers of the time relied on *experientia* as an infallible source of knowledge (see above, p. 146): Montaigne on the other hand finds no difficulty in admitting that "the opinion I give of [things] is to declare the measure of my [vision], not the measure of things."⁵³ This claim was not new in Montaigne's time, nor specific to skepticism: as well as its ancient attribution to Protagoras, it had been made by the celebrated fifteenth-century thinker Nicholas of Cusa.⁵⁴ From this claim, Montaigne draws the alarming conclusion that "naturally nothing falls where everything falls. Universal sickness is individual health."⁵⁵ This phrase encapsulates a nightmare version of the "coherence" theory of truth, in which the coherence which validates propositions is associated not with truth but with error. Montaigne's concluding passage from the "Apology" is even more devastating, as it attributes unceasing flux to man's environment:

Finally there is no existence that is constant, either of our being or of that of objects. [Both] we, and our judgement, and all mortal things go on flowing and rolling unceasingly. Thus nothing certain can be established about one thing by another, both the [person making the judgement] and the judged thing being in continual change and motion. We have no communication

with being, because every human nature is always midway between birth and death, offering only a dim semblance and shadow of itself, and an uncertain and feeble opinion.⁵⁶

The higher "scientific" disciplines and their associated epistemological virtues thus do not come out well of Montaigne's critique of them; nor, apparently, do the less elevated disciplines of the arts; his use of the terms *artiste*, *artialiser* to refer to these disciplines is consistently negative.⁵⁷ But there is a greater degree of agreement here with his own thinking than Montaigne seems prepared to make explicit. The arts and "practical philosophy" (politics, ethics, and "economics" in the sense of domestic management), being goal-directed and not purely speculative, are characterized by their instrumental attitude to knowledge; they are more concerned with the usefulness than with the essence of things.⁵⁸ Montaigne supports this position wholeheartedly, and he alludes approvingly to a well-known passage from Cicero which makes the same point.⁵⁹ What he and those whom he quotes have to say in this regard seems very close to a pragmatic theory of truth in modern terms. Even skepticism, normally looked upon as a philosophy which does not promote action, is made into a practical philosophy by Montaigne:

There is nothing in man's invention that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness [as Pyrrhonism]. It presents man naked and empty, acknowledging his natural weakness, fit to receive from above some outside power; stripped of human knowledge, and all the more apt to lodge divine knowledge in himself, annihilating his judgement to make more room for faith; neither disbelieving, nor setting up any doctrine against the common observances; humble, obedient, teachable, zealous; a sworn enemy of heresy, and consequently free from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by the false sects. He is a blank tablet prepared to take from the finger of God such forms as he shall be pleased to engrave on it.⁶⁰

He also adopts the looser versions of identity, difference and definition which are current in the arts disciplines of his day, and most notably in the discipline of law. There are many echoes of jurisprudence in Montaigne's writing relevant to the theme of this essay (reflecting no doubt his practice as a magistrate), including the reduction of truth to the mere performative utterance of a legal sentence (what the judge decides passes for truth by dictat⁶¹) and the low status

accorded to definition, as expressed in the legal maxim "every definition in civil law is precarious: for it is rare to find one which could not be subverted."⁶² Montaigne's predilection for verbal caution and reticence – "I like these words which soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions: 'perhaps,' 'to some extent,' 'some,' 'they say,' 'I think,' and the like"⁶³ – may also be related to the approved use of such formulas by jurists.⁶⁴ Even though he subjects the law to a rigorous critique at the beginning of the essay "Of Experience", its practical solutions to the problems of everyday existence and the almost infinite diversity of human life can only be congenial to him.

As can be seen from his passage about his own internal contradictions quoted above, he ironically espouses the *distinguo* of practical (and legal) philosophy, but transforms it into something rather different. There is according to him no complete identity in nature which would allow scientific definition;

As no event and no shape is entirely like another, so none is entirely different from another. An ingenious mixture on the part of nature. If our faces were not similar, we could not distinguish man from beast; if they were not dissimilar, we could not distinguish man from man. All things hold together by some similarity; every example [falls down], and the comparison that is drawn from experience is always faulty and imperfect; however we fasten together our comparisons by some corner. Thus the laws serve, and thus adapt themselves to each of our affairs, by some roundabout, forced and biased interpretation.⁶⁵

This seems at first sight to be a critique of laws, but is in fact a grudging admission of their applicability, which can only be effected if there is a less than perfect match between the relevant legislation, couched as it is in general terms, and the infinite variability of human actions and circumstances. Another feature of Montaigne's acceptance of this practical but philosophically imperfect approach to things is the importance he accords to the resolution of contraries by time; so much so that he can claim never to contradict himself because his writing has the character of a chronicle or a "register," that is, a financial account under which a line is never drawn, whose sum is never fully resolved, and whose figures never reconciled. The *contrerolle* or *registre* becomes one of the favourite images for his own writing; he links it to the infinite generativity of the project

of self-portraiture: "who does not see that I have taken a road along which I shall go, without stopping and without effort, as long as there is ink and paper in the world? I cannot keep a record of my life by my actions; fortune places them too low. I keep it by my thoughts."⁶⁶

As well as having a looser conception of identity, difference, and definition, the arts are also characterized by a wider range of argumentative procedures, known as topics. These consist in a reservoir or arsenal of arguments (*loci*) which cannot be reduced to syllogistic form, and are often based on premises which are not more than plausible.⁶⁷ Such premises are often, in the words of Aristotle, "generally accepted opinions [. . .] those which commend themselves to all or to the majority or to the wise – that is to all of the wise or to the majority or to the most famous and distinguished of them."⁶⁸ The argument from authority, so rigorously excluded from philosophical discourse⁶⁹, regains entry into the arts disciplines by this route. As Montaigne's exhaustive practice of quotation reveals, he is himself very partial to this mode of argument (at least in this form), although he also goes out of his way to undermine it also in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" and elsewhere (see above pp. 145–6).

Two of these looser forms of argument are worthy of mention. We have already encountered the *locus a simili* (argument from similarity) in passages quoted above (pp. 154, 161); the fact that the similarity is rough and ready obviates the need for scientific definition, and leaves a space for the operation of human intuition. Second, the *locus a circumstantiis* (argument from circumstances) is the mechanism by which the singulars of experience find their way into legal discussions. The "circumstances" are recorded in Boethius' mnemonic *quis? quid? ubi? quando? quomodo? quibus auxiliis?* (who, what, where, when, how, with whose help?). Through the use of these questions, the truth of individual events is recorded. Montaigne, who claims history is his favoured reading, goes to great length to use examples in the *Essays* to represent the diversity and variety of human experience.⁷⁰ His use of examples rarely leads to inductive reasoning; to draw premature conclusions in the "register of the essays of [his] life"⁷¹ would be to betray the skeptical creed of never concluding, of which he expresses his approval: "[the] effect [of the teaching of the Pyrrhonists] is a pure, complete and very perfect postponement and suspension of judgment.

They use their reason to inquire and debate, but not to conclude and choose."⁷²

Montaigne also argues for a sort of "natural reasoning," seen in the parodic form of the syllogistic musings of his fox and his dog, and more seriously in his praise for ordered debate, which he sees as an innate feature of the human mind: "it is not so much strength and subtlety that I ask for as order [in debates]: the order that we see every day in the altercations of shepherds and shop boys, never among us."⁷³ For him to make such a claim, he has to restore some value to human reason, which, as we have seen, took such a battering in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," in which reason is described in negative terms as "an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable and adaptable to all biases and all measures." Curiously, if this passage is put in the context of Aristotle's definition of equity, much-quoted by jurists and almost certainly known to Montaigne the magistrate, a quite different light is cast upon it:

The essential nature of the equitable . . . is a rectification of law where law is defective because of its generality . . . For what is itself indefinite can only be measured by an indefinite standard, like the leaden rule used by Lesbian builders; just as that rule is not rigid but can be bent to the shape of the stone, so a special ordinance is made to fit the circumstances of the case. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, v.10. 1137b)

The scornful tone of Montaigne's description of the faculty of reason disappears if reason is seen as flexible and subject to circumstance, and hence closer to the particulars of human lives.

Montaigne's objection to the universal claims of the sciences is also met in this passage by Aristotle, the very model, according to the essayist, of wrong thinking in this regard. These claims are explored most aggressively in the opening pages to the chapter "Of Experience," where, after apparently conceding that reason is a better path to truth and knowledge than experience, Montaigne ends up, through an ingenious textual development, by recommending his reader to adopt not a general science of supra-temporal reason linked to the particulars of contingent lived experience but a general science of experience which retains its temporal character, linked to a particular science of reason which is no longer as abstract or subtle as it is in the derided case of syllogistic logic. The "truth of experience," which had been subverted by the "certain" demonstrations of the

highest sciences, is now restored to its rightful place;⁷⁴ the *veritas complex* is reunited with the *veritas simplex*; the facticity of human life has had its radical particularity and its subjection to change and time restored to it.

This lesser view of truth and knowledge represented by the arts is found to be commendable (or at least plausible) by Montaigne:

Theophrastus said that human knowledge, forwarded by the senses, could judge the causes of things to a certain extent; but that having reached the ultimate and original causes, it had to stop and be blunted, because of its weakness and the difficulty of things. It is a moderate and pleasant opinion that our capacity can lead us to the knowledge of some things, and that it has definite limits to its power, beyond which it is temerity to employ it. This opinion is plausible . . .⁷⁵

We may be in a world of perpetual flux, armed only with imperfect tools of perception, both sensory and rational; but that does not prevent us from developing practical strategies for living our lives. Montaigne seems to claim at one point in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" that we should forever suspend our judgment, which as a piece of advice is anything but practical; but he also translates Pyrrhonism (whether justifiably or not in historical terms) into a pragmatic philosophy of religious and political conformism which can provide guidance for the conduct of life (see above, p. 153).

The claims and modes of argument of university philosophy – its oversubtlety, abstraction, supra-temporality, pretensions to conclusiveness, to comprehensiveness and to the epistemological virtues of objectivity, certainty and universality – thus provided Montaigne with a useful foil against which to react; it also gave him some ammunition for his own enquiries into human existence in the form of the looser assumptions and argumentative procedures of the arts, notably of the law, and he was able to concur with the pragmatic version of truth espoused by practical philosophy. Even the much-reviled Aristotelianism of his day provided him with some useful doctrines (sense epistemology, the incorporated nature of human beings, the conventionality of language, a flexible notion of equity), and, as Edilia Traverso has shown, this savage critic of peripatetic philosophy came at the end of his life to quote Aristotle approvingly (mainly on ethical matters).⁷⁶ So the *Essays*, which Montaigne conceived of as a profoundly unphilosophical project of self-description,

turn out to share common ground with philosophy, and their author himself becomes by his own admission what he thought he would never become:

My behaviour is natural: I have not called in the help of any teaching to build it. But feeble as it is, when the desire to tell it seized me, and when, to make it appear in public a little more decently, I set myself to support it with reasons and examples, it was a marvel to myself to find it, simply by chance, in conformity with so many philosophical examples and reasons. What rule my life belonged to, I did not learn until after it was completed and spent. A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!⁷⁷

NOTES

1. II.12, F392, V527B. I have on occasion amended the translation by Donald M. Frame; these changes are placed in square brackets. I have also included the original French where this is necessary to my argument. I am grateful to Richard Scholar and Terence Cave, who kindly read an earlier draft of this chapter and made helpful suggestions.
2. See Lorraine Daston, "Can scientific objectivity have a history?," *Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung Mitteilungen*, 75 (2000), pp. 31–40.
3. II.12, F371, V502A; Montaigne quotes this as a prelude to his undermining of the syllogism through the liar paradox (see below, p. 147).
4. F403, V539A: "We do not ask whether this is true but whether it has been understood this way or that. We do not ask whether Galen said anything worth saying, but whether he said thus or otherwise". On this distinction see R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), pp. 29–43.
5. R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
6. The most helpful recent book on Montaigne's translation and his defence of Sebond is Claude Blum, ed., *Montaigne: Apologie de Raimond Sebond: de la Theologia à la Théologie* (Paris: Champion, 1990).
7. On Sextus Empiricus, see Popkin, *History of Scepticism*.
8. II.12, F371, V502A. See also Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).
9. II.12, F403, V539A; II.17, F498, V657C; I.26, F107, VI46A; III.13, F817, VI067B; III.5, F666, V874B.
10. III.2, F611, V805B; III.9, F762, V995–6C. See also Ian Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), p. 13.

11. III.2, F611, V805.
12. I.26, F106–7, VI46.
13. See André Tournon, *Montaigne: la glose et l'essai* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires, 1983); Ian Maclean, "Montaigne et le droit civil romain", in John O'Brien, Malcolm Quainton and James J. Supple, eds, *Montaigne et la rhétorique* (Paris: Champion, 1995), pp. 163–75.
14. I.26, F119, VI61A; Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, p. 8.
15. II.12, F429, V571A; II.17, F497, V655A; Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), pp. 169–221; Tournon, *La glose et l'essai*; Maclean, "Montaigne et le droit civil romain."
16. For the relevant parts of the arts course here discussed, see Ian Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature in the Renaissance: The Case of Learned Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 101–204; Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, pp. 17–57.
17. See Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature*, pp. 114–17.
18. II.12, F403–4, V540A. Montaigne uses *dialecticien* (translated by Frame as "logician") here to encompass all who engage in logical argument, whether in syllogistic or other forms.
19. See Charles B. Schmitt, "Experience and Experiment: A Comparison of Zabarella's View with Galileo's in *De motu*," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 16 (1969), pp. 80–138; Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
20. The sixteenth-century Aristotelian Julius Caesar Scaliger (of whose work Montaigne is aware: see III.13, F833, VI087B), adapts the Thomist formula to read *orationis adaequatio cum ipsis speciebus: Exotericæ exercitationes de subtilitate contra Cardanum* (Frankfurt: Wechel, 1592), p. 8 (first edn., 1557). See also Ian Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning in the Renaissance: The Case of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 74; Paul Cranefield, "On the Origin of the Phrase *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*," *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 25 (1970), pp. 77–80.
21. III.3.8, F710, V930B.
22. II.12, F 330–58, 443–55, V452–86, 587–601; II.12, F454, V600–01B; Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyposes*, II.4.20.
23. Francis Bacon, *Novum organum*, ed. Thomas Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), pp. 210–11 (1.41).
24. II.12, F496, V645C; II.12, F425, V565A; III.6, F693, V908B; see also Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, p. 74.
25. For a simple account of the syllogism, see Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature*, p. 124.
26. I.26, F126, VI71A.

27. II.12, F392, V527B.
28. II.12, F392, V527B; F337-9, V460-63.
29. See Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*, p. 72.
30. III.11, F785, V1026B. The phrase "l'opinion de science" is an oxymoron in philosophical terms: see Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, p. 32.
31. II.10, F301, V414A.
32. III.13, F818-19, V1069B.
33. II.37, F594, V781-2A.
34. III.13, F816, V1066-7B. My changes to this passage have been made to render more accurately the terms of legal art in this passage, such as the *usus communis loquendi* and *verba solemna*, on which see Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*, pp. 132-5, 142.
35. See Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, pp. 33-4; *Logic, Signs and Nature*, pp. 118-19.
36. II.1, F242; V335B. On *distinguo*, see Daniel Ménager, "Montaigne et l'art du distinguo," in *Montaigne et la rhétorique*, pp. 149-59.
37. III.2, F611, V805B.
38. See Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature*, pp. 121-4.
39. See Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*, pp. 158-60.
40. See N. L. Wilson, "Substance without Substrata," *Review of Metaphysics*, 12 (1959), pp. 521-39; W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 59; Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation" (1973), in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 136n; Ian Hacking, *Why does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 148.
41. "To the Reader," F2, V3A.
42. See III.1, F599-609, V789-803.
43. III.11, F785, V1027B. The same point is made in respect of linguistic signs and intention by Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1976), p. 7: "if [a sign] cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth."
44. II.17, F497, V655A.
45. See Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, pp. 23-9.
46. On the concept of *ens rationis* in Montaigne's time, see Marie-Luce Demonet, "Les êtres de raison ou les modes d'être de la littérature," in Eckhard Kessler and Ian Maclean, eds., *Res et verba in the Renaissance* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), pp. 177-95.
47. II.12, F400-01, V536-7C.
48. II.12, F390, V525C: "Now if there are many worlds, as Democritus, Epicurus and almost all philosophy has thought, how do we know whether the principles and rules of this one apply similarly to the

- others?" III.11, F385. V1027B: "Our reason is capable of filling out a hundred other worlds and finding their principles and contexture. It needs neither matter nor basis; let it run on; it builds as well on emptiness as on fullness, and with inanity as with matter."
49. I.21, F75, V105C.
50. See Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, p. 28. The claim that "truth must have one face, the same and universal" (II.12, F436. V578-9A) is made to demonstrate that dogmatic philosophies cannot possess it, as they all disagree as to what it is.
51. II.12, F452-3, V600A.
52. See above, n. 20 (Julius Caesar Scaliger).
53. II.10, F298, V410A.
54. Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de mente*, ed. Renate Steiger, *Opera omnia*, vol. 5 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), p. 172: *sic omnis rei mensura vel terminus ex mente est; et ligna et lapides certam mensuram et terminos habent praeter mentem nostram, sed ex mente increata, a qua rerum omnis terminus descendit*. See also Maclean, *Logic, Signs, and Meaning*, p. 105; Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyposes*, 1.32.216.
55. III.9, F734, V961B.
56. II.12, F455, V601A.
57. E.g. III. 8, F787, V926B; III.13. F817, 823, V1067B, 1076B; III.5, F666, V874C.
58. III.11, F785, V1026B, quoted above, p. 161.
59. III.10, F769, V1006B: "for it is not new for the sages to preach things as they serve, not as they are"; II.12, F374, V505B (*De divinatione*, I.18); cf. III.3.5, F639-40, V842B: "my philosophy is in action, in natural and present practice, little in fancy."
60. II.12, F375, V506A. The reference to the Aristotelian view of the mind as a *tabula rasa* is to *De anima*, III.4.430a; see also Romans 2:15.
61. *Digest* 1.5.25: *res iudicata pro veritate accipitur*.
62. *Digest* 50.17 202: *omnis definitio in iure civili periculosa est: rarum est enim ut non subverti potest*.
63. III.11, F788, V1030B.
64. For a fuller account of the presence of legal thinking in the *Essays*, see Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*, pp. 104-13, and "Montaigne et le droit civil romain."
65. III.13, F819. V1070B; cf. II.12, F342, V466A: "I ordinarily maintain . . . that there is more difference between a given man and a given man than between a given animal and a given man."
66. III.9, F721, V945-6; see also Philippe Desan, "La rhétorique comptable des *Essais*," in *Montaigne et la rhétorique*, pp. 163-75.
67. See Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*, pp. 75-85.

68. *Topics*, I.I.100a.
69. II.12, F376, V507A: "for truth is not judged by the authority and on the testimony of another."
70. I.26, F107, V146A; II.10, F303, V416A; see also Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*, pp. 53-6.
71. III.13, F826, V1079B.
72. II.12, F374, V505B.
73. III.8, F706, V925; also I.26, F117-22, V158-62.
74. II.12, F430, V571A.
75. II.12, F420-21, V560B.
76. *Montaigne e Aristotele* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1974).
77. II.12, F409, V546C.