

Interpretation

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- 3 Iraj Azarfaza Overcoming the Powerful Prejudice against Xenophon:
A Debate between Leo Strauss and Friedrich Schleiermacher
- 27 John F. Cornell *Sanza Mezzo: A Reading of Dante's Paradiso Cantos 5-7*
- 51 Thomas L. Pangle The Unfolding Plan of "Maxims and Arrows" in
Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*
- Book Reviews**
- 71 Francis J. Beckwith *Crisis of the Two Constitutions* by Charles R. Kesler
- 77 Shilo Brooks *Warspeak: Nietzsche's Victory over Nihilism* by Lise van Boxel
- 85 Steven H. Frankel *Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus* by Leon R. Kass
- 97 Eli Friedland *De Anima (On Soul)* by Aristotle, Translated by David Bolotin
- 103 Christopher Kelly *Hypocrisy and the Philosophical Intentions of Rousseau*
by Matthew D. Mendham
- 109 Marco Menon *Una filosofia in esilio* by Carlo Altini
- 115 Miguel Morgado *A Political Philosophy of Conservatism* by Ferenc Hörcher
- 121 Travis Mulroy *The Music of Reason* by Michael Davis
- 127 April Dawn Olsen *Reason and Character* by Lorraine Smith Pangle
- 133 Joshua Parens *Nature, Law, and the Sacred* by Evanthia Speliotis
- 137 Oliver Precht *Theory and Practice* by Jacques Derrida
- 143 Charles T. Rubin *Learning One's Native Tongue* by Tracy B. Strong
- 151 David Lewis Schaefer *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* by Douglas I. Thompson
- 159 Thomas E. Schneider *Property and the Pursuit of Happiness* by Edward J. Erler and
An Anti-Federalist Constitution by Michael J. Faber
- 165 Lee Ward *America's Revolutionary Mind* by C. Bradley Thompson
- 171 Jacob C. J. Wolf *Recovering the Liberal Spirit* by Steven F. Pittz

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Challenging the tendency among literary scholars to see Montaigne's *Essays* as an "apolitical" work, Douglas Thompson endeavors to bring the sixteenth-century philosopher's thought and example to bear on the debate among contemporary moral theorists about how far the "tolerance" that democratic politics requires presupposes transcending (as John Rawls and Rainer Forst would have it) *fundamental* differences of principle among the contending parties. Arguing that such differences—e.g., between Muslims and advocates of *laïcité* in France, or between "LGBTQ citizens in the United States" and members of the "Christian Right"—may not be readily soluble by purely "moral" appeals, Thompson contends that Montaigne offers a useful model of tolerance that, while it falls short of the idealistic demands of Rawls and Forst, is more than a mere "pragmatic...*modus vivendi*" (7–10, 12).

Montaigne, as he repeatedly mentions, spent some half of his adult life amid France's bloody civil wars, brought on by the Reformation. Yet he managed not only to survive almost unaffected by them (*Essays*, trans. Donald Frame [Stanford University Press, 1958], III.12.800), but also, while living a largely private life, to serve successfully as an intermediary among the warring parties (III.1)—quite possibly (I observe) having been a critical moving force in encouraging Henri of Navarre to adopt the policy of toleration that brought those wars to a close upon his accession to the throne in 1589 as Henri IV. To articulate what Thompson terms Montaigne's "political conception of tolerance," even portraying the *Essays* as "principally...part of a life of political action," "requires" in his view a "gestalt shift" (18–19).

Thompson follows Philippe Desan's implausible suggestion (in *Montaigne: A Life* [Princeton University Press, 2017]) that Montaigne may have originally intended the *Essays* (first published in a limited edition in 1580) as "a kind of curriculum vitae" designed to advance his political career, whereas by the time he began work on the expanded edition, which appeared in 1588, he discovered "that he had stumbled, perhaps inadvertently, upon a successful career as a writer" (21–22). (Of course, as a wealthy nobleman, Montaigne was hardly in need of a "career.") Situating the *Essays* in the context of such other sixteenth-century "humanist" works on politics and diplomacy as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, Thompson considers the aspects of Montaigne's self-described "political style"—his profession of frank speech; his "tendency to see multiple sides of an issue—that may not only explain his success as a negotiator, but also reflect an endeavor to effect a like "political formation in his readers" (26–28). Yet Thompson never explains what that new formation would look like, politically, beyond a disinclination to allow one's "attachments to boil over into violent partisanship." (Despite a welter of textual evidence to the contrary, articulated by such scholars as Arthur Armaingaud and the present reviewer, Thompson is convinced that Montaigne was "a sincerely believing and practicing Catholic," albeit one who nonetheless thought it possible to "cultivate a genuine affection for both sides" [39]. He similarly takes literally the author's professions of unmitigated honesty and openness, in practice and by implication [as seemingly affirmed in the prefatory note "To the Reader"] in his writing, failing to appreciate such double entendres as Montaigne's remark that he "mortally hate[s] to seem a flatterer" [26]—again, in utter disregard of contrary textual evidence, noted by Margaret McGowan [*Montaigne's Deceits* (Temple University Press, 1974)], Eva Marcu, Patrick Henry, and this reviewer, among others.)

In the subsequent chapter "The Pleasure of Diversity," Thompson claims that Montaigne's repeated "affirmation of...enjoyment of direct contact and dialogue with people of different religions and cultures" was "quite unprecedented for his time" (46)—a claim seemingly belied by the widespread interest at the time in reports of the life of natives of the New World (which Montaigne cites), including the celebrated "visit" of three natives to which the essayist alludes at the end of "Of Cannibals" (I.31; III.6). Repeating the (unarguable) claim that the essayist uses his self-portrayal "to model a generous attitude towards religious adversaries" (46), Thompson proceeds to miss the point of the central chapter of the central book of the *Essays*, "Of Freedom of Conscience," wherein Montaigne sings the praises of Julian the Apostate, despite his ostensibly having been "bad throughout" with regard

to religion (i.e., anti-Christian), by claiming that “at first glance...Julian’s example offers only a begrudging acceptance of *modus vivendi* toleration” (49). In fact, by giving Julian this central position in his book, and explaining that his policy of toleration was merely a temporary device compelled by the fact that “all his army was composed of Christians,” but aimed ultimately at allowing the fervent Christians to divide themselves into rival sects so as to defang them politically (II.19.509; cf. *Federalist* 10), Montaigne implies that his own espousal of toleration similarly rested on “pragmatic” grounds as part of a broader project of political and cultural transformation that would entail undermining the capacity of religious fanatics (of whatever sect) to make trouble. In other words, for Montaigne as for Julian, toleration is indeed only a *modus vivendi* reflecting the fact of religious division in his time and place—not an ultimate “moral” principle, as Thompson would wish.

Beyond the foregoing problem, Thompson exaggerates the novelty of Montaigne’s acceptance of disagreements, and not only his delight in observing the variety of different nations’ practices, but even his reported difficulty finding any customs that are not as good as French ones (53, 55, 60), failing to appreciate that this openness is characteristic of *philosophy* as such, by the author’s own estimation (e.g., II.12.375–77, 440–41), rather than merely of sixteenth-century “humanism” (54). (Cf. Plato, *Republic* 327a, and Thompson’s reference to Plato’s *Laws* at 61.) What distinguishes Montaigne’s rhetoric from that of his predecessors is his *more open* expression of this transcultural attitude—in contrast to the classical political philosophers’ belief in the necessity of “profitable lies” to attach human beings to their duties (II.12.379–80; Plato, *Republic* 414b–415d).

Thompson’s disregard of the link between Montaigne and his philosophic predecessors continues in the next chapter, “The Power of Uncivil Conversation,” where he singles out the essayist’s denial of taking offense at any proposition or belief, regarding anyone who contradicts him as a potential source of instruction, in “On the Art of Conversation” (III.3), as a “valorization of a more explicitly political form of dialogue” (65, 68–69), when the essayist is not discussing politics at all. Indeed, Thompson himself cites Montaigne’s acknowledgment that rather than seek to engage in debate with the next passerby, he prefers “to argue and discuss...in a small group and for myself” (71; III.3.704). He applies Montaigne’s willingness to listen to opposing views to political debate only by again situating the *Essays* within the humanist literature of the time that aimed to modify the political practice of courtiers, but holding that Montaigne aimed to do so for “a whole public” (79, 85).

Thompson proceeds to maintain that what he calls the “agonistic” form of dialogue Montaigne ostensibly praises in III.3—a “capacity to engage in frank dialogue across contentious lines of difference”—is what underlay Montaigne’s success as a political negotiator (as reported in III.1, “Of the Useful and the Honorable”), even though the author nowhere makes this connection (84), and attributes his success rather to the purported “pure naturalness and truth” he employs in that role (a claim that Thompson himself doubts) (80, 85), despite having gullibly accepted it regarding his writing. Thompson’s real aim is to contrast Montaigne’s tolerance with Forst’s conception of that virtue “as a form of civil public reason,” that is, engaging in “mutually justificatory dialogue” with others, designed to guarantee “that our justifications are acceptable to each other,” even amid “deep conflicts of value and interest” (86). Seeking “a reliable moral rule to which we can all give reasoned assent” in “judg[ing]” “potential justification[s],” Forst in turn draws on fellow theorist Thomas Scanlon’s argument “that moral agents ought to be able to justify their actions to each other in terms of principles that ‘no one could reasonably reject’” (87). Despite admiring the “moral comprehensiveness” of Forst’s theory (which would exclude from consideration any views allegedly grounded in “immoral prejudices”), Thompson sensibly observes that “such distinctions are rarely so clear in actual politics,” wherein “all sides... believe that their reasons are ‘defensible’” (89). Hence he asserts the practical superiority of Montaigne’s willingness to arrive at acceptable compromises “without having to find deep moral grounds for all of his political utterances” (90). Sound advice; but did we need *Montaigne* to inspire it? What statesman would be so foolish as to take instruction in his trade from otherworldly theoreticians like Forst or Scanlon?

In the next chapter, “Exiting the Marketplace of Intolerance,” Thompson considers how Montaigne “envision[ed]” the relationship “between prudential and normative concerns in situations involving tolerance” (91). In other words, was he chiefly a pragmatist, a moralist, or some combination of the two? Unfortunately, Thompson’s answer is uninformative: as elsewhere he maintains that the essayist “argues *in utramque partem*, both for and against reason of state, without resolution” (92). But a closer study of Montaigne’s argument, taking account of the essayist’s political situation, would demonstrate that he does indeed adopt a substantive position. Thompson curiously denies that in holding that laws “take their authority from possession and usage” rather than from reason or nature, and observing that tracing a given law “to its original purpose and use” would unmask the trivial foundations of what is accepted “by authority and on credit,” Montaigne is aiming to

“unmask” it—when that is just what he has been doing (100). While the essayist indeed denies the existence of “natural” moral laws (II.12.437), he proceeds to describe a way of life based on both “reason” and “nature,” that of the ancient philosophers who ignored conventional limitations on their hedonistic behavior (II.12.439–41)—but Thompson cannot believe he would seriously espouse it (190n37). Thompson misses the fact that Montaigne, an architect of modern liberalism, is arguing for a *reduction* in the scope and number of manmade laws that restrict our conduct in the name of some higher goal, using this lower but more realistic standard (see Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 15) to rationalize the laws that remain (I.23.84–85; III.9.756–58; III.10.769, 781; III.11; III.13.819–21; cf. Géralde Nakam, *Les Essais de Montaigne: Miroir et procès de leur temps* [Publications de la Sorbonne, 1984], 139–49).

While Thompson acknowledges Montaigne’s assertion in “Of Custom,” shortly after unmasking the arbitrary foundations of many laws, of the need sometimes to “bend” them for the public good, he persists in inferring from the essayist’s account of the supposed dangers of innovation that he remained “in the paradoxical position... of both condemning and advocating action contrary to established custom” (94–96). But this is to disregard the overall thrust of I.23, which stresses the arbitrariness of French practices by placing them in the context of the vast variety of human customs; includes a direct critique of the flimsy and irrational foundations of French laws; and, following a ridiculously exaggerated warning against *any* change in the laws, and a serious critique of *one* innovation (the Huguenot uprising, along with the equally violent reaction to it by the Catholic regime), concludes with the aforementioned, Machiavellian stress on the need for executive action that violates the law so as to accommodate the vicissitudes of “Fortune.” Could Montaigne have dared to make his position on *raison d’état* any clearer? (At 111 Thompson acknowledges the “risks” Montaigne took merely by calling reported “miracles” into question.)

Thompson takes up Montaigne’s relation to Machiavelli explicitly in the next section, but again misses his point. Connecting Montaigne’s reference to contemporaries who might “have something to say to a prince whose affairs Fortune had so arranged that he could establish them by a single...betrayal of his word” (II.17.492) to chapter 8 of *The Prince*, Thompson immediately cites Montaigne’s warning that princes who *repeatedly* lie will no longer be trusted—as if that demonstrated the futility of a single betrayal. Yet Thompson then cites Montaigne’s judgment that Machiavelli’s arguments “were solid enough for their subject” (a shocking remark for the time), although

others found them “easy to combat” (II.12.497), to show that “ultimately, there is no certainty to be found in maxims reflecting reason of state” or in opposed “political moralisms” (98–99). What benefit could one derive from considering Montaigne’s political reflections if that were all he had to teach?

Thompson also fails to appreciate Montaigne’s distinction between the sort of dissimulation that is essential to statecraft and the “lying” *religious* “opinion” used by founders and princes (II.16.477) to dupe the common people, often to their detriment (99)—just as Machiavelli had exposed Alexander VI as history’s greatest liar in *The Prince*, chap. 18. (Gullibly, Thompson takes seriously Montaigne’s ostensible exemption of the Mosaic polity from the list of polities whose founders relied on religious fraud [190n36]. Thompson overlooks the fact that Montaigne’s grudging acceptance of such “counterfeit” money occurs near the end of a chapter devoted to arguing *against* the pursuit of “glory” of various sorts.) But with reference to the question with which Thompson’s chapter began, he concludes that “Montaigne does something important” by “*not* resolving the question” whether “moral or prudential” reasons should be “dispositive in tolerance situations,” but rather showing that “the activity of justification is ambivalent” in that instead of offering a “way out of intolerant conflict” it may just as easily encourage conflict (109, Thompson’s emphasis).

Again, it is not apparent that a sensible person would need Montaigne to teach him such lessons. The same can be said of the message Thompson purports to derive from the *Essays* at the conclusion of the chapter: we should “look beyond the role of the state to investigate the broader culture and the social processes through which” such conflicts as that between Muslims and “anti-Muslim public opinion” in the West are generated, as they are by “the constant media association between Islam and ‘terrorism’” (117–18; note the scare quotes). One suspects that Thompson “knew” these things before he ever read Montaigne.

In the final chapter devoted to the *Essays*, “Radical Moderation,” Thompson investigates Montaigne’s view of moderation because the essayist cites it as a quality essential to his ability to negotiate “in good faith between two hostile parties” (119). Acknowledging what he terms the essayist’s “cheerful penchant for self-contradiction” (nowhere does Thompson attempt to uncover the reasons behind those contradictions, despite Montaigne’s insistence that his thought has always remained consistent [III.2.616; III.9.736]), he nonetheless believes that Montaigne’s account of moderation can “build a toleration for politics” (121–22).

Much of this chapter consists of a lengthy and not terribly precise or informative analysis of Montaigne's account of how virtue as such is acquired (cf. Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* [Cornell University Press, 1990/2019], chap. 7); curiously, the hilarious-then-serious chapter titled "Of Moderation" (I.30) goes unmentioned. But in conclusion, Thompson resumes his comparison between Montaigne's conception of tolerance and that of such contemporary theorists as Forst and William Connolly, again suggesting that the essayist's view is more realistic because it does not require the tolerant person to "relativize her most profoundly held convictions" (Forst) or adopt a "reciprocal 'relational modesty' concerning...one's own faith or creed" (Connolly) (148–49). Thompson is certainly correct to doubt that "ask[ing] committed Christians to accept, viscerally, that their faith is 'contestable'... is a productive model for political dialogue." In his most astute observation, Thompson remarks that Connolly's implied comparison of committed religious believers to children who need to learn to "reconfigure" their faith to qualify them to participate in genuine dialogue, which offers "like-minded readers theoretical license to think and talk about their (let's be honest: conservative, religious) opponents in this way...is probably not a productive path to the 'tolerance of negotiation'" that Connolly espouses (152–53).

As Thompson's criticisms suggest, the sort of professed academic theoreticians of tolerance he cites, far from favoring impartial negotiation among alternative moral views, simply want to rule all those who differ from them out of court (literally as well as figuratively). As I have noted elsewhere, when Rawls invented his doctrine of "public reason," ostensibly as a basis for tolerance among those holding diverse philosophical, moral, and/or religious beliefs, he disregarded the fact that the constitutions of the United States and other modern liberal republics already provided such a basis. His real goal, I noted, was to prevent those whose beliefs about such issues as sexual morality differed from his own from continuing to enact them in democratically adopted legislation—with an assist from the courts (Schaefer, *Illiberal Justice* [University of Missouri Press, 2007], chap. 10). While Montaigne was no prude (see *Essays* III.5), I am confident that he would regard such dogmatic, self-styled liberals as being just as dangerous to a secure, constitutional-republican order as the Christian fanatics whom the essayist vehemently denounced.

It will serve no purpose here to discuss Thompson's conclusion, in which he attempts to show how Montaigne's view of tolerance might assist in the resolution of certain contemporary political controversies, other than to

note that Thompson falls into the same partisan trap as Rawls and Connolly by simply writing off the concerns of Europeans worried about the effects of massive Muslim immigration as the consequence of “manipulat[ion] by media and political elites” (168). Here, Thompson manifestly violates the rules for effective negotiation and tolerance he professes to have learned from Montaigne.

Speaking of *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* as a whole, it is regrettable that, while Thompson displays greater prudence than the contemporary theorists he cites, he never appreciates the amount of study and reflection that are required to understand a work like the *Essays*. Nor does he exhibit much familiarity with any of the classic philosophic literature—as distinguished from mostly second-rate “humanist” writings—such as Montaigne expects of his readers. While the *Essays* has much to teach us about the most fundamental issues of human and political life, we have Montaigne’s own testimony that learning from him will require an effort that only those of a genuinely philosophic disposition are likely to undertake (III.8.716; III.9.761–62).