Montaigne, An Apology for Raymond Sebond: Happiness and the Poverty of Reason
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To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step toward being a sound, believing Christian.

—David Hume

Perhaps as a consequence of Richard Popkin’s searching analysis, Michel de Montaigne’s An Apology for Raymond Sebond (1575–80) has emerged as the most philosophically rich of all his Essays (1571–88). Despite Popkin’s insistence that Montaigne be recognized as a thinker whose contributions to the history of skepticism cannot be exaggerated, interpreters sometimes miss what is important about the Apology and what sets it apart from other expressions of classical Pyrrhonism.

In what follows, therefore, I wish to identify specific elements in the Apology that make it an especially rich document for skeptics, theists, and historians of philosophy. To do this, I will first summarize the principal arguments of the Apology and, secondly, I will examine the specific ties between the Apology and Sextus’s Outlines of Pyrrhonism, first published in Latin by Henri Estienne (1562). Next, I will turn briefly to the paradox of inquiry in Plato’s Meno, 80d–e, and to its bearing on the view that there is an essential connection between knowledge and

1. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779), Part XII.
3. Benson Mates is one of those who neither miss nor underestimate Montaigne’s importance as a skeptic or his debts to Sextus Empiricus (c. 2nd century C.E.). The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus’s Outlines of Pyrrhonism (Oxford, 1995), 4–6.
4. Popkin, The History of Skepticism, 18, 34. Mates says that Estienne’s translation was published in 1572 (The Skeptic Way, 221), but this is not the date given by other sources.
happiness. Finally, I must examine the foundations for Montaigne’s view, implied in *Of Experience* (1587–88) and certified in the *Apology*, that for human beings happiness is unattainable.

I

In his introduction to his translation of *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, M. A. Screech reviews two of the principal objections to Sebond’s (Raymond Sibidua’s) *Natural Theology or Book of Creatures*. Against the first charge Sebond’s critics make, that he errs in trying to support Christian beliefs with human reason, Montaigne replies that Sebond’s understanding of Catholicism, as well as the relation of faith to reason, surpasses that of his critics: “I do not believe that purely human means are in the least able (to support religious beliefs through reason alone). If they were capable, so many rare and excellent minds that were equipped with natural powers in antiquity would not have failed to arrive at this knowledge through their reason. Faith alone grasps vigorously and certainly the high mysteries of our religion.”

This quotation looks like a conventional statement of medieval fideism, but by adding a qualification Montaigne also echoes some rationalist elements that one can find in Aquinas’s *Summae*. We must accompany “our faith with all the reason we possess, but always with the reservation that we neither assume that our faith depends upon us nor that attempts at arguments are powerful enough to arrive at a supernatural and divine science” (484). The error of natural theologians, Sebond excepted, is the hubristic presumption that reason, unaided by faith, is enough to validate the belief that God exists and has the properties traditionally attributed to him (491–2).

One who scans only the first ten pages of the *Apology* might believe Montaigne is cut from the same cloth as rational theologians such as Anselm, Albertus Magnus, and Aquinas. But few serious readers will put down the *Apology* before they review all its arguments. After a thorough reading, their temptation to think of Montaigne even as a marginal rationalist should disappear. In this context, Montaigne’s extended answer to a second charge against Sebond, viz., that the arguments of his *Natural Theology* are weak, dominates the *Apology*.

Montaigne’s replies, against critics who maintain that Sebond provides only weak arguments for natural religion, vary from serious to frivolous. Sebond’s book


6. *Essais de Montaigne*, ed. A. Thibaudet (Bruges, 1950), 484. Subsequent citations and quotations from this edition are in parentheses in my text. Unless otherwise noted, translations from French and Latin are my own.

7. See Screech’s introduction to *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, xvii.


9. For an abbreviated summary and discussion of these two charges against Sebond, see Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht, 1983), 22–3.
is his inspiration, but Montaigne’s own declarations and arguments go far beyond it. Screech, without referring to Sebond, summarizes the overriding point of Montaigne’s skeptical arguments: *Pride is the sin of sins*; intellectually it leads to Man’s arrogantly taking mere opinion for knowledge. In terms that were common to many Renaissance writers, Montaigne emphasized that ‘there is a plague (a ‘*peste*’) on Man: *the opinion that he knows something*’.

The last two hundred pages of the *Apology* are aimed at documenting and deriding the baseless pride of human beings, pride that is accentuated by men’s convictions that, *qua* rational, they are the zenith of God’s handiwork. To document “the presumption that pride is our natural and original illness” (497), Montaigne describes man just as he is: isolated, unarmored, lacking the grace and knowledge of God that give him whatever dignity and power he is thought to have (494).

Evidence abounds that man is pathetic. He is the pawn of outside influences like the stars (496). He thinks he is superior to the animals, but his evidence is inconclusive. In probably the most familiar passage from the *Apology*, Montaigne wonders, “When I play with my cat, who knows whether she passes her time with me more than I pass my time with her?” (498).

If we try to say what sets human beings apart from animals, we are pressed to answer. We communicate; so do animals (498, 504–5). We are social and skillful beings, but birds and insects manifest society and craftsmanship that equal ours (500–1). We raise to the skies our own rational capacities even as we ignore the “reasoning” of an unremarkable dog that disjoins, conjoins, and enumerates propositions to determine which of three paths will take him home. Whether the decision of the dog arises from reasoning or from another principle, we are not able to make a firm distinction between human rationality and the natural capacities of animals (510–11).

Here the similarity between Montaigne and Hume is familiar. Whether one wishes to praise animals because they reason or criticize human beings for not seeing that what passes for reasoning is nothing more than habitual behavior, these two skeptics meet at a common center: “Nothing shews more the force of habit in reconciling us to any phaenomenon, than this, that men are not astonish’d at the operations of their own reason, at the same time that they admire the *instinct* of animals... To consider the matter aright, reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas.”

Even if it is true that men reason and that animals do not, Montaigne believes that reason unsettles us. Indeed, it is often the chief cause of the troubles

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10. *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, xxii; emphasis added. Sincere concerns about man’s prideful nature need not lead to an indictment of reason. The closing pages of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) describe pride as the worst of the seven deadly sins, although the strength of More’s Utopians is their rationality. See *Utopia*, tr. and ed. R. M. Adams, 2nd edition (New York, 1992), 84.

11. Screech notes that from this point until its closing page, “revealed wisdom is left aside” in the *Apology*, 13, note 37.

that seize us, e.g., sin, illness, irresolution, confusion, and despair (506). One need only recall the Renaissance humanist tradition, especially its celebration of human nature and intelligence, to see how far Montaigne is from the “official” version of what sets human beings apart from all other earthly beings. He presses his sentiments in passages that show the distance between him and humanists like Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Pietro Pomponazzi, and Juan Luis Vives. For Montaigne, but not for humanists who are rhapsodic about human dignity, man obeys the same laws of nature and is subject to identical vagaries of fortune that govern all other animals beneath the stars (506).13

But the poverty of reason takes numerous forms; hence, Montaigne, revealing in the Apology the primitivism that is conspicuous in his essay Of Cannibals (1578–80), writes that our “civilized” excesses have extinguished what is natural and sufficient for our brief stay on the surface of this planet. Inventing needs that are not needs is a mark of human foolishness, not of rationality (520–1).14 We deviate from nature’s counsel and finally corrupt ourselves trying to satisfy desires that are antagonistic to our welfare (521).

Rehearsing a strain of thought familiar from Erasmus’ Praise of Folly (1508), Montaigne also affirms that reason (actively realized as a desire to know) frustrates happiness and cannot be its source: “In my time I have seen a hundred artisans and another hundred laborers who are also wiser and happier than university rectors, and I wish I were more like them” (540). Montaigne covets simple contentment more than the specious wisdom of scholars, even as Erasmus speaks with nostalgia of the Golden Age in which “simple men flourished, without all that armor-plate of the sciences, under the leadership of nature and natural instincts alone.”15

“The plague on Man is the opinion that he knows something. That is why ignorance is so highly recommended by our religion as a quality proper to belief and obedience” (541).16 Following something close to the Epicurean position, Montaigne insists that given our limitations, the best we can attain in this life is an existence unencumbered by pain: “I hold that if ignorance and simplicity can bring us to the absence of pain, then it brings us to a very happy state given the human condition” (547).17 To provide “evidence” for this claim, Montaigne reminds us how many times and ways philosophy has been forced to concede its failure to provide the happiness we desire (548–53). In the final analysis, then, if we are going to be happy, happier than those who live a pain-free life, we must look beyond our own meager capacities since, “In truth we are nothing” (554).

14. Compare a similar expression of primitivism in Rousseau’s Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men (1755), Part I.
16. For Montaigne’s disapproval of ancient authors who prize learning and human knowledge beyond its worth, see pages 541–3.
Having set the stage for a sustained assault on reason and its protean manifestations, Montaigne turns directly to Sextus Empiricus. Sextus believed that all of philosophy could be divided into three categories. Dogmatists claim they have found what they seek, while Academics say what they seek cannot be found. Skeptics continue to search. Each, paradoxically, has in common, “the design to obtain truth, science and certainty” (558; emphasis added). Montaigne understands, borrowing not only from Sextus but also from Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura (c. 60 B.C.E.), the approach of the Pyrrhonian skeptics: “to shake convictions, to doubt, to inquire and neither to affirm nor to respond to anything,” and thereby to arrive at “ataraxia . . . which is a condition of life that is calm, peaceful, and free from agitation” (559). Montaigne also understands how the Pyrrhonian skeptics use reason in their searching and how their suspension of judgment (“epoche”) serves their aims: “They employ their reason for inquiry and debate but not to make choices or decisions. One who imagines an endless confession of ignorance and judgment without any tendency or inclination . . . conceives what Pyrrhonism is” (562).

Finally, Montaigne adds that Pyrrhonists, having suspended all judgments, live in terms of the customs and laws of their own time and setting. Living this way is a source of comfort, not an investment in any conviction. Pyrrhonists do not have to make a dogmatic or intellectual surrender to laws and conventions in order to obey and honor them (562–3).

Grasping the message and tactics of the Pyrrhonians is not enough. Montaigne wishes to serve his own end, the triumph of Counter-Reformation Catholicism over the incursions of the Protestant Reformation. One of the pillars of Reformed Catholicism, Terence Penelhum notes, is a respect for customs and modes of conduct that had served long and well to preserve the Universal Church: “Man, placed individually in history, and unable to rise above the relativities that derive from this, must recognize his inability to do so, and should submit to the religious forms and teachings that surround him, rather than try arrogantly to assert or deny them from an objective standpoint that is impossible for him . . . This position is almost purely Pyrrhonistic.”

Montaigne approves the neo-Pyrrhonian revival because none of its competitors has “greater utility nor a greater appearance of truth which exhibits man naked, empty and aware of his natural shortcomings, suited to receive outside power from on high, bereft of human learning and thus better able to lodge his faith. Thus stripped of all human understanding and so better able to lodge faith in the divine within him, man destroys his intellect to make room for his faith” (563).

Montaigne is most obviously at odds with philosophers who pretend to have found the truth or who are invigorated by (hopelessly) seeking it. Almost no one, from Socrates and Plato to the later Dogmatists, is spared. And in a touch of prag-

20. Emphasis added. This is an obvious reminder of Kant’s famous declaration “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith,” in the Critique of Pure Reason (1781), tr. N. K. Smith (New York, 1929), 29.
matism, he stresses the emptiness of our expectations: “It is the misery of our condition that often presents as truth what we imagine and what has least use for the purposes of life” (571).

To address specifically the bankruptcy of competing philosophies, Montaigne rehearses in detail the endlessly opposed views that ancient philosophies and pagan religions promote with respect to God’s nature, attitudes toward death and the afterlife, the union of the soul and body, the origin of the soul, the transmigration of the soul, and the creation of bodies (573–624). The details of these views are less important to Montaigne than what they tell us about reason: if philosophers “have anything to advance, reason is their touchstone, but certainly it is a touchstone full of falsity, errors, faults and foibles . . . When we cannot rely on reason when we talk about it, can we appropriately use reason to judge anything outside it?” (607).

Having addressed barren reason, the reason of animals, and the poverty of nearly every philosophy known to the Renaissance, in the last quarter of the *Apology* Montaigne produces arguments for the limits of reason and sense. His examples are familiar to anyone who has read Plato and Sextus.

In case Montaigne needs to remind us of our frailty, he offers a pejorative characterization of “Reason” as the faculty that is supposed to elevate us over those beings that lack it: “I always call reason that appearance of rationality which each of us forges for himself . . . It can be stretched, bent or adjusted to every size and bias” (635; emphasis added). Clever men and women can shape reason to suit various needs, but it cannot take them to knowledge and thus not to what is supposed to make them happy. Their reasoning is swayed by passions, health and feelings. What they know today is what they doubt tomorrow. We all want certainty, but what do we get? “What certainty can we take from what is so restless and unstable as the soul, subject to the dominance of perturbations and never moveable except under force . . . Can we anticipate security from it?” (639).

Even a judge eager to render a just verdict is no different from the rest of us. He too is moved by inclinations, relatives and friends, or the desire for revenge. Like anyone else, he can be swayed by a fleeting impulse that induces him to choose in light of his sympathies or hostilities (635–6).

The weather, our moods, and the appeal of conflicting hypotheses (641–2) make reason a pawn, not an arbiter of truth. The Pyrrhonists used their reason to reveal that we have no justification for beliefs based upon experience, even when experience seems to render them likely. Reason, far from serving a constructive role, expands doubts about the convictions we take from experience (643).

Reason fails to illuminate our highest good (650–1). We often pursue what we desire as an end but are puzzled about what satisfies our quest. The problems of philosophy and of reason’s search for truth are compounded by what we learn through exploration, anthropology, and geography. What passes for truth varies from place to place and from culture to culture. Some argue that natural laws are

21. And the discovery of the New World casts doubt on ancient attitudes about the Antipodes (643).
universal, yet between cultures there is wide disagreement about these laws and about what they demand from us (151–8). 22

As an empiricist no less than a skeptic, Montaigne insists, “the senses are our masters . . . Knowledge begins through them and is reduced to them” (663). In this respect he looks back to Aquinas and ahead to Gassendi or Locke. They all agree that at birth the human intellect is a kind of blank tablet on which nothing is written. We know, of course, from reading skeptically inclined empiricists like Locke and Hume, that Montaigne can be an empiricist and not defend the truth-securing credentials of his empiricism. After all, as Cicero noted in antiquity, if during our unreflective moments we feel certain that what the senses convey to us is so, in our philosophical moments we discover that our senses are inherently fallible (663–4).

What are the problems that our senses generate and leave unresolved? First, how do we know that we have senses enough to take in the facts that serve as the basis for knowledge? How can we know whether we lack other senses, since no sense discovers another sense and reason cannot promise that we have all the possible senses (664)? Second, a man born blind can never know the visible world. Perhaps those of us with the five working senses stand in relation to other animals as a blind man stands to us: “How can one know that the difficulties we have in discovering many of the works of Nature do not arise from defective or insufficient senses? How many of the actions of animals exceed our capacities and are produced by a sense-faculty which we lack? Perhaps some of them, through such a sense or means, have a fuller life and more complete life than ours” (665–6). 23

Beyond declaring the fallibility of our senses, Montaigne also rehearses arguments familiar to students of modern philosophy. Echoes make us believe that sounds come from sources that do not produce them. Sight, overpowering reflection, causes us to fear heights that we have no reason to fear (671). “For a man in pain and affliction, the clear light of day seems dark and obscure. Our senses are not only altered; they are often dazed altogether by the passions of the soul” (673). And Montaigne, before Descartes, thinks there are more than enough reasons to confuse vigorous dreams with wakefulness: “Why should we not doubt whether our thinking, our acting, are not another dream and our waking up another species of sleeping?” (674).

Similar problems of sense arise even if the “dreaming argument” is not an issue. To those suffering from inflamed eyes objects look red, and there is a good chance that animals, whose eyes are often different from ours, do not see what we see even though we look at the same thing. To human beings with jaundice, everything appears to be yellow (675). 24 Montaigne misunderstood the nature and


23. Emphasis added. This is at least partly a knife in the back of Aristotle and Aristotelians for denying that animals can lead a happy life. Nicomachean Ethics, 1178b, 24–8.

effects of jaundice, but whether there is any way to certify as veridical the perceptions of those who have normal vision is a perennial question that does not allow one to dismiss Montaigne as naïve or out of his depth (675).

The same arguments apply to the perceptions of children, adults, and very old people whose grip on the world is infirm. At different ages, we see and taste things differently (676–7). But do we have a way to identify a particular age and its perceptions as definitive when the issue is perceiving objects as they are, not as they appear?

We encounter objects as-sensed. We can neither evade standing in a lockstep with our senses nor can we, as a consequence, be certain that p is in itself as p appears to us when it is filtered through our senses: “Our imagination is not in immediate contact with any external objects, which are perceived solely by the intervention of the senses, and the senses do not embrace outside objects themselves but only their impressions of them . . . So whoever judges from appearances judges from something different from the object itself” (679).

Furthermore, there is no way that we can appeal to some privileged standard to determine the actual qualities a thing possesses. We have already conceded that the senses cannot get beyond themselves to the thing as it is in itself, and reason cannot infer from sensory experience to that which, in fact and in principle, neither reason nor sense apprehends. Moreover, any effort to appeal to some nonsensuous standard miscarries. If we turn to reason to decide a dispute about the true nature of things, we will have to validate our reasoning, but in reasoning, we must appeal to reasons, which sets the table for an infinite regress (679).

Montaigne concludes An Apology for Raymond Sebond with what Popkin characterizes as a “symphony of doubt.” This is precisely what we should expect from a follower of Sextus Empiricus: “There is not any constancy either in our existence or in that of objects. We, our judgment and all mortal things flow and move endlessly. There is no establishing anything certain about us or the objects we seek to know, since what is judged and judging continuously shift and change” (679).

If there were no need to interpret this catalog of doubts and limitations, Montaigne could simply take his place on a long list of skeptics. But because skepticism in the Apology actually reaches beyond the grounds we have for doubting our reason and senses, we need to turn next to other issues to which my discussion points.

II

More than the sum of its arguments and references to authority make Montainge’s Apology a classic. Montaigne uses Sextus Empiricus explicitly to establish that the
Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian identification of happiness with the excellent employment of reason generates a futile quest for happiness.

In a sense, but with a crucial difference, Montaigne voices in prose what Dante sings in *terza rima*: pagan knowledge cannot possibly deliver the happiness that all of us seek. To whatever degree, therefore, that our happiness depends upon reasoning well and upon natural means to satisfy our natural desire to know, we are not happy.

The reference to Dante is not a digression. Dante meets Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, and she chides him, very far through Purgatory, for looking still to Virgil as his guide to happiness. Is Dante unaware that happiness is available only to the redeemed Christian? Reason, properly directed, reveals the soul’s vices, but this for Dante, which is far more than for Montaigne, is all it can do. “Sweet reason” can never allow Dante the ineffable happiness that he experiences in the ephemeral vision of God with which the *Comedy* closes.

Even when reason has done everything it can do, it cannot, since happiness is the end for which we act, do enough. This is Dante’s message in *The Purgatorio*, XXVII, 127–43, and XXX, 50–63. It is the same message that John Ciardi summarizes when he introduces *The Inferno*. As Dante is lost in the Dark Wood of worldly excess, the figure of Virgil appears and “explains that he has been sent to lead Dante from error . . . Virgil offers to guide Dante, but only as far as Human Reason can go. Another guide (*Beatrice*, symbol of Divine *Love*) must take over for the final ascent, for Human Reason is self-limited.”

Dante’s poetry, not his commitment to orthodoxy, is exceptional. A wayward Christian, under the direction of reason, does what he can in an effort at self-discovery and purification, but this is never enough for salvation and for the authentic happiness that comes from divine election. Reason enables Dante to advance toward a divine love that is the conduit to happiness, but Beatrice must first summon Virgil—faith has to wake reason—for the process to begin.

Still, Dante is a late Thomist, and even his brief for the limited role of reason in becoming happy sets him apart from Montaigne. To make a case that no human being can be happy—that is, as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle conceive happiness as rational contemplation—Montaigne appeals to Sextus. In reading the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Montaigne does not doubt the claim, “all men wish for happiness is a fundamental assumption of the Socratic, as well as Platonic and Aristotelian moral psychology,” but he doubts that “all men,” as men, get what they want.

By reviving the arguments and tropes in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Montaigne has an arsenal to show that whether a person appeals to the senses (with the empiricists) or to reason (with the rationalists), he will never know anything. The

28. Ibid., 34.
30. The model for knowing emerges in the *Theaetetus*, *Meno*, *Republic* and *Posterior Analytics*. But even if one settles for a more dilute view of knowledge, probability, or right opinion, Montaigne (following Sextus) argues that the case is hopeless.
problem is insurmountable. If happiness consists in knowing and is the yield of productive inquiry, one must abandon prospects for happiness and settle for something else, as Sextus does. Even if he entertains the claim that knowing and being happy are inseparable, finding no reason to think that we can know he settles for ataraxia.31

Benson Mates makes the Pyrrhonian point in discussing Sextus’s attitude toward ataraxia: “The goal . . . of the Skeptic is ataraxia ( . . . ‘imperturbability’); as regards things that are forced upon him, it is to have moderate pathē [‘affects’]. Ataraxia is not to be pursued directly; instead it arises as a byproduct of epoche [‘suspension of judgment’], which in turn follows upon the state of aporia that results from the Skeptics’ attempts to resolve the anomaly (anōmalia) of phenomena and noumena by discovering what is the case, as contrasted with what merely appears to be the case.”32

Insofar as ataraxia is freedom from perturbation, Sextus insists that we err if we think about it as we think of happiness, as a “panacea for life’s troubles, such as might be held out by religion or perhaps by a Seneca-style stoicism. Instead, the Skeptic’s ataraxia is . . . only a relief from whatever unpleasant puzzlement one might have about what is really the case in a supposedly mind-independent external world.”33

The Pyrrhonists find that no assertion is safe or secure in the sense that it is indubitable. They can never say to a level of certainty or even to justified true belief that any proposition p is true or false, and ataraxia provides a respite from trying to decide what is undecidable. Still, they need not retreat from living simply because they live without beliefs. Pyrrhonists will yield to some emotions. They will honor the traditions and customs of the city in which they reside, and they will do what they can to earn a living.34 No Pyrrhonist will mistake his own choices for dogma; hence, at the outset of Outlines of Pyrrhonism Sextus says, “As regards none of the things that we are about to say do we firmly maintain that matters are absolutely as stated, but in each instance we are simply reporting, like a chronicler, what now appears to us to be the case.”35

Obviously, then, if Pyrrhonists are skeptical of all assertions, they must resist every temptation to believe, and they must avoid dogmatism.36 What, then, is Pyrrhonism? What does it amount to? It is a way of living and of thinking about which Sextus writes:

The Skeptic Way is a disposition to oppose phenomena and noumena to one another in any way whatever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence among the things and statements thus opposed, we are brought first to epoche and then to ataraxia . . . By “equipollence” we mean equality as

31. Indeed, Pyrrhonists are pleased to reach ataraxia as an epiphenomenon of aporia and epoche.
32. The Skeptic Way, 45.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 9.
35. Ibid., 89; emphasis added.
36. Ibid., 601.
regards credibility and lack of it, that is, that no one of the inconsistent statements takes precedence over any other as being more credible. *Epōchē* is a state of the intellect on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything. *Ataraxia* is an untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul.\(^{37}\)

One might wonder why, if Pyrrhonism promotes a life that evades stress and confusion, Sextus’s Pyrrhonists “continue to search” for the truth?\(^{38}\)

Mates addresses this question by saying that the Pyrrhonist’s “*aporía*, leading through *epōchē* to *ataraxia*, is . . . consistent with his ‘continuing to search’ . . . , for the ‘searching’ that the Skeptic does turns out to be, in most cases, nothing more than the raising of questions about the meaning and seeming implications of Dogmatic assertions purporting to be true.”\(^{39}\) I agree but make the point a bit differently. Dogmatists, insisting that they know the truth, have no reason to search. This is what makes them dogmatic in the first place. Academics are just as certain that neither they nor anyone else can ever know the truth; hence, they regard searching for it as useless.

What about the Pyrrhonists? They search in the most passive sense of “search,” i.e., remain barely open, not optimistic, to the possibility of knowledge. Indeed, as a practical philosophy Pyrrhonism seems to have developed more by accident than by design: “the Skeptics were hoping to achieve *ataraxia* by resolving the phenomena and noumena, and, being unable to do this, they suspended judgment. But then, *by chance as it were*, when they were suspending judgment the *ataraxia* followed, as a shadow follows the body.”\(^{40}\) The search for knowledge bears no fruit, but the willingness to suspend one’s judgment leads to imperturbability.

Pyrrhonists do not satisfy their desire to know, but unlike the Academics and Dogmatists, they find calm in failure. Frustration, not tranquility, might seem the more likely consequence of failure; however, a product of suspending judgment when knowledge or resolution does not follow inquiry is *ataraxia*. On Sextus’s sympathetic account, then, the consistent Pyrrhonist can find contentment even when he cannot find knowledge.\(^{41}\)

Throughout the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus emphasizes *ataraxia*, that elusive “untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul,” not *eudaimonia* or happiness, as the likely result of a Pyrrhonist’s behavior.\(^{42}\) One could claim that other Hellenistic philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism also stress contentment, tranquility, or pleasure but are themselves relatively mute about happiness; however, understanding the position of the Pyrrhonists, not that of Epicureans and Stoics, is vital for getting at the marrow of Montaigne’s *Apology*.

Unless I have misinterpreted an argument in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus does *not* claim that *ataraxia* is one’s highest conceivable good. His claim is more

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37. Ibid., 89–90.
38. Ibid., 89.
39. Ibid., 32.
40. Ibid., 93.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 90.
modest and defensive: given the restrictions imposed upon us by the limits of reason, by our few and defective senses, by the intrusive character of our passions, and by other impediments to thinking and knowing, we can at best surrender to our limitations and attain ataraxia. This does not imply that being calm and being happy are identical.

We can suggest that Sextus could well have shared the Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian notion that knowing and being happy are inseparably linked, but suggesting and securing an interpretation are different. The searching that Sextus defends might, were it successful, beget the happiness we desire and not merely the calm with which we can live. Nonetheless, and this is too important to neglect, the hypothesis that knowledge leads to—or amounts to—happiness cannot be tested unless we not only desire knowledge but actually acquire it. An untested hypothesis is nothing more than empty speculation (605), but for Sextus and Montaigne the assertion “Knowledge makes us happy” is that kind of hypothesis. No less serious, each philosopher believes that the insuperable limitations on our capacity to know or justifiably to believe militate against our ever being in a position to verify or to disconfirm the claim “Knowledge makes us happy.”

One can more safely claim, then, that Sextus and Montaigne are far from assuming knowledge leads to happiness or S is happy if and only if S is a member of the set of those who know. When, therefore, Aristotle declares at the close of the Nicomachean Ethics, Book X, that philosophers, second only to the gods whose activity they imitate, are the happiest beings insofar as they know and contemplate, he obviously does not speak for skeptics like Sextus or for neo-Skeptics like Montaigne. For Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics, X, viii, “Happiness extends . . . just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy, not accidentally, but in virtue of the contemplation; for this is itself precious. Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation.”

But for Sextus and Montaigne, the choice looks disappointing where happiness is our concern: (a) one can seek knowledge with the hope of attaining happiness, or (b) one can claim that happiness is independent of knowledge. I find no clinching evidence in Outlines of Pyrrhonism or An Apology for Raymond Sebond that (b) “happiness” is independent of knowledge, and (a) is out of the question insofar as both philosophers argue that looking for happiness in knowl-

43. Ibid., 32.
44. For Hume on barren speculative hypotheses, see A Treatise of Human Nature, 82–3.
46. One can profitably look at Plato’s Apology, 29d–30b, and Republic, 353d–354b, for hints at the connective tissues between Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on happiness and the good life.
edge ends neither in knowledge nor in the happiness that is supposed to depend upon knowing.

Perhaps there is another choice (c), viz., the admonition to find happiness in the quest for knowledge even if the quest is bound to fail. This is a choice that Augustine mentions in the *Contra Academicos* (c. 386 C.E.), but neither Sextus nor Montaigne endorses seeking truth when happiness is what we are after. The searching they describe reveals the grounds for doubting our senses, our reason, and our conventional beliefs about the world. Moreover, Augustine himself rejects (c) and promotes a position that points to Montaigne’s but that is somewhat more hospitable to reason: “philosophy is not wisdom itself but is called the study of wisdom. If you give yourself to philosophy, you will not . . . be wise here, during this life, for wisdom is found only with God and man cannot attain it, but when you have studied and have purified yourself, you will certainly enjoy wisdom after life, when you are no longer mortal.”

This is a claim that skeptics could, with an obvious modification, accept. Augustine’s spokesman says this life affords no happiness because it offers no knowledge. Whether someone can be happy in a life to come is unanswerable because believing there is a life after death and believing one actually knows anything in a life after death far exceed what Sextus would ever affirm.

III

One can make even shorter work of the futile search for truth than what (c) above describes. Consider the famous paradox of inquiry in the *Meno*, 80d–e. Montaigne knew the *Meno* and quoted it in *Of Experience* (1200), but even if he had never read it, the problem of the paradox is a salient feature of *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*.

The nominal concern of the *Meno* is how virtuous men come by their virtue; its deeper concern is how anyone knows what “virtue” (areté) is. Socrates states the paradox when Meno, frustrated by all his failed attempts, doubts that he can ever find a definition for “virtue”: “I know what you mean to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater’s argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he knows not what to seek for” (80e).

Plato defuses the paradox by introducing the metaphysical and epistemological equipment with which all subsequent Platonists are familiar—the eternally knowing soul in which necessary truths (objects of knowledge) are eternally stored (81a–d) and the method of “recollection” (anamnesis) that enables anyone, with direction and diligence, to recall these truths (85c–e). But Plato’s solution is

49. *Contra Academicos*, III, xx; emphasis added.
51. For what characterizes an object of Platonic knowledge, see the *Cratylus*, 439d–440b.
unavailable to Montaigne. If Montaigne had been friendly to Plato’s epistemological nativism, rather than to empiricism, the skepticism at the center of the *Apology* would not have been an issue in the first place.

What, then, is the point? Granting the force of Plato’s paradox—a paradox that Plato himself treats as insoluble without introducing into the *Meno* metaphysical and epistemological elements that belong to the middle dialogues—successful inquiry is impossible; hence, so too is the acquisition of knowledge. Where Plato is willing to craft an extravagant metaphysics and a doctrine of innate ideas to rescue knowledge and inquiry, Montaigne is not. Where Plato finds only deficiencies in empiricist theories of knowledge, Montaigne insists (without discounting these deficiencies) that non-empiricist theories of knowledge are too extravagant to entertain.\(^{52}\) The message is simple and is one we have already seen in Sextus’s arguments. A philosophy that insists upon a necessary connection between knowledge and happiness, but denies the possibility of knowledge, must deny the possibility of happiness. That this is obvious does not make it less true, and I think that Montaigne seized and appreciated the consequences of this connection.

**IV**

Where does what I have said in I through III leave Montaigne’s treatment of happiness? Here too I think the answer is transparent. Although, as I have noted throughout my discussion, Montaigne talks about degrees of contentment and about the question whether a sage is more fully at peace than an untutored Brazilian, he does not quite go so far as to make the *absolute* claim that there is no connection between knowing and being happy or, for that matter, between reasoning with excellence and being happy (545). The problem for Montaigne is that men and women are, as we have seen over and over, fallen and imperfect. One of the many consequences of that fall, as well as of the inherent imperfections of being a creature, is that human beings cannot know anything to a level of certainty nor can they sense beyond the phenomena of experience. This means, unless I have misread the *Apology*, that human beings (with an emphasis on “human”) cannot be happy, if to be happy is to know. Sextus, his predecessors and epigones are correct: the best we can manage on our own, in this life, is something close to *ataraxia*. This is because knowledge, that is, strict knowledge that the ancients praised as contemplation and called “theoria,” is unattainable. Even Aristotle, without any notion of Christian doctrine or grace, hinted that human beings could at most approximate, not experience, happiness at its highest registers.\(^{53}\)

We try to understand the world, and inevitably we come up short of the mark (600). This is not news; it is inevitable. We are as far from knowing the things we

52. One might read the subtext of the *Meno* as Plato’s effort to explain how we know truths that are necessary, universal, and eternal, even though we live in a world of contingent particulars.

hold in our hands as we are from knowing the remotest stars (602). Where does all this take us?

In a sense, but without stretching a claim beyond its tolerances, Montaigne speaks—as some think Aristotle might have—for two different roads to happiness.\(^{54}\) This binary approach may lead some commentators of the first rank, such as Popkin and Stephen Toulmin, to describe Montaigne as “mildly religious” or as a man of his times who “did not find it indispensable, either to be forever invoking the name of God, or to voice a continual anxiety about... personal salvation.”\(^{55}\) I believe, however, to characterize Montaigne in religiously tepid terms, even if such a characterization turns out to be accurate, is not very helpful in getting at Montaigne’s attitude toward happiness.

Those who celebrate *Of Experience* and read it as Montaigne’s last word because it is his last essay may themselves emphasize the secular man who finds contentment in following nature and perhaps in detecting, through self-examination, limitations of the human condition.\(^{56}\) They too will celebrate Montaigne for embracing as his motto the question “*Que sçay-je?*”—“What do I know?” (589), and they will praise him insofar as he chides all those who cannot find value in living the life of a human being:

> We are great fools: He has spent his life in idleness. We say, “I have done nothing today.” Really, have you not lived? This is not only the most fundamental but the most illustrious of your occupations. . . . Have you been able to think about and manage your life? You have managed the greatest burden of all . . . To compose our nature is our responsibility, not to write books. To gain order and tranquility, not to win battles and provinces, is our goal. *Our grand and glorious masterpiece is to live suitably* (1,247; emphasis added).

This passage is Montaigne’s picture of the self-made man or woman. It is the epitome of a person who, within the perimeter of what is *humanly* possible, lives as well as life can be lived (1,250).

But none of this is an answer to the question of whether living well as a human being is the same as being a happy human being. I think that for Montaigne the answer is clear, but perhaps clarity depends upon how one puts the question. If one wishes to know for Montaigne whether a human being can be happy, the answer is different from the answer to the question of whether a *transformed* human being can be happy. To put the matter briefly and directly, Montaigne’s position, which is no different from that of Aquinas, Dante, or Erasmus, is that “happy” and “human” are incompatible. More directly still, the answer to the

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55. See, respectively, *The History of Skepticism*, 56, and Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis* (Chicago, 1990), 37.
56. These are the interpreters who also find much to admire in *Of Moderation* (1572–80) and *Of Cannibals* (1578–80). For Harold Bloom on *Of Experience*, see *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, 1994), 154–7.
question “Can a human being be happy?” is for Montaigne “no.” But the answer to
the question “Can a transformed human being be happy?” is, of course, “yes.”

There is nothing surprising about these answers, nor is there anything sur-
prising about Montaigne’s position: happiness comes only to those to whom God
offers it. Something less comes to those who make the most of what their limited
humanity allows. Montaigne agrees with his classical and medieval antecedents
that human beings desire happiness as an end in itself, and he agrees with
many of them that no one can satisfy this desire through some rational quest for
certainty: “Men who have assayed and probed everything, within those masses of
learning and many diverse things, have found nothing solid or firm—nothing but
vanity. Then they have renounced their arrogance and realized their natural condi-
tion” (556; emphasis added).

Recognizing one’s ignorance and abandoning a futile search for knowledge
will not alone make one happy. Resignation is not enough. The recipe for happi-
ness requires faith and election. True believers offer their faith, but God makes
them eligible for happiness: “The things that come from Heaven alone have the
right and the authority to persuade us. They alone come with the mark of the truth;
but we cannot see them with our eyes, nor do we acquire them through our means.
So great and holy an image cannot reside in such a puny domicile if God does not
prepare it for that use, if God does not reform and fortify it by his particular grace
and supernatural favor” (634; emphasis added).

At the end of the Apology, Montaigne states unmistakably his view that no
one can make himself happy. He approves Seneca’s declaration, “Oh, man, a vile
and abject thing. . . . if he does not rise above his humanity” (682; emphasis added).
The pagan Seneca was actually writing of a need to extend ourselves as far as is
“humanly” possible. Montaigne has something different in mind. No human being
can reach beyond his or her humanity. Because this is the case, no one can make
himself happy or change herself into the sort of being for whom happiness is pos-
sible. Human beings will rise to become something more than men or women if
and only if God, by extraordinary means, offers his hand. “He will rise by aban-
donning and renouncing his own means, allowing himself to be raised and lifted by
purely heavenly means.” Finally, therefore, “It is our Christian faith, not Stoic
virtue, to aspire to this divine and miraculous metamorphosis” (683; emphasis
added).

If this quotation is radical, then so is Catholic orthodoxy. Montaigne here
says nothing very different from what Aquinas defends in the Summa Contra
Gentiles. For Aquinas consummate happiness is not possible in this life because
knowledge akin to that of the angels, as well as knowledge of God, exists only in
a deified being, and a deified being is no longer human. The transformation, which

57. See similar texts in 555–6, 622.
58. In the introduction to his translation of Aquinas’s Treatise on Happiness (Notre Dame,
1983), xiii, John A. Oesterle says that Aquinas admits a diminished level of happiness is possible
for human beings in their natural condition, but “The determination of what natural happiness is
and in what it consists is difficult to make,” and “in his theological work St. Thomas can put this
question aside.”
Aquinas labors to explain in Book III, chapters XL–XLIII, is paradoxical, not metaphorical. According to him, and after him Montaigne, a human being satisfies the ultimate desire for happiness only by being turned into something that is superhuman, namely, into a being that has more than opinions, “sacred science” (theology) and faith, but also unmediated knowledge of God: “Because it is necessary to place our ultimate happiness in some type of knowledge of God, it is impossible that man’s happiness should be in this life.”

Striving to become happy, like trying in this life to know to a level of certainty or to perceive things as they are and not as they appear, offers no more promise than a serious search for knowledge in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Happiness comes to pious Christians who, through God’s intervention, are made into much more than extraordinary men and women. Sextus, unwilling to admit even the possibility of “true opinions,” would have been among the last to condone metaphysical speculation about a “miraculous metamorphosis.”

Montaigne, using everything he could from Sextus’s skeptical modes, argues that satisfying the universal desire for happiness occurs only if God saves us from the poverty of our nature. This means that reasoning, our characteristic human talent, is unsuited to satisfying our characteristically human desire. One can, accordingly, draw a moral from *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* that makes it darkly philosophical and consistently orthodox: *one cannot be happy and human*. This is Montaigne’s answer to the question, “*Que sçay-je?*”

59. *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, xlvi, in Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia* (25 vols., New York, 1948–50), XII; emphasis added. Erasmus’ “fool for Christ,” like the pilgrim Dante, enjoys a glimpse of God in this life, but this supreme happiness that the Christian fool experiences does not last and “is just the tiniest taste of the bliss to come.” *The Praise of Folly*, 87. For Jonathan Edwards, Calvinist saints, who are among the few “elect,” behold directly God’s loveliness and holiness through the “spiritual light” or “sense of the heart.” But Edwards is clear that this faculty has nothing in common with ordinary reason and that what it discerns is never revealed to unsanctified humans. *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, 121–2, 136–49.


62. I am grateful to my graduate students—especially to Chad Hale—for searching comments on the first draft of this paper.