JUDITH N. SHKLAR

Putting Cruelty First

MANY YEARS AGO, a deeply religious Roman Catholic friend said to me, with some irritation, "Why *must* you liberals bring everything down to cruelty?" What could he have meant? He was, and is, the most gentle and kindly of men, and a principled defender of political freedom and social reform. As a Christian, he obviously regarded cruelty as a dreadful vice. He was not defending cruelty or abandoning liberal politics; rather, he was explicitly rejecting the mentality that does not merely abhor brutality, but that regards cruelty as the *summum malum*, the most evil of all the evils. And he was reminding me that, although intuitively, most of us might agree about right and wrong, we also, and of far more significance, differ enormously in the way we rank the virtues and vices. Those who put cruelty first, as he guessed, do not condemn it as a sin. They have all but forgotten the Seven Deadly Sins, especially those that do not involve cruelty. Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God; pride, as the rejection of God, must always be the worst one, which gives rise to all the others. Cruelty, as the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear, however, is a wrong done entirely to *another creature*. When it is marked as the supreme evil, it is judged so in and of itself, and not because it signifies a rejection of God or any other higher norm. It is a judgment made from within a world where cruelty occurs as part both of our normal private life and our daily public practice. By putting it irrevocably first—with nothing above it, and with nothing to excuse or forgive acts of cruelty—one closes off any appeal to any order other than that of actuality.

To hate cruelty with utmost intensity is perfectly compatible with biblical religiosity, but to put it *first* does place one unalterably outside the sphere of revealed religion. For it is a purely human verdict upon human conduct, and so puts religion at a certain distance. But while this tension is inherent in the decision to put cruelty first, it is not just religious skepticism that prompts this moral choice. It emerges, rather, from the recognition that the habits of the faithful do not differ from those of the faithless in their brutalities, and that Machiavelli had triumphed long before he had ever written a line. To put cruelty first, therefore, is to be at odds with both religion and politics. My Catholic friend perhaps thought all this through carefully, but I suspect that he merely sensed it, for I think few people have really considered most of the implications of putting cruelty first. That is why one might well investigate the

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

matter more closely, and one way of illuminating it is to examine the most distinguished of those moralists who hated cruelty most of all, specifically Montaigne and his disciple Montesquieu.

Why should one hate cruelty with the utmost intensity? Montaigne thought it an entirely psychological question. He looked first of all into himself and found that the sight of cruelty instantly filled him with revulsion. It was a wholly negative reaction, for as he put it, "the horror of cruelty impels me more to clemency than any model of clemency could draw me on."[1] There was nothing positive here, no particular approval of charity or humane feeling. Indeed, he distrusted soft men: they tended to be unstable and easily became cruel. Cruelty, like lying, repels instantly, because it is "ugly." It is a vice that disfigures human character. We need not doubt Montaigne's word that he simply hated cruelty, and as he put it, "What we hate, we take seriously."[2] But although his loathing of cruelty was a personal choice, it was not random, nor did it occur in an intellectual or historical vacuum.

It is clear that well before he began to write his *Essays*, Montaigne had lost most of his faith in Christianity. The next step for him and his contemporaries was a return to the philosophers of classical antiquity, and Montaigne never ceased to depend on their wisdom. There was, however, a danger in this neo-paganism that he could not ignore. Given his sensibilities, he was bound to recognize that Machiavelli was also a refugee from Christian restraints, and that this most outspoken of enemies of revealed religion was also the foremost teacher of cruelty. It must have seemed to Montaigne that cruelty was everywhere, that it was the ubiquitous moral disease of Europe. He put it first among the vices, because it had become the most conspicuous and the least reformed evil, especially in the course of the then-current wars of religion. The first three of the *Essays* are, therefore, not surprisingly aimed at Machiavelli.

The opening one turns Machiavelli upside down. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli had asked whether it was more efficient for a self-made ruler to govern cruelly or leniently, and had decided that, on the whole, cruelty worked best. Montaigne raised the question that the prince's victims might ask: Was it better to plead for pity or to display defiance in the face of cruelty? There are no certain answers, he concluded. Victims have no certainties. They must cope, without guidebooks to help them. The second of the *Essays* deals with the sadness of those whose children and friends die. And the third suggests that one might take precautions against the terrors of princes. If there were an established review of the deeds of princes as soon as they died, their passion for posthumous fame might restrain them here and now. Even Machiavelli had noted that an indiscriminate butcher was not likely to enjoy the best of reputations in history, even if he should have succeeded in all his enterprises. Montaigne was only too aware of how cruel the passion for fame made ambitious princes, and he did not really place much hope in any restraining devices. But by reading *The Prince*, as one of its victims might, Montaigne set a great distance between his own and Machiavelli's classicism. Putting cruelty first was thus a reaction to the new science of politics. It did not reconcile Montaigne to revealed religion. Indeed, it only reinforced his conviction that Christianity had done nothing to inhibit cruelty. He could not even admit that

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

his hatred of cruelty was a residual form of Christian morality. On the contrary, it only exacerbated his antagonism to established religiosity.

For Montaigne, and for Montesquieu after him, the failure of Christianity from a moral point of view was made perfectly manifest by the conduct of the Spaniards in the New World. Montaigne regarded them as the supreme example of the failure of Christianity. It preached a purer doctrine than any other religion but had less influence on human conduct. Mohammedans and pagans tended to behave better. What an opportunity was lost when the New World was discovered by Spaniards! How might the New World have flourished if Greek and Roman virtues had been introduced to the natives! Instead, there was unexampled slaughter for the sake of gold, with hypocritical talk of conversions to Christianity. For hypocrisy and cruelty go together, and are, as it were, unified in zeal. Zeal had taken the place of both religion and philosophy, and it works wonders "when it seconds our propensity to hatred, cruelty, ambition, avarice, detraction, rebellion," and the like.[3] This indictment went well beyond the tradition of Christian reformers who had always invoked the memory of Christ and the Apostles to rebuke a wayward Church. To Montaigne, the distance between profession and behavior appeared unbridgeable. Montesquieu, indeed, did use the image of a charitable Christ to shame a cruel Inquisitor, but only ironically, for he put the argument into the mouth of an Iberian Jew. For Montesquieu, the professions no longer mattered. All religions were to be treated as forms of social control—necessary, but not, on the whole, admirable. The Spaniards were, to be sure, "superbly Christian" as they went about their slaughter, but in fact they were like all other conquerors, past and present. But we are meant to feel more than a touch of disgust at this species of cruelty.

The Spaniards, as Montesquieu saw them, had created a new nightmare world. They had not only through prejudice renounced all gentle and humane feelings, but had also contrived to reorder reality. When they encountered a population with habits and an appearance unlike their own, they found it easy to say that God could not have put souls into such ugly bodies, that clearly those creatures lacked the higher rational qualities. Once the Spaniards had begun their cruelties, it became especially important to say that "it is impossible to suppose these creatures to be men, because allowing them to be men, a suspicion might arise that we were not Christian."[4] For both Montesquieu and Montaigne, the Spaniards in the New World served as the ultimate example of public cruelty. It was the triumph of Machiavellism by those who claimed to be its chief opponents. Here, cruelty and pious pretense had joined to prove Machiavelli right.

Because cruelty is made easier by hypocrisy and self-deception, they are bound to stand high on the list of vices that begins with cruelty. And in fact, Uzbek, the intelligent and cruel tyrant of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, is typically self-deceived. He believes that the women who are tormented in his seraglio all love him, since they are all so unlike him. Dishonesty becomes here less a violation of truth than an aid to cruelty. And other traditional vices that are remote from cruelty did not shock Montesquieu at all. He was not disturbed by any manifestation of genuine affection, even if it was incestuous. And

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Montaigne regarded the knot of lying, treachery, malice, and cruelty as far worse than adultery, so much berated by other moralists. Lust, in fact, was not a fault at all. We are, Montaigne argued, made infinitely worse by our self-hatred in performing the most natural and necessary acts. What could be more appalling than to hide in the dark when we create a new life, while we destroy life with whoops of joy in broad daylight as we cry, "Kill, rob, betray"?[5] It was this transvaluation of values that took Montaigne well beyond the mere rejection of Christian doctrine. Indeed, it put him outside most of the conventions of his world. The contempt that Europeans felt for their physical nature was, in his view, just one more sign of mankind's general moral imbecility.

In spite of their own advice and habitual good humor, hatred of cruelty reduced both Montaigne and Montesquieu to a profound philosophical misanthropy. Montesquieu was a master of black humor and satire, while Montaigne had simple outbursts of loathing for his fellowman. In one essay of really concentrated disgust, he decided that it was better to laugh rather than cry at mankind, because the former "expresses more disdain," which is appropriate, since "we can never be despised more than we deserve." It is not even a matter of intelligent evil, but of inanity. "We are not so wretched as we are vile."[6] Misanthropy is surely one of the hazards of putting cruelty first. If it horrifies us, we must, given the facts of daily life, always be in a state of outrage, overwhelmed, like Hamlet, by the density of evil. Montaigne was neither so paralyzed nor so desperate as to suggest that mankind simply stop reproducing itself, but at times he could not think of a single thing to say in favor of humanity. For positive qualities, he therefore looked to those ultimate victims of human cruelty, the animals.

Animals are our moral superiors in every significant way, according to Montaigne. They seek only "tangible" and "attainable" goods, while we have only "wind and smoke" as our portion.[7] They have an unimpaired sense of reality, seeking only repose, security, health, and peace, while we pursue reason, knowledge, and renown, which bring us nothing but grief. With the exception of the bees, they want only to preserve themselves, and know nothing of war or terror. Phyrrho's pig, untroubled by a storm at sea, had no more ardent admirer. Montesquieu thought that, compared to the animals, we are nature's stepchildren, because animals do not seem "to make so bad a use of their passions" as we do.[8] But Montaigne thought that nature was entirely fair. We have only ourselves to blame for our follies and cruelties. Although he was devoted to Lucretius, he could not accept the latter's melancholy picture of nature's mindless destructiveness. That would have taken cruelty out of the realm of human choice and morality. Montaigne compared men to animals, not to condemn nature, but to reveal human folly. No greater mark of idiocy seemed imaginable than the doctrine that man was the best of creatures, destined to lord it over the vegetable and animal kingdom. The result is that we are encouraged to be cruel from our earliest years to plants and beasts. What in fact could be more absurd than that "this miserable and puny creature, who is not so much as master of himself . . . should call himself master and emperor of the universe"?[9] Such is the extremity of misanthropy to which one is driven if one looks at people through the eyes of our chief victims, plants and animals.

The need to escape from such a degree of misanthropy is particularly obvious if one is led to it by the hatred of cruelty. For loathing of one's kind and

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

of oneself is hardly the best cure for us. The temptation is therefore great not only to identify with the victims, but to idealize them and to attribute improbable virtues to them as well. That is how Montaigne came to overrate the animals and the peasants. Montesquieu overestimated the Jews, at least for the purposes of political argument. Dickens idolized children; Hawthorne, women. It is of course a perfect way to shame the cruel, but even more significantly, it is the only way to avoid the nausea of misanthropy. The saving virtues most becoming to a victim are fortitude and pride, and it is these that are usually ascribed to them. Pride may be a deadly sin for those who preach meekness, but it recommends itself to those who put cruelty first. Roxanne, one of Uzbek's wives in the harem, commits suicide both as a final act of defiance and to escape from the seraglio. In this she demonstrates not only her own courage, but also her superiority over her owner, who contemplates suicide because he is a bored and frustrated despot who wants to quit this life because his existence has no cosmic significance. His chatter is typical of a tyrant's self-importance, while her death is an act of heroic self-assertion and liberation.

Valor was for Montaigne the greatest virtue, even though he was often unsure of even that. He could dissociate it from aggression best by recognizing its perfection in defeated soldiers, but not in victorious ones. Only the Indian kings conquered by the marauding Spaniards display valor as a spiritual, rather than as a merely physical, quality. Their invincible courage is a dignified refusal to placate their conquerors, rather than just a desire to triumph. Peasants, another victimized group, live in resignation and die without making a fuss. That is also a form of valor. Montesquieu's Jews hold philosophical discourse in sight of the stake and openly hold fast to the faith of their fathers, without deceit. That was not their only virtue. They, and they alone, engaged in commercial activities in spite of Christian persecutions and prohibitions. They thus preserved for Europe the social activity most likely to save it from war and Machiavellism. For the spirit of commerce is the spirit of peace. Montaigne in an earlier age would not have understood this improbable hope. He found it peculiarly horrible that the Spaniards had turned a beautiful country upside-down merely "for a traffic in pearls and pepper."[10] For him, only pure, aristocratic valor, courage as a style of life, was admirable and a claim to noble standing.

Valor is generous; it is the obverse of cruelty, which is the expression of cowardice. But more often, valor appears to be quite indifferent to others, for its aim is self-perfection. It serves to satisfy a heroic self-image. It can be an extreme individualism, but in its military context, Montaigne saw it occasionally as a comradeship among brave men, and he admired it as he valued the company of his peers. He could do this without considering the purposes that brought them together: war, which he despised. War, he wrote, is "a testimony of our imbecility and imperfection."[11] Montaigne was not the first or last man to be puzzled by the fact that the most brutal of all social enterprises should also be the occasion of so much personal nobility, fellowship, and courage.

Montaigne not only detested war, he particularly did not admire victors. Winning wars is entirely a matter of fortune. Unlike Machiavelli, he did not think that Fortune was a woman to be manhandled by determined and aggressive princes. Fortune, he thought, was the sum of uncontrollable and

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

unpredictable circumstances. Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar were merely its beneficiaries. Conquerors, in short, are deprived of all merit. Their victories are not due to their efforts or character. Only victims can rise to true fortitude, because Fortune has obviously deserted them. The glamour of glory is quite gone. What matters is how bravely one endures defeat. Putting cruelty first may in this way lead on to an ideology of heroic self-destruction. And indeed Socrates, as the dignified suicide, was Montaigne's ideal figure. Cato's showy act seemed to him very inferior.

There is surely something disturbing about idealizing the defeated. They also are pawns of Fortune, no better than her favorites. They are just losers. To favor them extravagantly is, however, a way of escaping from misanthropy and finding an ethos that, unlike revealed religion, leads neither to zeal nor to cruelty. Valor, as a defiant refusal to live as a slave or a victim, may be a recipe for isolation and potential suicide, but not for cruelty. It is the pride that saves. When Montaigne said, "It is fear that I stand most in fear of," he was thinking of both the victims and the victimizers.[12] Fear makes the latter cruel and increases the suffering of the former. If we could learn not to fear the void after death, killing would lose both its appeal and its apprehension. The infliction of pain would remain, and Montaigne insisted, over the explicit objections of the ecclesiastical authorities, that any punishment beyond mere killing was cruel. He seems, however, to have thought that a more rational view of death would do much to discourage cruelty generally. Montesquieu already knew better. Much as he admired the stoic temper, he did not think that a rational attitude to death would in any way decrease our cruelty. He thought it might be better if we thought of men as sentient rather than rational beings. Uzbek, his tyrant, is indeed a model of enlightened rationality, and free from any fears of the afterlife, but he is as cruel as the next despot. Valor in the face of death might be admirable, but it did not seem to Montesquieu to lessen mankind's murderous propensities. In either case, learning how to die is hardly a social virtue. And that generally may be one of the costs of putting cruelty first. It leads to an ethic for isolates.

There are other equally significant social ideas that emerge within this mental world, especially an easy acceptance of cultural variety and a negative egalitarianism. Since the most spectacular public brutalities are usually visited upon alien peoples, Montaigne and Montesquieu were bound to investigate the justifications offered for the slaughter and enslavement of barbarians. The oldest and most common argument has been that they are naturally inferior. Since nature was taken to issue rules of conduct, it was clear that she intended Europeans to enslave those lesser peoples whom she had marked out by color for that very purpose. Montaigne entirely agreed that nature was indeed our best guide to good conduct. It was therefore a matter of some importance to him whether the differences between cultures were indeed natural, and which cultures, if any, were inferior and superior, when judged in terms of their habitual cruelty.

Barbarism, he soon discovered, was anything that "does not fit in with our usages." Every people seems barbaric to some other tribe. Moreover, the endless multiplicity of customs and opinions that he loved to list proved that not one of them stood out as natural. All were human contrivances. There is

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

nothing that is not decent or indecent somewhere. All are departures from nature's original simplicity, and their variety only proves how insignificant they are, for "nature puts to shame our vain and trivial efforts."[13] Customs as such are all equidistant from nature, and the differences are therefore unimportant in themselves. What does matter is who is cruel. Cannibals eat the flesh of dead people and we recoil in horror, but it is we who torture and persecute the living. Our pride is unwarranted. There are no naturally superior or inferior peoples, but arrogance and cruelty mark Europeans, not those whom they disdain as barbarians. There was, in fact, a vein of primitivism in Montaigne, but that is not necessary to his purpose. Montesquieu did not share it, and he no longer looked to nature for human standards at all. He nevertheless also used the variety of customs to undermine the pride of the European civilization. It was simply a matter of exposing the triviality of the excuses offered for the enormous harms inflicted on primitive peoples. "Because negroes prefer a glass necklace to gold . . . it is proven that they have no common sense."[14] American Indians trimmed their beards in an unfamiliar manner, so they were legally enslaved by the Spaniards. Unlike Montaigne, Montesquieu knew enough not to dwell on any fancied superiority of the native peoples. It was enough to show that no difference could ever justify cruelty. He had, moreover, another reason for wanting his readers to know and understand all the cultures. He really believed that "knowledge makes men gentle," just as ignorance hardens us.[15] Not the primitive, but the *supra*civilized may recover from cruelty after all.

All inferiority and superiority for Montesquieu were the creations of policy. Once we enslave aliens, whom in our ignorance we despise, we reduce them to inferiority. Slavery makes imbeciles, not the other way around. "Nothing makes one more like a beast than always to see free men without being oneself free."[16] Once they have been reduced by enslavement, cruelty acts to make the distance between owner and slave even greater. In Asia, Montesquieu claimed, black slaves were castrated to that end. And in his *Persian Letters*, black eunuchs are employed to maintain the steady flow of submission and dominance in the harem. They are the abject tools of their common owner, who rules all by remote control. If such social distances create the climate for cruelty, then a greater equality might be a remedy. Even Machiavelli had known that one cannot rule one's equals with cruelty, but only one's inferior subjects. Montesquieu occasionally admired those ancient democracies whose frugality and equality made the citizens unable or unwilling to lord it over one another. And Montaigne came to admire the simplicity of the peasantry, whose relations to one another, he thought, were better regulated than those of the nobility. But this was just a rejection of aristocratic competitiveness, not a reflection on inequality as a social situation. And indeed, neither Montaigne nor Montesquieu were at all disposed to treat social equality as a positive good. Inequality mattered insofar as it encouraged cruelty. Theirs was a purely negative egalitarianism, rooted in a suspicion of the paltry reasons offered to justify not merely inequality, but its worst consequences. Inequality moreover generates illusions. Montaigne thought that it dims our common sense so badly, that we forget that "the pedestal is no part of the statue."[17] There was more here than the usual complaint that we fail to value real merit because we are easily taken in by mere finery and trappings. What Montaigne feared was the pure

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

glamour of power, the show of valor that accompanies it, and the cruelty that both encourage. Montesquieu was, thanks to Versailles and all it stood for, obsessed by the politics of courtly power. The vacuum that surrounds the despot and separates him from his subjects is the condition of both the maximum of inequality and of cruelty. Nothing could, then, be more dangerous than the deification of political superiors. The desacralization of politics was, in fact, one of Montesquieu's chief objects. Equality was not required for that, and he preferred a hierarchical pluralism, although he did cherish one highly egalitarian institution, the jury chosen by lot. For juries determine the outcome of those occasions when the ordinary citizen is confronted by the criminal law. Negative egalitarianism is really a fear of the consequences of inequality and especially of the dazzling effect of power. It is an obvious result of putting cruelty first.

Not equality but modesty is the cure for arrogance. And no form of arrogance is more obnoxious than the claim that some of us are God's agents, his deputies on earth charged with punishing his enemies. It was, after all, in defense of the divine honor that all those heretics had been tortured and burned. Montaigne saw that torture had infected the entire official world, both secular and ecclesiastical. It had become the ubiquitous evil. Montesquieu, living in a relatively milder age, was still outraged by the judicial prosecution of sins and minor faults. That was partly because neither one believed in these sins any longer, but also because they put cruelty first. The crimes so brutally punished were not themselves acts of cruelty. They therefore appeared particularly unimportant precisely when put in contrast to the horrors of official torture. Montesquieu advised the courts to leave belief and sexual habits alone, and to concentrate on the serious business of protecting the security of life and property. Montaigne had no faith in even this kind of legal reform. He thought most laws useless, because general rules never really fit the actual diversity of individual cases, and most judicial procedures are so cruel, that they terrified law-abiding citizens without achieving much else. He and Montesquieu were at one, however, in insisting that the discretion of judges must be as limited as possible, both thereby expressing a considerable distrust of the judiciary in general. That should not surprise us. Both were, after all, experienced magistrates, who had spent years on the bench at Bordeaux. They did not trust any ruling class, certainly not their own.

The wisdom of experience only enhances the skepticism of those who put cruelty first. How could it be otherwise? The usual excuse for our most unspeakable public acts is that they are necessary. How genuine are these necessities, in fact? Neither Montaigne nor Montesquieu was blind to the imperatives of law and of reason of state, but they knew that much of what passed under these names was merely princely willfulness. To respond to danger is one thing, but necessity in the Machiavellian vocabulary means far more than that. It expresses a great confidence in controlling events once they have been intelligently analyzed. To master necessity is to rule. It is, together with the subduing of Fortune, quite within the power of an astute ruler. Once necessity has been mapped and grasped, it is just a matter of plotting and executing. This is the utopianism of efficiency, with all the cruelty and treachery that it invites. Montaigne thought that politics were far too chaotic

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

and uncertain to be managed according to any plan. He dismissed Machiavelli as being no more plausible than any other political schemer, and just as shortsighted as most. In short, Montaigne did not think these amoral arguments conclusive. They did not really amount to rational responses to any necessities. But when one doubts necessity, one doubts everything. If princes must commit atrocities, let them at least regret it and let them make some effort to avoid going to war in order to indulge some personal whim, Montaigne concluded. That amounts to throwing up one's hands in despair.

There is no temper that is less utopian than this sort of skepticism. "The world is incapable of curing itself; it is so impatient of the weight that oppresses it, that it only aims at getting rid of it, without considering the cost,"[18] Montaigne wrote. Montesquieu had more faith in legislation and social change, but he was no enthusiast. He wrote an account of a little utopian community in his novel. But even in this imaginary world, utopia appears only to prove that it must quickly end. Age and continuity are the best recommendations for institutions, not because they are anything but "barbarous" and "monstrous," Montaigne argued, but because "we wonderfully incline to the worst."[19] Most of our laws and customs are beneath contempt, but if we alter them, we only fall into instability and direct destruction, which might well be worse. A decent, but not excessive, loyalty to the existing order, without excuses, seemed to him the only way. To that extent he had chosen sides in the civil war, since it could not be avoided. But he remained fair to the opposition. As an admiring Emerson was to write of him, he found himself "equally at odds with the evils of society and with the projects that are offered to relieve them," and went on to say that he "denies out of honesty."[20] Honesty in this case meant that Montaigne saw no reason to suppose that changes in belief altered human behavior significantly. Those who have attempted to correct the world by new beliefs, he noted wearily, have only removed the surface vices; the essential ones have not been touched. The best religion, therefore, with peace in view, is the one into which one is born, the one most established in one's country, and that which one is most used to. This is not an attempt to disregard the enormous faults of existing ideologies and institutions. It is rather the recognition that the alternatives are no better. It is the conservatism of universal disgust, if it is conservatism at all. For in what sense can one be said to support an existing order of affairs if one cannot think of anything to say on its behalf except that it is there? It is an act of perfect dissociation, but not necessarily a retreat from the public world.

When one begins with cruelty, an enormous gap between private and public life seems to open up. It begins with the exposure of the feebleness and pettiness of the reasons offered for public enormities, and goes on to a sense that governments are unreal and remote from the actualities about which they appear to talk. It is not that private life is better than public: both are equally cruel. It is rather that one has a sense of the incoherence and discontinuity of private and public experience. Montesquieu thought that it was impossible that the good man and the good citizen should ever be the same. The two were inherently incompatible. The demands of social life and those of personal morality are simply different. This may cause us much unhappiness, but it cannot be altered. "It is one of the misfortunes of the human condition," he wrote, using Montaigne's celebrated phrase, that "legislators must act more

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

upon society than upon the citizens, and more upon the citizens than upon men."[21] He did not despair, because he believed that, on the whole, we can control our public life more effectively than our personal characters. The climate works directly upon us, and while its effects can be modified by forcing us into specific social directions, we do not as individuals really change. The English have an excellent constitution, are solid citizens, but perfectly awful people. They also suffer from incurable melancholia and suicidal tendencies. Laws can make collective life better or worse, but each of us is fundamentally unalterable, and morality is, at some point, a personal matter. He was in fact moved to optimism by believing politics and morality were wholly dissimilar, because laws made social reform possible without demanding a moral revolution that would be both impossible and tyrannical in the extreme.

To separate morals and politics in this way is to open the door to Machiavellism to a degree that was impossible and intolerable for Montaigne. He thought, in any case, that our ability to control our personal life, even if only in isolation, was greater than our collective existence where Fortune ruled. Human volition was simply reduced in politics, and public men are forced to perform abominations as if out of necessity. For Montaigne did not deny that there was much that was unavoidable in politics, but he would not call it right, and he wanted no part of it. And even when he was resigned to public cruelties, he could not quite accept them as inevitable. There had always been generous and great men who had avoided them. His mind was self-divided, a picture of distraction. Of his public career, he said that the mayor and Montaigne have always been two, very distinctly separated."[22] Montaigne, the mayor, had played a part on a stage as a matter of duty, and fulfilled its demands as best he could. He was not one of those fastidious souls who preserve their inner purity by shunning politics altogether. As mayor, he tells us, he did as little as possible, a policy that he defended as the least harmful course of action available to him. He obviously felt more helpless in public offices than in his library, but there was for him no moral difference. Loyalty remained the same under all circumstances. He would not betray his prince for a private individual, but neither would be betray the latter for the sake of the prince. Epaminondas seemed to Montaigne particularly admirable because he would not kill in battle an enemy who had once been his guest. Nevertheless, the irrelevance of goodness in politics did impress him deeply. Let princes be just; if they tried to be magnanimous, they would only be arbitrary. Moreover, society did not depend on personal virtue for its survival. A society of complete villains would be glued together just as well as ours, and would be no worse in general. Not morality, but physical need and laws, even the most ferocious, keep us together. After years of religious strife, Montaigne's mind was a miniature civil war, mirroring the perpetual confusion of the world. But his jumble of political perceptions reflected not intellectual failure, but a refusal to accept either the comforts of political passivity or of Machiavelli's platitudes.

There has been in recent years a considerable literature on Machiavelli, most of it admiring his most "realistic" pages. I have tried to present the views of those who rejected him, not because they were moved by religious or moral illusions, but because they were *more* realistic, had read Plato's remarks about dirty hands *more* carefully, and were *more* honest. This is a position that goes

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

well beyond anything one can call liberalism. My Catholic friend was wrong in thinking that putting cruelty first amounts to just that, but he was quite correct in seeing that it is incompatible with his faith. What he should have asked is, how many people, excepting Montaigne, are really prepared to accept all the consequences of doing so. It has been my purpose to show at least what it might involve.

References

This paper was originally delivered at the Lionel Trilling Seminar at Columbia University on April 2, 1981. I would like to thank my friends Stanley Cavell, Harry Hirsch, and Stephen Holmes for their help and encouragement. All references to Montaigne are first to *Oeuvres complètes (O)*, edited by Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Pleiade, 1962). The translations are those of *The Essays of Montaigne*, by E. J. Trechmann (E), (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.). All references to Montesquieu are to *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Andre Masson, (Paris: Nagel, 1950). The translations are my own.

[1]*Of the Art of Conversing*, III, 8, *(O)* 900, (*E*, vol. 2) 333.

[2]*Of Democritus and Heraclitus*, I, 50, *(O)* 291, (*E*, vol.) 296.

[3]*Apology for Raimond Sabond*, II, 12, *(O)* 421 (*E*, vol. 1) 434.

[4]*De l'Esprit des Lois*, XV, 5, vol. 1, 330-31.

[5]*On Some Lines of Vergil*, III, 5, *(O)* 825, (*E*, vol. 2) 303.

[6]*Of Democritus*, *(O)* 296, (*E*, vol. 1) 291.

[7]*Apology*, *(O)* 478, 483; (*E*, vol. 1) 464, 468.

[8]*Esprit*, I, i, vol. 1, 4.

[9]*Apology*, *(O)* 427, (*E*, vol. 1) 441.

[10]*Of Coaches*, III, 6, *(O)* 889, (*E*, vol. 2) 372.

[11]*Apology*, *(O)* 452, (*E*, vol. 1) 466.

[12]*Of Fear*, I, 18, *(O)* 76, (*E*, vol. 1) 71.

[13]*Of Cannibals*, I, 31, *(O)* 203-04, (*E*, vol. 1) 205-06.

[14]*Esprit*, XV, 5, vol. 1, 330.

[15]Ibid., XV, 4, vol. 1, 329.

[16]Ibid., XV, 13, vol. 1, 338.

[17]*Of the Inequality that is Among Us*, I, 42, *(O)* 251, (*E*, vol. 1) 255.

[18]*Of Vanity*, III, 9, *(O)* 935, (*E*, vol. 2) 423.

[19]*Of Presumption*, II, 17, *(O)* 639, (*E*, vol. 2) 107.

[20]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Representative Men," in *English Traits* etc., (London: J. M. Dent, 1908), pp. 237, 242.

[21]*Esprit*, XXVII, c. 1, vol. 2, 170.

[22]*Of Husbanding ones Will*, III, 10, *(O)* 989, (*E*, vol. 2) 482.

This content downloaded from 132.174.254.159 on Sun, 27 Dec 2015 11:49:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions