

MICHAEL DE MONTAIGNE'S "OF CANNIBALS"  
 AS CULTURAL RELATIVISM, CRITIQUE, AND COUNTERPROPOSAL:  
 AN ISSUE IN THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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I am as free as Nature  
 First made Man;  
 Ere the base laws  
 Of servitude began  
 When wild in woods  
 The noble savage ran.

John Dryden  
*The Conquest of Grenada*

During the 16th century, sustained contact with New World and African cultures served as a stimulus for dramatic changes in traditional European worldviews. For many, contact with "otherness" (Levi-Strauss 1962; Long 1980) called into question the nature of the European "Self." The world opened as a mirror. For the most part, Renaissance Europeans did not clearly see their own image as they peered into the alien, aboriginal looking glass of Africa and the New World.

The Renaissance is a significant period for the germination of several "protoanthropological" ideas and concepts. By protoanthropological, I mean those ideas and concepts comprising the intellectual framework around which the present discipline of anthropology would eventually coalesce (cf. Rowe 1964, 1965). For instance, the

initial expression of a set of ideas later termed cultural relativism is frequently ascribed to the Renaissance. Invariably associated with this Renaissance expression of cultural relativism is the essayist Michael de Montaigne. As Margaret Hodgen (1964:185) suggests, Montaigne is an important protoanthropological figure as he "...strove mightily to understand the condition of savagery as it was then found in the New World."

Of concern here is the fact that anthropological interest in Montaigne exclusively centers on his essay "of Cannibals." Written in 1580, "Of Cannibals" was included in Montaigne's first volume of essays. "of Cannibals" recounts an incident in 1562 in Rouen, France, where through interpreters Montaigne spoke with one of three Brazilian Indians brought back to Europe by merchant seamen. In his essay, Montaigne recounts how his meeting and conversation with this Brazilian had a profound effect upon his thoughts about his own way of life as well as about the way of life of the Indians. Montaigne tells us he subsequently searched out merchant travelers and explorers, anyone "reliable," as he terms it, who might tell him more about these people. The theme of the essay is the practice of cannibalism on prisoners captured by the Indians during war. Montaigne concludes by admonishing his fellow countrymen not to judge Brazilian cannibalism unthinkingly. He cautions that the practice of cannibalism is common in Renaissance Europe and can be judged even more "savage" than its Brazilian counterpart:

I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead; in tearing a body limb from limb by racks and torments, that is yet in perfect sense; in roasting it by degrees; in causing it to be bitten and worried by dogs and swine (as we have not only read, but lately seen, not amongst inveterate and mortal enemies, but among neighbors and fellow-citizens, and, which is worse, under colour of piety and religion), than to roast and eat him after he is dead (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:259).

This comparative perspective toward the practice of cannibalism has drawn the sustained attention of historians of anthropology as a Renaissance example of cultural relativism.

Focusing as they do on the issue of protoanthropological cultural relativism, prevailing interpretations of "Of Cannibals" are fairly consistent. Hodgen's (1964:112-113,

191-208) attention to the essay is the most extensive. Montaigne, she asserts, exhibits a response to Brazilian Indian customs singularly free from then-current forms of European ethnocentrism. Montaigne, she says, sought to solve two problems: to "see people as they really are," and to "communicate an undistorted view of people." In his brief discussion of Montaigne, Honigmann (1976:57-59, 73-75) cites "Of Cannibals" as an example of protoanthropological cultural relativism. Honigmann's reading of the essay is that, for Montaigne, "savage" societies possessed their own separate morality and logic. Particular moral standards such as negative Eurocentric reactions to cannibalism, he says, cannot be automatically applied across cultures. Malefijt (1974: 46-47) discusses "of Cannibals" as a protoanthropological instance of "...studying cultures for their own sake." Her emphasis is on Montaigne's argument that his own society surpasses the cruelty and barbarity ascribed to the Brazilian Indians. Montaigne, she states, recognizes the role of what we term ecology enculturation in accounting for differences in human behavior; that is, his explanation for variation in custom was rendered at the level of geography and history. Malefijt concludes that Montaigne doubted the existence of invariable laws applicable to all human societies. Voget (1975:25) considers "Of Cannibals" in the context of his larger discussion of the Renaissance opposition between "civilization" and "savagery." Renaissance thinkers such as Montaigne, he says, believed that "savages" lived in an apolitical state of nature bereft of visible law. Finally, in her collection of readings on the history of anthropology, Darnell (1974:85) introduces "Of Cannibals" by citing the essay's emphasis on cultural relativism. Darnell reminds us of Montaigne's belief that the morality and customs in his own society were not the only possible expressions of *human* morality and custom. For Montaigne, practices such as cannibalism in other cultures were just as cruel, just as reasonable, as were similar practices in Renaissance European societies.

The problem here is that these prevailing anthropological assessments of "Of Cannibals" assume explicit definitions and understandings of the intricate concept of cultural relativism. It is assumed that cultural relativism itself is an accepted intellectual fact. It is assumed, rather than demonstrated, that "Of Cannibals" actually presents an explanation of Brazilian Indian customs by recourse to the idea of cultural relativism. Anthropological chroniclers of Montaigne do not substantiate claims of cultural relativism through fine-grained content analysis of, or extensive recourse to apt examples from, "Of Cannibals" itself. Further, they neglect to address the more historical sources of this presumed cultural relativism as well as the kind and degree of relativism expressed. For example,

assuming cultural relativism we need to ask what accounts for Montaigne's appreciation of the Indian way of life? Why was Montaigne so singularly affected by aboriginal New World lifeways? What was Montaigne's motivation for writing "Of Cannibals"? What is the relationship of themes and ideas in the essay to more specific Renaissance circumstances of time, place, and person?

This essay reevaluates "Of Cannibals" in terms of its degree of expression of our present notion of cultural relativism. In so doing, I conclude that "Of Cannibals" has been misinterpreted. With particular reference to distinctions framed by Herskovitz (1972) one indeed finds relativism in "Of Cannibals," but it is not *cultural* relativism. I argue that "Of Cannibals," reflects moral and ethical, rather than cultural relativism (cf. Cantril 1955, Hantung 1954, and Kluckhohn 1955 on this distinction). Upon a close content reading of the essay itself, I feel that claims of protoanthropological cultural relativism are not justified. Ideas in "Of Cannibals" we interpret as culturally relativistic are more properly viewed in consideration of the influence of aspects of Montaigne's life; Skepticism, Stoicism, and Socratic thought were important to his writing, as was the permeating influence of Copernican relativism on the Renaissance of which Montaigne was a part.

Michael de Montaigne is significant to the history of anthropology, but his significance has been misplaced; this is due to prevailing approaches to the study of protoanthropological ideas and figures in general, as well as owing to shifts in the philosophical underpinnings of relativistic ideas over the last four hundred years, in particular. An examination of "Of Cannibals" illustrates several conceptual and methodological problems accompanying the study of the history of anthropology.

#### Montaigne's Relativism: A Critique

Herskovitz (1972:1-68) distinguishes, and elaborates upon, three interrelated aspects of the idea of cultural relativism: (1) the methodological, (2) the philosophical, and (3) the practical (cf. also Schmidt 1955). Though by no means definitive, these distinctions are useful in critiquing, from our present point of view, the degree of cultural relativism expressed in "Of Cannibals."

As (1) a method of study, relativism requires that judgments of customs, cannibalism for example, be made within their sociocultural context rather than with respect to observer criteria. Instead of an ethical argument that cannibalism is either "good" or "bad," the cultural relativist

would note that cannibalism helps maintain, say, cross-village ties and therefore is not bizarre but quite functional. The first order of methodological business is the proper internal ordering of descriptive evidence. When they are made, considerations and evaluations of customs different from one's own are viewed as "relative" to the sociocultural context in which they occur.

In "Of Cannibals," it is reported to Montaigne that the Brazilian Indians exist in a continual state of war. Taking prisoners is common. Prisoners are said to be well-treated and are accorded the dignity of worthy adversaries defeated in battle. In due time, however, the persons to whom the prisoners "belong" (as Montaigne terms it, those capturing them in battle) invite a great assembly of friends to their village. The important act here begins when ropes are tied to each of a prisoner's arms. One rope is held by the "owner" of the prisoner, the other "...by the friend the owner loves best" (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:258-159). In the presence of the gathered assembly, the prisoner is killed by their swords. Then, the prisoner is roasted and eaten by the assembled guests. Pieces of the prisoner are sent to friends unable to attend the gathering.

Montaigne's explanation of the custom is that it is based on "...a desire for revenge--for the remediation of acts committed by a worthy enemy during war" (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:259). But how does he *know* this? Montaigne further states he heard the Portuguese practice the same act of cannibalism on their enemies, and for a similar motivation--revenge. The cultural relativism ascribed to Montaigne is his argument that one ought to view *both* the Portuguese and Brazilian customs as cruel and barbarous--not one more so than the other:

"I am not sorry that we should here take notice of the barbarous horror of so cruel an action," he says, "but that, seeing so clearly into their faults we should be so blind to our own" (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:259).

Methodologically, we are given no information in the essay on which to base an assumption that Montaigne's mode of inquiry into the customs of the Brazilian Indians is culturally relativistic. Presented with an opportunity to inquire into the meaning of cannibalism to the people who practice it, as well as into the functions it ostensibly serves in their society, Montaigne's analysis does not match the methodological criteria of our idea of cultural relativism. Speaking through an interpreter to one of the Indians at Rouen, the discussion is peripheral to Montaigne's stated

theme of cannibalism:

I talked to one of them a great while together, but I had so ill an interpreter, and one who was so perplexed by his own ignorance to apprehend my meaning, that I could get nothing out of him of any moment. Asking him what advantage he reaped from the superiority he had amongst his own people (for he was a captain, and our mariners called him king), he told me; to march at the head of them to war. Demanding of him further, how many men he had to follow him? he showed me a space of ground, to signify as many as could march in such a compass, which might be four or five thousand men; and putting the question to him, whether or not his authority expired with the war? he told me this remained; that when he went to visit the villages of his dependence, they plained him paths through the thick of their woods, by which he might pass at his ease. All this does not sound very ill, and the last was not at all amiss, for they wear no breeches (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:266).

For reasons having to do with his preoccupation with the French civil wars, Montaigne inquires of the Indians as to matters of warfare, clothing, and the size of armies. He inquires into the function of chieftomship rather than into the function of cannibalism. The relationship of cannibalism to other aspects of the Indian way of life remains unclear. Montaigne's methodological strategy seeks explanation *across* groups rather than relativistically ("functionally") *within* the group under study. Cannibalism is explained by way of analogy to similar Portuguese practices. Montaigne's method of inquiry into the practice of cannibalism does not meet our initial criterion of cultural relativism: that of relating foreign customs to their sociocultural context.

As (2) a philosophy our concept of cultural relativism argues that human experience, knowledge, and behavior are mediated by culture and the enculturative experience. Cultural relativism also acknowledges the power of ethnocentrism to tint the mirror through which alien cultural practices and values are both viewed and interpreted. Herskovitz (1972:39-45) says that after objective examination of the facts of cultural difference, one is led both to acknowledgement of the *plurality* of cultural (value) systems and an increased tolerance of cultural differences.

Seemingly, the philosophical aspect of what we term cultural relativism is to be seen in Montaigne's awareness of Eurocentric conditioning causing knee-jerk reactions among his fellow countrypersons about the matter of Brazilian cannibalism:

...I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:253)

Montaigne argues for the use of what he terms "reason," what we might translate as "considered judgment," to get behind the powerful emotional forces of custom. But an argument against intolerance and unreflective judgment is not an argument *for* cultural relativism. Montaigne's does not truly argue for an acceptance of the equal plurality of value systems; as we will see, he makes a comparative value judgment *against* Renaissance France. In "Of Cannibalism" Montaigne does adopt a posture against ethnocentrism, but it is not with respect to a defense of Brazilian culture so much as it is a defense of "reason." Montaigne does reflect *some* of our current notions about cultural relativism as philosophy, but he does not practice the philosophy suggested.

As (3) a practice, Herskovitz (1972:47-48) argues that cultural relativists ought to study cultures "...for their own sake," as Malefijt (1974:46-47) terms it in her discussion of Montaigne. From this perspective, however, an examination of "Of Cannibals" finds Montaigne concerned with the Brazilian Indians not so much for the dispassioned study of another way of life for its own sake, but for what the Indians can tell him about his own society--and about himself. Cannibalism is not so much examined for what the custom says about the Indians as it is used as a frame of reference to talk about the state of French society in general and the French civil wars in particular:

Their wars are throughout noble and generous, and carry as much excuse and fair pretense, as that human malady is capable of; having with them no other foundation than sole jealousy of valour. Their disputes are not for the conquest of new lands, for those they already possess are so fruitful by nature, as to supply them without labor or concern, with all things necessary, in such abundance that they have no need to enlarge their boundaries (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:260).

The emphasis in "Of Cannibals" is as much on the nature of French society and its customs as it is on the nature of Brazilian society and its customs.

As practice, the third phase in constructing a culturally relativistic posture suggests implications for the conduct of an observer following initial methodological and philosophical tasks. One ought to study the facts of other cultures, then become part of those cultures long enough to understand the meaning and function of their customs and practices. One ought to distinguish judgments about factual matters in the culture from judgments concerning values (cf. Bidney 1979; Hantung 1954). Recognition of a cultural difference, for example, ought not be an advocacy of it. Montaigne, though, has no qualms about looking at another culture, actually using it, in order to reinforce judgments about his own way of life. Rather than practicing the suspension of value judgments, "Of Cannibals" is a study in moral judgment.

Montaigne, for example, tells us he believes it is France, rather than the cannibals, that is corrupt and degenerate:

But there never was any opinion so irregular, as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty, which are our familiar vices. We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason; but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of ways exceed them (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:260).

Archetypically, Montaigne uses the Brazilian Indians as a living example of pre-lapsarian (before expulsion from the Garden) Man existing in a precultural (pre-"civilized") state of nature. Renaissance France, wracked by civil/religious war, had obviously degenerated from the Golden Age exemplified by aspects of the Indian way of life. Montaigne emphasizes the "purity," "nobility," "fairness," "health," and "vigor" reputed as common among the "savages" as the distance from which a decadent French society had fallen from a prior pristine state of virtue and morality (cf. Greene 1957). The "savage" society of the Indians illustrates the natural quality of life in an ahistorical state of nature freed from "civilization." Viewed from the moral ruins of a France smothered by "inventions" and the customs of civilization, Montaigne finds his fellow countrymen (as well as himself, to a degree) pockmarked with disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty. Like Locke, Montaigne does not forego the notion that there are universally valid moral rules and modes of conduct best seen in people adhering more close-



ly to the presumed "laws of nature" (cf. Sayce 1972:195). Unlike Locke, however, Montaigne exhibits a more empathetic imagination and comfortableness with cultural diversity. There are laws, natural laws, serving as a pan-human frame of reference for the evaluation of all societies. In particular, Montaigne argues that the Indians seem to preserve the natural state of a moral society (the "common order") much better than do his fellow Frenchpersons. Montaigne argues the moral degeneration of his own culture as compared with that of the "savages": "... we ought to call those wild," he says, "whose natures we have changed by our artifice, and diverted from the common order" (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:253). According to Herskovitz (1972:47-48), the practice of cultural relativism requires an observer's nonintervention with one culture's interactions with another. But the moral judgment and devaluation of his own culture leads Montaigne to argue that Europeans ought to limit their contact with New World cultures not because of Indian "savagery," but because of French immorality:

Three of these people [the visitors to Rouen] not foreseeing how dear their knowledge of the corruption of this part of world will one day cost their happiness and repose, and that the effect of this commerce will be their ruin...  
(Montaigne 1580 [1877]:265).

Montaigne experiments with the criteria for making moral judgments, not with the practical means by which moral judgments might be suspended. "Of Cannibals" does not reflect the desired value neutrality associated with the practice of cultural relativism. One cannot in fact so easily derive an ought from an is (cf. Schmidt 1955). Cultural relativism implies that facts, in and of themselves, do not justify prescriptive judgment.

#### Montaigne's Relativism: A Counter Proposal

Examining "Of Cannibals" in terms of contemporary conceptions of the idea of cultural relativism, we find the degree of its expression to be overstated. We cannot account for "Of Cannibals" through customary evaluations of cultural relativism. My suggestion is that biographic and historic points of departure provide a more adequate contextual level of interpretation.

#### Biographical Sketch

Montaigne was born in Bordeaux, France, in 1533 (cf.

Lowenthal 1935). Notable experiences in his childhood, and the composition of his family, undoubtedly reinforced an early awareness of cultural diversity. Pierre Eyquem, his father, was a French aristocrat. His mother, Antoinette de Louppes, was the daughter of a Jewish Toulouse merchant. Michael's brother and sister were Catholics. Pierre Eyquem sent young Michael off to live in a poor peasant village to be trained, as he put it, in "common living." This experience was supplemented by the attention of private French and Greek tutors. From ages 6 to 13, Montaigne attended the College at Bordeaux. At 21, he was appointed Concillor in the Bordeaux parliament. At 27, he was appointed to the court of Francis II and undertook frequent travel expeditions at the King's request. Montaigne actively participated in several French army campaigns. It was only at the age of 38 that Montaigne began a serious intellectual life. From then until he was 57, Montaigne retreated to his estate in Bordeaux. This period of reflection and study produced the first volume of his *Essays* published in 1580. At 57, through suffering from physical ailments, Montaigne began a period of reflective travel. Believing that purposeful expeditions and sojourns were the truest form of education, for three years Montaigne traveled widely (and painfully) into Switzerland, Germany, and Italy. A detailed travel diary was kept and later published. During this period, he completed additions to the first volume of *Essays*. In 1592, Michael de Montaigne died in bed, at age 60, at his estate in Bordeaux.

Several major themes and concerns in "Of Cannibals" can be interpreted by reference to aspects of Montaigne's life. Much like the relationship between Malinowski's life and ideas as revealed in his diary (Malinowski 1967), "Of Cannibals" in part is an exercise in reflexive study. For example, the values Montaigne routinely attributes to the New World Indians are categories of significance to his own life. The Indian traits Montaigne continually emphasizes of all those undoubtedly related to him include health, valor, virtue, and courage.

Though of aristocratic parentage Montaigne suffered life-long poor health. Most painfully, he suffered from "renal colic" (bladder stones). His life was a stoic effort to train his body to health and vigor. Montaigne was afraid of pain, disease, and death. He continually praises endurance and greatly respects strength of will. A concern with sickness and health pervades "Of Cannibals":

...as my witnesses inform me, 'tis rare to hear of a sick person, and they moreover assure me, that they never saw any of the natives, either paralytic, bleary eyed, tooth-

less, or crooked with age (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:256).

The physical and biological concerns expressed here also are metaphorical references to the "poor health" of a France wracked by religious civil war. We further note a strongly stated respect for the value of friendship and love illustrated in the Indian way of life. For most of his life Montaigne was plagued by insecure personal relationships, tension over women in general, and with female love relationships in particular. Though married in 1565 for what he terms "rational reasons," the strongest relationship in his life was prematurely terminated when his male companion, Etienne de la Boetie, died at the age of 32. Montaigne describes the final days of his friend's life as Plato described the death of Socrates. Montaigne saw etched in a presumably unchanging Indian way of life those virtues, such as male friendship, he personally most admired and found valuable. He saw as many similarities between himself and the Indians as he saw differences (on this important note, see Frame 1955). I feel this level of mutuality is due more to Montaigne's personality and personal history than to any objective concern with the relativity of customs.

#### Historical Sketch

Montaigne's work customarily is divided into three phases: Stoicism (1572-1574), Skepticism (1575-1577), and Epicureanism (1578-1592) (cf. Frame 1955). The fact that "Of Cannibals" germinated between 1562 and 1580 is of consequence to a contextual understanding of the essay.

What is often taken for cultural relativism in "Of Cannibals" may also be interpreted as Montaigne's adherence to Stoic requirements of moderation and restraint as well as the pervading influence of a philosophy of skepticism. More specifically, Montaigne found Christian absolutes insufficient to provide the moral code he so desperately sought for living in an increasingly violent world, as evidenced by the grim realities of the French religious wars. I feel Montaigne turned for his moral center to Stoicism with its emphasis on self-master, right conduct and virtue, tolerance, and the primacy of natural law.

In "Of Cannibals" we read of Montaigne's respect for the bravery, virtue, and vigor of the Brazilian Indians as well as of his admiration for the virtue and courage exhibited by the men at Thermopylae: "The part that true conquering is to play," he says (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:263), "lies in the encounter, not in the coming off; and the honor of valour consists in fighting, not in subduing." A lifelong goal was the training of his body and mind to Stoic ideals of prudence and virtue. In the Brazilian Indians, I

feel he saw qualities he was trying to achieve in his own life--qualities he struggled to encompass, but which he felt were given to "savages" as a natural birthright. Stoic qualities of simplicity, restraint, and valor are continually praised and uncritically ascribed to the Indian way of life. Montaigne seems to feel that if he had only been born "savage" rather than "civilized," closer to natural laws rather than to the deleterious artifices of his own society, he would have had better opportunity to exemplify his Stoic ideals (cf. Sayce 1972:192).

Directly influenced by Augustine's *Confessions*. Montaigne's development of the essay format itself was a vehicle for the further exploration of Self. Socrates was an important influence on Montaigne's life and thought and is widely quoted in "Of Cannibals." Again parallel to Malinowski (1967), by way of comparison with other cultures we see that ideas and concepts in "Of Cannibals" reflect, in part, the working out of tensions and problems in Montaigne's own life. The study of the "Other," then, became a mirror accompanying the study of the "Self." Montaigne sought Truth. He discovered Truth neither resides in the heavens nor in other men, but in the natural laws structuring the diversity characterizing both.

Though Montaigne negatively judges French society with respect to the Brazilian way of life, there is a more encompassing comparison being made in "Of Cannibals." On one level, he is saying that perceived differences between seemingly alien ways of life are artificial. Montaigne looked into the glass darkly and, like few others, saw his own reflection. Through personal effort and struggle to deny the bonds of what we would term ethnocentrism and the power of custom Montaigne argues that one can, so to speak, get behind these particulars in order to apprehend the more universal categories by which differing ways of life can be judged (cf. Frame 1979). Montaigne sought a moral code existing apart from secular religions such as Christianity, which he felt had failed him. The "rules of reason" to which Montaigne continually refers are based on his belief in the primacy of Stoic (i.e., *transcultural*) natural law. Different ways of life can be judged in terms of each other as well as in terms of their degree of adherence to "natural" states of being human:

These nations then seem to me to be so far barbarous, as having received but very little form and fashion from art and human invention, and consequently to be not much remote from their original simplicity. The laws of nature, however, govern them still, not as yet much vitiated with any mixture of ours...(Montaigne 1580 [1877]:254).

Montaigne admired these "savage" Indians because he deemed them closer to that prelapsarian state where humans existed by the rules of natural law rather than by the rules of "art" (culture/custom) and the artifices of "civilization." Particular groups of people develop different aspects of "civilization." Particular groups of people develop different aspects of human nature and natural law. Human nature and natural law are the foundation of all particular ways of life. To Montaigne, the Brazilians expressed more of the potentiality of human beings to live according to natural law. Montaigne was saddened that his fellow Europeans had not better actualized the potential naturally available to them.

Accurately judging the degree to which different ways of life adhere to, or deviate from, natural law is a difficult task. Montaigne emphasizes the need for a Socratic knowledge of Self since Self is the mechanism through which differing degrees of adherence to natural law are closely approached: "...how cautious men ought to be of taking things upon trust from vulgar opinion," he writes (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:249), "and that we are to judge by the eye of reason, and not from common report."

"Reason" is the road leading to accurate perceptions of the working of natural law among these newly discovered "savages." "Common report" refers to the fact that Montaigne feels people in his own society are overwhelmed by the power of custom and cannot readily perceive "natural" relationships past what we would term enculturative boundaries. People remain blinded by the glaring diversities masking fundamental unities. But "reason" lies buried in all people only waiting to be unshrouded through acts of personal will. Delving into Self as he did, Montaigne sought to seek out and eradicate the passions, excesses, "vulgar opinions," and personal idiosyncracies hampering effective perception and judgment. Montaigne felt that travel, contact with "Others," and self-knowledge improve one's critical judgment while negating the effects of "common report."

Montaigne's awareness of diversity was also conditioned by his response to the profound 16th century European shift from a homocentric/terracentric worldview to a heliocentric worldview (cf. Cassirer 1944: 14-15). Montaigne's response to Brazilian Indians owed as much to the astronomical theory of Nikolai Kopernik (Nicolaus Copernicus, 1473-1543) as it did to Stoicism and Socrates. Published in 1543, 37 years before "Of Cannibals," Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* was a stimulus to the sense of

conditionality pervading the essay. Montaigne witnessed, indeed contributed to, the slow death of the Ptolemaic worldview. The absolutism of that worldview was not to be trusted. Montaigne's life was a constant quest for personal integration and a firm base for faith in the midst of religious war and intellectual upheaval. Montaigne struggled against the weight of the Ptolemaic tradition and medieval Great Chain of Being emphasis on fixity, immutability, and final authority. Montaigne's acceptance of diversity in human life reinforced a skeptical orientation toward an apparent lack of absolutes in the human as well as celestial world. On this level we can profitably read "Of Cannibals" not as an effort to generate a theory of cultural relativism, but as a conscious attempt to dust off lingering vestiges of Ptolemaic (rather than natural law) certainty. Remember that in the face of the French civil wars, Christian absolutism failed to generate moral guides for Montaigne. In turn Montaigne embraced Copernican relativism. Montaigne's motives in "Of Cannibals," then, were not entirely academic. By seeking out variation and diversity in the sociocultural world, Montaigne helped fan the political fires of skepticism and Copernicanism. "Of Cannibals" neatly fits into the conditional worldview of post-Ptolemaic, Copernican Europe. Montaigne was not afraid of diversity, of difference, because he came to believe instead in the absoluteness of the *natural* law behind it.

Montaigne's orientation here is toward skepticism rather than toward what we term cultural relativism. That there are many different ways of life with many different customs and many different value and moral systems, *ipso facto*, is justification for skepticism. Yet again, an argument for toleration, skepticism, and comparison is not necessarily an argument for cultural relativism. Montaigne struggled to reconcile apparent diversity with belief in natural law. The emphasis on comparison and diversity we find in "Of Cannibals" is a repercussion of the decentering of 16th century European Man, from their perceived position as center of the universe. Indeed, Montaigne argues that using natural law as a comparative point of departure illustrates that Europeans are further from the prelapsarian center than the Brazilian "savages." The relativism in "Of Cannibals" is skepticism over Ptolemaic and Christian absolutes coupled with moral judgments about the degenerating condition of "civilization" in general and European society in particular. Montaigne was also influenced by the 16th century writings of William of Ockham. Skeptical of the Scholastic synthesis, both William and Montaigne fell on the side of their being no absolute, final authority for moral judgment except natural law.

Montaigne responded affirmatively, as did Giordano

Bruno and Leibniz in particular, to the new cosmology. Bruno and Leibniz focused on the relationship to Self to an increasingly infinite and changing physical universe (cf. Goselin and Lerner 1977). Montaigne focused on the Self in relation to an increasingly infinite and diverse human universe. For Montaigne, the sense of Self expanded both culturally and geographically. The context for self-understanding and human understanding broadened to include other cultures as well as the cosmos. The old pre-Copernican, Eurocentric Self extended itself to embrace the newly discovered heavens. Other cultures, other moral and value systems, were examined in part to confirm the truth of Copernicus. And the truth was that the newly discovered diversity in the geographic world paralleled the newly discovered diversity in the astronomical world. On both levels, the Truth is that the laws of nature celebrate diversity.

#### Presentism, Historicism, and the Study of Anthropology

Instead of reflecting what we would term cultural relativism, evidence points toward Montaigne's being an absolutist with respect to his belief in natural laws behind cultural laws. The misreading of "Of Cannibals" and accompanying failure to grasp the subtleties of Montaigne's thought stems in part from the overemphasis on presentism, and a corresponding lack of emphasis on historicism, exhibited by chroniclers of anthropology.

Presentism characterizes those approaches to the history of anthropology *solely* motivated to "study the past for the sake of the present" (Stocking 1963:3). Ideas and concepts now important to anthropology are not contextualized in the specifics of time and place, but instead move in a steady stream to the disciplinary present. Personages are lifted from their sociocultural contexts to demonstrate the convergent development of present-day anthropological ideas and concepts. Deductively, historians tend to hunt and peck until they find what they are looking for. This approach, of course, is useful in marking out broad historical trends. As I have used it in the application of Herskovitz's typology, presentism is a valid point of departure for the microlevel examination of specific people and ideas. As used here, however, presentism is not employed to *legitimize* present-day anthropological concepts and ideas. The content analysis and critique presented here reveals the manner in which Montaigne has been misread. On the other hand historicism characterizes approaches to protoanthropological issues motivated by the desire to "understand the past for the sake of the past" (Stocking 1963:3). To the extent methodologically possible, historical approaches consider and evaluate anthropologically relevant ideas and concepts

withing the situational context of specific persons, times, and places. This essay illustrates the more effective use of *both* presentism and historicism. Both approaches are needed in studying the history of anthropology.

Instead of reflecting cultural relativism, the evidence points more toward Montaigne being what we would term metaculturally inclined: Montaigne's notion of natural law is something encompassing our concept of culture. It is not merely a matter of Montaigne being misread. Prevailing interpretations of "Of Cannibals" reveal more about the epistemological assumptions girding the loins of present-day anthropology than they do about Montaigne. The latent issues here are the cultural bias implicit in ethnography and ethnology as well as the continued commitment of anthropology to cultural relativism. There are strong disciplinary taboos with respect to acknowledging the legitimacy of supracultural (not merely superorganic) levels encompassing the particulars of Culture. Rather than nature, Culture is our absolute. Montaigne does not abandon the concept of human nature to the idea that human behavior is exclusively a function of what we term Culture, as contemporary cultural anthropology seems to have done. Montaigne exhibits a universalistic posture toward the idea of human nature which is antithetical to our idea of cultural relativism.

The cultural relativist argues that there are no absolute norms valid for all humankind (Bidney 1979:157). Montaigne argues that natural laws, the laws of ideal human nature, *are* norms valid for all humankind. He believes it is the duty of the self-reflective person to seek to enhance the expression of natural laws. Adherence to the idea and practice of cultural relativism insures that our own way of life remains a normative absolute, an inviolate standard against which there is no appeal. By way of contrast, "Of Cannibals" tells us that the Brazilian Indians found the France of Charles IX as wanting as did Montaigne:

The king himself talked to them a good while, and they were made to see our fashions, our pomp, and the form of a great city. After which, some one asked their opinion, and would know of them, what of all the things they had seen, they found most to be admired? To which they made answer, three things, of which I have forgotten the third, and am troubled at it, but two I yet remember. They said, that in the first place they thought it very strange, that so many tall men wearing beards, strong, and well armed, who were about the king ('tis like they meant the Swiss of his guard), should submit to obey a child, and that



they did not rather choose out one amongst themselves to command. Secondly..., that they had observed that there were among us men full and crammed with all manner of commodities, whilst, in the meantime, their halves were begging at their doors, lean, and half-starved with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these necessitous halves were able to suffer so great an inequality and injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throats, or set fire to their houses (Montaigne 1580 [1877]:266).

Adherence to a strict definition of cultural relativism insures that other cultures cannot critique our practices and that, indeed, we cannot learn from "them" just as they cannot learn from "us." Each culture spins in its own self-contained orbit, and moral judgment on the basis of presumably panhuman needs are inhibited. In appealing to the panhuman realm of natural law Montaigne tried to reduce the subjective, ethnocentric basis of his moral judgments.

For our purpose the crux of the matter involves Montaigne's method of comparing European and Brazilian ways of life. Montaigne judges these differing ways of life not so much with respect to each other, but with respect to "natural law." The mode of comparison is vertical. *Then* these differing ways of life are compared with each other. With respect to cultural relativism, our present-day cross-cultural comparisons are more horizontally rendered. Initially cultures are considered in terms of themselves then compared with other ways of life with respect to "objective" (etic) criteria, such as "kinship." From our perspective Montaigne's method is again seen as metacultural rather than culturally relativistic.

Within American anthropology, what we term cultural relativism emerged at about the turn of the century. I follow Hatch (1981) in believing that ideas and concepts such as cultural relativism are situationally conditioned. The cultural relativism of the Boasians is a unique development rooted in responses to 19th century unilinear evolutionism and the Eurocenteredness of Victorian thought.

Contemporary critiques of cultural relativism suggest a return to an anthropological concern with the basis on which differing ways of life might be judged (Bidney 195; Grindal 1979; MacCormack 1979; Maslow 1964; Maslow and Honigmann 1970; Sapir 1924). If Montaigne were with us, my sense is he would feel most comfortable with those contemporary variations of Stoic natural law whereby mostly moral

and value norms presumed common to all humans may yet form the basis on which the validity of various ways of life, experiments all, may be judged.

Montaigne's Renaissance humanism in many respects is similar to the *antirelativistic* posture of contemporary humanistic anthropology (Johnson 1976). Both approaches emphasize the metacultural character of human experience and take for granted the common humanness of both the observer and the observed (Wagner 1979:3):

In the last analysis, culture is not the measure of all things; nature is the measure. There are more things in nature than are comprehended through our cultural symbols... Cultural relativism is a fact of human experience as conditioned by culture, but it is not the whole truth (Bidney 1979:156).

For Montaigne as well as for contemporary humanistic anthropologists traits such as dignity, well being, and equality are not exclusively personal ideals, but remain reflections of metacultural potentials the rightful property of all human beings.

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