

**Montaigne on virtue and moral luck**  
Johannes Roessler & Giulia Luvisotto

*Abstract*

There is a puzzle over Montaigne's view of what Bernard Williams called moral luck: in 'Of cruelty', Montaigne seems both to endorse and to subvert the intuition that moral merit is immune to luck. We present an interpretation on which Montaigne can be seen to make a distinctive contribution to contemporary debates about moral luck, a contribution that bears some points of contact with Gary Watson's suggestion that moral responsibility has more than one 'face'. Montaigne is not denying the force of the moral luck intuition, yet he deploys his considerable philosophical and literary skills to steer us away from it.

*Keywords:* Bernard Williams, cruelty, Montaigne, moral luck, responsibility, virtue

In 'Of cruelty', Montaigne draws a well-known distinction between three types of ethical dispositions: perfect habituation, self-control, and natural goodness, as they might be called. While Montaigne characterizes the first two dispositions as different forms of virtue, the third type, he writes, "makes a man innocent, but not virtuous." (2003, p. 376) On a natural and common reading, the case for relegating the third type to the status of something less than a virtue turns on what we'll call the moral luck intuition: the intuition, roughly speaking, that moral merit or blame is immune to luck. That interpretation is suggestive since Montaigne explicitly associates the third sort of disposition with the operation of fortune. Possession of such dispositions is "accidental and fortuitous" (p. 377), and it seems natural to suppose that for that very reason the disposition does not deserve the title of a virtue but should be called mere "innocence". In a nutshell: virtue implies moral merit, which is immune to luck; hence natural goodness does not count as a virtue. Call this the moral luck reading.

Whether the moral luck reading is correct is a significant question for a variety of reasons. Most immediately, it matters to our understanding of what Montaigne is trying to do in 'Of cruelty'. The essay falls into two parts, the first concerned with the tripartite account of ethical dispositions, the second with Montaigne's own aversion to cruelty; an aversion he classifies as an example of the third type of disposition. The moral luck reading thus has an important bearing on the interpretation of a central element of Montaigne's ethical thinking, one that has recently provided a source of inspiration for Judith Shklar's 'Putting cruelty first' approach to moral and political philosophy. (Shklar 1982) The question also bears on wider issues regarding Montaigne's ethics and its place in the history of moral philosophy. Jerome Schneewind locates Montaigne in the context of the pre-history of what he calls a "morality of self-governance", which he suggests "reached its culmination in Kant". (Schneewind 2005, p. 224-5) Kant, of course, is often described as the nemesis of moral luck — the "most rigorous exponent" of the idea that moral evaluations are immune to luck, in Williams's words. (Williams 1981, p. 20) Kant is also known to have been an avid

reader of Montaigne, able to quote whole tracts of the *Essays* from memory.<sup>1</sup> On the moral luck reading, Kant would have been right to see Montaigne as an ally in his resistance to moral luck. It is a good question whether in this, as in other areas, Montaigne might have been an inspiration for Kant's practical philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

We want to suggest that in addition to its historical interest, Montaigne's stance on moral luck also makes a distinctive contribution to contemporary debates about moral luck. Our argument will be that despite enjoying a measure of textual support, the moral luck reading, on closer inspection, turns out to be deeply misleading. It would be more nearly right to characterize Montaigne's project in 'Of cruelty' as an attempt to sideline the moral luck intuition. He tries to do so by charting different regions in our ethical thinking, some of which are more hostile to luck than others. In a characteristic twist, he also hints that which region we should inhabit is, in part, an ethical question. On our reading, there is in fact a certain kinship between Montaigne's and Williams's reaction to the moral luck intuition, though there is also an important difference. Briefly: while Williams is concerned to confront and repudiate the sort of ethical thinking in which the intuition has its home, Montaigne, without denying the intuition's force, is trying to steer us away from it.

### 1. Moral luck: some preliminaries

When he introduced the expression "moral luck", Williams expected it "to suggest an oxymoron". His thought was that "there is something in our conception of morality [...] that arouses opposition to the idea that moral responsibility, or moral merit, or moral blame should be subject to luck."<sup>3</sup> It is important that luck, as Williams conceives it, is not the same as good luck: the putative incoherence of moral luck encompasses the incoherence of bad moral luck. What luck stands opposed to, in Williams's discussion and much work influenced by it, is control. The point is brought out clearly in Nagel's formulation of the moral luck intuition: "we feel that the appropriateness of moral assessment is easily undermined by the discovery that the act or attribute, no matter how good or bad, is not under the person's control." (1979, p. 25) Following Nagel's lead, it has become common to break down the general question of the coherence of moral luck into more specific sub-questions, corresponding to specific domains of control. We might be said to lack control over aspects of the outcomes of our projects ("resultant luck"), over our own character traits ("constitutive luck"), over the circumstances in which we act ("circumstantial luck"), and over the way antecedent circumstances determine our actions ("causal luck"). (See Nelkin 2019)

Without attempting a detailed review of the debate that ensued from Williams's and Nagel's original articles, it will be useful to distinguish two central questions in play in this debate:

- (a) Is it true, as Williams and Nagel maintain, that the moral luck intuition is deeply rooted in "our conception of morality"?

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<sup>1</sup> See Kuehn, 2001, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Some elements of Kant's debt to Montaigne are well-documented. His catchphrase 'unsociable sociability' ('ungesellige Geselligkeit'), for example, is a quote from 'Of solitude': "there is nothing so unsociable and so sociable as man." (Montaigne 2003, p. 212). On this, see Trullinger 2015.

<sup>3</sup> We owe this biographical note to Williams himself: see his 1994, p. 241.

- (b) If the answer to (a) is ‘yes’, where does this leave our conception of morality? Is Williams right that, since the idea of a dimension of assessment that is immune to luck is a fantasy, we should be sceptical about morality? Or should we side with morality and insist that the denial of moral luck is defensible?

We first set out the case for thinking Montaigne is committed to answering (a) in the affirmative. We then raise some doubts and present an alternative interpretation. We return to (a) in section 5, suggesting that Montaigne’s answer is more subtle than a simple ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

## 2. The moral luck reading

Montaigne reaches the tripartite account in two steps. He first draws a basic distinction between virtue and mere “innocence”. The suggestion here is that “virtue means something greater and more active than letting oneself, by a happy disposition, be led gently and peacefully in the footsteps of reason” (p. 372): virtue essentially implicates the capacity to overcome “opposing appetites” (p. 374). By way of illustration, Montaigne depicts two ways in which one might fail to exact vengeance: out of a “natural mildness and easygoingness” or by arming oneself “with the arms of reason against this furious appetite for vengeance”. (p. 372) The second step is a response to an apparent counterexample: straight off, it would seem that by the lights of Montaigne’s initial distinction, “the soul of Socrates” (“the most perfect that has come to my knowledge”) would be “a soul deserving little commendation”. This is because “in the movement of his virtue I cannot imagine any difficulty or any constraint”. (pp. 373-4) To accommodate the likes of Socrates or Cato, Montaigne introduces a further distinction between two kinds or modes of virtue: virtue that involves the exercise of self-control in resisting “opposing appetites” vs a “perfect habituation to virtue” whereby the tendency towards virtuous conduct has become second nature, eradicating “opposing appetites” and so making self-control dispensable.

It seems clear enough that Montaigne’s initial distinction is fuelled by a concern with the conditions of merit or praiseworthiness. The moral luck reading elaborates on this observation in two ways: it suggests that Montaigne is concerned, specifically, with *moral* merit; and that what disqualifies innocence from counting as a virtue is, specifically, the agent’s lack of *control*. A reading along these lines is encouraged by a number of recent expositions of the tripartite account, emphasizing as they do the connection between virtue and choice. According to Ullric Langer’s, for example, Montaigne describes himself — exemplifying mere innocence — as “temperate by nature, or rather, accident, not by *rational choice*.” (Langer 2016, p. 515-6; our emphasis) Again, consider William Hamlin’s account of the initial distinction: “A man who forgives an insult because he has an easygoing nature must be judged quite differently from a man who *chooses* forgiveness after resisting a passionate urge for vengeance.” (Hamlin 2020, p. 68; our emphasis)

There is an immediate complication we face here. What exactly is the target of the sorts of assessment Montaigne is concerned with? Are we talking about assessing an agent for having a certain disposition or for performing a certain action? Langer assumes it is the former: for him, Montaigne’s question is, for example, whether he can claim credit for his temperateness. Hamlin assumes it is the latter: for him, Montaigne is interested in whether someone deserves credit, for example, for foregoing revenge on a particular occasion. There

are, correlatively, two kinds of control that may seem to be relevant: control over our dispositions and control over our actions. Which of them should we appeal to in fleshing out the moral luck reading?

A plausible answer to these questions, we suggest, is that Montaigne is concerned with the assessment of both dispositions and actions — yet the former enjoy a certain explanatory priority. His first move is to urge that a disposition (e.g.) not to exact revenge only counts as a virtue if the agent plays an active role in acquiring and maintaining it. In the case of the self-controlled virtuous agent, that active role is a matter of resisting “opposing appetites”. In the case of the perfectly virtuous such as Socrates or Cato, it takes the form of having “so formed oneself to virtue that the very seeds of the vices are rooted out” (p. 376). The status of a disposition, in turn, bears on the assessment of actions manifesting it. Actions that are exercises of virtue — in either mode — deserve a special kind of credit, which is precisely what “the name of virtue” (p. 372) confers on them. That is a sort of credit to which actions manifesting mere “innocence” cannot aspire, in view of the agent’s lack of control over the operative disposition. This is not to deny that in acting as she is, the agent is doing “well”, merely to insist that she is not acting “virtuously”. (p. 372)

It is instructive to distinguish three connected contrasts that inform Montaigne’s view of the status of “innocence”:

- Activity vs passivity: virtue means something “more active”; innocence involves “letting oneself [...] be led” by “a happy disposition” (p. 372).
- Reason vs nature: virtue deploys “the arms of reason” (p. 372); innocence is a matter of being “provided with a nature easy and affable” (p. 376). (Contrast this with the *second nature* the perfectly virtuous have acquired through their own efforts.)
- Design vs accident: “My virtue is a virtue, or I should say an innocence, that is accidental and fortuitous. If I had been born with a more unruly disposition, I fear it would have gone pitifully with me.” (p. 377)

One might wonder whether the lower status of “innocence” might not be accounted for simply by reference to its lesser reliability or robustness. Perhaps the trouble with innocence is just that in certain nearby possible worlds — say, worlds in which nature has provided the agent with an “unruly disposition” — things go pitifully with the merely innocent. Yet, in the light of the close alignment between the three contrasts, it seems undeniable that the moral luck intuition is at work in Montaigne taxonomy. What matters is not just the greater robustness of virtue but the *reason why* it is robust: viz. the role of rational choice in sustaining it. To elevate mere innocence to the status of a virtue, it seems, would be to countenance “constitutive” moral luck: it would amount to moral praise for a disposition (and actions manifesting it) that is not under the agent’s control.<sup>4</sup> Seen in this light, Montaigne’s example of someone who forgives an insult out of “natural mildness and easygoingness” looks like a cousin of Kant’s example of naturally sympathetic “souls” who “find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them” but whose actions, though

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<sup>4</sup> A more extensive treatment would need to connect the moral luck intuition (as it figures in ‘Of cruelty’) with Montaigne’s wider thinking about the nature of fortune. On the latter, and its Epicurean roots, see Hoffmann 2005.

conforming with duty, are not performed *from duty* and so have “no true moral worth” (Kant 1998, p. 11).<sup>5</sup>

This completes our sketch of the moral luck reading. As every careful reader of Montaigne knows, it is sometimes not a straightforward matter whether a given passage expresses Montaigne’s considered view, or even whether he is speaking in his own voice. In the next section, we suggest that Montaigne’s apparent invocation of the moral luck intuition is a case in point. In section 4, we sketch an alternative interpretation.

### 3. Some doubts; and a question

Misgivings about the moral luck reading spring from several sources. There are, first of all, aspects of Montaigne’s exposition of the tripartite account that should give us pause. Here is one observation. It seems that for Montaigne the differential moral worth of actions displaying virtue vs mere innocence is a matter of *degree*. (Compare and contrast Kant.) Even someone who refrains from vengeance out of a “natural mildness” would “do a very fine and praiseworthy thing”. It is just that the virtuous agent “would without doubt do much more”. (p. 372) Furthermore, there are places in which Montaigne appears ambivalent about the status of “innocence”. He sometimes does refer to it as a virtue, only to then correct himself (as in the passage quoted earlier: “my virtue is a virtue, or I should say an innocence”). And consider this formulation: “a good natural disposition is not the path of *true virtue*” (p. 373, our emphasis). This makes one wonder whether a natural disposition might be a virtue of sorts, less admirable than “true” virtue but a virtue nevertheless. Note, too, that Montaigne has no compunction about characterizing natural dispositions by using terms we would ordinarily take to designate particular virtues (e.g. “just”, “liberal”, “mild”).

There is also a larger question about Montaigne’s intentions in ‘Of cruelty’. How should we understand the relation between the tripartite account, set out in the essay’s first few pages, and Montaigne’s sustained ruminations about his own attitude to cruelty in the longer second part of the essay (introduced, characteristically, with the phrase “To say a word about myself”) (p. 377)? The link between the two parts, of course, is Montaigne’s insistence that his attitude is an example of mere innocence. Now, if the moral luck reading were correct, we should expect mere innocence to be of relatively little interest from the point of view of moral philosophy. Yet there can be no doubt about the deep ethical significance Montaigne attaches to his attitude. As one commentator put it, Montaigne’s aversion to cruelty “is a cornerstone of ethical behaviour in general” and has “a particular moral urgency for Montaigne’s contemporaries.” (Quint 2014, p. 53)

Finally, there are broader considerations that should make us suspicious of the moral luck reading. It may seem as if the tripartite account represents a (rare) foray into moral theory. Montaigne may appear to develop a taxonomy of ethical dispositions on the basis of moral intuitions he not only carefully articulates but endorses. On this interpretation, it would be natural to expect that the capacity for rational self-determination should occupy a central role in Montaigne’s ethical thinking. If morality is constitutionally immune to luck, it must be

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<sup>5</sup> Another parallel that would be worth exploring is between Kant’s and Montaigne’s attitudes to “resultant luck”. Compare this passage from ‘That intention is judge of our actions’: since “there is nothing really in our power but will”, “all man’s rules of duty are necessarily founded and established in our will.” (p. 23)

sustained by capacities that are not subject to luck or at least greatly reduce its scope. Montaigne should be expected to make much of our capacity actively to deploy the “arms of reason” in shaping ourselves. Yet these expectations are not exactly borne out. Montaigne, unlike Kant, takes a decidedly dim view of reason’s power to shape our lives. In part, this is because he takes a dim view of the power of human reason in general. In a complicated sense that would need careful delineation, Montaigne’s way of thinking may be described as “quasi-Pyrrhonian”, and central to it is a well-developed wariness of inflated claims about human rationality. One of Montaigne’s recurring concerns is the power local customs and traditions exercise over our thinking. This is one place in which the weakness of human reason is to the fore: “the principal effect of the power of custom is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances.” (p. 100) Detailed consideration of Montaigne’s view of reason would take us too far. But it seems clear that for Montaigne, “who we are” depends very significantly on factors beyond our control. Indeed, he seems to be sceptical about the very idea that exercising rationality enables us to curb our vulnerability to luck. He approvingly quotes Plato as saying that “like ourselves, our reason has in it a large element of chance.” (p. 254)

Given all this, it is unsurprising that some scholars take the initial contrast between virtue and “innocence” with a pinch of salt. Douglas Thompson, for example, renders the tripartite account simply by distinguishing “three modes of *virtue*” (2018, p. 127; our emphasis). David Quint goes further, suggesting that by the end of the essay, Montaigne has “questioned and reversed the essay’s opening proposition, its apparent valorization of virtue over mere goodness.” (2014, p. 58) But what is the nature of the reversal (if there is a reversal)? Should we take Montaigne to be recommending that on reflection, we should *reject* the moral luck intuition, despite articulating (and apparently endorsing) it in the first part of the essay? If so, is that because, like Williams, he is ultimately sceptical about our ordinary conception of morality in which the intuition has its home? Or is it because he would deny that our ordinary conception is committed to the incoherence of moral luck?

To make progress with these issues, we need a better understanding of the sort of ethical disposition of which Montaigne presents his aversion to cruelty as a prime example. Let’s call the suggestion that Montaigne’s disposition is genuinely a ‘mode of virtue’ an aretaic interpretation. The central question facing the aretaic interpretation is this: can “mere goodness” be genuinely a *virtue* in the sense relevant to morality, in view of its innocent, natural, non-rational character? To get the issue into focus, consider these manifestations of Montaigne’s aversion to cruelty: “I do not see a chicken’s neck wrung without distress, and I cannot bear to hear the scream of a hare in the teeth of my dogs” (p. 379). Montaigne does not give his disposition a name. We might call it fellow-feeling; alternatively, squeamishness. But whatever we call it, it is natural to wonder whether the disposition is not too ‘primitive’ or ‘visceral’ (and perhaps fortuitous) to pull its weight in the context of morality and moral responsibility.

It is instructive to consider an analogous worry Susan Wolf raises for Gary Watson’s view of responsibility. On Watson’s view, to remark that someone behaved shoddily (an example

Watson borrows from Peter van Inwagen<sup>6</sup>) is not necessarily a matter of blaming or censuring the person or “holding her accountable”, where this would imply that, owing to her shoddy behaviour, the person deserves some sort of negative reaction, such as certain kinds of affective response, say resentment, or even some form of retribution. Rather, calling someone’s behaviour shoddy might simply be a matter of describing it in terms that, roughly speaking, show the agent in a bad light. Here is how Wolf puts her worry about this view:

As one can observe that a person has a tendency to behave shoddily, so one can observe that he has a tendency to behave clumsily (i.e., that he is accident-prone). And if attribution is simply a matter of evaluative description, attributing shoddy behavior (or a disposition to shoddy behavior) to a person is of a piece with attributing bad eyesight to a bat, polluted water to a river, or unrealistic characters to a novel. We would not, however, be inclined in the least to regard the bat, the river, or the novel to be responsible for their respective defects [...]. (Wolf 2019, p. 42)

As it happens, Montaigne admits to a tendency to behave clumsily.<sup>7</sup> The question facing the aretaic interpretation is whether the case of Montaignian sympathy/squeamishness is not relevantly similar to the case of clumsiness. The latter may be a defect, but it is not, surely, a vice. In calling a person or a performance clumsy we offer what Wolf calls an “evaluative description”, but we do not assess them in a way that implicates a concern with moral responsibility. Is the same not true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Montaigne’s ‘natural goodness’? Call this Wolf’s challenge. In the next section, we suggest that Montaigne provides materials for meeting the challenge. In section 5, based on that suggestion, we present an interpretation of Montaigne’s stance on the moral luck intuition.

#### 4. Ordinary virtues

Although Montaigne goes out of his way to emphasize the ‘visceral’ aspects of his abhorrence of cruelty, it is not quite right to characterize his disposition as non-rational. Affect features prominently in his account, but so does the ability to comprehend and use certain evaluative concepts. Furthermore, the application of such concepts has immediate implications for our reasons for action, as Montaigne recognizes. If possession of a virtue is, in part, a matter of being “sensitive” to relevant kinds of facts “as reasons for acting in certain ways” (McDowell 1998, p. 53), then Montaigne’s disposition is a strong candidate for being a virtue.

Consider first Montaigne’s account of his affective response to cruelty. It is not that he observes a statistically significant correlation between the sight of slaughter and the experience of nausea or distress. Montaigne’s affective response is not merely caused by relevant perceptions, it is rendered appropriate and intelligible by them. He is responding to a perceived fact, and a fairly complex one at that: roughly, the fact that someone, or some animal, is being treated cruelly. Compare: “I have not even been able without distress to see pursued and killed an innocent animal which is defenceless and which does us no harm.” (p.

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<sup>6</sup> See Watson 2004, pp. 264-5.

<sup>7</sup> “My hands are so clumsy that I cannot even write so I can read it; so that I would rather do over what I have scribbled than give myself the trouble of unscrambling it.” (2003, p. 591)

383) What Montaigne is recording here is sympathetic distress *at the killing of a defenceless creature that is doing no harm*. Montaigne's aversion to cruelty, moreover, spans the conventional division between affect and intellect. "I cruelly hate cruelty", he writes, "*both by nature and by judgement*, as the extreme of all vices." (p. 397, our emphasis) The sort of fact that arouses his emotional response is one he is able to articulate in the form of a judgement, for example, by saying 'that's inhuman' (see pp. 382, 385 for references to (in)humanity); but the connection between emotional reaction and judgement is not rigid. He tells us that he "cannot witness with a steady gaze" even "executions of the law, however reasonable they may be." (p. 381) In such cases, presumably, he would refrain from judging the execution to be cruel and morally objectionable, despite his sense of unease. In other cases, he firmly endorses (and by doing so, perhaps reinforces) the appraisal of the situation that leads him to feel distress. Judicial torture is a case in point: "As for me, even in justice, all that goes beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty [..]" (p. 381)

Montaigne's main objective in emphasizing the 'natural' character of his disposition, we want to suggest, is not to contrast it with a rational disposition (which a virtue would surely have to be), but to resist a *rationalist conception* of the virtues. Here are three themes in Montaigne's account that are plausibly described as anti-rationalist:

- Montaigne's appreciation of the viciousness of cruelty does not consist in his comprehension and application of some relevant moral principle, but in his ability to recognize instances of cruelty and (to use McDowell's formula) his sensitivity to them as reasons against acting in certain ways.<sup>8</sup>
- Montaigne highlights what we might call low-level elements of his disposition for humanity, to do with the perceptual salience of perceived suffering and a susceptibility to empathic responding.<sup>9</sup>
- Montaigne makes much of the fact that his hatred to cruelty encompasses a hatred of *cruelty to non-human animals*: human rationality is not a condition for 'moral standing'. He goes as far as suggesting that we "have a general duty of humanity that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants." (p. 385) Note that it is not in the light of philosophical theorizing about some such general duty that Montaigne extends his "respect" to animals and plants. Quite the opposite: his reflection on duty is informed by his sensitivity to reasons for action furnished by his empathic recognition of suffering.

Montaigne's anti-rationalist agenda<sup>10</sup> may in some ways be connected with his interest in the ethical dispositions of ordinary people, as distinct from ethical heroes such as Socrates,

<sup>8</sup> See Perler 2018, ch. 3, esp. pp. 164ff for illuminating discussion.

<sup>9</sup> This is connected to several larger themes in Montaigne's ethical thinking. One is his interest in the human body and the relation between body and soul: compare, for example, his remark (in 'Of the education of children') that "(i)t is not a soul that is being trained, not a body, but a man; these parts must not be separated." (p. 148) For discussion, see Green 2012, esp. pp. 69ff. An adjacent theme is the nature and ethical significance of habits. On this, see Langer 2015; Dromelet and Piazza 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Montaigne's view of the nature and power of human reason is a notoriously delicate subject, and not one we can address fully adequately here. Doing so would require careful attention to the relation between Montaigne's view of the multiple frailties of human reason and his occasional invocations of the normativity of reason. (For an example of the latter, see the beginning of 'Of cannibals': "we should [..] judge things by



Cato or Epaminondas: “You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff.” (p. 740)<sup>11</sup>

To return to Wolf’s challenge, we can say straight away that Montaigne’s clumsiness and his aversion to cruelty are relevantly dissimilar insofar as the latter, but not the former, is a disposition (in part) for relevant *intentional* activities; it involves a capacity to recognize certain kinds of reasons and a disposition to act in the light of them. Still, one might insist that there is another respect in which the two dispositions *are* relevantly similar. Since they are both, as it were, gifts of nature, it would make no sense, so it might be argued, to treat Montaigne as responsible for either. That is not to say that we should not characterize Montaigne’s hostility to cruelty as a case of ‘natural goodness’, or that in doing so we offer an ‘evaluative description’ of him. It is merely to deny that such an attribution amounts to a moral assessment, and so to deny that the disposition under consideration should count as a *virtue*.

To see how the aretaic interpretation may be defended against this challenge, it is useful to consider an example. Take Montaigne’s decision to write an essay denouncing judicial torture. No doubt this manifests a variety of character traits<sup>12</sup>, but one of them, as Montaigne himself encourages us to think, is precisely his aversion to cruelty. A reaction elicited by this in many readers is something like esteem, admiration, even love. What readers are resonating with is not a mere an evaluative description akin to “she has good eyesight” or akin to Montaigne’s own description of his late father: “I am the son of a very nimble father whose sprightliness lasted him until his extreme old age” (p. 591).<sup>13</sup> Good eyesight or nimbleness are valuable characteristics, but they tell us nothing about their bearer’s *values*. Montaigne’s aversion to cruelty does. Borrowing Gary Watson’s terminology, we might say that it implicates Montaigne’s “fundamental evaluative orientation” or his “practical identity”. (See Watson 2004, p. 271) As such, it invites an appraisal not of some faculty or talent of Montaigne’s, such as his perceptual or motor skills, but of Montaigne as a person. Importantly, Montaigne himself highlights the depth of the sense in which his disposition is part of “who he is”: it as “an attitude so natural and so *much my own* that the same instinct and impression that I brought away from my nurse I

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reason’s way, not by popular say” (p. 182).) Furthermore, we should allow that there may be more than one notion of ‘reason’ at work in the *Essays* (not all of which may entail an *opposition* between reason and nature). In labelling Montaigne’s agenda “anti-rationalist” we do not mean to prejudge these delicate interpretative issues. What we have in mind, roughly speaking, is hostility, not to human reason, but to philosophical views that exaggerate the power of human reason and distort its role in human virtue. In this context, see Azar Filho 2002 for illuminating discussion of the relationship between virtues, reason and customs.

<sup>11</sup> Montaigne is officially agnostic on the question of how he *acquired* his aversion to cruelty — whether his father “infused into me a part of his humors” or whether “the good education of my childhood insensibly contributed to it.” (p. 377). But it is tempting to suppose that he considered both sorts of factors relevant. For a rich perspective on the second sort of factor, see ‘Of the education of children’ (pp. 129ff). There are interesting points of contact between Montaigne’s anti-rationalist approach to virtue and some contemporary work. See for example, Nancy Snow’s thesis that the acquisition of what she calls “ordinary virtues” “occurs mostly outside of conscious awareness” (2018, p. 68) — in Montaigne’s words, “insensibly”.

<sup>12</sup> Arguably, courage. It may have come as no surprise to Montaigne that his denunciation of judicial torture was one of the tenets to which the Roman Inquisition took exception. See the list Montaigne provides in his travel diary of opinions that were questioned by the Master of the Sacred Palace: “*item*, esteeming as cruelty whatever goes beyond plain death”. (2003, p. 1166) See Smith 1981 for discussion.

<sup>13</sup> In contrast, of course, to Montaigne the younger: “Adroitness and agility I have never had [...]”. (*ibid.*)

have still retained.” (p. 378, our emphasis) This comes close to an explicit endorsement of the possibility of constitutive moral luck. His disposition is profoundly his own, in a sense that invites a moral appraisal, yet he owes it “more to fortune than to reason” (p. 377).

Those who wish to press Wolf’s challenge further might suggest an alternative interpretation of what readers respond to when they admire Montaigne’s aversion to cruelty. They might say that we need to distinguish the natural attitude Montaigne “brought away from his nurse” from his *reflective endorsement* of that attitude. Montaigne himself, they might argue, alludes to something like that distinction in professing that he hates cruelty “both by nature and by judgement”. Perhaps what we morally assess and admire is Montaigne’s considered attitude regarding the evils of cruelty, not his natural propensity for fellow-feeling. And his considered attitude, one might insist, is not a gift of nature but something Montaigne freely embraces, hence something he can appropriately be held accountable for.

This is an important development of the challenge, and we cannot do full justice to it here.<sup>14</sup> But we want to suggest that the proposed reading faces several obstacles. For one thing, it is not easy to square with Montaigne’s relentlessly deprecating remarks about the part of reason in his aversion to cruelty.<sup>15</sup> Of course, such passages may be treated as hyperbole or irony; certainly other passages do seem to express a reflective endorsement of the attitude. The real question, however, is not whether, exercising his power of judgement, Montaigne endorses his aversion to cruelty, but whether he does so from a standpoint external to his disposition — a standpoint that is not already imbued with the deliverances of his “natural” aversion to cruelty. There is nothing to suggest that Montaigne is intending the phrase “by judgement” in this way, and there are some indications that he is not. It seems plausible, for example, that in reflecting on the “general duty of humanity that attaches us [...] to animals” Montaigne is not only endorsing but *expressing* his natural sense of connection with animals. For he seamlessly transitions into a more personal register: “I am not afraid to admit that my nature is so tender, so childish, that I cannot well refuse my dog the play he offers me or asks of me outside the proper time.” (p. 385) The thrust of Montaigne’s discussion, we suggest, is precisely to discourage the temptation to analyze his disposition into independent natural and rational ingredients.<sup>16</sup> It seems more promising to hypothesize that for Montaigne, there is a mutual dependence between the natural and rational aspects of his disposition. His judgement is informed by the deliverances of his affective-rational sensitivity to certain reasons. On the other hand, to exercise that sensitivity well, he needs to be alert to the possibility that its deliverances may occasionally need to be revised in the light of other considerations.

## 5. Moral luck?

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<sup>14</sup> A major question raised by it is how we should understand the sense in which we are responsible for our evaluative beliefs. For a treatment of this question (from a point of view that is continuous with the perspective we attribute to Montaigne), see Luvisotto 2021.

<sup>15</sup> For example: “I find [...] more restraint and order in my morals than in my opinions, and my lust is less depraved than my reason.” (p. 378)

<sup>16</sup> Compare Perler’s striking formulation: Montaigne’s response to cruelty manifests “natural rational abilities.” (Perler 2018, p. 166)

Let us return to our puzzle over Montaigne's considered view of moral luck. How can we reconcile his apparent endorsement of the moral luck intuition in his exposition of the tripartite account with his apparently resolute dismissal of that very intuition in his animadversions against cruelty? We have sketched some elements of an aretaic reading, on which Thompson would be right to refer to Montaigne's natural aversion to cruelty as a "mode of virtue", even if Montaigne himself shuns that label. But terminology apart, how can we resolve the apparent conflict in Montaigne's view of moral luck?

A number of possibilities suggest themselves. In line with his Pyrrhonist sympathies, Montaigne has a habit of arguing *in utramque partem*.<sup>17</sup> We might see his reaction to moral luck as a case in point.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, we might follow Quint in suggesting that the latter half of the essay, "reversing" the hostility to moral luck that informs its first half, represents Montaigne's real view. Building on, but also modifying, these suggestions, we would like to put forward a third possibility. Consider Watson's thesis (the thesis, to remind, that was the original target of Wolf's challenge): "moral accountability is only part, and not necessarily the most important part, of our idea of responsibility." (Watson 2044, p. 263) "Moral accountability", as Watson uses the term, stands for an area of our interpersonal practices that accords a central role to the idea of a distinctive kind of *merited response* to our conduct, such as blame, resentment, or retribution of various kinds (or, differently, praise or recognition). Now, it seems compelling that the moral luck intuition has its home in this area of our practices. For what fuels the intuition is our sense that it would be *unfair* to blame (or praise) someone for something that is not under their control.<sup>19</sup> Watson's main point is that there is more to moral responsibility than accountability: our practices of treating teach other as responsible agents include what he calls "aretaic appraisals", judgements that show the agent in a bad or good light, in view of their evaluative orientation, but that do not expect or encourage any kind of merited response or sanction.

Montaigne, we contend, would agree. Asked whether, as Williams and Nagel maintain, the moral luck intuition is deeply rooted in "our conception of morality" (= question (a) in section 1), he might be taken to reply: 'yes' and 'no'. 'Yes', insofar as there is a region of our moral thinking where we are (understandably) inclined to consider "virtue" to be incompatible with "fortune". 'No', insofar as there is an adjacent region in which we take a close interest in each other's evaluative orientations, but in which blame or sanctions or punishment are not to the fore. In this latter region, the notion of moral luck does not have the air of an oxymoron. There is nothing paradoxical about an ethical disposition, deeply implicated in someone's evaluative orientation, that was "brought away from their nurse". Deploying his peerless literary skills, Montaigne, then, is doing several things in 'Of cruelty'. One is to articulate the moral luck intuition and to give it its due. Another is to steer us away from it. Like Watson, he takes the view that accountability, with its standing invitation to engage in retributive practices, is not "the most important part of our idea of responsibility."

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson 2018 interestingly highlights this tendency in connection with Montaigne's stance on tolerance. See esp. ch. 3 on Montaigne's approval of Stefano Guzzo's recommendation that we should become "avezzo a tolerar con buono stomaco" the world's diversity of opinions (p. 70).

<sup>18</sup> Biancamaria Fontana's discussion of 'Of cruelty' encourages this view: see her 2008, esp. p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> Williams highlights this aspect in his discussion of moral luck in his 1985: see p. 195.

Our diagnosis can be further developed by connecting it with Montaigne's 'first-order' ethical concerns. He laments living "in a time when we abound in incredible examples of this vice [cruelty], through the licence of our civil wars." (p. 383) A recurring theme in his analysis of the vice is the connection he sees between cruelty and the pursuit of vengeance. As he puts it in his second essay on cruelty ('Cowardice, mother of cruelty'): "The first cruelties are practiced for their own sake; thence arises the fear of a just revenge, which afterwards produces a string of new cruelties, in order to stifle the first by the others." (p. 641) But it is not just the *fear* of revenge that engenders cruelty. It is in the nature of the "the appetite for vengeance" that it aims to make an enemy "feel our revenge", to make him "lick the dust", without "finishing him off." (p. 636) On this analysis, there is a disturbing link, or set of links, between cruelty and the idea of a 'merited response' on which our practice of holding each other accountable (in Watsons' sense) pivots. Montaigne's shift from articulating the idea of self-determined, luck-free virtue to emphasizing the vital importance of natural fellow-feeling and humanity may be seen in the context of his attempt to foster what Quint calls "an ethics of yielding". (See Quint 2014, ch. 4) Without denying the force of the moral luck intuition, Montaigne seeks to loosen its hold over us. Montaigne's reservations about the practice of accountability recur throughout the *Essays*, including in this striking passage from 'Of Physiognomy': "Ambition, avarice, cruelty, vengeance do not have enough natural impetuosity of their own; let us spark them and fair their flames by the glorious titles of justice and piety." (p. 971) Montaigne ends that essay by making the same point in a self-deprecating key: "To me, who am only a jack of clubs, may apply what they said about Charillus, king of Sparta: 'He could not possibly be good, since he is not bad to the wicked.'" (p. 992)

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