The Concept of the Hidden God in the Works of Montaigne and Charron

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Abstract

The thesis examines the concept of the hidden God in the moral literature of Renaissance authors Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron. The study of the concept in these authors is preceded by a consideration of two interconnecting traditions of thought, presented jointly as the 'hidden God tradition', from within which the concept emerged. One, the 'philosophical tradition', includes the Jewish writer Moses Maimonides and the Christian writers Aquinas, Ramon Lull and Raimond Sebond, while the other, the 'Jewish mystical tradition', includes Maimonides, the Kabbalists, Léon Hébreu and Jean Bodin.

The concept of the hidden God expresses the notion that God's being is revealed to human beings indirectly or negatively through the creation. The agent that makes it possible to recognise the mind of God in the created world is providence or the Holy Spirit. Well-judged moral behaviour, in harmony with nature and with the divine order, is presented as the best practical preparation for receiving wisdom: the guidance from the Holy Spirit in daily life that is conceived in the tradition as knowledge of God.

In Montaigne's and Charron's interpretation of the concept, special emphasis is laid on the details of good moral practice which will lead to the knowledge of God that God intended man to have. Both authors concentrate on self-knowledge as the means to read the 'book of nature', God's articulation of truth through physical and psychological phenomena. Both develop the concept of reason inherited from the hidden God tradition, insisting that the individual must acknowledge the vanity of conventional or worldly reason and make his
mind a blank sheet so that it might receive divine reason. Drawing on pagan, Jewish and Christian ideas, both authors see in this concept of reason the key to secular wisdom and a starting point for a good Christian life.
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Introduction

This study on the nature of the concept of God in the works of Montaigne and Charron began, fittingly, with a consideration of the nature of reason as it is presented in Montaigne’s ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’. In this central chapter of the Essais Montaigne claims, as the title indicates, that he is defending the Catalan theologian’s doctrine of reason in the Theologia naturalis. But the reader is immediately challenged to question this claim when what follows is not a defence of reason, but what appears to be a passionate attack on it. Many critics have taken this view on the concept of reason in the ‘Apologie’, including, as Robert Aulotte points out, quoting the view of an earlier critic, those who maintain that Montaigne was faithful in his interpretation of Sebond’s philosophy:

Ainsi, Montaigne a abandonné sur plusieurs points le dogmatisme de Sebond: l’excellence de l’homme dans la Création, les attributs de Dieu, la nature de l’âme, tout cela pour lui est obscur. Il ne partage plus la belle confiance de Sebond dans la raison humaine. En le défendant, plusieurs fois, il le contredit directement.

What exactly did Sebond mean by the term ‘reason’?, one is obliged to ask at this point. Some critics have focused predominantly on Sebond’s claim in the prologue to the Theologia naturalis that man can, by the use of reason, know God, deducing from this claim that Sebond felt human beings to have a role

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1 Montaigne’s French translation of the Theologia naturalis, La théologie naturelle, was published in Paris by Guillaume Chaudiere in 1569.
superior to that of other creatures in the universe. In his introduction to the 'Apologie', M. A. Screech takes an altogether different approach to the concept of reason in Montaigne and Sebond, suggesting that underneath its surface lies a very specific concept of God which is rooted in a well-established Christian humanist tradition. Contesting the opinion that Sebond believed unaided human reason to be capable of attaining truth, he says,

Sebond firmly bases his method on 'illumination'. He does not claim that human reason by itself can discover Christian truths. Quite the reverse. Without 'illumination' reason can understand nothing fundamental about the universe. But, duly illuminated, Man can come to know himself and his creator as well as his religious and moral duties, which he will then love to fulfill.

Clearly, what we have here is a paradox. If man uses his own reason to know God, then he is not truly illuminated. If on the other hand he is illuminated – that is, inspired by grace – how can he be using his own reason? This is the first question that this thesis sets out to answer: how can man, by the use of his reason, be inspired?

Sebond is a crucial figure in understanding this paradoxical concept of reason and the paradoxical concept of God which underlies it. His fundamental answer to the riddle in question, which appears to have profoundly influenced Montaigne, is that man may come to know God not by using his reason directly or positively, but by using it negatively or backwards. The individual must turn his reason back on itself, Sebond explains in the Theologia naturalis, and investigate his own humanity, because by becoming aware of the imperfections

\[\text{philosophiques de Montaigne}\] (pp. 10-11).


4 Michel de Montaigne, An Apology for Raymond Sebond, trans. and ed. by M. A. Screech
that characterise his finitude and contingency, he will come to attain an awareness of the perfections that must reside in the infinite creator of all things. Sebond encapsulates his negative or natural theology in the notion of the 'book of nature', according to which man can learn to read the 'letters' – that is the creatures and all other aspects of the creation that God has written or spoken into being:

It was the visible 'letters' of this Book – the 'creatures' placed in God’s good order, not our own – that Man was intended to read, not with human will but aided by God's judgement.5

As Screech points out here, man's interpretation of the book of nature (which in Montaigne becomes self-knowledge: knowledge of man, the creature par excellence) is to be inspired by God. The question is, how does this inspiration take place, and what exactly does reading the book of nature entail?

Having identified this central theme of the inspired use of reason, it became important to establish how this theme connects with the concept of the hidden God.6 Traditionally, the term ‘hidden God’ refers to the supremacy of revelation over reason. Since Montaigne arrives at precisely this conclusion at the end of the ‘Apologie’ - ‘[l'homme] s'eslevera si Dieu lui preste extraordinairement la main’ - it is true to say that

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5 An Apology for Raymond Sebond, pp. xv-xvi. See Screech's discussion of Montaigne's use of Plutarch's On the E'i at Delphi to express the notion of knowing God backwards through self-knowledge (pp. xxviii-xxx).

6 Despite not treating the concept of inspired reason directly, Raymond C. La Charité highlights many aspects of it in his The Concept of Judgement in Montaigne (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968). Other Montaigne scholars whose work was useful on the subject are acknowledged in footnotes. Characteristics of the concept of the hidden God as it is presented in this study can be recognised in Goldmann's Le Dieu caché: étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine (Paris: Gallimard, 1955). However, on the basis that Goldmann studies a later period and approaches the subject from the perspective of methodology, his work has not been used in this thesis.
In at least one respect, Montaigne’s conception of God was that of St Augustine, of many medieval and Renaissance thinkers, and of Pascal: God is a hidden God, a *Deus absconditus* who hides himself from Man and therefore can only be known from his self-revelation.\(^7\)

However, it does not necessarily follow from this, as some critics have assumed, that Montaigne is a fideist.\(^8\) Like Sebond, he maintains that reason has a role to play in the process of coming to know God: it must make room for grace by recognising its own incapacity. Again, it was necessary to return to Sebond’s ‘book of nature’ to understand the connection in the minds of the authors in question between the inspired use of reason and the conception of God as hidden and self-revealing. The two pieces of the puzzle seemed to fit together only through the notion that God has revealed himself to man through the creation itself, a fundamental aspect of which is man’s reason, his vision of the world. One had to ask, could these authors be saying that, when man turns his reason back on himself to study his own imperfections, his vision of the world is transformed in such a way that the hidden God becomes visible?

The answer to this question which I propose in this study was informed to a significant extent by the work that M. A. Screech has carried out on the doctrine of Christian folly in his *Erasmus: Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* and by his indications of the importance of the doctrine in the ‘Apologie’. In his introduction to the ‘Apologie’, Screech draws attention to the fact that, according

\(^7\) *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, p. xx. In a note, Screech adds that the expression ‘hidden God’ derives from Isaiah 45. 15, saying that ‘Christians of many persuasions used the term to emphasize the need of grace and for revelation from God, who is his own interpreter’ (note 12, p. xx). For the quotation from Montaigne, see *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1962), pp. 588-89.

\(^8\) For the opinion that Montaigne was a fideist, see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, rev. edn (California: University of California Press, 1979), p. 6 and p. 52. For Screech’s refutation of this argument, see *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, p. xxvi.
to the paradox at the heart of the doctrine of Christian folly, it is humility which
brings about the bestowal of grace or wisdom on the individual, not presumption:

Pride is the sin of sins: intellectually it leads to Man’s arrogantly taking mere opinion for knowledge [...]. This pride and this trust in opinion are all part of Man’s vanity (of that vain emptiness evoked by Ecclesiastes, the Old Testament book from which were derived several inscriptions in Montaigne’s library). The ‘Apology’ briefly contrasts such ‘vanity’ with the assurance supplied by Christian ‘Folly’ (which proclaims that God’s true wisdom is to be found in the lowly, the simple, the humble and the meek). ‘Christian folly’ was a major theme in Renaissance thought and had been long allied to scepticism.  

After the discovery that Montaigne’s sceptical assault on reason in the ‘Apologie’ could well be based on the doctrine of Christian folly came the task of appraising the place of this doctrine in the works of Montaigne and Charron. The study of the key works of Erasmus on Christian folly (prompted by Screech’s indications of the importance of the doctrine) and of the Pauline Epistles, Erasmus’s single most important source on this subject, revealed that this Christian tradition of thought was fundamentally important to Montaigne’s and Charron’s conception of God.

The rest of the answer to the question of how Montaigne and Charron conceived God’s hidden being to be revealed to man through reason was to come from an entirely different direction. A close reading of the ‘Apologie’, which was motivated by a search for clues to the meaning behind Montaigne’s paradoxical concept of reason, led me to investigate what could easily pass as a relatively unimportant comment by Montaigne on the possible sources of Sebond’s ideas. The trail indicated by Montaigne led, via Lull, the medieval Catalan mystic, to Aquinas, the great theologian-philosopher, whose natural

9 An Apology for Raymond Sebond, pp. xxii-xxiii.
theology appeared to be at the heart of Sebond’s work. My reading of the works of these authors, which was informed by the expertise of scholars working in the relevant fields of research, revealed that what they had in common was a conception of God whose being is hidden or revealed according to the use the individual makes of his reason.

Meanwhile, it was becoming apparent that the tradition was wider than I had first anticipated. Charron’s repeated references in his works to Jewish ideas, particularly those of Maimonides and the Kabbalists, had already alerted me to the possibility that these ideas were somehow connected to the concept of the hidden God. This possibility was confirmed by the work of scholars on Aquinas and Maimonides, from which it became clear that Maimonides had influenced Aquinas precisely in those aspects of negative, natural theology that lay at the heart of the concept of the hidden God. When I began researching the Kabbalah, an esoteric Jewish tradition, it became apparent that the philosophical and Jewish mystical traditions to which I had been led were intimately connected. I found that the connection consisted in part in the influence of Maimonides, who seemed to be the first writer to have expressed a set of ideas that could be identified as the ‘concept of the hidden God’. Gershom Scholem’s Origins of

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10 I discuss the details of Montaigne’s reference to this tradition at greater length at the beginning of Chapter 1.
11 The work of Étienne Gilson, Le thomisme: introduction à la vie de saint Thomas d’Aquino, 5th edn (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947), and the Revd. Brian Davies, The Thought of Thomas Aquinas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), on Aquinas has been immensely useful to me in this study. Frances A. Yates’s work on Lull’s elemental astrology in Collected Essays, 3 vols; I, Lull and Bruno (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) has been equally important, helping me to understand Lull’s ideas, which are often obscure and difficult to penetrate.
12 Most of these references appear in Charron’s Discours chrestiens (Paris: Pierre Bertault, 1604).
13 See, for example, the work of David B. Burrell, Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 2.
the Kabbalah was a vital source in this area of study, enabling me to understand the ideas in question and their increasingly exoteric expression in medieval Europe. François Secret's work on the Christian Kabbalah in the Renaissance helped me to understand the sixteenth century's interpretation of the Kabbalah and to evaluate the precise nature of the Jewish ideas that had contributed to Montaigne's and, to a greater extent, to Charron's interpretation of the concept of the hidden God.

When the philosophical and Jewish mystical traditions were placed side by side, it emerged that two fundamental themes were driving the concept of the hidden God: the notion of providence or the Holy Spirit as the agent mediating between man and God through man's reason, and the idea that good moral practice (lovingly imitating the attributes of God's being that he reveals to man through nature) is what makes one eligible to receive wisdom (divine inspiration). These key ideas and their development through the two traditions — including the influence of Léon Hébreu and Jean Bodin, two Jewish writers who placed particular emphasis on the importance of morality in the search for knowledge of God — are studied in depth in Chapters 1 and 2.

Following the study of the concept of the hidden God in Montaigne's Essais in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 — which are designed to reflect the way in which the 'mystical' process of spiritual death and rebirth at the heart of Christian Folly underlies Montaigne's interpretation of the concept — the focus of the thesis is shifted to the place of the concept in the works of Pierre Charron. Charron is

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considered not as the disciple of Montaigne who plagiarised his work (the view of many critics over the years), but as an independent thinker who drew on the hidden God tradition often in similar ways to Montaigne, but equally often in original and different ways. Opposing the widespread view that the emphasis on nature and reason in Charron’s *De la sagesse* makes the work subversive of Christian doctrine, this thesis shows that when Charron’s works are considered in the light of the hidden God tradition, his moral philosophy is in fact entirely supportive of the Christian religion and, indeed, drawn from orthodox Christian ideas based on Thomist natural theology. Instead of focusing solely on Charron’s book of moral philosophy, *De la sagesse* (to which Chapter 8 is devoted), the thesis offers in Chapters 6 and 7 a detailed analysis of Charron’s two other major works, the theological texts *Les Discours chrestiens* and *Les trois veritez*. In investigating Charron’s work from the neglected perspective of his profession as a priest and a theologian, the study draws on the unpublished doctoral thesis of Richard B. Macdonough, ‘Pierre Charron: His Career at Bordeaux and *Les discours chrétiens*’ and on the work of J.-D. Charron. My analysis of Charron’s works seeks to show the evolution of the concept of the


18 For the view that Charron’s *De la sagesse* is subversive of Christianity, see René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle*, 2 vols, (Paris: Boivin et Cie., 1943), I, p. 43. *De la sagesse* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1601).

19 *Les trois veritez contre les athées, idolatres, juifs, mahometans, heretiques & schismatiques* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1593).

hidden God and the increasing amount of emphasis laid on the importance of morality that this evolution entails.

The methodological approach adopted in this study is that of the historian of ideas. I have tried, as far as my abilities allow, to contribute to the history of ideas in the same tradition as those scholars whose work in their respective fields of research has contributed to this thesis. My intention has been to return as often as possible to the original texts of the authors of the hidden God tradition. However, since many of these texts were written in Hebrew, Arabic, Catalan, Greek and Latin – languages of which I have little and, in most cases, no knowledge – I have been unable to do so much of the time. As a result, I have had to rely extensively on the work of translators, to whom I am immensely grateful for making these important texts accessible. The aim of this thesis is to shed light on a corner of the history of ideas by demonstrating that the concept of the hidden God is at the heart of the writings of Montaigne and Charron.
Chapter 1

The Historical Appearance of the Concept of the Hidden God and its Development through the Philosophical Tradition

1. Where the story begins

The story of the concept of the hidden God begins, from the perspective of this study, with a clue that Montaigne inserts, in what seems to be a playful gesture, at the beginning of the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’. In this chapter of the Essais Montaigne seeks to defend Sebond and to justify his own use of the ideas that Sebond puts forward in the Théologie naturelle, the book whose ‘fin est hardie et courageuse, car il entreprend, par raisons humaines et naturelles, establir et verifier contre les atheistes tous les articles de la religion’. Expressing his curiosity with regard to the origin of the inspiring ideas in Sebond’s work, Montaigne provides us with what appears to be an erudite and partially veiled reference to the tradition to which the Théologie naturelle belongs:

Cet ouvrage me semblant trop riche et trop beau pour un autheur duquel le nom soit si peu conueu, et duquel tout ce que nous scavons, c’est qu’il estoit Espaignol, faisant profession de medecine à Thoulouse, il y a environ deux cens ans, je m’enquis autrefois à Adrien Tournebu, qui scavoit toutes choses, que ce pouvait estre de ce livre; il me respondit qu’il pensoit que ce fut quelque quinte essence tirée de S. Thomas d’Aquin: car, de vray, cet esprit là, pleine d’une erudition infinie et d’une subtilité admirable, estoit seul capable de telles imaginations. Tant y a que, quiconque en soit l’autheur et inventeur (et ce n’est pas raison d’oster sans plus grande occasion à Sebond ce tiltre), c’estoit un très-suffisant homme et ayant plusieurs belles parties. (p. 417)

1 Michel de Montaigne, Œuvres complètes, Book II, Chap. 12, p. 417. All references to the Essais will henceforth appear in the main text. For the full title of Montaigne’s translation of the Theologia naturalis, see section 5 on Sebond in this chapter.
The veiled reference to a mediating source between Aquinas and Sebond is most probably to Ramon Lull, the medieval Catalan theologian known as the great *Doctor Illuminatus* who was held to be the Quintessence of Aquinas.\(^2\)

With customary subtlety and ingenuity, Montaigne thus alludes to three key thinkers who sought to unite faith and reason within the context of the supremacy of the Catholic Church. For the purpose of this study, one other (non-Christian) writer has been added to Montaigne’s list of authors composing a philosophical tradition. Moses Maimonides was a Spanish Jew living and writing in Egypt during the twelfth century. His work profoundly influenced Aquinas in the development of his natural theology, a rational system rooted in theology holding that man can know God, not directly, but through the created world and its contents. Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed* represents what appears to be the first systematic presentation of a collection of ideas that may be considered under the heading of the ‘concept of the hidden God’.

2. Moses Maimonides

i) *Maimonides and the Guide for the Perplexed*

The man known to the Latin west as Rabbi Moyses or Rabbi Moyses Aegyptius (1135-1204) was a Spanish Jew who lived in Cordoba until the invasion of the Almohads in 1148 when he fled first to Morocco before settling in Fostat, Egypt.\(^3\) Maimonides became the leader of the Jewish community in Egypt, where he led an intensely active public life performing the various roles of private and court


\(^3\) See *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Joseph A. Buijs (Notre Dame, Indiana:...
physician, businessman, judge and rabbi. A prolific writer, Maimonides was famous initially within Jewish circles for his epic codification of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, which focused on the revelatory and tradition-based aspects of the Jewish religion with the aim of helping the individual Jew to apply the rules of Scripture and the Talmud to everyday life. But it was with the appearance of the *Guide for the Perplexed* that Maimonides gained recognition further afield.

The *Guide*, or *Dalalat al-Ha 'irin*, which was originally written in Arabic with Hebrew characters, became a classic text virtually instantly and remains to this day one of the most widely translated and commented-upon philosophical texts ever written. Within ten years of its appearance and with the approval of Maimonides, the *Guide* was translated twice into Hebrew, first by Samuel ibn Tibbon (c.1160-1230) and then by Judah al-Harizi (1170-1235). Shortly after Maimonides's death, both Hebrew versions were translated into Latin. Ibn Tibbon's version circulated under the titles *Dux perplexorum* and *Doctor perplexorum*, while al-Harizi's translation was known variously under the titles *Dux neutrorum*, *Dux dubiorum*, and *Dux dubitantium*. Christian medieval thinkers appear to have read the Latin translation of al-Harizi's Hebrew text, which made a profound impression on their thinking.

Maimonides is first mentioned by name in the Latin world after 1230, first by the Dominican writers Roland and Moneta of Cremona (around the year

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5 The *Guide for the Perplexed* also appears in English translation as the *Guide of the Perplexed*.
1240), and then by Albertus Magnus, another Dominican, who was the teacher of Aquinas. All three authors were acquainted with the *Dux neutrorum*, the complete translation of the *Guide* made from al-Harizi’s Hebrew version. Their interest in Maimonides lies principally in the concern that they share with him for what happens, from both a philosophical and theological point of view, ‘when philosophic positions are related to religiously founded convictions’. A Latin translation of the *Guide* was published in Paris in 1520 by Augustini Justiniani under the title *Rabi Moses Aegyptii Dux seu dubitatium aut perplexorum*. The existence of this edition, coupled with the fact that Aquinas often mentions Maimonides and discusses his arguments in his works, makes it possible that Montaigne knew of Maimonides and was familiar with his ideas. I have, however, found no compelling evidence that Montaigne had first-hand knowledge of the Jewish author’s writings.

**ii) Maimonides’ Guide: a parabolic text**

The *Guide for the Perplexed* purports to provide enlightenment for those perplexed by the contradictions that ensue when rational, scientific thinking is considered within the context of religious law and tradition. His aim, he says in the introduction, is to ‘enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy law […] and at the same time has been successful in his

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10 Jean Bodin, a major influence on Charron in particular, but also on Montaigne, makes direct references to Maimonides and is strongly influenced by his ideas (see section 9 on Bodin in the next chapter). Charron refers to Maimonides by name in the *Discours chrestiens* (see Chapter 6).
philosophical studies’ and who ‘finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on the literal interpretation of the Law’. His intention, he continues, is to explain the figurative meaning of those passages of the prophets in the Bible that had hitherto been interpreted literally.

The means of communicating this information is not, however, straightforward, for Maimonides wishes to incorporate into his written text the safety mechanism characteristic of the oral tradition whereby the sacred mysteries in question are revealed only to those who are qualified and prepared to receive them, keeping them hidden from those who are not. He forewarns his reader that he must work at interpreting the text, reading between the lines and making the connections that invisibly but meaningfully underpin and radiate through the visible words. He asks that the reader pay attention to the creative disorder at work in the text in order to find its esoteric meaning:

Hence you should not ask of me here anything beyond the chapter headings. And even those are not set down in order or arranged in coherent fashion in this Treatise, but rather are scattered and entangled with other subjects that are to be clarified. For my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then once again be concealed, so as not to oppose that divine purpose which one cannot possibly oppose and which has concealed from the vulgar among the people those truths especially requisite for His apprehension.

The revelation that he is offering to those who are ready to receive it is the means or method of knowing the unknowable God. The diligent reader, having cracked the code that allows him to interpret the Guide in the appropriate manner, will, he

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hints, apply the same method to the mysteries contained in Scripture. When the *Guide* and its interpretations of Scripture are interpreted figuratively, as Maimonides suggests, the message of the text that emerges is that the individual must learn to know God through his creation. The text articulates the notion that the creatures themselves and their interactions must become words and letters under the gaze of the individual so that he might understand the meaning with which God has endowed them.

**iii) The practice of negative theology: knowing the back of God**

The most important parable in the *Guide* from the point of view of the French tradition of Montaigne and Charron is drawn from Exodus 33. The image distilled by Maimonides from the biblical passage in question becomes a central theme of the tradition of the concept of the hidden God. Indeed, the striking literary effect that it affords and the popularity that it finds among the authors who follow Maimonides make it an appropriate symbol of the concept itself. In Chapters 37 and 38 of the first book of the *Guide*, Maimonides discusses the meaning of the Hebrew words *panim* and *ahor*, ‘face’ and ‘back’ respectively, directing us by the connected use of these *chapter headings* (see the quotation on the previous page for Maimonides’s instructions) and direct references to Exodus 33 to the dialogue that takes place between God and the prophet Moses when Moses asks to see God’s face:

> And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. And he said, Thou canst

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not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen. (33. 18-23)

Chapter 37 tells us that God cannot be known directly: 'in the same sense the word panim must be understood in “And my face (panai) shall not be seen” (Exod.xxxiii.23); i.e., my true existence, as it is, cannot be comprehended’ (p. 53). Chapter 38 then goes on to tell us that the term ahor ‘includes also the idea of following a thing and of conforming with the moral principles of some other being [...]: “ye shall walk after (ahare) the Lord, your God” (Deut. xiii. 5)’ (p. 54). And Maimonides continues:

In this sense the word occurs in Exodus xxxiii. 20, ‘And thou shalt see my back’ (ahorai); thou shalt perceive that which follows me, is similar to me, and is the result of my will, i.e., all things created by me, as will be explained in the course of this treatise. (p. 54)

The second parable in the Guide of particular interest to us in relation to the theme of negative theology is that in Book III, Chapter 51, in which various classes of men are differentiated according to their ability to approach and enter the palace in which God rules and dwells. In the quotation that follows, Maimonides speaks directly to the addressee of the Guide, Joseph Ibn Aknin (1160-1226).

Know my son, that as long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and the art of logic, you are one of those who walk around the house searching for its gate [...]. If, however, you have understood the natural things, you have entered the habitation and are walking in the antechambers. If, however, you have achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science, you have entered
in the ruler’s palace into the inner court and are with him in one habitation.  

Thus progress in the natural sciences and in political and ethical concerns constitutes a crucial part of man’s focus on God’s attributes of action, the exterior aspect of his being to which the individual has access. However, none of this learning and none of these concerns have any meaning, according to the Guide, unless they spring from the individual’s love and worship of God. This involves observing the way in which divine providence loves and cares for each individual, providing everything necessary for his or her well-being (including the disciplined face of love which maintains justice), and imitating it in one’s approach towards others. Maimonides describes this final good of man in the last chapter of the Guide (III: 54):

It is clear that the perfection of man that may be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him [...], and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance. [...] The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving kindness, righteousness and judgement, through assimilation to His actions [...], as we have explained several times in this Treatise.

Maimonides’s concept of providence, according to which God is present in the heart of his creation, caring for individual existing beings, has its roots in the notion of the divine overflow of God’s loving being from himself to the creatures. For Maimonides, the overflow of God’s being is simultaneously the overflow of knowledge of his being in the case of those creatures endowed with a

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rational faculty. In the *Guide*, this notion is translated into the concept of prophecy.

**iv) Prophecy: the union of faith and reason through love**

Maimonides presents prophecy as the act through which man may know the unknowable, infinite divinity. What enables him to maintain this paradox – the meeting of the infinite and the finite – is his concept of the Active Intellect, the force of prophetic inspiration that is identified with the overflow of God’s being into his creation. The Active Intellect represents providence, therefore, the immanent aspect of the infinite divinity connecting it to its finite creation, but it simultaneously represents the mediating agent that maintains the transcendence of God:

> The Active Intellect, the qualities of which are shared by the passive intellect in its highest stage of achievement, is not identical with God; it is only an intermediary being, a major ‘angelic’ agent through which God operates in the lower forms of existence and in which this unification is accomplished. The Active Intellect functions mainly as one of the channels through which the divine overflow, emanating like a spring of water from God, is distributed in the lower worlds [...]. God is conceived as acting upon the intellects of selected and gifted persons, prophets and philosophers by means of this divine overflow. So also does divine providence operate. This is the quintessence of Maimonides’s religious philosophy, or the point at which the contours between religion and philosophy fade away. [...] We may see the Active Intellect as the meeting place of the emanating divine overflow with the human intellect.\(^{17}\)

Man’s inherent connection with God through the mediation of the Active Intellect is conceived by Maimonides in the *Guide* in terms of a knowing ignorance that is love: love of God and, as a consequence of that first love, love

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\(^{17}\) Ithamar Gruenwald, ‘Maimonides’s Quest Beyond Philosophy and Prophecy’, in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. by Kraemer, pp. 141-57 (pp. 144-45).
of all created things. This love of created things turns out to be a heightened state of knowing that leads the individual to an apprehension of God that is beyond the rational, or rational in the supreme sense. It is an act of knowing which is immediate and intuitive, a type of knowing which goes beyond that couched in rational propositional logic, a knowledge which reaches out in a-rational ways to comprehend the rationally incomprehensible. [...] Man shares in this divine love, and is transformed by it. He becomes aware of it when he exceeds his rational limits and gives himself to that perception of reality which is not evident to our senses or to our intellect.

Love of God enacted via the whole-hearted participation in ordinary life in accordance with the attributes of God's being (loving-kindness, righteousness and judgement) is conceived, therefore, by Maimonides as a mode or frequency of knowing that unites man to God without blurring the boundaries between humanity and divinity. It is a 'negative knowing' that corresponds to the state of the mind when it dreams. For dreams

leissent filtrer les rayons de la 'lumière nocturne' qui est la vie de l'esprit, l'étincelle divine visible seulement, comme la lumière des étoiles, quand se couche l'astre diurne de la connaissance humaine, sensible et rationnelle. Leurs images sont des allégories à interpréter.

In the interior universe of the individual it is the imagination which, when it is moved and guided by the Active Intellect, performs the task of connecting man and God:

Le monde symbolique des songes devient ainsi [...] le règne intermédiaire qui relie le ciel et la terre; l'escalier, le pont, l'arc-en-ciel qui témoigne du pacte d'alliance entre l'homme et Dieu. [...] Et l'imagination qui, par grâce divine, est responsable de ce règne dans l'âme de l'homme, devient

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19 Irvy, 'Islamic and Greek Influences on Maimonides's Philosophy', in Maimonides and Philosophy, ed. Pines and Yovel, pp. 139-56 (p. 150).
21 Massimo Jevolella, 'Songe et prophétie chez Maïmonide et dans la tradition philosophique qui l'inspira', in Maimonides and Philosophy, ed. Pines and Yovel, pp. 173-84 (p. 175).
le symbole de cette médiation, la puissance intermédiaire qui transcende les données des sens en les transférant sur le plan de la connaissance intellectuelle.\textsuperscript{22}

The imagination and the images it produces can therefore be regarded as a boundary separating the divine and human realms in the same way that the created world itself serves as a boundary between God and his creation.\textsuperscript{23} When the mind is functioning according to the mode of ordinary rational consciousness, the products of the imagination remain opaque and unintelligible. But when it functions according to the higher mode of ‘knowing-loving ignorance’, the contents of the imagination become transparent, and the divine light filling and animating them with meaning becomes visible and comprehensible.\textsuperscript{24}

Maimonides is emphatic in the *Guide* that knowledge of God for human beings is and can only be knowledge of the created world and its contents. But this knowledge includes within itself the imperative of loving and caring for others as God loves and cares for his creatures, thus reuniting the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the individual’s being:

The excellent individual, according to [Maimonides] is one who achieves intellectual knowledge of God, i.e., intellectual knowledge of the physical world, and who *as a result of that knowledge* is able to act in accordance with ‘loving-kindness, righteousness, and justice’.\textsuperscript{25}

The paradoxical knowledge of God offered by Maimonides in the *Guide for the Perplexed* is therefore a moral wisdom, the essence of which was to live and grow through the tradition of thought that developed under its impetus:

\textsuperscript{22} Jevoella, ‘Songe et prophétie’, pp. 178-79.
\textsuperscript{24} See Jevoella, ‘Songe et prophétie’, p. 184. For Maimonides’s concept of angels as the mediators between man and God, see Minkin, *The World of Moses Maimonides*, pp. 125-26.
The knowledge and comprehension of God are for Maimonides no mere abstract thing but inspire piety, modesty, and good relations with one’s fellow men. [...] He wrote: ‘When the perfect bear this in mind, they will be filled with fear of God, humility, and piety, with true, not apparent, reverence and respect of God, in such a manner that their conduct, even when alone with their wives or in the bath, will be as modest as they are in public intercourse with other people’.

3. Thomas Aquinas

i) Aquinas and the ‘New Law’ of Christianity

The most important Christian theologian on whom Maimonides exercised a direct influence - an influence widely recognised by scholars - was Aquinas (1225-74). Aquinas incorporated the essence of Maimonides’s hidden God philosophy into his own works, using it as a basis on which to construct his natural theology. The way in which philosophy and theology are united in Aquinas to form a ‘natural theology’ cannot be fully appreciated until his work is considered in the context in which he himself places it. This context is established by what Aquinas conceives as an historical and theological event, namely, the coming of Christ and the creation of the Christian religion, which together mark the dawning of a new age for humanity in which God and men are united according to God’s will. The revealed doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are central to Aquinas’s description of what the new age means for mankind. For Aquinas, far from remaining abstract theological precepts, these


doctrines are, by virtue of Christ’s physical appearance in the world, actual realities for individual human beings.\textsuperscript{28}

Aquinas describes this historical event in terms of the advent of the New Law of Christian belief and action. The New Law is defined in contrast to the Old Law of the Jewish Old Testament, according to which people followed divine laws extrinsic to themselves that they did not understand on the basis of fear and subservience to authority. What characterises the New Law of Christianity, according to Aquinas, is that Christians will understand why they should behave lovingly and justly towards themselves and others and will want to do so not because they are forced to, but of their own free will. Aquinas expresses this notion of a transition between the two laws through the story of the fall - the advent of evil in God’s creation - told in the Bible:

The law of nature [...] is no other than the light of intelligence set in us by God, showing us what we should do and what to avoid. This light and law was given at creation [...]. But on top of this law the devil has sown another, the law of concupiscence. At the beginning the soul of man was subject to God, and so flesh was subject to reason [...]. The law of concupiscence frequently corrupts the law of nature and the plan of reason. Nature being in ruins, the law of Scripture now enters to recall man to deeds of virtue away from vice. Two influences are at work here, fear and love. First, fear; a man begins to avoid sin by the prospect of judgement and hell [...]. Though a man who avoids sin from motives of fear is not righteous, nevertheless righteousness starts here where the Mosaic Law lays its emphasis. Yet its force is not enough, the hand may obey but the mind is not held, and therefore the Gospel Law sets another measure to keep men away from evil and bent on good, namely, the power of love.\textsuperscript{29}

The law of nature is here overlaid with the law of grace, the distinction between the two remaining clear. The New Law is the conjunction of grace with

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\textsuperscript{28} See Davies, \textit{The Thought of Thomas Aquinas}, pp. 261-62.

nature and reason, therefore, but the term *nature* in Aquinas can sometimes
denote this conjunction without referring explicitly to grace, as is the case in this
verse from St Paul, whose writings are central to Aquinas’s development of this
idea:

> When Gentiles who do not possess the law carry out its precepts by the
> light of nature, then, although they have no law, they are their own law,
> for they display the effect of the law inscribed on their hearts. Their
> conscience is called as witness, and their own thoughts argue the case on
> either side.  

St. Paul states in Romans that it is by offering themselves completely to God that
Christians will be so transformed as to be able to ‘discern the will of God, and to
know what is good, acceptable, perfect’ (12. 2), and says in Philippians that they
will be taught ‘by experience what things are most worthwhile’ (1. 10). In
Hebrews 8. 10 he cites Jeremiah 31. 33 - ‘I will put my law within them, and I
will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my
people’ - the text signifying, according to Aquinas, that ‘with the coming of
Christ and the Spirit people are able to love with God’s love and not simply to
obey him’.  

For Aquinas, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation of Christ
both represent and enact the union of humanity with God, the Holy Spirit
bestowing grace on humans through the humanity of Christ, who is both human
and divine:

> The New Law consists chiefly in the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is
> shown forth by faith working through love [...]. People become receivers

31 Cited in Fox, p. 148.
32 Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 261 (the author’s words, not those of Aquinas).
of this grace through God's son made human, whose humanity grace filled first, and thence flowed forth to us.\textsuperscript{33}

The significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for human beings also lies, according to Aquinas, in the fact that it enables us to 'image' God by knowing and loving him, 'for the Trinity is God bringing forth God, knowing God, and loving what is divine'.\textsuperscript{34} The intimate and internal nature of the union between man and God enacted by the Holy Spirit can be seen in the following passage where Aquinas explains that when we see and know God it is through him and strictly by virtue of the grace that he bestows upon us:

When a created intellect sees the essence of God, that very divine essence becomes the form through which the intellect understands. Hence there must be some disposition given to the understanding beyond its own nature so that it can be raised to such sublimity. Since, as we have shown, the natural power of the intellect is not sufficient to see the essence of God, this power of understanding must come to it by divine grace. This increase in the power of understanding we call 'illumination' of the mind, as we also speak of the intelligible form as 'light' [...] By this light we are made deiform, that is, like to God.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{ii) Aquinas's concept of God}

Aquinas holds that we can know a certain amount about God, including the fact that he exists and the nature of some of his attributes, by our own reason: 'the existence of God and similar truths about him attainable by strict rationalism are not articles of faith, but preambles to them; faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection the capacity for it'.\textsuperscript{36} The picture of God that emerges from his works on the basis of his reasoning is, nevertheless, often informed by and supplemented with his theological

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Summa theologica}, Ia2ae.108.1, cited in Davies, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{34} Davies, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Summa theologica}, Ia.12.5, cited in Davies, p. 252.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Summa theologica}, Ia.ii.2, \textit{ad} 1, in Gilby, p. 43.
understanding, itself supported by Scripture, thus reinforcing the reader’s sense of Aquinas’s belief that, ultimately, philosophy and theology cannot be separated.

According to Aquinas, God is infinite and everywhere. His being is such that his creatures participate in it by their very existence. That is to say, God holds them in being:

Since the infinite must be everywhere and in all things, we have now to consider whether this applies also to God. God is in all things, not, indeed, as part of their essence, or as a quality, but in the manner that an efficient cause is present to that on which it acts. An efficient cause must be in touch with the product of its action immediately, and this by its own power. Now since God’s very essence is his existence, created existence is his proper effect. […] While a thing endures […], God must be present to it according to its mode of being. Existence is most intimate to each and deepest in all reality since it is the heart of all perfection. Hence, God is in all things, and intimately.\(^{37}\)

This passage highlights precisely the characteristics attributed to God by Aquinas that assure both the transcendence and the immanence of the divinity and set in place a direct link between each individual creature and God. Aquinas maintains that God’s ultimate unity and simplicity (qualities ensuring his ultimate transcendence) cause his essence to be one with his existence, thus transforming existence from some ‘thing’ that separates the creatures from God into the act proper to the divinity which expresses and manifests its essence. Rather than supporting the conception of God as something completely different from his creatures, this philosophical move brings one to conceive of God as the first mover whose very actions are the things that exist:

The operation of a thing is twofold, as Aristotle teaches: one is immanent and is a perfection to the doer; the other issues into external reality and is a perfection to the thing made. Both belong to God: the first in that he understands, wills, loves and rejoices; the other that he produces things in

\(^{37}\) *Summa theologia*, Ia.viii.i, in Gilby, p. 81. See also Étienne Gilson, *Le thomisme*, p. 146.
being and sustains and fosters them. The first is termed an operation or activity, the latter rather a making.\textsuperscript{38}

It was in fact Maimonides who helped Aquinas to take this dramatic step in the history of ideas. Building on Ibn-Sina’s (Avicenna to the Latin world) distinction between essence and existence, Maimonides was able to ensure the transcendence of God:

It is known that existence is [...] something that is superadded to the quiddity of what exists. This is clear and necessary with regard to everything the existence of which has a cause [...]. As for that which has no cause for its existence, there is only God, may He be magnified and glorified, who[se] existence is necessary. Accordingly, His existence is identical with His essence and His true reality, and His essence is His existence.\textsuperscript{39}

But it is also likely that St Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God helped him to develop his thinking on this point. In Chapter 3 of the \textit{Proslogium} Anselm defines God as ‘a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist’, comparing this divine and necessary mode of existence with the contingent mode of existence of the creatures: ‘to thee alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others’.\textsuperscript{40} The concept of different modes of existence allows one to conceive of all reality as God’s existing being in such a way that nothing is outside him and nothing denigrates his supremacy and transcendence.

\textsuperscript{38} II \textit{Contra gentes}, I, in Gilby, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Guide for the Perplexed} (1: 57), cited in Burrell, \textit{Knowing the Unknowable God}, p. 27. Aquinas did read and make direct use of Ibn-Sina’s work (Burrell, p. 19).

\textsuperscript{40} St Anselm, \textit{Basic Writings}, trans. by S. N. Deane, rev. edn (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1962), pp. 54-55. I am here following the argument of Charles Hartshorne in \textit{Anselm’s Discovery: A Re-Examination of the Ontological Proof for God’s Existence} (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1965), that the real ontological argument put forward by Anselm was that in Chapter 3 of the \textit{Proslogium} and not, as history has interpreted it, in Chapter 2, where he presents God as ‘a being than which nothing greater can be conceived’ (\textit{Basic Writings}, p. 53).
Aquinas’s notion that existence is the dynamic expression of God’s essence, coupled with Anselm’s concept of different modes of existence, has important repercussions on the relationship between God and his creatures. In effect, it enables God and the individual to meet directly within the individual’s being, which becomes the arena for the union of necessary and contingent being. Moreover, Aquinas’s philosophical demonstration that God’s knowledge is one with his being (on the basis of his ultimate unity and simplicity) allows one to reason as follows: if God is perfect intelligence and consciousness, it follows that our created consciousness, being the contingent expression of his essence, can know God precisely because it is God knowing himself through us: ‘all conscious things implicitly know God in everything they know’.41

Paradoxically, therefore, it is the distinction itself between humanity and divinity which causes the unknowable God to be known.42 Aquinas, like Maimonides, articulates this notion of a distinction between the two modes of God’s being, essence and existence, through the theme of intermediaries through which God pours himself into the heart of each existing being:

There are two elements in providence, the plan and its execution, which is called government. As regards the former, God’s plan is immediate to everything, for in his mind is the reason for everything, even for the very least. As regards the latter, there are intermediaries, for the divine rule governs lower by higher, not from any defect of power, but from abundance of goodness endowing creatures with the dignity of causing.43

Thus the law of nature has its own jurisdiction, delegated to it by God, and the independence of the sublunar realm is maintained (including the free will of man), without, however, excluding God’s presence from the world:

41 Disputations, XXII De veritate, 2, ad, 1, in Gilby, p. 215.
42 See Burrell, Knowing the Unknowable God, p. 3.
It must be granted without qualification that God operates in all natural and voluntary activity. Through not appreciating the situation accurately, some have made the mistake of attributing all action exclusively to God and denying that natural things perform by their proper powers, as though fire did not heat, but that God creates heat.\(^{44}\)

Describing the paradoxical movement by which God pours his being into the creation, Aquinas says that 'no lessening of the original is involved in the separation and multiplication, for the divine goodness remains undivided in its essence, unspent and simple'.\(^{45}\)

Aquinas's ideas on the subject of God's inherent intelligibility and his creation of the world through intermediaries culminate in the notion that the world itself is a metaphor of God's being. That is to say, in communicating his goodness and other attributes to his creatures through matter or contingent reality, God is using creation to speak or write his being: 'matter is for the sake of form, not form for the sake of matter [...]'; God [...] brought things into existence in order to communicate his goodness to creatures and to be reflected in them'.\(^{46}\)

We may understand God's 'Word', therefore, according to Aquinas, both through the metaphors used by the prophets in the Bible and through the tangible metaphors of existing things\(^{47}\):

*He watereth the high hills from his chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works* [Ps.ciii.13]. From eternity the Lord King of Heaven made the law that the gifts of his providence should reach lowly things through intermediate principles [...]]. On this point Augustine remarks, that just as the crasser and weaker bodies are ruled by subtler and more potent bodies according to plan, so are all bodies ruled by the rational spirit of life. And therefore the psalm of our text sings this law, observed

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\(^{43}\) *Summa theologica*, Ia.xxii.3, in Gilby, p. 118.

\(^{44}\) Disputations, III De potentia, 7, in Gilby, pp. 122-23.

\(^{45}\) Opusc. XIV, Exposition, *De divinis nominibus*, ii, lect, 6, in Gilby, p. 130.

\(^{46}\) *Summa theologica*, Ia.xlvii.1, in Gilby, p. 150.

\(^{47}\) The 'Word' is associated in Aquinas's Christian philosophy with the person of Christ who comes forth from the Father and is identified with creation. See Davies, pp. 306-08.
in the communication of spiritual truth, through metaphors drawn from the things of sense.48

iii) Knowing God: learning the language of love

So far we have established that in Aquinas's view, human beings can know God by virtue of their intrinsic connection to him and participation in his being. However, we have yet to see exactly how this may be possible. At this point we must turn to the 'negative' aspect of Aquinas's natural theology in order to understand how love, the force of grace identified with the Holy Spirit, is conceived to be the quality that enables one to know God. It is important to bear in mind here that Aquinas believed complete knowledge of God to be possible only after death: 'faith is the foretaste of that knowledge which hereafter will make us happy'.49 The focus in this life is, as a result, set on what we are capable of as human beings, namely the knowledge of God that springs from the practice of moral virtues in conjunction with the 'illumination' that is bestowed on us by divine grace: 'the contemplative life is superhuman, the life of sensual pleasure beastly, but the active life is properly human, and humane activity turns on the practice of the moral virtues'.50

Using an argument that Charron was later to make use of at the beginning of the Discours chrestiens, Aquinas insists that God is, in some ways, supremely knowable:

Though in himself supremely knowable, God surpasses the power of a limited intelligence by very excess of truth. The bat blinks in the blaze of the sun. Impressed by this thought, some have concluded that no created intellect can see the nature of God. But it is an awkward conclusion. For

48 Opusc. XL, Breve principium fratri Thomae de Aquino quand incepit Parisiis ut Magister in Theologia (Aquinas's inaugural lecture as Professor at the Paris University), in Gilby, p. 187.
49 Opusc. XIII, Compendium theologiae, 2, in Gilby, p. 321. See also Gilson, Le thomisme, p. 33.
50 Disputations, De virtutibus cardinalibus, 1, in Gilby, p. 306.
since man's ultimate happiness consists in his highest activity, were he never able to see God, then either he could never reach his bliss or this would lie in something other than God, which is alien to Christian belief. Moreover, it is philosophically unsound, for there is an inborn desire of knowing cause when effect is seen – this is the spring of wonder. If, therefore, the mind of rational creatures could never see the first cause of things this natural desire would be pointless.\(^\text{51}\)

The metaphor of the bat blinking in the blaze of the sun is strongly reminiscent of Maimonides's reference to Exodus 33.20, where God refuses to show Moses his face, but then covers his eyes as he turns around and reveals his back. Indeed, what Aquinas has in mind is precisely a negative knowledge of God through love of the creatures.\(^\text{52}\) 'Our mind is not able to grasp [God’s] essence,' he says, 'we have to start from the things about us, which have diverse perfections though their root and origin in God is one'.\(^\text{53}\) Aquinas describes love as the mode of knowing that enables the knower to experience things as they are in themselves through the will rather than through the intellect, which merely moulds things to its own form and dimensions:

Not merely learning about divine things but also experiencing them - that does not come from mere intellectual acquaintance with the terms of scientific theology, but from loving the things of God and cleaving to them by affection. Fellow-feeling comes from fondness rather than cognizance, for things understood are in the mind in the mind’s own fashion, whereas desire goes out to things as they are in themselves; love would transform us into the very condition of their being. Thus, by the settled bent of his affections, a virtuous man is well apt to judge straightway the affairs of virtue; so also the lover of divine matters catches their gist.\(^\text{54}\)

\(^\text{51}\) *Summa theologica*, la.xii.i, in Gilby, pp. 85-86.
\(^\text{52}\) See *Summa theologica*, la. iii, prologue, in Gilby, p. 67.
\(^\text{54}\) Opusc. XIV, Exposition, *De divinis nominibus*, ii, lect. 4, in Gilby, p. 33. Elsewhere Aquinas says 'a thing can be immediately loved though mediately known' and 'love takes up where knowledge leaves off' (Disputations, *De caritate*, 2, ad 11, in Gilby, p. 217; *Summa theologica*, 2a-2ae.xxvii. 4, ad 1, in Gilby p. 317).
We will remember that, according to Aquinas, the New Law is based on the ability of individuals to understand within themselves the divine imperative to love, to be good in the image of God and to wish to do so of their own accord. This ability is bestowed upon the individual by grace, that is, by God’s love sent out in the person of the Holy Spirit. There is, Aquinas says, ‘a general love, by which God loves all things that are, as Wisdom says; by this he bestows natural being on created things’, but there is also

a special love, by which he draws the rational creature above its natural condition to have a part in the divine goodness […]. By this love God simply speaking wills for the creature that eternal good which is himself.\(^5\)

Thus when one loves God and seeks to know him by loving his creatures, one is placing oneself in alignment with the divine law which represents the inherent goodness of God’s being. Good moral action is simply the adherence to the divine order which, Aquinas tells us, human reason can discern because it is inherently a part of it: ‘reason in man is rather like God in the world’.\(^5\)

Goodness is a prerequisite for knowledge of God, therefore:

Righteousness of heart is required antecedently and concomitantly. None can reach happiness without goodwill, and the loves of one who sees God fall in with the divine plan.\(^5\)

And good and evil are determined by whether specific actions fall in line with reason and divine law:

Good and evil should be set in the context of what is proper to man as man. This is his rational life. Therefore a good or bad human act is tested by its agreement or otherwise with reason instructed by the divine law, whose principles may be inborn, acquired or infused.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) *Summa theologica*, Ia2ae.110.1, cited in Davies, p. 253.
\(^6\) Opusc, XI, I *De regno*, 12, in Gilby, p. 236.
\(^7\) *Summa theologica*, Ia-2ae.iv.4, in Gilby, p. 275.
\(^8\) Disputations, II *De malo* 4, in Gilby, p. 281.
This is so, according to Aquinas, quite simply because ‘the universe of creatures, in which man is like a part in the whole, is not an ultimate end itself; it is ordered to God’.  

From this perspective, morality can be considered as similar to mental clarity, for when a man’s moral deeds are in alignment with the divine and natural laws perceived and followed by reason, he is said to be able to see or know God intimately. Thus just as the intellect needs to be exercised regularly if it is not to be clouded by opaque and nonsensical images, so the moral virtues (how an individual is in the habit of acting on a regular basis) must be exercised and purged of presumption and egotism under the guidance of reason if man is to know God:

The term foolishness conveys the meaning of a certain senselessness in judgement, chiefly in the face of the highest cause, the supreme good and last end. This may be the outcome of [...] such indulgence in worldly concerns that a man is rendered inept at perceiving divine values, and this foolishness is sin.

Morality is not an end in itself, therefore, but lays the groundwork on the basis of which man may come to know God: ‘the moral virtues do not essentially constitute the contemplative life, but dispose thereto’. At this point, man must look to God for the capacity to know him, for only grace can accomplish this superhuman task:

It is impossible that any created mind should see the essence of God by its own natural powers [...]. Only to the divine intellect is it connatural to know subsistent existence itself. This is beyond the scope of any created understanding, for no creature is its existence, it has a share in existence.

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59 Summa theologica, 1a-2ae ii.8, obj. ad 2, in Gilby, pp. 268-69. See Davies, p. 88.
60 Summa theologica, 2a-2ae xlvi.2, in Gilby, p. 314.
61 Summa theologica, 2a-2ae clxxx.2, in Gilby, p. 322.
Hence no created mind can see the essence of God unless he by grace joins himself to that mind as something intelligible to it.\textsuperscript{62}

Rather than human beings coming to know God, God reveals himself to human beings, and he does this in various ways according to the capacity of the individual:

The things of faith surpass our understanding and so become part of our knowledge only because God reveals them. For some, the prophets and the Apostles for example, this revelation comes from God immediately; for others, the things of faith are proposed by God’s sending preachers of the faith.\textsuperscript{63}

We will remember that on the basis of the concept of intermediaries, God acts both directly and indirectly through the free will of an individual (that is, it is truly him that acts, but it is also truly the individual that acts of his own free will). With this notion in mind, one can say that whether God reveals himself directly, as to the prophets and apostles, or indirectly through preachers of the faith, he nevertheless, albeit paradoxically, always acts directly. He is as fully present in the mediated revelation as he is in unmediated revelation because all existence belongs to him. What this ultimately means, from Aquinas’s point of view, is that God and his creation are one. Thus God’s ‘prime-moving’ presence is always behind every movement that takes place in the natural world:

If we speak of grace in the sense of the assistance of God moving us towards the good, no preparation as it were anticipating the divine assistance is required on our part; rather, whatever preparation there might be in us derives from the assistance of God moving the soul towards the good. In this sense, that good movement of free choice itself, by which someone prepares to receive the gift of grace, is the action of a free choice moved by God [...]. The principal agent is God moving the free choice; and in this sense it is said that our will is prepared by God, and our steps are directed by the Lord.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Summa theologica, Ia.12.5, cited in Davies, p. 251.

\textsuperscript{63} Summa theologica, 2a2ae.6.I, cited in Davies, pp. 282-83.

\textsuperscript{64} 1a2ae.112.2., cited in Davies, p. 338. The biblical reference is to Prov. 8. 35 in the Vulgate.
Man’s ‘preparation’ for grace through his development of the moral virtues is not pointless, therefore, according to Aquinas, because our free actions are endowed by God with the capacity to bring events about. Divine providence, he says,

does not merely arrange what effects are to occur; it also arranges the causes of these effects and the relationships between them. And among other causes, some things are caused by human acts. So human beings have to do certain things, not so as to change God’s plans by their acts, but in order to bring about certain effects by their acts, according to the pattern planned by God. The same thing also applies to natural causes. Similarly in the case of prayer we do not pray in order to change God’s plan, but in order to obtain by our prayers those things which God planned to bring about by means of prayers, in order, as Gregory says, that our prayers should entitle us to receive what almighty God planned from all eternity to give us.65

The portrait of reality that emerges from Aquinas’s works is thus one that posits a paradoxical union of God and man which, like the human and divine person of Christ, does not involve a fusion of natures. For Aquinas, a key figure in the foundation of the tradition of thought that is the object of our inquiry, God is God and man is man, but man’s nature is nevertheless entirely embraced and supported by the divinity. His concept of God was to have a tremendous influence.

4. Ramon Lull

i) Lull’s Life

As we have already seen, Montaigne appears to have believed Ramon Lull (1232-1316), the medieval Catalan mystic and philosopher, to be the writer who moulded the essence of Aquinas’s views into a form that was then taken up and

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65 Summa theologica, 2a2ae.83.2, cited in Davies, p. 180. The reference to Gregory is to Dialogues, I, 8.
used by Raymond Sebond in the *Théologie naturelle*. Although modern scholarship on Lull tends not to focus on his use of Aquinas, it is clear from the central ideas in Lull’s work that Montaigne and his sources were right in noting Lull’s intellectual debt to Aquinas. Lull is a particularly interesting character with regard to the development of the concept of the hidden God through the philosophical tradition, not least because he applied the essence of the concept to the process of living. At every step his literary and philosophical work interconnects with his experiences, and vice-versa, reinforcing the reader’s sense of the importance, within the context of the tradition, of morality and ordinary living in the quest for knowledge of God. Lull’s *œuvre* as a whole can be described as a negative, natural theology, as we have seen it expressed in Maimonides and Aquinas, according to which the individual uses his own experience in the world as a ladder leading to God.

As a young man, living on the island of Majorca only recently liberated from Muslim rule (in 1229 by James I of Aragon), Lull underwent a conversion similar to that of St Paul and St Augustine. A flamboyant and dashing courtier with a passionate interest in women, Lull was one day composing a song for a woman with whom he had fallen in love when he had a vision of Christ on the cross. So real did this vision seem to him that he was severely shaken, and

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66 See above, section 1.
67 References to Aquinas in Lullian scholarship exist but are not numerous, critics preferring to examine other aspects of Lull’s work. E. Allison Peers writes the following on the subject of faith and reason in Lull: ‘his general position on this important subject is that of St Thomas Aquinas, who upheld apologetics and made use of “necessary reasons” to prove all but a few of the higher truths of Christianity’. See *Fool of Love: The Life of Ramon Lull* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1946), pp. 112-13.
continued to be so over the next few days as the vision recurred every time he attempted to carry on composing his song. Finally, he came to the conclusion that the visions were a message from God urging him to give up his worldly existence and surrender his life to him: 'our Lord God Jesus Christ desired none other thing than that he should wholly abandon the world and devote himself to His service'.

On the subject of his womanising, Lull writes:

I, Lord, have loved women many times, so much that neither night nor day was there anything in my heart but love of them. In my great folly, Lord, I took those things I loved as if they were gods, for I loved them as You should be loved.

As a direct result of his visions, Lull became a preacher, a missionary and a prolific writer whose aim was to convert the infidels (the Muslims and Jews) to Christianity by the use of reason and in the spirit of tolerance and respect. The same former Master General of the Dominican Order, St Ramon de Penyafort, who persuaded Aquinas to write the *Summa contra gentiles* (begun in 1258) had a profound influence on Lull (whom he met in about 1265), encouraging him to take part in public disputations between Jews, Muslims and Christians. It was in the course of debates such as these that Lull became closely acquainted with and profoundly influenced by Jewish and Muslim philosophy and mysticism. In 1274 Lull had what he believed was another direct encounter with the Holy Spirit.

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69 *A Life of Ramon Lull*, trans. by E. A. Peers (London: Burns, Oates & Company, 1927), cited in Peers, *Fool of Love*, pp. 10-13 (p. 13). Much of the biographical information about Lull in Peers and other critics is taken from this text, a contemporary Catalan biography of Lull (the author of which is unknown) written in about 1311. As Hillgarth mentions, this work 'is of great value since it was based on Lull's reminiscences as an old man' (p. 1).

70 *Libre de contemplaciô en Dèu: obres de Ramon Lull, ediciô original* (Mallorca, 1906-50), vol. II, Chap. 8, 39, cited in Hillgarth p. 34.


72 Hillgarth, pp. 5-6.
while he was meditating in a cave on Mount Randa in Majorca. It was at this moment that he conceived his ‘Art’, an essential truth or system identical with the pattern of reality that enables one, so he believed, to resolve all questions by human reason. On the basis of this ‘revelation’ and the almost inexhaustible series of works resulting from it that developed the notion of revelation through reason, Lull became known as the ‘Doctor Illuminatus’.

Lull’s works were widely diffused in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He wrote in Catalan, Arabic and Latin and often translated his own works from one language into another. A significant number of his texts were published in Latin translation in Paris. The impact that Lull’s works made on sixteenth-century writers in France is attested to by the appearance, in 1533, of a commentary on the Ars brevis by Henry Cornelius Agrippa (H. C. Agrippae in artem brevem R. L. commentaria).

ii) Lull’s ‘Art’

In his Desconort Lull describes the ‘Art’ that he believes was revealed to him in the following manner:

Encore vous dis-je que je possède un Art général, nouvellement donné par un don de l’Esprit, grâce auquel on peut savoir toute chose naturelle, en tant que l’entendement atteint les choses des sens; bon pour le droit, et pour la médecine, et pour toute science, et pour la théologie, laquelle m’est plus au cœur. A résoudre questions aucun art tant ne vaut, ni a détruire erreurs par raison naturelle.

74 Among them the following: Liber contemplationis (Jabobus Stapulensis, 1505), Libellus Blaquene de Amico e Amato (J. Stapulensis, 1516), Metaphysica nova (Bernardus a Lavinheta, 1516), Proverbia (J. Stapulensis, 1516), Ars cabbalistica (A. E. Gorbincum, 1578) and Liber de articulis fidei (A. E. Gorbincum, 1578).
In essence, the ‘Art’ consists of matching patterns found in created reality to the patterns of the ‘Dignities’ or attributes of God that express or manifest the divine being in created form. When Lull first saw the ‘Art’ in his vision on Mount Randa it consisted initially of two letters: A and T. ‘A’ represented the hidden centre of God’s infinite being, ‘namely Essentia, Unitas, Perfectio’\textsuperscript{76}, while ‘T’ represented the outward manifestation of ‘A’ in the created world.\textsuperscript{77} In its more developed form, the ‘Dignities’ — Goodness, Greatness, Eternity, Power, Wisdom, Will (or Love), Virtue, Truth and Glory — are identified by letters (BCDEFGHIK) and it is through the combination of these letters on geometrical patterns (matching the ‘outer’ patterns of the divinity with the ‘inner’ ones) that the solutions to problems, according to Lull, are found.\textsuperscript{78} For Lull, therefore, God is present in his creation in the same direct manner that we saw him to be present for Aquinas:

God, in so far as He can be known to man, consists, for Lull, of a series of essential attributes, which also form the absolute principles of the \textit{Art}. The Lullian Dignities [...] are the instruments of God’s creative activity, the causes and archetypes of all created perfection. The Lullian world is one of analogy and symbols, a translucent universe in which the least thing is a living token of the presence of God. The essence of the \textit{Art} [...] consist[s] [...] in the metaphysical reduction of all created things to the Dignities, transcendental aspects of reality, and in the comparison of particular things in the light of the Dignities.\textsuperscript{79}

Lull also follows Aquinas on the manner in which God’s essence has its effect on the created world, namely via the channel of intermediaries or an intermediary realm or mode of being. Again we find that the aim here is to maintain God’s transcendence while at the same time ensuring his immanence.

\textsuperscript{76} Yates, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{78} Hillgarth, pp. 10-11.
In the following passage Lull explains by analogy that it is the Dignities that are at work behind the effect of the stars and astrological signs on the created world through 'similitudes'. They pour their Goodness, Power and other qualities into the world in a process that is strikingly similar to Aquinas's account of the influx of grace in the individual, which subsists alongside his or her free will:

The seal which imprints the similitudes of its letters on the wax pours its influence into the similitudes which are not of the essence of the seal. For the seal does not put anything of its essence into the wax; for the letters which are on the seal are of its essence and do not leave it. Similarly, signs and planets do not transmit to inferior bodies anything, either substantially or accidentally, of their essential properties and natures; but they imprint on them their similitudes which are the influences which they transmit to the inferiors. And those influences are drawn from potentiality into action from the qualities in the inferior substances, through the superior substances [...] And the similitudes or influences which are transmitted from the superiors are the similitudes of bonitas, magnitudo, and of the other principles of the heaven, which move the inferior substances so that they become in act those letters which they have in them in potentiality. As Sol, who by his great splendour, in summer multiplies greater heat in fire; and as Luna, who by her waxing and waning makes fountains, rivers, and the menstrue in women to increase and decrease. 80

This notion of the divinity being wholly in the world without its transcendence being compromised is developed further in this text, the *Tractatus novus de astronomia*, through the idea of proper and appropriated qualities. The proper qualities of the signs and planets are, Lull explains, *bonitas, magnitudo* and the other Dignities, while the appropriated qualities are the individual characteristics of the signs and planets, for example, the badness of Saturn or the goodness of Jupiter. It is this feature of reality that makes it possible for Goodness and the...

79 Hillgarth, p. 10.
other Dignities to be entirely present in a world of imperfections and for harmony to encase and suffuse the discordant tones of misguided human action.\(^81\)

Lull may be talking in astrological terms in this treatise, but the very essence of his Art is that these basic principles be applied to all sciences and human concerns, including moral philosophy. His literary work is testimony to his belief that the principles of the Art must be applied to everyday life if the individual is to know God. Thus in his encyclopaedic novel, *Felix or the Libre de meravelles* (c.1284), Lull exchanges the language of science for that of human experience, explaining (to Felix and to the reader) through the character of the King's son, that the elemental processes can be compared with those by which justice engenders charity in a sinful man. Felix is told that the engendering of the Son by the Father in the real process of the Trinity can be compared with God's gift of virtue to the elements so that they might engender their like.\(^82\) The lesson he is being taught in the book reduces to the notion that God reveals himself at every level of creation and in every form of being that exists:

The transitions from elemental theory to law and ethics, and to theology – which seem to the King's son to arise so obviously from the philosopher's lecture on the elements – occur again and again in the books which follow on plants, metals, beasts, and man. In these books, Felix is being led to contemplate the *bonitas, magnitudo, virtus* and other attributes of God as revealed in different forms on the steps of the ladder of creation. \[\ldots\] And this revelation demonstrates to him the truth of the Incarnation and the Trinity.\(^83\)

In practical terms, therefore, the principles of the Art teach the individual how to attune himself to the harmonious frequency of the universe (that of


\(^82\) See Yates, p. 35. This Catalan text can be found in the series *Els nostres clàssicos*, ed. by S. Galmès (Barcelona, 1931). The section of it cited here is in vol. II, Bk. IV, Chap. 20, pp. 11-12.

\(^83\) Yates, pp. 35-36.
goodness) by increasing the amount of virtue possessed and decreasing the amount of vice. In his novel *Blanquerna*, for example, where Blanquerna becomes Pope, one of his first actions is to appoint a teacher whose office is ‘to show by means of nature how man could mortify within himself the vices, and strengthen the virtues’. Lull’s art effectively involves immersing oneself in the ‘elemental’ realm, the invisible world connecting the divine and human dimensions of reality from within which the causes of concrete reality can be known and concrete reality itself modified (vice changed into virtue, for example). In the *Liber de Ascensu et Descensu Intellectus* (1305), the intellect is shown to be able to ascend or descend the ladder of creation composed of the following levels: *Flamma, Planta, Brutum, Homo, Coelum, Angelus, Deus*. In one example Lull maintains that the intellect is able to descend into the operation of the stone jasper and can deduce the fact that the cause of its power to staunch the flow of blood is the natural *bonitas, magnitudo* and other qualities underlying jasper and Saturn, its mediating agents. Thus Lull goes below the appearances of the world of nature to its underlying structure, which for him is elemental astrology, and makes that the fundamental *exemplum* through which he calculates the metaphors and so demonstrates the moral and mystical truths.

It was most probably the ninth-century Irishman, John Scotus Erigena, whose work *De divisione naturae* had the greatest influence on Lull’s thinking here.

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85 This text was included in a Latin collection of Lull’s works that was published at Valencia in 1512.
87 Yates, p. 55.
88 See Yates, *Lull and Bruno*, Chapter 2, ‘Ramon Lull and John Scotus Erigena’, for extensive evidence of Lull’s use of Erigena. It is also highly probable, however, that the Jewish Kabbalah influenced him too, for the ideas in question are strikingly similar and it is known that Lull came
Eriugena’s physics were formed on the basis of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the only original Platonic text to which he had access, a point of interest in the context of Montaigne’s use of the *Timaeus* in the ‘Apologie’. According to Eriugena, the elements in their ‘inform’ state are the direct link between the primordial causes and nature: ‘[the elements], or [...] the ‘ideas’ of the elements, are the intermediary between the primordial causes and the whole of creation’.  

However useful Lull considered his ‘Art’ to be, however, he did not intend it to be a closed scientific system. Like Aquinas, he conceived the universe to be held in being by God and therefore wished his art to serve the divine objective of bringing all things back into harmony with the original divine pattern of Goodness and the other Dignities.

iii) *The ‘Art’ in the service of love of God*

The pattern that we saw to be central to the work of Maimonides and Aquinas - whereby the divinity manifests itself outwardly in the form of creation without blurring the distinction between its own inner essence and the existence of the created world - is at the heart of Lull’s writings. It is this fundamental pattern that enables Lull to say that ‘the divine nature does not receive any alteration in the conjunction which it makes with the human nature’ and ‘the human nature is exalted in receiving the divine nature through concordance’. Elsewhere, on the relationship between the individual and God, he says that

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into contact with the Kabbalah in Spain; see Yates p. 6 and pp. 111-12, and Hillgarth, p. 18.

89 For Eriugena’s use of the ‘Timaean’ physics followed by Augustine and many other Fathers of the Church, see Yates, p. 93. For Montaigne’s use of the *Timaeus* in the ‘Apologie’, see Chapter 5, section 3.

90 Yates, p. 93.

Love and loving, Lover and Beloved are so straitly united in the Beloved that they are one actuality in Essence. And Lover and Beloved are entities distinct, which agree without contrariety or diversity of essence. Wherefore the Beloved is to be loved above all other objects of affection.\textsuperscript{92}

The reference to love in this last quotation is highly instructive, because for Lull, as for Aquinas and Maimonides, love is the means by which one can know God and experience him directly. Or more specifically, love of the creatures in the service of God is the means to reach him, as the following verse illustrates:

The bird sang in the garden of the Beloved. The Lover came, and he said to the bird: ‘if we understand not one another in speech, we may make ourselves understood by love; for in thy song I see my Beloved before mine eyes’.\textsuperscript{93}

This is so, from Lull’s point of view, because God is love – ‘wherefore is He to be loved?, Because He is Love itself’ – and because it is on God’s command that he be loved not directly, but through the creatures:

They asked the Lover where his love first began. He answered: ‘it began in the glories of my Beloved; and from that beginning I was led to love my neighbour even as myself, and to cease to love deception and falsehood’.\textsuperscript{94}

In one of the most moving verses of the \textit{Book of the Lover and the Beloved}, Lull creates a powerful visual scene that encapsulates the essence of his negative theology. It is cited here in the French translation, which captures something of the beauty of Lull’s poetry:

Le cœur de l’Ami monta aux hauteurs de son Aimé, pour ne pas être embarrassé de l’aimer dans l’abîme de ce Monde, et quand il fut avec son Aimé, il le contempla avec douceur et plaisir. Mais l’Aimé le fit

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Blanquerna}, trans. by Peers, p. 415, v. 27.
descendre jusqu'à ce Monde, afin qu'il le contemplât avec les tribulations et les peines que procure l'Amour.⁹⁵

However, for the individual to love God through the world, he or she must have the right intention; that is, the world must be loved not for its own sake but because it is God’s creation. This is the notion behind Lull’s doctrine of the Two Intentions, which had a significant influence on the writers following the hidden God tradition. In the Liber de prima et secunda intentione, Lull addresses his son, using his customary scientific analogies to demonstrate that in knowing the world, one’s first intention must be to know God:

Dear son, [...] each element [...] has a First Intention towards its own quality and a Second Intention towards that of another element [...]. And what the elements do through First and Second Intention I counsel thee, son, to take as an example (exemplum), so that using Intention with the virtues against the vices, thou mayest have a First Intention towards God above all things.⁹⁶

The world that Lull creates in his numerous literary works is a world that speaks to the seeker after wisdom at every turn, demonstrating to him the divine source of its being. His allegorical forests are alive with sheep who kneel, shed tears and raise their eyes to heaven, with nightingales that summarise his other works, with characters such as the past and future tense lodging together in an inn and with the battle between the gold and emerald in a ring.⁹⁷

The omnipresent force in his novels is that of the Holy Spirit, which is often personified in the role of Love. In the spirit of the doctrine of Christian folly - which, as we will see, is central to Montaigne’s and Charron’s

⁹⁷ In the Tree of Science (c. 1295), cited in Peers, Fool of Love, p. 75.
interpretation of the concept of the hidden God - this guiding and nurturing figure inspires the individual with the 'madness' that is required to reverse the intention with which he loves (so that he loves first God and then the world). In the *Tree of the Philosophy of Love*, the 'Lover' of the story falls seriously ill and is visited by the Physician of love who

> found that [he] had need of a medicine which should give him frenzy, that love might cause him to speak as a fool, for they that speak of love in manners most like to those of fools are they that are in truth the sanest. So the Physician compounded a medicine of the roots of the tree of love, that it might be very potent, and gave it to the Lover, bidding him drink it for love of his Beloved.\(^8\)

The relationship between the individual and love (the Holy Spirit) in Lull’s works takes place in the intimate setting of the mind of the individual. For Lull, love is the guide within one’s own being upon which one can call and with which one can converse freely and openly: ‘Love came to the Lover, who asked him: “what wilt thou?” And Love replied “I have come to thee that I may nurture and direct thy life”’.\(^9\)

In keeping with the Augustinian tradition developed in particular by St Anselm and St Bonaventura, Lull presents nature itself as a book that reveals God’s being.\(^10\) The stories that Lull writes can be said to represent the way in which the seeker after wisdom travels across the landscape of the divine mind through his own experience, finding God at any given point on the circle of divine being. For Lull, as for the other writers in the tradition, faith is always supreme, while reason or the understanding is raised or illuminated by means of

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\(^10\) See Yates, p. 62. The Augustinian text at the heart of this tradition is the *De trinitate*. 
it. From the individual’s perspective, the means to carry out faith, Lull maintains, is to surrender one’s reason to God so that this illumination may take place:

As one that was a fool went the Lover through a city, singing of his Beloved; and men asked him if he had lost his wits. ‘My Beloved,’ he answered, ‘has taken my will, and I myself have yielded up to Him my understanding; so that there is left in me naught but memory, wherewith I remember my Beloved.’\(^1\)

5. **Raimond Sebond/Ramon Sibiuda**

i) **Sebond and Montaigne’s translation and interpretation of his work**

In sharp contrast to Ramon Lull, very little is known about Raimond Sebond (end 14\(^{th}\) century-1436), the Catalan theologian who wrote the text that Montaigne was to translate for his father over a century later, the *Théologie naturelle*.\(^2\) Indeed, besides a few biographical details, Sebond is known to the modern world almost exclusively through Montaigne’s appropriation and defence of his ideas in the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’. Sebond is thought to have been born in Gerona or in Barcelona in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. He taught theology and medicine at the University of Toulouse, where he held the post of rector in 1428 and 1435. It was there that he wrote the *Theologia naturalis*, or *Liber creaturarum* as it is otherwise known, which he finished on 11 February 1436, just a few weeks before his death. The first edition of the work was published in Lyon by Johannes Siber in 1484, and a second edition followed one year later,

\(^1\) ‘The Book of the Lover and the Beloved’, *Blanquerna*, p. 419, v. 54.

\(^2\) Montaigne published his translation of the book in 1569, about 2 years before beginning to write the *Essais*. The full title of the work is *La théologie naturelle de Raymond Sebon, docteur excellent entre les modernes, en laquelle par l’ordre de nature est démontrée la vérité de la foy christienne et catholique*. 

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published in Deventer.103 Over the next fifty years the Theologia Naturalis was rapidly diffused, nine more Latin editions appearing in northern Europe.104

It is widely recognised that Sebond was heavily influenced by Lull, whose geometrical patterns and calculations he left aside in order to focus on the basic principles underlying Lull’s art.105 Rather than focus on the similarities that can be traced from Lull (and previously from Maimonides and Aquinas) through Sebond to Montaigne, some modern scholars see a rupture in the transmission of ideas from Sebond to Montaigne on the subject of human reason. Robert Aulotte, for example, writes that

Après quelques pages consacrées effectivement à la réfutation des objections faites aux idées de Sebond, Montaigne occupe les neuf-dixièmes de son essai à se livrer à une critique mordante de cette même raison humaine à laquelle Sebond avait accordé une si large confiance dans son traité, à remettre en question une idée cardinale de la Théologie naturelle, celle de la royauté de l’homme, fondée sur sa vocation spirituelle.106

It is certainly true that Montaigne toned down Sebond’s claims for the capacity of human reason to find truth, both in his rewriting of the Prologue of the Theologia naturalis, which was placed on the Index in 1564, and in his tempering of other passages in the rest of the work, which had been temporarily condemned in 1559. However, the evidence from the works of both authors suggests that Montaigne was in agreement with Sebond’s fundamental principles as they are

104 Two in Strasbourg (1496 and 1501), one in Cologne (1499), one in Nuremberg (1502), one in Paris (1509) and four in Lyon (1507, 1526, 1540, 1541). See Aulotte, Montaigne, pp. 21-22.
understood in the light of the tradition that he (Montaigne) himself signals to the reader.

**ii) Sebond’s concept of God**

It is clear at a glance that Sebond’s God is the hidden and self-revealing God of the tradition we have examined in this chapter: he is simple, all-encompassing and infinite: ‘tout ce qui est en luy est une mesme chose avec son estre: son estre est toutes choses, et toutes choses sont son estre’.\(^{107}\) Sebond makes extensive use of St Anselm’s ontological argument throughout the text. On the basis that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived (the basic argument in Chapter 2 of the *Proslogium*), he writes:

> Or puisqu’être est meilleur que ne pas être, il faut d’abord affirmer que Dieu est, et non de n’importe quelle manière, mais en plénitude infinie. C’est pourquoi il est impensable que Dieu n’existe pas.\(^{108}\)

We can see from this quotation, however, that Sebond was also aware of Anselm’s fully developed argument (presented in Chapter 3 of the *Proslogium*), whereby there are two modes of divine being: that of God, who cannot be conceived not to exist, and that of created things which can be conceived not to exist:

> So truly, therefore, dost thou exist, O Lord, my God, that thou canst not be conceived not to exist. And, indeed, whatever else there is, except thee alone, can be conceived not to exist. To thee alone, therefore, it belongs

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\(^{107}\) *La théologie naturelle* (trans. by Montaigne), fol. 15\(^{v}\). Page references to this edition (1569) will appear in the text.

to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others.\textsuperscript{109}

This notion is fundamental to Sebond's entire text. What results from it is a portrait of infinite, divine being that is somehow circular: whichever point on the circle of God's being one picks, there is always an inner and an outer layer, the outer, contingent layer subsisting through the inner, eternal layer which it manifests outwardly. For Sebond, the inner layer is invisible, being perceived only by the mind, while the outer layer is visible and tangible to the senses: 'or d'autant que Dieu est tout esprit et tout ame, il ne peut estre compris, ou aperceu que par l'intelligence' (fol. 35\textsuperscript{r}). Both layers of being are God according to this concept, physical objects being the concrete manifestation of God's ideas:

Or y a il double essence en toutes les creatures, l'une est en elles et en leur propre nature, et celle là nous la voions: l'autre est en l'essence de Dieu, laquelle nous ne pouvons veoir: tout ainsi qu'en une maison il y a double estre, l'un en sa propre nature qui se montre exterieurement, l'autre en l'entendement de l'ouvrier qui l'a bastie, laquelle nous est occulte. (fol. 20\textsuperscript{r})

Sebond is emphatic that these two modes of being, the immutable and the contingent, are united in God's paradoxical being despite their contrary natures:

Mais d'autant que l'estre extérieur des creatures, lequel elles ont en leur propre nature, est muable, finy et corruptible, et qu'à l'opposite nous avons presupposé celuy de Dieu immuable, eternel et indivisible, il s'ensuit que leur estre visible n'est en l'essence de Dieu, car Dieu n'est pas la terre, l'eau, et le feu, que nous voions; toutefois puis-que nous avons des-ja gagné que son estre est tout estre, et que rien ne peut estre hors de lui, il nous reste necessairement à conclure qu'il y a un autre estre des choses, outre le leur propre, par le moyen duquel elles sont en Dieu, semblable à celuy de la maison qui est en l'esprit de l'architecte: [...] Areston donc que l'estre de Dieu a de toute eternité en soy l'estre de toutes les creatures [...], ne faisant qu'un avec son estre. (fol. 20\textsuperscript{r})

\textsuperscript{109} St Anselm, \textit{Basic Writings}, p. 55.
He explains that God comes out of himself in this way in order to communicate the greatness of his nature to another being (man, the conscious representative of all other forms of created being), his intention being to ‘produire le monde en la maniere qui plus pourroit manifester, et faire luyre la divinité et la grandeur de son essence, et la difference qui est entre elle, et celle qui a esté produite’ (fol. 25°). In order to be noticed and glorified, therefore, and to pass his being on to others - ‘ains pour se donner par communication à un autre estre hors de soy’ - God created ‘de rien un estre nouveau, afin que cest estre créé participast au sien eternel’ (fol. 26°).110 Following closely in the hidden God tradition, Sebond also incorporates the notion of God’s being overflowing into created things and flowing directly from these to other created things: ‘ce qu’il a donné à chasque chose, il l’a donné à fin qu’elle le peut redonner à une autre’ (fol. 46°).

iii) Sebond’s negative theology

Having established, therefore, that eternal, immutable being and finite, contingent being are together embraced by the infinity that is God, Sebond is able to present the central argument of the concept of the hidden God: that God is known not through his essence, but negatively through the creatures. The analogy that he chooses to represent this idea belongs to the tradition that appears to have begun with Maimonides’s figurative references to Exodus 33. Speaking of the divinity’s two modes of being, Sebond says,

>Ces deux estres servent donc comme de deux lumières à nostre entendement: l’une eternelle et perpetuelle, qui est Dieu: l’autre creée et nouvelle, qui est le monde: et les rayons de celle-cy font les creatures.

110 The fact that the world is created ex-nihilo, a central theme in the hidden God tradition, represents the contingency of the created world next to the eternal and immutable nature of God’s essence.
As with the sun, he continues, we cannot look upon the brilliance of God directly, and since we are

empeschés par la tendresse des yeux de nos entendemens, de pouvoir pendant que nous sommes ça bas, contempler vis à vis, et de droit fil l’esclairante et lumineuse grandeur de l’estre de Dieu, il faut que l’estre du monde nous serve de passage et de moyen par où nous puissions conduire et pousser nostre veuë iusques à ce grand et resplandissant miroir de l’essence de Dieu, et comme d’une ombre, au travers de laquelle ainsi que nous faisons regardans le soleil nous montions jusques à la haute et divine consideration de nostre creator. (fol. 28°)

It is on the basis of this argument that Sebond presents his theme of the book of nature, according to which ‘Dieu a basti les creatures comme il a revelé ses escritures’ (fol. 3°):

Dieu nous a donné deux livres, celuy de l’universel ordre des choses ou de la nature, et celuy de la Bible. Cestuy-là nous fut donné premier, et des l’origine du monde: car chaque creature n’est que comme une lettre, tirée par la main de Dieu. De façon que d’une grande multitude de creatures, come d’un nombre de lettres, ce livre a esté composé, dans lequel l’homme se trouve et en est la lettre capitale et principale. [...] Les creatures joinctes ensemble et accouplées l’une à l’autre emportent diverses propositions et divers sens, et contiennent la science qui nous est necessaire avant toute autre’. (fol. 3°)

In the course of the Théologie naturelle, Sebond explains how by combining the ‘letters’ of the creation - that is by considering man in relation to the other creatures at one end of the chain of being and to God at the other - one comes to learn the infinite greatness and goodness of God who is master and creator of all things. For example, by observing the differences between ourselves and the animals - the gift of free will and reason bestowed only on humans - we are humbled, Sebond says, at the evidence of God’s greatness and liberality and inspired to feel joyful and grateful towards him (fols. 64°-67°). Similarly, the fact that, unlike us, the creatures are already in tune with the law of the universe (nature) - ‘car leur devoir et leur faire s’entre respondent
continuellement’ (fol. 268") - enables us to see how all creatures, ourselves included, are obliged ‘par un expres commandement de nature [...] non à s’endommager et offenser, mais à s’agrandir et embellir, à conserver et amender leur nature’ (fols. 72^1-73^1). By considering the similarities between ourselves and the other creatures - the creaturehood that we share and the intricate interconnections linking all parts of the universe - man comes from a different angle to the same conclusion, Sebond says. He realises that there is an infinitely powerful and intelligent creator whose simple being encompasses all other things (fols. 58^2-60^2): ‘encore semble-il que l’argument que nous pouvons tirer de l’unité de la matière de laquelle sont composez les corps, tant des hommes que des arbres et animaux, nous pousse plus vivement à croire l’unité d’un createur’ (fol. 60').

The perspective on the universe that Sebond presents to the reader is that of man, therefore, and human reason is the lens through which we are invited to view the world. It is clear from the text, however, that Sebond’s aim is to demonstrate not the greatness of man, as some critics have assumed, but the supremacy of God:

Rien n’est plus étranger à notre auteur que le désir de faire de l’homme un absolu [...]. L’homme chez Sebond est le centre de la création, mais un ‘centre centré’. Il est mesure de toute chose, mais ‘mesure mesurée’ comme le démontrera Nicolas de Cuse (De Mente, V) [...]. En effet, puisque Dieu a créé l’homme à son image et ressemblance, celui-ci est miroir vivant et conscient de toutes les créatures dépourvues de conscience. ‘Il lui suffit d’être homme sous le regard de Dieu pour que Dieu et son œuvre se reflètent en lui’.111

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Sebond's apparent rationalism and homocentricity are further put into context when it is noted that, as for Lull, the way to reach God, according to Sebond, is to love him by loving his creatures. In doing so, he explains, man will accord his nature with the divine law of the universe, which is love itself:

Or la generale boucle et commun fermeil de ceste riche enchaineure et union du monde, c'est l'amour. L'amour est la perfection et consommation de ce bel ordre. C'en est le commencement et la fin. L'amour de Dieu a premierement ordonné les creatures pour l'homme, et l'homme apres par l'amour s'unist et s'attache à Dieu. (fol. 128°)

Embedded in this argument are Lull's doctrine of the two intentions and Aquinas's notion of the transformation of the lover into the object of his love.

Before turning to God, Sebond says, we love the world for its own sake: 'nous aymons premierement les choses inferieures pour la beauté qui est en elles, pour le service que nous en recevons, et quand tout est dit nous les aymons à cause de nous' (fol. 135°). As a result we are debased by what we love: '[nostre volonté] s'estrange de sa nature [...] elle se bannist de son propre domicile à la suite de son amour, pour loger en terre estrangere [...] sterille et infertille' (fol. 139°).

But when we have been up to God and come back down the ladder to creation,

nous les aymons à la contemplation de nostre creator, par ce qu'il les a faictes et par ce qu'elles sont siennes: voir nous ne nous aymons nous-mesmes que d'autant que nous sommes siens. (fol.135°)

Thus, when we make ourselves transparent, emptying ourselves of our nature, God is able to act through us, Sebond says, and hence to grow and communicate his being in accordance with his original intention:

C'est luy qui produict et qui engendre l'affection que nous portons à toutes les creatures, et à tout ce qui est à Dieu, c'est par la force et fertilité de ce seul amour que toutes choses sont aymées, et il n'y en a nulle qui ne le soit. Voila comme il croit et s'amplifie sans mesure. (fol. 135°)
Sebond explains that man’s will (the liberal arbitre, or faculty through which man loves and reasons) is itself ‘au dessus de toutes les creatures’: it is ‘le siege du seul creator’ (fol. 108') and the means through which God may act through his creatures when they, by their own free will, have turned towards him:

Voila donc le liberal arbitre fait siege et domicile de son Dieu, sa saincte majesté doit seule commander en luy, y doit presider et y exercer sa sacrosaincte authorité. Voyez comme de prés et immediatement nous l’avons attaché et joinct à Dieu, comme il n’y a rien plus voisin de nostre creator que nostre liberal arbitre, comme il le touche, porte et soutient. De vray la grande excellence et perfection que nous tirons à cause de luy procede de ce qu’il a cest honneur d’estre fait perpetuel et immortel siege de Dieu. (fol. 108')

Aquinas’s notion, which was also used by Lull, that God’s grace is the first cause of all human actions is easily identified in these passages of the Théologie naturelle. Sebond’s overriding concern is to show that reason is the means by which we can make the right decision when faced with the choice between loving the world for its own sake and loving God through the world. But it is presupposed by Sebond that reason is only capable of making the right decision because God acts through it: ‘[nostre volonté] se coule tres-aisément vers l’amour de nous, et s’y repose sans l’aide d’autruy: mais elle ne peut venir à l’amour de Dieu, n’y s’y tenir si quelque autre ne luy preste la main’ (fol. 186').

iv) From theology to psychology

While it is clear that Sebond is following the hidden God tradition extremely closely in the Théologie naturelle, it also becomes apparent that he is particularly original and creative in the domain of man’s psychological experience of God’s presence in his life. Morality is an important aspect of the concept of the hidden

112 These words must be considered next to those of Montaigne at the end of the ‘Apologie’: ‘ny
God in Maimonides, Aquinas and Lull, but Sebond makes it the main focus of his text in a way that Montaigne, in particular, was later to appreciate. Through his notion of the *liberal arbitre*, Sebond has already established that man and God are directly linked and that it is God who orchestrates man's knowledge of him. The next step that Sebond takes is to state that man can actually feel the presence of God's intelligence in his own intellect and emotions and that he can make use of this presence to make decisions about how he should act in his daily affairs. For this to happen, man must turn his mental gaze in on himself through the practice of self-knowledge. Sebond explains:

D'autant que nul ouvrage de Dieu n'est si prochain à l'homme qu'il est à soymesme, la science que l'homme bastira par la cognoissance de soy, qui est l'un des ouvrages de Dieu, sera plus grande que nulle autre [...]. La cognoissance que nous tiron par ce que l'experience nous a monstre, est bien plus certaine que celle que nous tiron de ce que nous avons ouy dire [...]. Et veu que nous ne sçavons rien si bien que ce que nous sentons et voions, la notice de Dieu establie en nous, par ce que nous voyons et sentons est au dernier point d'asseurance et de certitude. (fols. 215^f^-15^v^)

According to this important passage, what we see and feel is God's consciousness within us. For Sebond, therefore, the individual knows God directly through the actions that the divinity carries out through his (the individual's) experience: ‘c'est vrayement cognostre Dieu que de sentir et veoir par experience les operations qu'il faict en moy’ (fol. 216^v^).
In practical terms, knowing God through experience involves always choosing God rather than not God; that is, choosing to adhere to the divine law of goodness (being) rather than the path of evil (non-being) (fols. 73\textsuperscript{v}-75\textsuperscript{v}). Thus, according to the natural law which states that ‘chasque chose se doit naturellement pourchasser son bien et éviter son dommage’ (fol. 72\textsuperscript{v}), Sebond says, ‘il faut apprendre un art d’affermer et de nier, d’advouër et de contredire, qui puisse engendrer en nous une constante resolution et asseurance’ (fol. 71\textsuperscript{v}). The logic is quite simple, he tells us: adhering to the natural and divine laws ensures our own happiness, while not doing so causes us misery and pain (fol. 71\textsuperscript{v}).

We can see from these extracts that Sebond’s concept of reason blends together man’s natural contribution to his knowledge of God and God’s underlying, ‘prime-moving’ force of grace in much the same way that Aquinas sometimes merged grace and nature into the single concept of nature. Sebond’s notion of experience or reason as a mode of knowing does not, however, push grace out of the picture; rather it posits the existence of an intimate relationship between man and God, which takes place within the individual’s own being.\textsuperscript{114} Within this context, the influence of grace is conceived in the form of a ‘second-degree’ reason, ‘une sorte de raison naturelle profonde, […] d’attention du sujet à soi-même, qui, en censurant la raison du savoir, ouvre en même temps un espace au monde du merveilleux.’\textsuperscript{115} Sebond maintains that man’s rational knowledge

\textsuperscript{114} Jaume de Puig writes of Sebond’s notion of experience: ‘dans son degré suprême, l’expérience est un savoir intime, inébranlable, exclusivement personnel, mais objectif […], sur la valeur de laquelle on ne saurait plus douter, même dans le cas où cette connaissance apporterait des données dépassant l’ordre de notre raison’; see his ‘L’impensable rationnel dans le Liber creaturarum de Raimond Sebond’, in Montaigne: Apologie, ed. by Blum, pp. 69-84 (pp. 79-80).
\textsuperscript{115} Jaume Casals Pons, ‘Sur le second degré de l’”Apologie”’, in Montaigne: Apologie, ed. by Blum, pp. 187-200 (p. 198). The author identifies this second-degree reason with Montaigne’s concept of judgement: ‘nous savons, surtout après l’étude de R. C. la Charité’ - The Concept of
of God (in its wider sense of 'experience') is the aim of God’s growth outside himself through the creation of the world. By virtue of their complementary natures, Sebond explains, man and God can grow together through man’s growing consciousness of God’s omnipresence:

Dieu ne peut croistre interieurement, car il est infiniment et souverainement parfaict, mais il le peut exterieurement et hors de soy. La creature ne peut croistre qu’au dedans de soy et interieurement [...] Il a donc fait sa creature raisonnable pour croistre en elle, c’est à dire à fin qu’une nouvelle coignoissance et notice de soy s’engendrast en sa creature. [...] Il s’ensuit qu’ensemble et tout en un coup et Dieu croist hors de soy en l’homme, et l’homme croist en soy de Dieu et en Dieu et que ce n’est qu’une mesme accroissance’. (fols. 205*-06*)

As this passage makes clear, however, the growth is ultimately one single growth, that of the supremely paradoxical – transcendent and immanent – divinity.

v) Philosophy in the context of Christianity

In the second part of the Théologie naturelle, which is devoted entirely to a presentation of Christian doctrines that are in harmony with the rational assertions in the first part, Sebond follows the pattern of the concept of the hidden God in its movement from reason to faith. The figure of Christ, whose simultaneously divine and human nature represents and enacts the union of man with God, is central to this part of the text. Sebond’s concern here is to show how the individual can participate in the redemption of mankind personally and directly by applying the metaphor of Christ’s being to his own life. He explains this idea by saying that

En mourant [...] si franchement, luy qui estoit naturellement immortel, en donnant une vie si excellente au dessus de la nostre, il semble nous trainer
par la main au mespris des dangiers et de tous mauvais accidens, et nous pousser à ne faire nul compte de ceste chetive et miserable vie qui est en nous, au pris de nostre devoir et de l’obligation que nous avons à l’obeissance de Dieu. (fol. 335°)

Sebond identifies the practising of Christ’s death in this way with the death of the part of the individual that cleaves first to the world before cleaving to God. It is this reversal of the human and divine roles, he says, which constitutes an infringement of the divine law according to which spirit rules over matter: ‘n’est-ce pas un estrange desordre en luy [l’homme] que la partie immortelle, incorruptible, spirituelle et image de son createur serve la terrestre, grossiere, caducque et perissable? (fol. 288°). According to Sebond, man can further put Christ’s death into practice in his own life by the use of his imagination and memory. Since the event itself has passed,

les hommes ne le peuvent prendre et recevoir qu’en leur imagination et memoire: c’est par là que [...] l’homme [...] fait sienne la grace et vertu de Jesus Christ toujours vivant et etemel. C’est la mort, que produict et fait en soy nostre memoire, qui nous rend immortels, et qui nous vivifie. (fol. 376°)

By redefining the context surrounding the arguments which constitute the concept of the hidden God - from rational evidence that can be used to convert non-Christians to Christianity to rational evidence that supports the truth and supremacy of Catholicism over other forms of Christianity - Sebond takes the concept into the next phase of its development. In his hands the medieval arguments designed to be carried on missions and crusades overseas, or to convert those non-Christians living in Christian lands, are transformed into a tool that will be used at the cutting-edge of the Reformation.

Before considering the next stage of the hidden God tradition, in which Montaigne and Charron interpret and mould the concept in new ways, we must
return to the Middle Ages in order to trace another current of mystical-
philosophical thinking which strongly influenced its growth: the tradition of the
Jewish Kabbalah.
Chapter 2

The Influence of Jewish Mysticism on the concept of the hidden God

1. Kabbalah, Christianity and the spiritual interpretation of religious truths

In the last chapter we saw that those authors writing within the Christian tradition were particularly influenced by Aquinas's notion, drawn from the Pauline Epistles, of a new era in which people would act morally from the heart rather than according to the letter of the divine law. The law in question is of course the Jewish law, which was perceived as having been superseded by the new, spiritual law of the Christian religion. In this chapter I propose to examine the mystical Jewish tradition of the Kabbalah, a tradition which appears to have strongly influenced the development of the concept of the hidden God in its articulation of a figurative understanding of religious ideas or principles. Given that the Kabbalah is the object of a vast amount of research in its own right, this study will seek only to examine the development of its central ideas in the light of its influence on the French moral tradition. Attention will be focused for the most part on the theme of morality as a means of knowing God which links this mystical tradition with the philosophical tradition examined in the previous chapter.

As we will see in the course of this chapter, Maimonides and Sebond appear to be particularly closely connected with the Kabbalistic tradition. This may also be true in the case of Lull, although some controversy surrounds his
relationship with Jewish mysticism.¹ The picture that emerges from the interconnections between the Christian and Jewish traditions is that of an historical period profoundly imbued with the spirit of eclecticism, during which Neoplatonic Christian ideas and Jewish mystical ones are exchanged freely and creatively. It is precisely in the context of this climate of tolerance and mutual understanding between religions, I would suggest, that the moral philosophy of Montaigne and Charron should be viewed in order to achieve an accurate understanding of their work.

2. Maimonides’s inauguration of the Kabbalistic tradition

Scholars of the Kabbalah have traditionally viewed the rationalism of Maimonides’s Guide for the Perplexed as the very antithesis of mystical theology, seeing the Kabbalah itself as a reaction against Maimonides’s ‘audacious reinterpretation of Jewish esotericism and his attempt to replace the mystical traditions with a philosophical understanding’.² This point of view is implicitly challenged, however, by the large number of Maimonidean scholars who, following the apparent instructions of the author, interpret the Guide esoterically and consider it the vehicle of mystical truths pertaining to the importance of moral activity in the search for truth. It is also challenged by the fact that Maimonides appears to have been indirectly involved in the birth of the

¹ See Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah, p. 389, for the opinion that Lull was influenced principally by Erigena. See Yates, Lull and Bruno, p. 6, for the opinion that Lull was almost certainly influenced by the Kabbalah.

historical Kabbalah and that some of the writers in the tradition – notably those who immediately preceded Montaigne and Charron – were strongly influenced by Maimonides’s ideas in conjunction with Kabbalistic ones.

When he was nearing the end of his life (he died in 1204), Maimonides sent a letter to the newly flourishing centre of Jewish scholarship in Provence which was soon to become the birthplace of the Kabbalah. In this letter he clearly indicates that he views this French community as the sole heir to the Jewish spiritual tradition. He writes,

You, members of the congregation of Lunel, and of the neighbouring towns, stand alone in raising the banner of Moses. You apply yourselves to the study of the Talmud and also cherish Wisdom. The study of the Torah in our communities has ceased; most of the bigger congregations are dead to spiritual aims; the remaining communities are facing the end.5

Maimonides’s distinction in this passage between the study of the Talmud and the cherishing of ‘wisdom’ is particularly significant with regard to the question of exoteric and esoteric interpretations of religion. With the term ‘Talmud’, Maimonides is referring to the fundamental code of Jewish civil and canon law that is traditionally associated with mainstream, exoteric Judaism. By juxtaposing the words ‘Talmud’ and ‘wisdom’ – the term that comes to represent the mystical means of knowing God in the Kabbalistic tradition – Maimonides appears to be indicating his belief that the outer adherence to the law must be accompanied by the practice of mystical or inner Judaism. ‘A person that has a true knowledge of the whole Law,’ Maimonides says in the Guide,

is called wise in a double sense; he is wise because the law instructs him in the highest truths, and secondly because it teaches him good morals. But as the truths contained in the Law are taught by way of tradition, not

5 This letter is cited in Isadore Twersky, A Maimonides Reader (West Orange, NJ: Berhman House, 1972), p. 481.
by philosophical method, the knowledge of the Law, and the acquisition of true wisdom, are treated in the books of the Prophets and in the words of our Sages as two different things; real wisdom demonstrates by proof those truths which Scripture teaches by way of tradition. (III: 54: p. 394)

3. The birth of the Kabbalah

According to the documented reports of the Gerona Kabbalists dated around the year 1300, a series of revelations took place during the twelfth century among the most eminent members of the same community of Jews in southern France to which Maimonides had addressed his letter. These Kabbalists, who were the disciples of the recipients of the visions, describe the events that took place as the descent of ‘Wisdom’ or the Holy Spirit upon the men in question in the form of the apparition of the prophet Elijah, the guardian of the sacred tradition and of the highest mysteries of the Jewish religion. Together with the appearance of two important texts (the *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Book of Creation* and the *Sefer Bahir* or *Book of Brightness*) these revelations constitute what is considered by those within the tradition as the historical birth of the Kabbalah, which means ‘receipt’ or ‘tradition’ (Scholem, pp. 38-42). Moses was believed to have been the original recipient of two laws: the literal law, intended to be written down for use by the people, and the spiritual law, entrusted to seventy sages who were meant to transmit it orally, but not through the written word. From their work, it seems that later Kabbalists believed that it was this spiritual tradition that had finally surfaced into the consciousness of a few men, ready to be diffused to a wider

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4 See Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 35-37. Further references to Scholem, whose *Origins of the Kabbalah* I have used extensively in this chapter, will appear in the main text.

audience by the writing down of the content of the revelations, which had previously been kept a well-guarded secret.

The main feature of the Kabbalistic tradition that is of interest to us with regard to the French moral tradition, and which was presented in increasingly exoteric terms by successive generations of Kabbalists, concerns the notion of God as simultaneously hidden and self-revealing. On the basis of this key idea, the Kabbalah portrays man and the created world as directly connected to the divinity by virtue of intermediary essences, or sephirot. These essences, which are conceived in a wide variety of symbolic forms, serve to separate contingent creation from God's ineffable and hidden essence, while at the same time causing the multiple parts of the creation to be embraced by the infinite whole that is God. What is specific to the Kabbalah is the conception of language as the medium through which the mystic may travel into the invisible dimensions of consciousness underlying the concrete realm of reality which connect him to God. As we shall see in the rest of this chapter, one of the ways in which the concept of language mysticism is interpreted within the Kabbalistic tradition is through the notion that God speaks or writes his 'Word' or 'Wisdom' - the product of his own being identified by Christian Kabbalists with Christ, his son - through the manifestation of the physical world.

4. The Sefer Yetzirah, or Book of Creation

The most important text in the Kabbalistic tradition from the perspective of the concept of the hidden and self-revealing God is the Sefer Yetzirah, or Book of

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Creation, which is thought to have been written, by an unknown author, in the fourth century A.D. This small but immensely rich and symbolic text inspired many Hebrew commentaries from the very beginning of the Kabbalistic tradition and was one of the key influences on the unknown author(s) of the Sefer Bahir or Book of Brightness (Scholem, pp. 48-53). In the sixteenth century the Sefer Yezirah was translated from Hebrew into Latin by the great humanist writer who wrote extensively on the Kabbalah, Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522).

The Sefer Yetzirah is the first text in which the term ‘sephirot’ (singular: sefirah) is used to describe the invisible web of essences that transforms God’s hidden and infinite nature into contingent creation. These essences are described in the opening verse of the book as the ‘32 mystical paths of Wisdom’, consisting of ten primordial numbers (the sephirot) and the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet. ‘Wisdom’, Hochmah or Chakmah in Hebrew, which is also designated by the Greek term Sophia, is the second essence or sephirah in the ‘Tree of Life’ marking the second stage of the unfolding of the divinity or the communication of its essence to the physical realms of being:

8 It is not known exactly when this book was written. Scholem considers it to be a composite work, some strata appearing to date back to the eighth century, other fragments indicating that it was developed or added to in the twelfth century (p. 65).
9 Sepher lezira, trans. by Johannes Reuchlin, in Artis cabalisticae, ed. Ioannis Pistorii (Basle: Sebastianum Henricpetri, 1587). This collection of Kabbalistic works contains, among others, Reuchlin’s Arte cabalistica and De verbo mirifico and Léon Hébreu’s Dialoghi d’amore. François Secret includes the Sefer Yezirah among those major works that were most widely known by Christian Kabbalists (Les kabbalistes chrétiens, p. 110). For information on Reuchlin, see Francis Barham, The Life and Times of John Reuchlin, or Capnion, the Father of the German Reformation (London: Darton & Co., [1822 (?)]). On Reuchlin’s relationship with Erasmus, see Giulio Valles, Erasmo e Reuchlin, in appendice Erasmo da Rotterdam, L’Apoteosi di Reuchlin, 3rd edn. (Napoli: G. Scalabrini, 1964), pp. 48-49.
10 Sefer Yezirah: The Book of Creation: In Theory and in Practice, trans. and commentary by
The Sefirot are the means through which God communicates with His creation. They are also the means through which man communicates with God. If not for the Sefirot, God, the Infinite Being, would be absolutely unknowable and unreachable. It is only through the Sefirot that he can be approached.\(^\text{11}\)

But ‘wisdom’ is also the very matter from which creation is formed, a malleable substance consisting of thought or letters at an elemental stage of existence which the mystic can perceive and mould with his mind and through which he is connected to all other things:

In a Kabbalistic sense, Wisdom is seen as pure, undifferentiated Mind. It is pure thought, which has not yet been broken up into differentiated ideas. Wisdom is the level above all division, where everything is a simple unity. [...] It is on the level of Wisdom that all men are one. Hence, if one is on this level, he must learn from every human being, and indeed, from all creation.\(^\text{12}\)

The term used to describe the process through which God communicates his hidden essence is ‘engraving’. The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are described as the elements or building blocks of the cosmos that are formed by being ‘engraved’ (the Hebrew verb is *chakak*). Thus, in contrast to writing, which involves adding ink or some other material to a surface, this process involves the removal of material. This detail indicates that the author is referring to the creation of the universe *ex-nihilo*: from a nothingness or a space that is made from an original whole:

Before a universe could be created, empty space had to exist in which it could be made. But initially, only God existed, and all existence was filled with the Divine Essence, the Light of the Infinite (*Ain Sof*). It was out of this undifferentiated Essence that a Vacated space had to be engraved. [...] The hollow engraved in the Supernal Luminescence was the Vacated Space, in which all creation subsequently occurred.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) Kaplan's commentary on Chap. 1, v. 1, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 21.

\(^{12}\) Kaplan's commentary, (Chap. 1, v. 1), pp. 11-12.

\(^{13}\) Kaplan, commentary on the word ‘engraved’ (Chap. 1, v. 1), pp. 13-14.
Thus ‘Wisdom’, or *Hokhmah*, marks the point at which the undifferentiated essence of the divinity moves into the ‘chaotic’ channel - the intermediate, unformed mode of being between the wholeness of God’s being and the contingency of the created world - that brings about its manifestation into physical reality.¹⁴

The concept of wisdom in the *Sefer Yetzirah* is, however, multi-faceted, for it presents wisdom not simply as a location in a cosmological structure, but simultaneously as a mode of consciousness that the mystic must attain in order to reach the inner core of reality. The text exhorts the seeker of wisdom to ‘swing’ himself into a state of ‘ignorant’ or ‘not-knowing’ consciousness in which the mind is clear of thought and able to receive the flux of divine wisdom:

Chakhmah consciousness is particularly important in reaching the Sefirot. [...] The Sefirot are ineffable, and cannot be understood verbally. As the *Sefer Yetzirah* itself says, they must be reached by ‘paths of Wisdom,’ that is, through the paths of non-verbal Chakhmah consciousness.¹⁵

The notion of wisdom as an invisible, psychological reality emanating from the divinity’s eternal being and constituting a direct link between human beings and God just beneath the surface of the physical world is central to Sebond’s *Théologie naturelle*. It has been pointed out that Sebond may well have been a New Christian, that is, one of the Jews who fled the Iberian peninsular during the period of the persecutions and who outwardly converted to Christianity, but who were suspected of practising their religion in secret.¹⁶ Sebond’s concepts of the book of nature and the combination of letters (creatures), along with the fact that

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¹⁴ For the concept of chaos in Lull and its relationship with Erigena’s ideas and those of the Kabbalah, see Yates, *Lull and Bruno*, pp. 93-97.
¹³ Kaplan, commentary on Chap. 1, v. 4, p. 40
¹⁶ See Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, note 100, on p. 37, note 5, on p. 43 and note 48, on p. 55.
he lived in Catalonia approximately a century and a half after the Kabbalistic centre at Gerona had reached the peak of its activity, suggest that he may well have been familiar with the ideas at the heart of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

In the *Théologie naturelle*, Sebond speaks of God growing out through his ‘name’, his exterior form: ‘les œuvres partent de la chose qui ouvre, et puis paroissent et se voyent exterieurement. Le nom se voit aussi par le dehors continuellement attaché à elle’ (fol. 209v). Sebond translates this idea of the divinity’s exterior manifestation of an interior essence into psychological terms that relate to man’s direct experience. Having told us that God’s dwelling-place is in man’s heart, he goes on to say that this invisible ‘name’ or presence of God in man must itself be made manifest:

Mais ce nom ainsi contenu en nos cœurs et occulte se manifeste par un autre nom sensible, visible et ouyble, exprimé ou par voix ou par escrit, signifiant et representant exterieurement celuy que l’homme a caché en son cœur [...]. Car tout ce que l’homme fait au dehors est signe de ce que son cœur faict au dedans. Comme Dieu se manifeste et nous donne sa cognoissance [wisdom] par ses œuvres apparentes et exterieures, ainsi descouvrons nous la cognoissance et estimation interieure que nous avons de luy, et manifestons son nom et honneur qui est caché au dedans de nostre cœur par signes et effects exterieures et visibles. (fols. 212r-12v)

5. **The development of key Kabbalistic ideas: from the esoteric to the exoteric: Isaac ‘the Blind’**

One of the main exponents of the new Kabbalistic ideas in the early stages of the tradition was Isaac ‘the Blind’ (from the Aramaic, *Saggi-Nehor*, meaning, paradoxically, ‘full of light’) (1165-c.1235). Among the intellectual achievements for which he is noted, Isaac, who was one of the main recipients of

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17 For an extensive analysis of the concepts of Isaac the Blind, see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 251-309, and for biographical details, see the introduction to *The Early Kabbalah*, by J. Dan, p. 31. The latter presents two texts from the school of Isaac the Blind (pp. 71-85): ‘The Mystical Torah -
the Provençal revelations, appears to have been the first person to use the term 'Kabbalah' to designate an esoteric tradition involving the passing down of sacred information 'in whispers and in secret' (Scholem, p. 261). It was also Isaac the Blind who created and developed the notion of 'En-Sof or God as infinity beyond human comprehension, a concept he made great use of in his highly influential commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah. In this work Isaac describes the unfolding of the divinity from boundless infinity into creation in terms of thought and language. The three stages of the process are constituted by the Infinite ('En-sof), thought and speech. These represent respectively the ineffable essence of the divinity, the higher spiritual realms which are intelligible to the mind and the higher senses, and the lower realms which are perceptible to the physical senses (Scholem, p. 265). The final stage of the divinity’s self-revelation, the realm of speech (dibbur), is identified with the seven lower sephirot. He calls these lower essences both dibburium and debharim, that is, simultaneously words and things, reinforcing the notion central to the Kabbalah that the creation is literally the utterance of the divinity (Scholem, p. 265).

In accordance with the Sefer Yetzirah, Isaac also presents Hokhmah, the sephirah of wisdom, as the ‘beginning of being’ and the ‘beginning of the dibbur’: the point from which all the sephirot proceed in a clear chain of emanations (Scholem, p. 277). The paradox of an eternal-contingent divinity remains intact, however, for though its unfolding takes place through emanation, each given thing or letter nevertheless comprises all ten sephirot in ever-new configurations so that the whole is still present in every part (Scholem, p. 278).
Through contemplation of these different configurations of the sephirot, and the myriad of interconnections that harmoniously compose the fabric of the created world, the mystic can, according to Isaac, connect with the essences underlying reality that serve as channels linking God to his creation. This act of contemplation he describes as an inner listening and an inner sight, both of which come from the heart rather than the mind:

From the inner spiritual essences which are not apprehensible [by the senses], but visible to the heart, he has chiseled, and there emanated from them, material [essences] which are apprehensible.\footnote{18}

As we saw in the philosophical tradition, the reference to the heart indicates that love is considered the means of travelling between the different dimensions of reality.

Isaac attaches particular importance to the contemplation of exterior things in order to reach their interior, itself a notion that recurs repeatedly both in the philosophical tradition and in the work of those authors following in the Jewish tradition who directly precede Montaigne and Charron. The idea is conveyed through the use of analogies taken from the Sefer Yetzirah such as the following:

The paths [of the Sophia] are like the threads of the flames which are the paths for the coals, and through the flames man can see the coal [which is at their base] in the manner of a skein, for by following the thread, he arrives at the place of the skein. Similarly, man finds through the leaves, boughs and branches, and the numerous trunks, the conduits [the cavities of the sap] which lead to the essential and to the subtle reality of the root, invisible on account of its subtlety and inwardness.\footnote{20}

\footnote{19} Isaac’s Commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah, cited in Origins, p. 280. Scholem’s brackets.
\footnote{20} Isaac’s Commentary, Scholem, Origins, pp. 281-82. Isaac is here drawing on Chap. 1, verse 7 of the Sefer Yetzirah (Kaplan, p. 57).
In the *Théologie naturelle*, Sebond takes up the tree analogy used here and describes the hidden and self-revealing divinity in strikingly similar terms:

L’estre du monde divisé en quatre marches nous estant tresnotoire et tresmanifeste de soy, nous a conduit à la cognoissance de l’autre estre, qui nous estoit occulte, et avons trouvé infaliblement que l’estre du monde est produit et vient du non-estre, et qu’il y en a un autre qui est le vray estre, subsissant par soy mesme, non produit du neant ny d’autre chose. Ainsi l’estre de Dieu semble proprement la racine, et celuy du monde le tronc, les branches et les feuilles de l’arbre. Car tout ainsi que l’une partie de l’arbre paroist au dessus de la terre, et l’autre est cachée au dessous, et que ce qui se voit est nourry et engendré par ce qui ne se voit pas: tout de mesme en va il à nos estres, l’un nous est descouvert, multiplié en rameaux et fleurs, en feuilles et en branches: l’autre produisant et engendrant est uniforme et caché. (fols. 22^2^)

Sebond explains that this ‘example’ or analogy is incomplete since the root is a piece of the tree while God is not a piece of anything and concludes this passage by saying that ‘par la cognoissance du monde nous avons eschellé jusques à la cognoissance de Dieu’ (fol. 22').

For Isaac the Blind, contemplation (*hithbonenuth*) involves the attainment of knowledge or wisdom by means of a gradual ascension of the chain of emanations that constitute the divinity’s self-revelation and through the perception of all things in one another. He describes the cosmic stages of being as a magnetic chain that causes everything to rise above itself under the influence of the divine whole so that the end of things is enclosed in their beginning (Scholem, p. 290). This image of a magnetic chain is remarkably similar to Plato’s description of divine inspiration in his *Ion* through the metaphor of iron rings linked together by the force of a magnet. As we shall see later, Montaigne makes significant use of this metaphor in the *Essais*, its influence reverberating

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through the work of Charron as well. Isaac describes the magnetic attraction in question as an act of vision and communication, reinforcing the notion of the divinity permeating and sustaining the universe by virtue of its ubiquitous consciousness:

The vision is the meditation of one thing out of the other [...]. Every cause is taken up and rises and then looks down from a cause that is higher than itself [...]. Everything is in the other and is in communication with the other.

Another aspect of Isaac’s work that can be found in Sebond is the emphasis on man’s special role in the divine process which honours him with a direct connection to the higher realms and with titles such as ‘great seal’ or ‘quintessence of all creatures’. But, as in the Théologie naturelle, the claim that man is supremely connected to his creator is tempered and qualified by the fact that when debhequth or cleaving to God occurs, what takes place is not a unio but a communio, in which the boundary separating humanity and divinity remains entirely intact. For Isaac, as for Maimonides, the spiritual work of the mystic in his perception of the divinity in all aspects of the created world must be complemented by moral activity. While humans are incapable of knowing the commandments intellectually, they are capable of a mystical experience of the divine by living their lives in accordance with divine law. As Scholem says, according to Isaac,

Man is [...] unable to plumb the depths of the commandments of the Torah, which appear to have a fixed dimension and end [...], for the more

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22 For the use of this metaphor in Montaigne, see below, Chapter 4, section 5. For its presence in Charron’s philosophy, see Chapter 8, section 5.
23 Isaac’s Commentary, cited in Scholem, p. 290.
24 See Scholem, p. 290.
25 See Scholem, p. 302. See also the linguistic analogy that Sebond uses to describe the communio of humanity and divinity in Christ which maintains the boundary between the two opposing but complementary parts of his being (fol. 349').
he turns his mind to its contemplation the further the commandment expands, like the contemplative thinking of man himself. It seems that Isaac is saying that in fulfilling the commandments man advances from the limited to the unlimited and the infinite. The activity of man in the accomplishment of the Torah converges, therefore, in the experience of the mystic, with the ascension of his contemplative thinking. The two spheres are not separated. (Scholem, p. 306)

6. The Gerona Kabbalists

In the next major phase of its development, the Kabbalah moved to Gerona in Spain, where the disciples of the first Provençal Kabbalists began to work with the central ideas of the tradition in new ways. It was here in the first half of the thirteenth century that the Kabbalah began to open up to a considerable number of philosophical influences outside the sphere of Jewish thought and mysticism, leading to an ever-wider dissemination of the key ideas in question. The older generation of Kabbalists in France did not look upon this publication of the secrets of the tradition favourably, but this did not dissuade the majority of Gerona Kabbalists from continuing to develop their ideas in an openly didactic manner.

The two most daring and adventurous writers in this respect were the Rabbis Ezra and Azriel. Azriel’s work in particular, including a commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah, had a profound impact on later writers, Jewish and Christian alike. In another twist in the web of interconnections linking Judaism and Christianity, it appears that Azriel was influenced by the Christian Neoplatonism of John Scotus Eriigena, the ninth-century Irishman who translated the works of

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26 Scholem says that ‘Isaac’s contemplative mysticism comes very close to the teaching of Maimonides at the end of The Guide of the Perplexed (3: 51)’ (p. 304). He adds that ‘the connection with Maimonides becomes clearer still in the generation following Isaac - for example in Nahmanides’ (p. 304).
Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and wrote the *De divisione naturae* (Scholem, p. 375). Azriel’s work shows him to be particularly drawn to the notion of negative theology, of which Pseudo-Dionysius is the main exponent in the Christian tradition. However, as the following extract from *The Explanation of the Ten Sefirot* suggests, it is likely that Azriel was also familiar with Maimonides’s presentation of negative theology in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, and that he has both sources in mind when he speaks of ‘the philosophers’:

> Know that everything visible and perceivable to human contemplation is limited, and everything that is limited is finite, and that everything that is finite is insignificant. Conversely, that which is not limited is called ‘En-Sof and is absolutely undifferentiated in a complete and changeless unity. And if He is [truly] without limit, then nothing exists outside Him. And since He is both exalted and hidden, He is the essence of all that is concealed and revealed. But since He is hidden, He is both the root of faith and the root of rebelliousness [...]. Furthermore, the philosophers are in agreement with these statements that our perception of Him cannot be except by way of negative attribution. And that which radiates forth from ‘En-Sof are the ten sefirot.’

Through his concept of the Being and the Nought, a development of Isaac’s concept of ‘En-Sof, Azriel draws specific attention to the immanence of the divinity brought about by its self-transformation from hidden essence into the revealed contingency of the creation. Isaac had conceived of God’s infinite essence as Nahmanides (a prominent Gerona Kabbalist who was far more reserved in his expression than Azriel) later described it: ‘a hidden thing beyond all thought and speech, which does not enter into any enumeration’. Both Isaac and Nahmanides focused almost entirely on the transcendence of the divinity, leaving the doctrine of its immanence in the shadows of the secret oral tradition.

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27 See Scholem, p. 366, and Dan’s introduction to *The Early Kabbalah*, p. 34.
28 This text is published in English translation in *The Early Kabbalah*, pp. 87-107 (this passage, pp. 89-90), along with another of Azriel’s texts, the *Commentary to Talmudic Legends*. In a note
But it is precisely this doctrine that Azriel draws out of the shadows, making it available for other writers to use and develop in the context of their own intellectual and religious persuasions. He writes,

He who brings forth Being from Nought is thereby lacking in nothing, for the Being is in the Nought after the manner of the Nought, and the Nought is in the Being after the manner of the Being. And of this the author of the book Yesirah said: He made his Nought into His Being, and he did not say: He made the Being from the Nought. This teaches us that the Nought is the Being and the Being is the Nought [...] Being and Nought together represent that which is meant when the phrase ‘Being from Nought’ is used. Being is therefore nothing but a Nought, and everything is one in the simplicity of the absolute distinctness and it is to this that the warning refers [Eccles. 7:16]: Do not take on too much in your speculation, for our finite intellect cannot grasp the perfection of the Impenetrable which is one with ‘En-Sof.’

This passage was cited by Reuchlin ‘without a word of polemic or criticism [...] in the first fairly accurate Latin account of the Kabbalah’ (Scholem, p. 424).

For Azriel, as for Isaac the Blind, the second sephirah of Hokhmah or wisdom marks the point at which the Nought engraved from God’s Being becomes the ‘nothing-being’ or contingency of creation. Scholem explains:

The act of creation does not consist, as with later generations of kabbalists, in the establishment of the Nought but is in that of ‘something that is’: the Sophia [...] The ‘leap’ of creation does not consist, therefore, in the transition from ‘En-Sof’ to the first sefirah, but in the unity of both with the second sefirah. It is this leap that constitutes God’s free decision to emanate. (Scholem, p. 438)

This ‘leap of creation’ is precisely the divine act that was associated by Christian kabbalists with the birth of Christ, which from their point of view was both a real event and a metaphor for the direct connection between man and God that

to the passage cited, the editor refers the reader to Maimonides’s Guide for the Perplexed (1: 58).
29 Nahmanides’s Commentary on the Sefer Yezirah 1:4, cited in Scholem, p. 433.
Christ's presence in the world (synonymous with the Holy Spirit or the force of love) symbolised.\textsuperscript{31}

7. The transmission of Jewish mystical ideas to the French moral tradition

As the work of François Secret makes clear, Kabbalistic ideas in conjunction with Christian interpretations of them were widespread in the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{32} While it is probable, therefore, that Montaigne and Charron were familiar with Christian Kabbalistic ideas in general, a close examination of their works reveals that they were far more likely to have been influenced by those authors who interpreted the Kabbalistic tradition in moral terms. In the case of Montaigne, although it is possible that he was directly influenced by other writers in the Jewish tradition, the evidence points to Sebond being his main source for the ideas in question. Charron's works demonstrate, however, that he was familiar with the Jewish tradition, in particular with the work of the two authors who sculpted the Jewish interpretation of the concept of the hidden God into a more specifically moral form: Léon Hébreu and Jean Bodin.

The work of these two authors is characterised by their emphasis on the importance of moral behaviour in the process that leads to the individual’s communion with God. While the mainstream Christian Kabbalah tended to focus on the importance of combining the letters of Scripture in order to glimpse the higher mysteries of the Christian religion, Léon Hébreu and Bodin concentrated

\textsuperscript{31} See Pico's interpretation of Hockmah as Christ, in Secret, pp. 33 and 36.

\textsuperscript{32} See Les kabbalistes chrétiens. See also Marc Fumaroli's chapter, 'Vers le triomphe de la prose: les manifestes de Vigenère', in La diplomatie de l’esprit: de Montaigne à La Fontaine (Paris: Hermann, Éditeurs des sciences et des arts, 1994), pp. 23-58, for a consideration of Kabbalistic ideas interpreted by Christian writers in accordance with the notion that the creatures are letters spoken or written by God.
on the way in which the things of the world, including the creatures, can be seen as letters which, when combined in various ways through experience and the consideration of moral issues, reveal the same mysteries as those contained in the Bible. As these themes suggest, both authors were deeply inspired by Sebond’s *Théologie naturelle*. Maimonides’s influence is also central to the syncretistic interpretations of Léon Hébreu and Bodin, both of whom refer to him in their work on numerous occasions. The most influential aspect of the Spanish Jew’s work in this context is the metaphor (taken from Exodus 33.20) of God revealing his back to Moses, which reappears in striking literary form on the last page of Bodin’s *Théatre de la nature universelle*.

8. **Léon Hébreu / Judah Abrabanel**

Judah ben Isaac Abrabanel (c.1460-after 1523) was, as his Jewish name indicates, the son of Isaac Abrabanel, the Portuguese philosopher and courtier who was well-known and respected by his contemporaries for his virtue, erudition and political expertise. Father and son fled the Iberian peninsula in 1483 when the Catholics’ distrust of the Jews finally erupted into persecution. Both eventually settled in Naples (Judah in 1483, Isaac in 1492), where Judah continued his career as court physician. Judah Abrabanel became known as ‘Leon’ by his entourage at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella, for whom he was personal...

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33 See Chaim Wirsinski’s *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 175, for Pico’s distinction between the two kinds of Kabbalah.


35 See the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: [n. pub.], 1972), pp. 109-11, Sirat, p. 407, and Damiens, pp. 15-22, for these and more biographical details.
physician when he fled from Lisbon to Seville in 1481. The name is a reference
to Jacob’s speech in Genesis 49. 9, in which Judah’s tribe is compared to a lion,
indicating that Judah was esteemed as highly as his father for his virtue and
ability.36 But Léon was to become more famous for his philosophy than for his
medical skills. His Dialoghi d'Amore, which was written in Italian and published
in 1535, became one of the most successful European works of the sixteenth
century.37

The Dialoghi d’Amore consist of a lengthy three-part dialogue between
Philo and Sophie, a wise man who is both courting and answering the ‘philoso-
phical’ questions of his inquiring female interlocutor (whom he also loves). In
the course of this profoundly syncretistic work, Léon refers frequently to
Aristotle, Plato, Empedocles, Pythagoras, Alfarabi, Avicenna, Algazali, and
Maimonides. The text also betrays the strong influence of Ramon Lull, Raymond
Sebond and Marsilio Ficino.38

Wisdom, in its role as intermediary between the individual and God, is
one of the dominant themes of the Dialoghi d’amore, in which love, as the title of
the text suggests, and morality play a vital role.39 It is through virtue, Philo
explains, that man’s passive intellect joins with the Active Intellect (identified

36 Damiens, p. 16.
37 See the Encyclopaedia Judaica, pp. 110-11. The Dialoghi was first published in Rome; new
Italian editions followed, published by the Aldine press, in Venice in 1541, 1545, 1549 and 1552.
Revised Italian editions were published in 1558, 1572 and 1586. Extant Latin editions include the
Venice edition of 1564 and the edition included in the same collection of Kabbalistic texts - the
Artis cabalisticæ (Basle, 1597) - containing Reuchlin’s translation of the Sefer Yetzirah. The
work was translated into French by Seigneur du Parc Champenois and published in 1551 under
the title Philosophie d’amour de M. Leon Hebreu (Lyon: Guil. Rouille & Thibaud Payen).
Bodin, Montaigne and Charron may have read this edition or the edition said to have been
translated by Pontus de Tyard, also published in Lyon in 1551. I use the 1551 translation by
Seigneur du Parc Champenois. Page references to this edition will be presented in the main text.
38 On Léon’s syncretism, see Damiens, p. 12. It is highly possible that Léon knew both Pico and
Ficino (Encyclopaedia Judaica, p. 109; Damiens, p. 19).
with the realm of the angels), enabling him to make judgements in harmony with
right reason:

L'amour Divin non seulement a de l'Honneste, mais contient en soy
l'Honnesteté de toutes choses et de tout l'amour d'icelles, comment que
ce soyt, pource que la Divinité est commencement, milieu, et fin de tous
actes honnestes [...]. Il est commencement, en ce que de la Divinité
depend l'ame Intelective, agente de toutes les Honnestetez humaines:
laquelle n'est qu'un petit rayon de l'infinie clarté de Dieu, approprié à
l'Homme pour le faire raisonnable, immortel et heureux: et encore faut il
que ceste ame Intelective, pour venir à faire les choses honnestes,
participe de la lumière Divine. (p. 56)

This ‘divine sight’ permitted by the mediation of the Active Intellect is possible
because the transcendent-immanent divinity is pure intellectual vision in which
the human mind participates by carrying out its own simple operations:

Aucuns autres, qui contemplent plus la Divinité, disent (et moy avec eux
aussi) que l'intellect actuel qui illumine le nostre Possible est le treshaut
Dieu; et ainsi tiennent pour certain que la Beatitude consiste en la
cognition de l'intellect Divin auquel sont toutes choses premierement, et
plus perfaictement, qu'en aucun Intellect créé. Pource qu'en iceluy toutes
 choses sont essentiellement, non seulement par raison d'Intellect, mais
aussi causellement [...], de sorte que c'est la cause qui les produit,
l'Esprit qui les conduit, la forme qui les informe, et sont faictes pour la fin
qu'il leur adresse. Et de luy viennent, et retournent en luy finalement
[...] et par sa participation toutes choses sont [...]. Il suffira que vous
congoissiez que nostre Felicité consiste en la congoissance et vision
Divine, en laquelle toutes choses sont veues tresperfaictement. (pp. 76-
77)

The influence of the work of Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas which permeates
the philosophical tradition is clearly identifiable in this passage, in which the
doctrine of the divinity’s two modes of being – eternal and contingent – bridged
by the presence of the Active Intellect is seen to be a central foundation of Léon’s
philosophy.

39 See Damiens, p. 12.
The essence of Léon Hébreu's text lies in the notion of returning to the origin and source of all things, which is itself purely intellectual and which is reached through the realm of non-concrete intelligibles. Here, once again, we encounter the idea according to which concrete things emerge from a spiritual, intellectual reality:

Tout ainsi que l'Estre, la Vie, et l'Intellect, et toute autre perfection, bonté, et beauté, depend des choses spirituelles, et derive des immaterielles aux materielles (en sorte que toutes ces excellences se trouvent es spirituelles premierement qu'es corporelles), ainsi l'amour se trouve au monde intellectuel premierement, et plus essentiellement, et depend d'iceluy au monde corporel. (pp. 273-74)

On the basis of this notion, Léon insists that it is through intimate psychological and emotional knowledge of God (that is, through the all-pervading force of love, which is also the Active Intellect) that the individual must know all other things, and not vice-versa. Philo tells Sophie,

[Vous] devez entendre que la Félicité consiste à cognoistre une seule chose: car elle ne peut consister en la congoissance de toutes, estant chacune à par soy séparément, ainçois, estans toutes ensemble, en la congnoissance d'une seule chose, en laquelle sont toutes les choses de l'univers: et, quand elle est congnoise, elles se congnoissent toutes ensemble en un Acte. (p. 74)

Paradoxically, however, and in keeping with the hidden God tradition, this inner knowledge of God is acquired through interaction with the things of the world, the aspect of his being (his works) that God has chosen to reveal to the creatures:

Quelle plus grande Bonté, plus ferme Verité, plus profonde Sapience, plus diligente Prudence, que celle que nous congnoissons estre en la Divinité? Non pas que nous la congnoissions selon l'Estre, qu'elle a en soy-mesme, mais par les œuvres siennes, que nous voyons en la creation et conservation des creatures de l'univers: de sorte que, qui considerera bien les vertus Divines, l'imitation d'icelles est voye et moyen à le tirer à tous les actes honnestes et vertueux, et à tous les sages conceptions ausquelles l'humaine condition peut arriver. (pp. 58-59)
We can see here that Isaac the Blind’s notion of the mystic being magnetically drawn up through the stages of God’s unfolded being by means of the contemplation of exterior things has been fused with the notion that the correct way of cleaving to God is through good moral actions (the imitation of the divine virtues).

Léon refers to love in the *Dialoghi* as the force of providence in nature which enables animals and all other non-sentient beings to know how to act (or be) in order to fulfil their divinely-given natures:

> Combien qu’ils n’ayent pas en eux mesmes ces puissances conscietives, si sont ils adressez par nature, connoissante et governante toutes choses inferieures, ou par l’ame du monde, en une droicte et infaillible connoissance de leurs choses naturelles, pour l’entretenement de leurs natures. [...] Ainsi ces corps inferieurs cherchent leur propre lieu et fin: non pas de leur propre connoissance, mais par celle vraye et droicte du premier creator, infuse en l’ame du monde, et en l’universelle nature des choses inferieures: tellement que [...] l’inclination [...] de ces corps insensibles vient de connoissance et amour naturelle. (pp. 127-28)

The ‘knowledge’ of these creatures is therefore God’s love for them infused into their very natures. Their natural alignment with God’s being is contrasted later in the text with the freedom of the human condition. This freedom makes it possible for man to fall out of alignment with the divinity if he does not manage his moral affairs as nature intended. Thus the individual must learn to control his ‘sensuality’, the ‘bestial’ part of himself, with his reason. Using the analogy of the relationship of the moon and the earth to the sun, Léon describes the human soul (the moon) as the entity that moves between the inferior part of the individual, his corporeal nature (the earth) and the superior part, his intellect or reason (the light of the sun). He explains that
This divine union, he adds, causes the individual to abandon his fixation with corporeal things (p. 329). Man’s alignment with God occurs, therefore, when the individual centres his mental focus in his ‘intellect’, the part of him that joins him to God, whereas

As we shall see, the notion of bestise, whereby the individual becomes like a beast when he allows his ‘sensuality’ or lower passions to usurp the place of reason in his being, is a central theme in the work of Montaigne and, notably, in the form it takes here, in the work of Charron.

Love in the Dialoghi is a unifying force, which, as in Lull’s elemental universe, has the power to join together the opposites of humanity and divinity, philosophy and religion. Like Plato’s daimon, it is for Léon the intermediary between the world of the senses and the invisible, sacred world of divine intelligence which supports all created being. A critic describes the place of love in Léon’s philosophy as follows:

40 Elsewhere Léon draws the parallel between divine love and the light of the sun more clearly: ‘l’opération de l’amour de Dieu à causer nostre felicité, et celle de tout l’univers, est telle qu’est celle du souleil à causer que nous le voyons’ (p. 663).
41 See Damiens, p. 12.
Force cosmique, il est aussi la source d'une conquête des plus hautes vertus chez l'homme. S'il n'est pas le Bien, il en est le premier reflet; il est parent du divin et le point que les auteurs de la Renaissance contesteront le plus volontiers, c'est que l'amour soit un démon, thèse qu'ils entendent, cependant au sens platonicien, c'est-à-dire au sens où le démon est un être intermédiaire entre le divin et l'humain, ou mieux encore entre l'intelligible et le sensible. 

9. Jean Bodin

The role of morality in the process by which man is reconciled with God is also central to the religious works of Jean Bodin (1530-96), the French lawyer contemporary with Montaigne and Charron. Bodin is best known for his political works: the *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566), the *Response aux paradoxes de M. de Malestroit* (1566) and the *Six livres de la république* (1576). His three religious works - the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis* (probably 1593, unpublished), the *De la demonomanie des sorciers* (1580) and the *Universce naturce theatrum* (1596) - are profoundly influenced by Jewish mystical ideas, a fact that has led to much speculation about his possible Jewish origin. These texts follow in the same tradition of thought as the *Dialoghi d’amore*, focusing on the moral aspects of kabbalistic doctrines as opposed to the magical and literal interpretations popular at the time.

In his *De la demonomanie des sorciers*, the book written against those who practise magic and witchcraft, Bodin makes a clear distinction between what

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42 Damiens, p. 42. For information on the Christian Neoplatonic tradition informing the *Dialoghi*, see Damiens, Chapter 2, 'Le syncrétisme théologico-néo-platonicien dans la tradition historique de l'Antiquité au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle', pp. 22-23.

43 Most Bodin scholars mention the legend or tradition according to which the French author is said to be Jewish on his mother's side. See Henri Baudrillart, *J. Bodin et son temps* (Paris: Librairie de Guillaumin et Cie., 1853), pp. 112-13 and p. 207, and Yates, *Collected Essays*; III, *Ideas and Ideals in the North European Renaissance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), Chap. 18, 'The Mystery of Jean Bodin', p. 139, for the opinion that the legend is plausible. On the question of Bodin's ambiguous religious status in general, see Pierre Mesnard, 'La pensée
he considers to be the true Kabbalah - the philosophy stemming from the sacred oral tradition which focuses on moral and natural matters - and the ecstatic interpretation of this tradition which involves magic and sorcery. Bodin includes Pico, Reuchlin, Galatin and Agrippa in this latter group, placing Philo, Léon Hébreu and Maimonides in the group of natural-moralists:

For Bodin, therefore, true kabbalistic wisdom involves not the combination of actual letters, but the combination of living ones, a notion that is further developed in his other religious texts.

In the *Colloquium heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis*, kabbalistic wisdom is presented as the key that enables all seven participants in

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44 The following editions of the *De la demonomanie des sorciers* appeared in the sixteenth century: 1580, 1581 and 1587 (Paris: I. du Puys); 1593 (Lyon: P. Frellon & A. Cloquemin); 1593 (Anvers: A. Coninx) and 1598 (Lyon: A. de Harsy).

the discussion (who each have different religious or non-religious beliefs) to meet on a level that transcends discord and intolerance. Salomon, the Jewish member of the group to whom all the others listen attentively with great respect, alludes frequently to the themes of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*, mentioning its author at least twenty times in the course of the text. Salomon explains that the Kabbala, which he describes as the knowledge of natural mysteries, can be understood only by the most learned people, indicating that Bodin identified Kabbalistic wisdom with the secret wisdom that Maimonides intended to safeguard in the *Guide* by veiling his text with parables and allegories (p. 95).

The desire to protect the innermost truths at the heart of all religions perhaps explains Salomon's own obscurity on the subject of the higher mysteries, which the text leads us to understand to be intimately connected with moral concerns. In the following quotation, the emphasis is placed on the act of interpretation, which can apply both to the allegories in Scripture and to the created world itself.

> If we eagerly read divine words and think often on our reading, it will be possible to bring forth incredible treasures. For thus did that royal voice of David, in the beginning of his psalms, proclaim happiness for that man who constantly contemplates divine laws day and night. Likewise he prayed that God would lift the veil from his eyes so that he could view the nature (p. 784), cited in Secret p. 211.

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46 The *Colloquium*, which was not published in the original Latin until 1857 (Ludwig Noack's edition), circulated in the sixteenth century in manuscript. For a complete account of the manuscript tradition of the text, see the introduction to E. Guhrauer, *Das Heptaplomeres des Jean Bodin* (Berlin, 1941), and Roger Chaviré's edition, *Le colloque de Jean Bodin des secrets cachés des choses sublimes* (Paris: Librairie Recueil Sirey and Librairie Honoré Champion, 1914). According to Chaviré in his introduction, most of the manuscripts indicate that the work was finished in 1593 (pp. 3-4). On the role of Jewish mysticism in the text, see Yates, 'The Mystery of Jean Bodin', in *Ideas and Ideals*, p. 141. The edition of the *Colloquium* used here is Marion Kuntz's English translation, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 1975). Page references will be given in the main text.

47 See, for example, pp. 93-94 and p. 360.
marvellous wisdom comprehended in divine laws. Therefore we must exercise our mind on rather obscure divine words so that we may not only abstain from faults and embrace true glory but also seek health for the body, prudence and wisdom for the mind, and the closest union with immortal God. (p. 96)

Salomon appears to be saying here that the obscure words of the divinity on which one must concentrate are those pertaining to moral affairs. We might speculate that these ‘obscure words’ are the creatures themselves whose very being is the ‘back’ of God that protects human eyes from the blinding light of divine infinity. This interpretation of the text becomes more plausible in conjunction with Bodin’s direct use of Maimonides’s ‘back of God’ analogy at the end of the Théâtre de la nature universelle and in the light of his reference to it in the Colloquium itself.

The symbolic importance of ‘obscurity’ is highlighted in the following quotation by the use of the term ‘silence’, which appears to have similar moral implications. Speaking of the transcendence of God and the distinction between God’s essence and the aspect of himself that he reveals to the creatures, Senamus, the member of the group who accepts all religions, says,

But who God is and of what nature God is (although there is no quality in Him) no mortal will know, however long he may live. For God said to Moses, when he asked God to show Himself to him: ‘No one living will see God’ [Ex. 33:20] – that is, know clearly. And that is why He is said to abide in black obscurity and to have established his hiding places in the shadows. In other words the understanding of God seems most obscure and difficult for men grounded in pitch-black darkness, although he, Himself, the Author of light, fills all things with His own brightness. Although it is noble to proclaim all His works, words, deeds, laws in frequent song, still there is no truer or better way to praise Him than by the silence of contemplation […]. Rabbi Moses and also the Chaldean paraphrast learnedly interpret the Hebrew words, Leka dumiyah tehillah when they say: ‘In your presence, silence is considered to be praise, because God, who or what He is, cannot be described by any words nor even understood by any reasoning power’. (pp. 56-57)
In the next speech, made by Curtius, the Calvinist, it becomes clear that this silence is in fact love of the creatures, who represent the words and deeds of God in the contingent manifestation of his eternal being. This passage also places particular emphasis on the inner act of turning to face God through whose unified and simple being all other things are then perceived. Speaking of the silence just mentioned by Senamus, Curtius tells the group that

Pythagoras intimates this in one of his symbols when he urges that God ought to be praised by silence and cherished with the pure love of the mind because speech itself is base and cannot mount to the true praise of God. Porphyry and Jamblichus interpret this silence to mean when the pure mind of man raised up in an ecstasy of divine love, is offered to God. The ancients meant this when they said in their sacrifices, 'Be silent!' or as Homer says: 'Cut out your tongues,' so that by the contemplation of sublime and divine affairs men's hearts may be carried on high above all heavens where the essence of God abides in separation from all thought of the world. This happens most of all when, in an attempt to know God, we contemplate His power, goodness, and all His words, deeds, judgments and actions; we are stunned into silence by the enormous infinity of wonderful and sublime things. (p. 57)

As we might expect, the Active Intellect plays an important intermediary role in the individual's discovery of God through moral affairs. Bodin uses Léon Hébreu's analogy of the sun, the moon and the earth to describe the intermediary activity of the soul in its relationship with the Active Intellect and the body, combining it with Maimonides's notion of a guardian angel who assists the individual in his moral life (p. 39). Salomon says to the others that

If anyone should wish to understand the force of the passive intellect on the active intellect, which Rabbi Moses calls an angel, he must consider nature as the guide for the sun and moon. [...] As the moon is illuminated and derives its light in conjunction with the sun, it is obscured when it is separated from the sun's orbit. So the human mind is enlightened by the attendance of an angel, as if by the sun's light, but languishes and grows dull without the angel's presence. [...] It becomes clear that the light of the passive intellect flows from the active intellect, but the light of the
active intellect flows from a higher and holier light. Let no one think that
the active intellect is God or worship it as God. (pp. 124-25) 48

Describing the Active Intellect in terms of the Socratic daimon, Coronaeus, the
Roman Catholic, reiterates the point, made more clearly by Bodin than by Léon
Hebreu, that the voice of wisdom within the individual must not be considered
God himself:

Although Plutarch had written a book, About the Demon of Socrates, that
is, about the angel of Socrates who always called him away from evils to
good, he never said that Socrates worshipped him as God, but rather
considered him as the most faithful and wisest advisor. (p. 127)

Highlighting the naturalness of the process of inspiration, Salomon then describes
the ways in which the individual’s guardian angel makes wisdom available to
him. He says that

Divine law [Num. 12:6] clearly teaches that divine oracles are only
granted to prophets as a gift of God and the prophets do not give them
with a raging mind but with a tranquil, steady soul. […] Sometimes what
to do is suggested to persons awake, but this is done through the inner
senses of the soul, through a guardian angel. Often divine voices are
heard by persons asleep, or their ears are twitched […]. When a sober
man whose soul is free from baseness, lust, idle cares, and greed sleeps
soberly he often has true dreams and excellent visions. He is taught to
avoid base things, to preserve honest ones, and to known the future, and
these can generally be called prophecies. Indeed, prophecy is a divine
power granted by a gift of God for seeing and announcing the future, and
this gift has been bestowed not only to men of old but also to men of our
times. (pp. 180-82)

It is clear from this passage that, for Bodin, the receipt of divine
inspiration depends on the individual’s moral uprightness (his ability to point his
will in the direction of the good), and on the degree of balance and harmony that
he is capable of attaining in the relationship between the constituent parts of his
being: his reason, his soul and his body. At the end of the Colloquium, it is

48 On the characteristics of divine wisdom presented here, see Eugene Rice Jr., The Renaissance
harmony that is once again the object of Bodin's focus as he indicates that the use to which one must put wisdom is the attainment of loving friendship with one's fellow men and, above all, with God. The group listens to a song expressing this idea - 'Lo, how good and pleasing it is for brothers to live in unity, arranged not in common diatonics or chromatics, but in enharmonics with a certain, more divine modulation' - and it is explained that

All were most sweetly delighted with this song, and they withdrew, having embraced each other in mutual love. Henceforth, they nourished their piety in remarkable harmony and their integrity of life in common pursuits and intimacy. However, afterwards they held no conversation about religions, although each one defended his own religion with the supreme sanctity of his life. (p. 471)\(^{49}\)

In the *Théâtre de la nature universelle*, the same Maimonidean-Kabbalistic view of the world is presented in an encyclopaedic format which seeks to account for all aspects of nature within the context of an infinite, eternal divinity.\(^{50}\) The theme of the intermediary role of the angels or the Active Intellect in the process of acquiring moral wisdom remains a central one:

Il ne faut pas doubter, que Dieu n'illumine l'Entendement des siens ne plus ne moins que le soleil fait les corps par sa lumiere: mais tout ainsi qu'un Sage prince ordonne son estat en telle sorte qu'il y a des Magistrats et Officiers en toutes pars de sa Province, à fin que selon les diverses occurrences ils soyent chacun prests d'executeur la charge, en laquelle ils sont appellez: tout de mesme ce Sage Procureur du monde a mis des

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\(^{49}\) At the end of the discussion, as Kuntz says, 'there is no rejection or acceptance of any one religion, but rather a recognition of the divine descent of all religious beliefs and a universal brotherhood of men in the worship of divinity and in a moral life and a free conscience for everyone' (Introduction, pp. xli-xlili).

\(^{50}\) The full title of the French translation used here is *Le Théâtre de la nature universelle, auquel on peut contempler les causes efficientes et finales de toutes choses [...] Œuvre non moins plaisante que profitable à ceux qui voudront rendre raison de toutes questions proposes en philosophie*, trans. by François de Fougerolles (Lyon: Jean Pillehotte, 1597). Page references will be given in the main text. The work was first published in Latin in 1596 as the *Universae naturae theatrum* (Lugduni: I. Rossum), and again in Frankfurt in 1597. The cosmological schema of the work appears to be Kabbalistic. Although he does not call them sephirot, Bodin says that there are ten levels of being, the tenth of which is 'exempte de toute condition corporelle estant infinie et par dessus l'ordre de nature, à savoir Dieu eternel et infini' (p. 5).
Ange tant bons que mauvais, comme en Garnison, pour executer chacun leur charge par toutes les contrées du monde. (p. 760)

Developing Léon Hébreu’s ideas on morality in the *Dialoghi*, Bodin lays special emphasis in this text on the role of the will, which he identifies as the point within the individual that links him to the Active Intellect. He says that

La liberté, ou (pour mieux dire) le liberal arbitre est une puissance, laquelle a esté donnée divinement à l’homme; et la volonté est l’acte de ce liberal arbitre, par lequel nous desirons le bien, ou fuyons le mal. (pp. 677-78)

By far the most striking passage of the *Théâtre de la nature*, however, is Bodin’s presentation of Maimonides’s ‘back of God’ metaphor in a new, more literary form. Coming, as it does, on the last page of the book, it serves as a fitting summary of the central ideas of the traditions examined in this chapter and the last. When Theorus asks his master, Mystagogue, why it was that Moses, who prayed to the architect and author of all things to show him his face, was told ‘qu’homme vivant ne la verroit descouverte, sinon son dos seulement par derriere’, Mystagogue replies:

Il nous est signifié par ceste elegante Allegorie que Dieu ne peut estre cognu par des causes superieures ou antecedentes, d’autant qu’il n’en a point, mais bien par derriere son dos, c’est par ses effects. Car il adjouste peu apres, ‘Je couvriray tes yeux de ma main’. Or ceste main n’est autre chose que les œuvres de Dieu, lesquelles il a estendues comme un tableau devant les yeux d’un chacun, en collocant l’homme non pas en un angle du monde, mais au beau milieu, à fin qu’il peust mieux de là, et avec plus grande facilé que d’ailleurs, contempler l’Univers et toutes les choses qui sont contenues en ce merveilleux ouvrage, et qui sont en nos yeux, comme des lunettes pour voir plus clairement le Soleil à travers les nuées, c’est à dire Dieu mesme en ses creatures. Voila pourquoy nous avons entrepris ceste dispute de la nature et des choses naturelles, à fin que nous obtenions par elle (encor’que bien legere) quelque ombrage de la cognoissance du Createur, et que par ce moyen nous soyons ravis et

51 The Active Intellect is described as ‘un Ange bon ou mauvais, qui a esté baillé à chacun des hommes, ou pour dresser la vie des gens de bien au bon chemin, ou pour chastier les laschetez des meschants, quand ils s’en sont fourvoyez’ (p. 755).
comme transportez à chanter haut et clair ses louanges immortelles; et que
finalement estans venus de ses creatures à le cognoistre, et de sa
cognoissance à prescher ses louanges, nous soyons ravis par tels degrez
en haut pour jouir de la beatitude Divine: laquelle certes est le dernier
refuge de tous les biens de l'homme. (pp. 915-16)

The rest of this study will examine the works of Montaigne and Charron
in the light of the hidden God tradition. I will argue that both authors were
following directly in the tradition, each in his own way, and will seek to present
the major literary themes through which they express their interpretations of the
concept of the hidden God.
Chapter 3

The Concept of the Hidden God in Montaigne Expressed through the Literary Theme of *Bestise*

1. The embodiment of the concept in Montaigne’s *Essais*

Of all the writers who together compose the hidden God tradition, none embodies the concept in quite the same way as Michel de Montaigne (1533-92). What distinguishes Montaigne from Charron and, indeed, from the other writers whom we have examined in the last two chapters, is his strong desire and his ability to integrate the notion of ‘ecstatic’ knowledge of God into the very fibres of his life and work: the two are but one essence, as the author tells us: ‘mon mestier et mon art, c’est vivre’ (‘De l’exercitation’, II: 6: p. 359). Not only does Montaigne translate the notion of knowledge of God into moral and human terms, therefore - an intrinsic aspect of the concept of the hidden God - but he gives it body and form in the exploration and exposition of his own interior life:

> Je peins principalement mes cogitations [...]. Je m’estalle entier: c’est un *skeletos* où, d’une veuë, les veines, les muscles, les tendons paroissent, chaque piece en son siege. L’effet de la toux en produisoit une partie; l’effet de la palleur ou battement de cœur, un’autre, et doubteusement. Ce ne sont mes gestes que j’escris, c’est moy, c’est mon essence. (‘De l’exercitation’, II: 6: p. 359)

Just as the concept of the hidden God was encapsulated at the earlier stages of its development in the image of God showing his back to Moses - a metaphor for God’s indirect or partial revelation of his being through the creation - Montaigne’s approach to the question of knowledge of God can be said to be embodied in an image which appears in the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’. The
solution to the problem of man’s unruly search for ultimate truth is fittingly encapsulated, Montaigne infers, in the story of the slave-girl from Miletus who taught the great philosopher Thales a lesson in simplicity and humility.

Je sçay bon gré à la garse Milesienne qui, voyant le philosophe Thales s’amuser continuellement à la contemplation de la voute celeste et tenir tousjours les yeux eslevez contremont, luy mit en son passage quelque chose à le faire broncher, pour l’advertir qu’il seroit temps d’amuser son pensement aux choses qui estoient dans les nues, quand il auroit proueu à celles qui estoient à ses pieds. Elle lui conselloit certes bien de regarder plustost à soy qu’au ciel. (II: 12: p. 519)

Unencumbered by the complicated reasonings which fill the mind of the philosopher and draw his mental gaze up to the heavens, the slave-girl is able to see the simple truth before her that self-knowledge is the doorway to knowledge of God. By presenting us with this ‘childlike’ story, Montaigne, too, intends to trip us up and rub our noses in the self-irony that we as a species try so hard to escape.

Montaigne’s presentation of the concept of the hidden God is thus itself veiled in the world of metaphors and stories that make up the Essais. If we are to understand what he says on the subject, we must take up the gauntlet and play the game as Montaigne designed it to be played. That is, we must interpret his words in their higher sense and, like children or, indeed, like animals, see with a mental vision that is untainted by the self-loving passions that afflict human beings. The lens through which we may view the concept of the hidden God in the Essais is the theme of bestise or animal-stupidity. Before examining Montaigne’s text in more detail, however, we must consider the doctrine that lies at the heart of this literary theme: Christian folly.
2. The doctrine of Christian folly in St Paul

The writings of St Paul had a particularly strong influence on Montaigne’s understanding and creative use of the doctrine of Christian folly. The paradox on which the doctrine rests is that one opposite can be achieved by means of another, in other words, that the infinity and eternity of God can somehow be known through the finitude and diversity of the created world. In Romans 1. 20, the verse which lies at the heart of natural theology in the Renaissance, Paul says,

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.

Following St Paul and, of course, Sebond, Montaigne signals to his reader in the ‘Apologie’ that the ‘creation’ also includes our entire selves, our bodies and our souls:

Aussi n’est-il pas croyable que toute cette machine n’ait quelques marques empreintes de la main de ce grand architecte, et qu’il n’y ait quelque image és choses du monde rapportant aucument à l’ouvrier qui les a basties et formées […]. C’est ce qu’il nous dit luy mesme, que ses operations invisibles, il nous les manifeste par les visibles […]. Le ciel, la terre, les elements, nostre corps et nostre ame, toutes choses y conspirent. Il n’est que de trouver le moyen de s’en servir. (p. 424)

Montaigne may have been remembering the words of Nicholas of Lyra, the thirteenth-century scriptural commentator. In his commentary on Romans 1. 20, Nicholas put forward the idea that when Paul spoke of ‘the things that are made’, he was referring to man, the ‘creature of the world’ par excellence.¹

Deceptively simple though they may seem, Montaigne’s words, ‘il n’est que de trouver le moyen de s’en servir’, are of vital importance to his central theme. At the beginning of the ‘Apologie’ Montaigne is adamant that human

¹ See Screech’s introduction to An Apology for Raymond Sebond, p. xxxii.
reason plays a part, in conjunction with divine grace, in the acquisition of knowledge of God. In accordance with Christian doctrine he states that ‘c'est la foy seule qui embrasse vivement et certainement les hauts mystères de nostre religion’ (pp. 417-18), but he does not concede to the authors of the first objection to Sebond's book that Christians do wrong to buttress their faith with human reasons: ‘mais ce n'est pas à dire que ce ne soit pas une très-belle et très-loisible entreprise d'accomoder encore au service de nostre foi les utils naturels et humains que Dieu nous a donné’ (p. 418). Having cited Romans 1. 20 in full a few pages later, Montaigne says that when faith comes to the aid of the human themes of Sebond and throws her light on them, she makes them firm and solid, capable of serving as an elementary guide that sets an apprentice on the road to knowledge (p. 425). For Montaigne, therefore, our reasoning faculty is the material taken up and animated by the grace of God: ‘or, nos raisons et nos discours humains, c'est comme la matière lourde et sterile: la grace de Dieu en est la forme; c'est elle qui y donne la façon et le pris’ (pp. 424-25). The question to which he devotes the rest of the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’ is what we may do with our reason in order to predispose it to such an honourable use.

The answer to this question is found in the words of St Paul, the essence of which is embedded in the text of the ‘Apologie’ and of the Essais as a whole: ‘if any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise’ (1 Corinthians 3. 18). Man must turn his reasoning faculty, his inquisitive mind, back on himself if he is to know God. The paradox of the doctrine of Christian folly according to St Paul is that those who are worldly wise are fools in the eyes of God, while those who make themselves as fools are wise
in the eyes of God. A closer reading of the Epistles reveals the underlying meaning of this paradox: what Paul means by ‘foolishness’ is the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the individual. In I Corinthians he explains that the apostles have received the spirit of God through which God reveals knowledge of those things he has prepared for those who love him, and which the carnal man cannot perceive (2. 9-12). Thus the wisdom of God is spoken in a mystery, a hidden wisdom (2. 7), ‘but the natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned’ (2. 14).

Throughout the Epistles, St Paul presents the notion of developing an inner and spiritual dimension within oneself so that one might become a fool. We are told to purge out the old leaven of presumption in order to become a new unleavened lump, making ourselves empty before God (I Corinthians 5. 7). We are also told that we were buried into death with Jesus by baptism; our old man was crucified with him, ‘that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6. 4). Paul beseeches us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12. 1). Such exhortations are meant to be interpreted not literally, but in a higher, spiritual sense. The Christian must humble himself, making war against his presumption so that he has room to cultivate the inner, spiritual values of faith, charity, goodness, meekness and poverty of spirit.

True wisdom, according to Paul, therefore, is the ability to open oneself up to the providential aspect of the divinity, the Holy Spirit, and to follow its instructions in one’s interpretation not only of the Bible (which is guided,
according to the Catholic religion, by the teachings of the Church), but also of one’s own being and the events in one’s own life. Like the image of God turning his back in order to reveal his being without harming his creation, the Holy Spirit is the ‘foolish’ version of God’s eternal wisdom:

Eventual access to this perfect knowledge is vouchsafed to man through God’s baby-talk, so to speak, through that ‘foolishness’ which is all of God’s wisdom that man can take. Such foolishness is the wisdom of God revealed, in ways that man can grasp, in the Bible. The highest manifestation of that foolishness - that divine Wisdom made intelligible to man - is Christ: God made man.²

In this context the person of Christ may be interpreted as a symbol of God’s providence in the world and of his presence in the most mundane aspects of the lives of human beings. This is precisely the argument that Montaigne presents through the theme of bestise in the Essais: if we make ourselves like animals, cultivating the spirit of Christ within us, then it will be granted to us to perceive God’s presence in our own existence.

3. Erasmus and The Praise of Folly

The great humanist, Erasmus (c.1469-1536), also had a very strong influence on Montaigne’s conception of Christian folly. His Moriae encomium or Praise of Folly sets the doctrine into dramatic literary form.³ The protagonist of Erasmus’s text, the personification of Folly, embodies the paradox that what is apparently true at first sight is in fact false, while truth is hidden where it is least expected to be. At face value Folly is a nonsensical jester blinded by self-love and presumption and prone to praising herself excessively. However, like a silenus -

³ Written in 1509, this work was first published in revised form in 1511 and then augmented and
a central theme in the book - she is more than she appears to be. The truth she hides is that of Pauline folly, which she praises openly and sincerely towards the end of the book and at intervals during it. In a sense she is exactly what she claims to be: a fool. But the scholarly and attentive reader discovers that she is merely a fool in the eyes of the world, which makes her wise in the eyes of God.

As Montaigne was to do after him, Erasmus draws almost as extensively on the rich symbolism of Socratic wisdom in the works of Plato as he does on Scripture. Drawing on the *Symposium* in his adage, the *Sileni Alcibiadis*, Erasmus describes sileni as small, carved images divided into two halves, which could be opened out and displayed. When closed they presented an ugly and ridiculous figure – in Classical mythology Silenus was the drunken and misshapen companion of Bacchus – but they opened out to reveal the figure of a god. In the *Sileni Alcibiadis* Erasmus names Socrates and Christ as silenic figures, but in the *Praise of Folly* he interprets the paradoxical notion of the silenus in more moral terms. In order to illustrate the first half of her paradox – the notion that the worldly wise are really fools – Folly describes life itself as silenic:

But if people prefer the sort of prudence which comes from forming judgements on life, please hear how far those who pride themselves on that account are from having it. In the first place, it's well known that all human affairs are like the figures of Silenus described by Alcibiades and have two completely opposite faces, so that what is death at first sight, as they say, is life if you look within, and vice versa, life is death. The same applies to beauty and ugliness, riches and poverty, obscurity and fame,

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learning and ignorance [...]; in fact you’ll find everything suddenly reversed if you open the silenus.⁵

We are then given a practical example of what this means: ‘we all agree a king is rich and powerful, but if he lacks all spiritual goods and can never be satisfied, then he’s surely the poorest of men’. Similarly, if this king is addicted to many vices then he is but a cheap slave (p. 44).

Moving on to the second half of the paradox, Folly contrasts the madness of those whose irreverent curiosity causes them to probe the secrets of nature and the hidden causes of the universe with the pious inhabitants of the Golden Age who lived solely according to natural instinct (p. 51). ‘By far the happiest of men,’ she says,

are those who have no traffic at all with any kind of learning and follow nature for their only guide. We shall never find her wanting unless we take it into our heads to overstep the limits of our mortal lot. (p. 53)

Those who ignore the fact that they are men and try to adopt the life of the immortal gods are the least happy and the most stupid, she says, while ‘conversely, the least unhappy are those who come nearest to the instinctive folly of dumb animals and attempt nothing beyond the capacities of man’ (p. 54).

Later in the text, when Folly has entirely thrust aside the appearances that veil her praise of Christian foolishness, she describes the teachings of Christ, which were given through the simplest of examples:

He taught [the apostles] to shun wisdom, and made his appeal through the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things, which live their lives by natural instinct alone, free from care or purpose. And then when he forbade his disciples to worry about how they should answer the charges of the governors and

told them not to seek to know times and seasons, it was surely because he wanted them not to rely on their own intelligence but be wholly dependent on him. (p. 126)

The theme of not worrying or being anxious about the future, but instead trusting the hand of providence in the turn of life's events is central in the *Essais*, as we shall see later on.⁶

In the spirit of the Pauline Epistles, Folly exhorts us to ecstasy, madness, death and war, all to be understood metaphorically and not literally. Madness and ecstasy of a kind desirable to man occur, she tells us, when the soul is freed from its anxious cares and restored 'by the addition of manifold delights' (p. 59).

In order to obtain this freedom, the sword of the spirit must penetrate into the innermost depths of the bosom and cut out every passion with a single stroke, 'so that nothing remains in the heart but piety' (p. 121). Those 'wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety' are dead to any normal feelings, Folly says, 'as if their spirit dwelt elsewhere than in their body' and do not suffer from poverty, hardship and humiliations; 'what else can this be but madness?' (p. 128). She then explains that the sacrament of the Eucharist represents this metaphorical death, the death of Christ 'which men must express through the mastery and extinction of their bodily passions, laying them in the tomb, as it were, in order to rise again to a new life wherein they can be united with him and with each other' (p. 131). Finally, when this union takes place and the individual is transformed, then the spirit will itself be absorbed by the Supreme Mind [...]. And so when the whole man will be outside himself, he will enjoy some ineffable share in the supreme good which draws everything into itself. (p. 133)

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⁶ On the theme of *sollicitudo* in Erasmus, see Screech, *Erasmus: Ecstasy and The Praise of Folly*, pp. 42-44.
Thus when man has emptied himself of himself, he will, according to Erasmus, experience the presence of God, whose grace will descend upon him and raise him up. Erasmus is here describing ecstasy experienced during life as a mere taste of what is to come after death. The incomplete nature of earthly ‘ecstasy’ should not distract us, however, from the important place it holds in Erasmus’s spiritual philosophy. Understood correctly, such ‘ecstasy’ provides the basis for a whole way of life rooted in devotion to God. The terms used by Folly in the text - it is ‘as if’ the spirit of Christian fools dwelt elsewhere than in their body (p. 128) - signal the higher meaning of the term ‘ecstasy’:

Folly is about to carry her argument into deeper meanings of Christian madness. The selfless conduct of the Christian fool, as Folly has just described it, is in itself an ecstasy, an apparent departure of his soul from his body, leading to an apparently insane selflessness. St François de Sales, although writing over a generation later, makes this so clear that he is worth quoting to clinch the matter: this kind of ecstasy – without which, he writes, other ecstatic experiences are at worst false and at best dangerous – is l'extase de l'œuvre et de la vie (that form of ecstasy which manifests itself in good works and in a selfless way of life). […] To leave all one's goods, to embrace poverty, opprobrium, martyrdom, chastity, going against the current of a hostile world – that is to live above the level of ordinary humanity: 'That is not to live in ourselves but outside ourselves (hors de nous) and above ourselves'. No one can do this “unless the Father draweth him” (John 6:44): ‘And so this kind of life must be a perpetual rapture (ravissement) and a perpetual ecstasy of act and work (une extase perpétuelle d'action et d'opération).

Erasmus does indeed interpret the notion of ecstasy in the Pauline sense, therefore, applying its meaning to everyday life and encouraging the reader to put the ideas he writes about into practice in his or her own life. As in the case of Charron, however, the tone with which he sets his thoughts to paper remains ecstatic nevertheless, and the reader senses that ecstasy in the more literal sense

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7 Screech, Erasmus, pp. 67-68. The author's reference is to Saint François de Sales, Œuvres (1669), I. 431.
has crept into the picture. The same cannot be said of Montaigne. Soul and body could not be in a sturdier, more intimate relationship than the one presented by the author of the *Essais*. Montaigne's down-to-earth, humorous, sometimes positive, sometimes negative perspective on life and on himself is reassuringly human. As any reader of the *Essais* knows, however, it is also powerful and moving in a way that bears witness to his ability to touch and communicate the essence of human joy and suffering. It is this paradox which is captured in the theme of *bestise*.

4. Beasts, angels and human beings in the *Essais*

In something of the same theatrical style as the *Praise of Folly*, Montaigne clothes his discussion of Christian folly in the apparel of humanist terminology. Following the Renaissance commonplace that man's position in the universal scheme of things is between that of the beasts and the angels — a colourful metaphor to denote the free will given by the grace of God that empowers man to choose between good and evil — Montaigne asserts through the theme of *bestise* that if man attempts to become an angel he will fall into *bestise*, or animal-stupidity, while if he makes himself into a *beste*, he will be raised above his former condition to that of the angels.  

Throughout the *Essais* he lays particular emphasis on the animal-stupidity of those presumptuous men who seek to attain the angelic status and the wisdom it tantalisingly offers: 'et combien ay-je veu de mon temps d'hommes abestis par temeraire avidité de science?' (‘De l’institution des enfants’, I: 26: p. 163).

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8 See ‘De l’expérience’, p. 1096: ‘c’est folie; au lieu de se transformer en anges, ils se
Carneades was so ‘affollé’, Montaigne says here, that he no longer had the time to groom himself and cut his nails, which caused him to descend into a bestial way of life (p. 163). Man has his place, he says in the ‘Apologie’, and should restrict himself to it, but human beings tend always to go to extremes, ‘comme la licence de leurs opinions les esleve tantost au dessus des nuës, et puis les ravale aux antipodes’ (p. 122). ‘Les plus grossieres et pueriles ravasseries,’ he says later in the same chapter,

se treuvent plus en ceux qui traittent les choses plus hautes et plus avant, s’abyssmans en leur curiosité et presomption. La fin et le commencement de science se tiennent en pareille bestise. (p. 209)

In opposition to the foolishness of this arrogant, knowledge-seeking bestise, Montaigne cites the case of the silenic figure Socrates – a quietly omnipresent character in the *Essais* – who, when told that the god of wisdom had called him wise felt that ‘il n’estoit distingué des autres et n’estoit sage que parce ce qu’il ne s’en tenoit pas’ (p. 165).

The many different kinds of metaphors used by Montaigne to express the notion of Christian folly do not, however, obscure the clarity and directness of the thoughts underlying them. These shine through in no uncertain terms at intervals in the text:

Que nous presche la vérité, quand elle nous presche de fuir la mondaine philosophie [the wisdom of the world], quand elle nous inculque si souvent que nostre sagesse n’est que folie devant Dieu; que, de toutes les vanitez, la plus vaine c’est l’homme; que l’homme qui presume de son savoir, ne sçait pas encore que c’est que sçavoit, et que l’homme, qui n’est rien s’il pense estre quelque chose, se seduit soy mesme et se trompe? (‘Apologie’, p. 116)
But, as Montaigne himself indicates, the best metaphor with which to convey what he wishes to say is the transparent, pulsating image of his own flesh, blood, thoughts and feelings. By his own admission, once involved in the process of assaying himself, Montaigne's aim is to display himself as he truly is, faults and all: 'je veux qu'on voye mon pas naturel et ordinaire, ainsin detraqué qu'il est' ('Du repentir', III: 2: p. 388). We can only guess, however, whether he knew before he began his self-portrait quite how perfectly his own bestise would mirror his conception of Christian folly. Montaigne's observation of the different kinds of people in the world, himself included, gives rise in the Essais to the discovery of a part of himself that is intolerant of plain stupidity. On the basis of this discovery, as we shall now see, not only does he learn to be more benevolent and charitable towards others apparently less capable in human affairs than he, but he finds that they, paradoxically, are the capable ones, from whom he has many a lesson to learn.

Returning to the central theme of the 'Apologie', that it is the way in which we use our reason that counts, Montaigne in 'De l'art de conferer' brings up the subject of the two kinds of bestise that frustrate him the most: the presumptuous foolishness of learned scholars who think themselves wise and the plain stupidity of uneducated people.

J'ayme et honore le sçavoir autant que ceux qui l'ont; et, en son vray usage, c'est le plus noble et puissant acquest des hommes. Mais en ceux là (et il en est un nombre infiny de ce genre) qui en establissent leur fondamentale suffisance et valeur, qui se raportent de leur entendement à leur memoire, [...] et ne peuvent dire rien que par livre, je le hay, si je l'ose dire, un peu plus que la bestise. (III: 8: p. 905)

Further on, he expands on his annoyance at the absurdity of the statements and behaviour of common people. He has often broken off business deals, he tells us,
because of the silly claims made by the peasant with whom he is negotiating and, although he does not lose his temper over the mistakes of those who work for him, ‘sur le point de la bestise et opiniastreté de leurs allegations, excuses et défences asnieres et brutales, nous sommes tous les jours à nous en prendre à la gorge’ (p. 906). Giving his frustration a free rein, he continues:

Ils n’entendent ny ce qui se dict ny pourquoy, et respondent de mesme; c’est pour desesperer. Je ne sens heurter rudement ma teste que par une autre teste, et entre plustost en composition avec le vice de mes gens qu’avec leur temerite, importunité, et leur sottise. Qu’ils facent moins, pourveu qu’ils soient capables de faire: vous vivez en esperance d’eschauffer leur volonté; mais d’une souche il n’y a ny qu’esperer, ny que jouyr qui vaille. (p. 907)

Montaigne is quick to recognise, however, that he is probably the one at fault here: ‘j’accuse mon impatience, et tiens premierement qu’elle est également vitieuse en celuy qui a droict comme en celuy qui a tort (car c’est toujours un’aigreur tyrannique de ne pouvoir souffrir une forme diverse à la sienne)’ (p. 907). Why can we encounter a twisted and crippled body without getting annoyed, he asks, yet not be able to bear the presence of a deranged mind without flying into a rage? (p. 907). ‘Cette vitieuse aspreté tient plus au juge qu’à la faute.’ Let us always have Plato’s saying on our lips, he says: that anything I find wrong in something or someone may be the result of my own malady. ‘Am I not the one at fault? May my criticism not be turned against me?’, we should ask ourselves: ‘Sage et divin refrein, qui fouete la plus universelle et commune erreur des hommes’ (p. 907).

Montaigne’s own error in this instance presents him with the opportunity to grasp the affliction of humanity as a whole: ‘noz yeux ne voient rien en derriere’ (p. 908). He is referring here to Aesop’s fable of the beggar’s wallet,
which conveys the simple but unfortunate truth that we have razor-sharp sight for
the pack of faults hanging over the back of the person in front of us, but are little
inclined to examine the contents of our own pack of faults hanging conveniently
out of sight. ‘Stercus cuique suum bene olet’, Montaigne says in the same breath:
‘everyone’s shit smells good to himself’. Ironically, it is Montaigne’s willingness
to examine his excrement with a somewhat critical eye that redeems him. In ‘De
la vanité’, his own faults are once again held under the microscope of his reason:
‘ce sont icy, un peu plus civilement, des excrements d’un vieil esprit, dur tantost,
tantost lâche, et toujours indigeste’ (III: 9: p. 923). Having already purged his
irritation at the animal-stupidity of common people by this point, he is now able
to express his aspiration to the kind of bestise that they represent.

One major fault in his character, he tells us, is his inadequacy at managing
his estates and his failure to participate enthusiastically in country life. But, says
Montaigne, those who say that it is due to arrogance and disdain that he cannot be
bothered to learn the names of the tools used in husbandry, for example, do him
mortal wrong: ‘cela c’est plustost bestise que gloire. Je m’aime rois mieux bon
escuyer que bon logitien’ (p. 929). It is merely worry and effort which he finds
too costly, he says further on, ‘et ne cherche qu’à m’anonchalir et avahir’ (p. 931). Montaigne’s apparent self-criticism is in fact a subtle acknowledgement of
the wisdom that enables him firstly to recognise his own faults and secondly to
focus on what is directly in front of him without losing himself in thoughts of
universal scale:

Nous empeschons noz pensées du general et des causes et conduittes
universelles, qui se conduisent très bien sans nous, et laissons en arrière
nostre faict et Michel qui nous touche encore de plus près que l’homme.
Or j'arreste bien chez moy le plus ordinairement, mais je voudrois m'y plaire plus qu'ailleurs. (p. 929)

Montaigne demonstrates here that he is altogether familiar with the Christian virtue discussed earlier in the chapter: the ability not to worry and to trust that everything outside one’s own small domain will be taken care of appropriately.\(^9\)

In ‘De la phisionomie’, the penultimate chapter of the *Essais*, Montaigne’s mature perspective on *bestise* comes into full focus. Here he praises the animal-stupidity of simple, uneducated folk in explicit and unequivocal terms.

The subject of death, which is intimately bound up with the theme of Christian folly, is once again the topic of Montaigne’s discussion. Acknowledging that of all the hardships we must face in life, death is perhaps the most difficult of all, Montaigne says that the simple-minded do far better than the erudite when it comes to the task of ending their life, for what learning promises – freedom from anxiety about death – simplicity provides (p. 1029). Peasants and craftsmen do not think about death before the event, he says, thereby following the precepts of nature which teaches them this, and unlike the rest of us, they require no prior consolation or remedy for it:

> Le commun n’a besoing ny de remede, ny de consolation qu’au coup, et n’en considere qu’autant justement qu’il en sent. Est-ce pas ce que nous disions, que la stupidité et faute d’apprehension du vulgaire luy donne cette patience aux maux presens et cette profonde nonchalance des sinistres accidens futurs? Que leur ame, pour estre crasse et obtuse, est moins penetrable et agitable? Pour Dieu, s’il est ainsi, tenons d’ores en avant escole de bestise. C’est l’extreme fruict que les sciences nous promettent, auquel cette-cy conduit si doucement ses disciples. (p. 1029)

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\(^9\) See above, section 3.
As it will become clear in Chapters 4 and 5, the decision to follow the guidance of nature is a particularly important aspect of the art of bestise as Montaigne describes it here.

The extracts of the Essais that we have considered so far reveal a basic pattern that can be found to reappear throughout the text. In ‘Des vaines subtilitez’ Montaigne highlights the playful but deliberate intention underlying his recurring message to the reader that self-awareness – the act of holding one’s being under the microscope of one’s own reason – is the catalyst that initiates the process of knowledge of God. He tells us that at home they have just been playing the game of who can find the most things that meet at extremes.\textsuperscript{10} Citing as an example the custom of giving the titles ‘Sire’ and ‘dames’ to high-ranking and low-ranking people but never to anyone in between, Montaigne quickly moves on to a more erudite discussion of paradoxes. A wider perspective on the subject reveals that it is human beings who fall into this mediocre middle category: ‘Democritus disoit que les dieux et les bestes avoient les sentiments plus aiguz que les hommes, qui sont au moyen estage’ (I: 54: p. 298). Montaigne’s interest, however, lies primarily in how this rule applies to everyday life. Whether a man is a beast or an angel is decided, he proceeds to explain, by how one reacts to adversity. Strangely enough, ‘la bestise et la sagesse se rencontrent en mesme point de sentiment et de resolution à la souffrance des accidens humains’ (p. 298). That is to say, both wise men and simple men avoid the battle-ground of the disruptive emotions provoked by life’s hardships, the

former by judging them for what they are and leaping above them with a vigorous mind, the latter by simply ignoring them (pp. 298-99). As for the rest: ‘l’ordinaire et moyenne condition des hommes loge entre ces deux extrémités, qui est de ceux qui apperçoivent les maux, les sentent, et ne les peuvent supporter’ (p. 299).

Having established that the middle category of human beings is where problems arise, Montaigne goes on to demonstrate, albeit with great subtlety and ingeniousness, that the problem is also solved by virtue of the ‘middleness’ of the middle category, so to speak. In terms of man’s worship of God, he goes on, the simple, uneducated folk who, through piety and obedience maintain a simple faith within the prescribed doctrine, make good Christians. Similarly, the piety of the ‘grands esprits’, who ‘par longue et religieuse investigation penetrent une plus profonde et abstruse lumiere és escriptures’ cannot be rivalled (p. 299). Once again, the middle category is singled out as problematic: ‘en la moyenne vigueur des esprits et moyenne capacité s’engendre l’erreur des opinions’ (p. 299). Instead of looking deeper into the silenic nature of the group below them, these middle minds follow the apparent truth of their first impressions and judge the lower minds as stupid. But, says Montaigne, ‘ils [...] ont quelque tiltre d’interpréter à simplicité et bestise de nous voir arrester en l’ancien train, regardant à nous qui n’y sommes pas instruits par estude’ (p. 299).

The ‘nous’ in this last sentence clearly suggests that Montaigne includes himself in the lower category. But at the end of the chapter, we find that he also places himself in the middle category, counting himself among ‘les mestis qui ont dedaigné le premier siege d’ignorance de lettres, et n’ont peu joindre l’autre (le
cul entre deux selles, desquels je suis, et tant d’autres)” (p. 300). We then discover that it is precisely because of his own experience of attempting to overstep the boundaries of the human condition and falling flat on his face (his breakdown described in ‘De l’oisiveté’ caused by the decision to retire from ordinary life to study books in his tower) that Montaigne’s place in the lower, more humble group is assured him. The prestige of higher bestise is his because he has learnt to recognise his mediocrity, his humanness: ‘de ma part, je me recule tant que je puis dans le premier et naturel siège, d’où je suis pour neant essayé de partir’ (p. 300).

5. Bestise in the ‘Apologie’

On the basis of what we have seen so far, bestise can be described as an internal process which, initiated by the act of becoming conscious of one’s humanness and thereby humbling oneself, involves the attainment of a new perspective on the world. As the old perspective - based on egotistical self-love and arrogance - fragments, the pieces settle, as in a kaleidoscope, into a new configuration that yields a different vision of the same objects and events of daily life. At the very centre of this configuration, for Montaigne, lies the providential force of nature. When man has emptied himself of his own ideas about how to live, what he sees, Montaigne says in the Essais, is how God intended him to live: according to the rules of nature, the law that represents his presence in the world.

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11 Michaël Baraz evokes this middle state in L’être et la connaissance selon Montaigne (Toulouse: Librairie José Corti, 1968), p. 17: ‘[Montaigne] semble se contenter, modestement, de vivre à un “moyen estage”, à un niveau également éloigné de l’unité et de la diversité pures. […] L’image du moyen étage semble suggérer une attitude qui consiste plutôt à réunir les extrêmes qu’à les exclure. Si nous ne pouvions pas saisir l’être pur, ce n’est pas que nous nous trouverions à un niveau ontologiquement inférieur, c’est que l’être est en réalité immanent au devenir’. 
In the ‘Apologie’, this notion, which is expressed in many different ways in the Essais, is translated into animal stories or fables which serve to trigger the reader’s higher interpretative powers into action. At the beginning of this central chapter of the Essais, Montaigne announces that his intention is to shake the impious confidence of those who think that they know better than Sebond, or who think they are able to put reason to better use: ‘le moyen que je prens pour rabatre cette frenaisie et qui me semble le plus propre, c’est de froisser et fouler aux pieds l’orgueil et l’humaine fierté’ (p. 115). It soon becomes clear that his intention is to belittle man’s homocentricity by contrasting it with the vast array of human and, indeed, more-than-human abilities characteristic of the animal kingdom. Following Sebond’s instructions, it seems that Montaigne is set on rearranging the letters and sentences comprising the book of nature (man and the animals) so that a deeper meaning of our relationship with our fellow creatures might emerge:

On saisira mieux la portée des nombreux passages où Montaigne exprime son admiration pour la sagesse spontanée des animaux et des gens simples, si l’on songe qu’il voulait réagir contre un rationalisme tendant à négliger les immenses richesses que recèlent les régions ‘obscures’ de l’âme. [...] Il y a d’ailleurs bien des passages dans les Essais où la sagesse de la ‘bête heureuse’ et du sauvage est conçue non pas comme purement instinctive, mais comme engageant, elle aussi, la totalité des fonctions psychiques, comme impliquant, entre autres, quelque chose d’équivalent au jugement humain.

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12 Floyd Gray comments as follows on these animal stories: ‘Montaigne intends for us to conclude that man is no more qualified to interpret the acts of animals without realizing the fictional bias of any such account than he is to circumscribe the attributes of God, and that his confusion in the matter is the inevitable result of his propensity for manufacturing sentences and assuming that language is in the image of reality’. See his ‘Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism’, in O un amy!: Essays on Montaigne in Honour of Donald M. Frame, ed. by Raymond C. La Charité (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum Publishers, 1977), pp. 119-34, p. 131.

A close reading of the animal stories of the 'Apologie' suggests that this 'deeper meaning' is the providential role of nature in human affairs and man's obligation to follow nature's rules and remain within the limits of the human condition:

Montaigne was quick to realize that the meaning of animal conduct depended upon human interpretation and that all that was needed to explain it was an adequate language. Had he been interested solely in confounding the dogmatist or with compiling examples of courageous impassibility, he could have restricted his demonstration to that of the dog or the pig; but since Pyrrhonism seemed to him to be involved with experience, with translating into human terms a natural way of life, he found it necessary to multiply his examples, to call upon prototypes in the animal world in proportion to the diversity of man.\textsuperscript{14}

Throughout this section of the chapter, Montaigne appears to identify and signal to his reader through the metaphors of his animal stories the characteristics of the \textit{homme-beste}, the Christian who practises the art of folly, which he must cultivate in accordance with the laws of nature. He begins by challenging the reader to open the silenus of the \textit{bestise} that he (and man in general) attributes to the animals. How can man, he asks, from the power of his own understanding, know the hidden, inward motivations of animate creatures?; 'par quelle comparaison d'eux à nous conclud il la bestise qu'il leur attribue?' (p. 430).

Under the heading of the remarkable similarities between the beasts and humans, Montaigne then suggests that 'sign-language' and not spoken language should be considered the property of man along with all the animals, since the ability to make and read signs and gestures is a meaningful language common to us all, with no prior learning required (pp. 430-31):
Aux bestes mesmes qui n’ont pas de voix, par la société d’offices que nous voyons entre elles, nous argumentons aisément quelque autre moyen de communication: leurs mouvements discourent et traictent […]. Pourquoynon, tout aussi bien que nos muets disputent, argumentent et content des histoires par signes? (p. 431)

The human body is the vehicle for many different kinds of sign language, Montaigne explains. All manner of thoughts and feelings are transmitted by the eyes, for example – ‘les amoureux se courroussent, se reconcilient, se prient, s’assignent et disent enfin toutes choses des yeux’ (p. 431). And what of the hopes, desires and judgements that are conveyed by hands?:

Nous requérons, nous promettons, appellons, congedions, menaçons, prions, supplions, nions, refusons, interrogeons, admirons, nombrons, confessons, repentons, craignons, vergoignons, doubtons, intruisons, commandons, incitons. (p. 431)

As if to underline his intention to break up the syntax of our habitual thought-patterns, Montaigne juxtaposes sixty-eight verbs in the first-person plural - including those verbs used to describe what we can ‘say’ with our heads - in two extraordinarily extended sentences. With Rabelaisian disregard for custom, he seeks to shock his reader into a state of openness to new ideas and lack of prejudice. As Floyd Gray has pointed out,

Whereas philosophic language is concerned with consecutiveness, skeptical language remains inceptive and discontinuous in imitation of the natural movement of words before they are assembled into artificial sequences. It is Montaigne’s contention that man is unable to communicate with being, with anything that is, the nature of which is change, and that Pyrrhonism, inasmuch as it tends towards indetermination, provides a means of thinking and of living in conformity with the essential movement of things.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) Floyd Gray, ‘Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism’, p. 132.
Montaigne then gets straight to the point. Speaking of the ordered web of interconnections that makes each inhabitant of the animal kingdom a vital component in the smooth functioning of the whole, Montaigne puts a rhetorical question to his reader:

Est-il police réglée avec plus d'ordre, diversifiée à plus de charges et d'offices, et plus constamment entretenue que celle des mouches à miel? Cette disposition d'actions et de vacations si ordonnée, la pouvons nous imaginer se conduire sans discours et sans providence? (p. 432)

He mocks man's tendency to assume that while Mother Nature leads the animals by the hand to the activities that befit them, human beings are abandoned to the whims of fortune and to their own meagre devices:

Pourquoy attribuons nous à je ne sçay quelle inclination naturelle et servile les ouvrages qui surpassent tout ce que nous pouvons par nature et par art? [...] Sans y penser, nous leur donnons un très-grand avantage sur nous, de faire que nature, par une douceur maternelle, les accompagne et guide, comme par la main à toutes les actions et commoditez de leur vie; et qu'à nous elle nous abandonne au hazard et à la fortune, et à quester par art les choses nécessaires à nostre conservation [...], de manière que leur stupidité brutale surpassed en toutes commoditez tout ce que peut nostre divine intelligence. (p. 433)

The animals do indeed have the upper-hand when we reason in such an absurd fashion, Montaigne infers, because the truth is, 'il n’en est rien’ (p. 433):

Nature a embrassé universellement toutes ses creatures; et n’en est aucune qu’elle n’ait bien plainement fourni de tous moyens nécessaires à la conservation de son estre [...]. Ces plaintes vulgaires que joy faire aux hommes [...] sont fauces, il y a en la police du monde une esgalité plus grande et une relation plus uniforme. (pp. 433-34)

As these passages indicate, Montaigne’s intention in the animal stories that follow is to demonstrate that human beings are no less protected and cared for by providence than the animals. In case his reader has any doubts about his central argument, Montaigne underlines it for him:
Nous devons conclure de pareils effects pareilles facultez, et confesser par consequent que [...] cette mesme voye, que nous tenons a ouvrir, c’est aussi celle des animaux [...], joinct qu’il est plus honorable d’estre acheminé et obligé a regléement agir par naturelle et inevitable condition, et plus approchant de la divinite, que d’agir reglément par liberté temeraire et fortuite; et plus seur de laisser à nature qu’a nous les resnes de nostre conduicte. (p. 437)

For Montaigne, the law of nature is an instrument of divine providence, therefore, and it is the duty of the Christian to follow its precepts in his daily life.

The stories that Montaigne tells in this section highlight the natural ability of the animals to know instinctively how to behave and what to do. Their capacity for self-knowledge and the ability to ‘go within’ in order to find the solution to a problem is given particular emphasis. Speaking early on in the section of the natural skills that humans possess, Montaigne hints at this animal-quality which he is shortly to praise more overtly. The sense of hearing which deaf people lack is naturally bound to the function of speaking, he says, ‘en façon que ce que nous parlons, il faut que nous le parlons premierement à nous et que nous le facions sonner au dedans à nos oreilles, avant que de l’envoyer aux estrangeres’ (p. 436).

Perhaps the best example of a self-knowing animal following the providential guidance of its own nature is given in Plutarch’s ‘strange’ story of the magpie. The bird in question, which resided in a barber’s shop in Rome, was unusually skilled at imitating any sound that it heard (p. 443). One day, trumpets were played at some length outside the shop. All that day and the next, Montaigne tells us, ‘voylà cette pie pensive, muete et melancholique, dequoy tout

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16 Plutarch is Montaigne’s most significant source for his animal material in this section of the ‘Apologie’, notably his texts Quels animaux? and Que les brutes usent de la raison. Amyot’s translation of Plutarch’s Moralia was published in 1572. Floyd Gray quotes from De l’amour &
le monde estoit esmerveillé’ (p. 443). Everyone thought that the magpie had been stunned and confused by the sound and that it had consequently lost its voice. This was not the case, however, and it was finally discovered

que c’estoit une estude profonde et une retraitie en soy-mesme, son esprit s’exercitant et preparant sa voix à representer le son de ces trompetes; de maniere que sa premiere voix ce fut celle là, de exprimer perfectement leurs reprinises, leurs poses et leurs nuances, ayant quicté par ce nouvel apprentissage et pris à desdain tout ce qu’elle sçavoit dire auparavant. (p. 443)

It appears that what Montaigne is describing here is the spiritual death and rebirth evoked in the Pauline Epistles. The influence of the Holy Spirit is signalled to us by the magpie’s melancholic nature. Being a sanguine melancholic himself, Montaigne was perfectly familiar with the Renaissance commonplace that this complexion disposed one both to madness and to divine inspiration.17

Another example of a spiritual death and rebirth is provided by Plutarch’s story of the dog that performed a role in a Roman play. The dog’s part consisted of feigning death having consumed a particular drug. After eating the bit of bread that he had to pretend was the drug, Montaigne says,

Il commença tantost à trembler et branler comme s’il eut esté estourdi; finalement, s’estandant et se roidissant, comme mort, il se laissa tirer et traisner d’un lieu à autre, ainsi que portoit le subject du jeu; et puis, quand il congneut qu’il estoit temps, il commença premieryement à se remuer tout bellement ainsi que s’il se fut revenu d’un profund sommeil, et, levant la teste, regarda çà et là d’une façon qui estonnoit tous les assistans. (p. 442)

Like Erasmus in the Praise of Folly, Montaigne emphasises the fiction of the event: as if he were dead, the dog plays the game, allowing himself to be dragged

around and then coming back to life as if he were waking from a deep sleep. The separation of his body and soul in the ecstatic act par excellence, death, is not interpreted literally but metaphorically. Reflecting a recurrent theme in these animal stories, the dog allows himself to be directed by an 'outside' force. This providential force is both outside and inside him, however, because he is following his own will and desire to play the part that he has been given. Like the magpie, the dog is 'comme [...] estourdi', stunned by the event. This reaction, along with that of the audience who are 'estonn[és]', reinforces the impression of divine inspiration, the traditional mark of which is amazement or stupor caused by fright.\textsuperscript{18}

The partnership between man and the Holy Spirit (working through nature) is also represented by the stories in which one small creature works together with a bigger creature for the benefit and fulfilment of both. Under the heading of gratitude (one of the many qualities in the text that ensure the superiority of animals over humans), Montaigne tells the well-known story of Androdus (Androcles) and the lion. Androdus must descend into 'une caverne cachée et inaccessible' in order to find the powerful and 'espouvantable' lion who becomes his friend and will later save his life in the amphitheatre (pp. 455-56). The Romans were so delighted by the story of their friendship that they petitioned for Androdus's freedom from slavery, and, says Montaigne, wherever they went together people exclaimed, 'voylà le Lyon hoste de l'homme, voylà l'homme medecin du Lyon' (p. 457). One is reminded here of Sebond's description of the way in which God grows outside himself in man, while in the same act, man disciplinables et excellans: aussi n'en est il point qui ayent tant de propencion à la folie'.

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grows inside himself through God. Montaigne goes on to describe the same kind of partnership between the whale and the sea-gudgeon: the smaller creature is able to journey through the ocean under the protection of the whale, while the whale is usefully guided by her companion (p. 458). The wren and the crocodile have an equally profitable agreement: in return for watching out for the crocodile’s safety, the little bird may dine on the remains of the crocodile’s meals stuck between its teeth (p. 458).

6. **Bestise as spirituality in a moral context**

The humility with which the ‘animals’ of the ‘Apologie’ know and accept themselves as they are, drawing on the instinctive abilities at their disposition and never attempting to overstep their limitations as mortal creatures, can be said to represent the essence of the term ‘nature’ in the *Essais*. The wisdom of these representatives of good *bestise* resides in the fact that they are instinctively capable of perceiving the thin line that separates the two poles of Christian folly, madness and divine inspiration:

> De quoy se faict la plus subtile folie, que de la plus subtile sagesse? [...] il n’y a qu’un demi tour de cheville à l’un à l’autre [...]. Qui ne sçait combien est imperceptible le voisinage d’entre la folie avecq les gaillardes elevations d’un esprit libre et les effects d’une vertu supreme et extraordinaire? (‘Apologie’, pp. 471-72)

Using the examples of Lucretius and Torquato Tasso to highlight the ease with which the liveliness of an agile mind tinged with presumption can crash into madness, Montaigne brings his hidden God argument into full view. In order to

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18 See Screech, *Erasmus*, p. 49, for the traditional characteristics of ecstasy.
19 See above, Chapter 1, section 5. iv.
be sane, well-ordered and secure in his own being, man must be shrouded in the shadows of ignorance:

Voulez vous un homme sain, le voulez vous réglé et en ferme et seure posture? affublez le de tenebres, d’oisiveté et de pesanteur. Il nous faut abestir pour nous assagir, et nous esblouir pour nous guider. (p. 472)

The prerequisite for being guided by the Holy Spirit, according to Montaigne, is to lose our own sight. The key word in the last sentence of this passage is esblouir, for it indicates that the shadows with which we are blinded (the shadows of our own being and of the creation in general) are, paradoxically, light. While on the one hand man’s efforts to know God directly are thwarted by the presumption that motivates them, on the other this thwarted presumption (bad bestise) itself becomes the means to know him, but this time indirectly via the channel of self-knowledge (good bestise). As we shall see in the chapters that follow, this notion is expanded to include the way in which the ‘bad’ things that happen to us in our lives are in fact disguised ‘good’ things waiting only for our interpretation of them to change to reveal their true nature.

The importance of bestise, the doctrine of Christian folly translated into literary terms, lies not in the domain of mystical experiences, therefore, but in that of ordinary life. What counts for Montaigne, who was writing as a layman, is whether a person is close to God through his or her own being and experience of life. According to the paradox of bestise, life has no meaning without its complement, death. It is fitting that on the basis of this paradox, Montaigne reveals his own spiritual development through the exposition of his fear of death
and of his growing ability to interpret this phenomenon, and phenomena in
general, in a higher sense.²⁰

²⁰ Baraz, in L'être et la connaissance, p. 12, argues that: ‘on peut distinguer chez [Montaigne]
deux niveaux de l’existence, dont chacun implique une vision différente de la nature en
mouvement. Au niveau inférieur, opposé à la sagesse, la nature apparaît comme un enchaînement
matériel de mouvements, dont l’homme est un jouet. Au niveau supérieur, c’est l’unité du
mouvement qui s’impose avec le plus de force à la conscience, et l’on entrevoit que l’infinie
diversité mouvante découle de cette unité, qu’on ne saurait concevoir comme purement matérielle
[...]. La nature apparaît à Montaigne comme une réalité à la fois matérielle et spirituelle’.
Chapter 4

Bestise in Practice: The Death of the Outer Man

1. Negative reason as providence in the world of man's psyche

The aim underlying the process of bestise, as we have seen in the last chapter, is to change radically the way in which man thinks, to transform or reverse his perspective on the world. Instead of using his reason positively, therefore, the individual must, according to Montaigne, turn it back upon himself in the act of self-knowledge, thus creating a negative space within him or a negative mode of living. This 'negative reason' is the good bestise or divine folly privileged and admired by Montaigne throughout the Essais. Just as nature is presented to us as the intelligent force of providence at work in God's creation, so negative reason or 'right reason' - synonymous with the soul - is portrayed as the link (within man and within all creation) between infinity and divinity, God and man:

Soul is the divine aspect which links man to God – 'elle [raison] est en l'âme, et partie ou effect d'icelle: car la vraye raison est essentielle' (II: 12: p. 523). [...] Reason is an apersonal principle demonstrated and controlled by God and instilled in man by the grace of God.¹

In order to grasp the full import of this inspired negative mode of being as it is revealed to us in Montaigne's assays of himself, we must enter the psychological world of the author's text from a more specific angle. The subject of death, which preoccupied and worried Montaigne perhaps more than any

¹ La Charité, The Concept of Judgement in Montaigne, p. 128. La Charité also says that 'Montaigne castigates [in the 'Apologie'] that reason which is merely discursive and theoretical and which beguiles man into thinking that it can solve metaphysical questions. On the other hand, reason has a second meaning, for it implies a sensible, "natural" approach to things purely human; this form of reason is man's critical spirit. Reason can be equated with "nature"; that which is
other, offers us the opportunity to view his spiritual development - his cultivation of negative reason and discovery of his interior world - from an ideal perspective.

2. A higher vision of death

During the course of the *Essais*, Montaigne's perception of death undergoes a dramatic change. Mirroring the transformation in his reaction to the *bestise* of simple people, Montaigne's new physical and emotional reaction to death's presence in his life demonstrates the way in which he comes to view the precepts of Christian folly in a more 'spiritual' and less literal way. From an early age, Montaigne had experienced a tremendous fear of dying. As one of his first chapters illustrates, the subject of death was, on the basis of this fear, a compelling and fascinating one. In 'Que philosopher, c’est apprendre à mourir' (I: 20), Montaigne discusses the frightening reality of death head on, from a literal perspective, seeking the solution to fear of death with the help of stoical precepts.

His reaction to the way in which common people deal with the prospect of death – simply by not thinking about it at all – almost jumps off the page with the force of vigorous condemnation that motivates it:

> Le but de nostre carrière, c’est la mort, c’est l’object necessaire de nostre visée: si elle nous effraye, comme est il possible d’aller un pas avant, sans fiebvre? Le remede du vulgaire, c’est de n’y penser pas. Mais de quelle brutale stupidité luy peut venir un si grossier aveuglement? (p. 82)

Any method is good enough if it successfully protects you from the blows of this enemy, Montaigne agrees with his hypothetical reader,

"natural" is likely to be reasonable’ (p. 49).
mais c’est folie d’y penser arriver par là. Ils vont, ils viennent, ils trottent, ils dansent, de mort nulles nouvelles. Tout cela est beau. Mais aussi quand elle arrive [...], les surprenant en dessous et à découvert, quels tournants, quels cris, quelle rage, et quel désespoir les acable? [...] Cette nonchalance bestiale, quand elle pourrait loger en la teste d’un homme d’entendement, ce que je trouve entièrement impossible, nous vend trop cher ses denrées. (p. 84)

His own solution to the problem is to declare that one must stand firm and fight (p. 85). That is, one must deny death the one great advantage it has over us - our unfamiliarity with it - by thinking of it constantly and thus exercising ourselves in it (p. 85). Whenever a horse stumbles, a tile falls or a pin pricks, he says, let us remember that death may be knocking at our door: ‘à tous instans representons la à nostre imagination et en tous visages’ (p. 85). Montaigne was unaware when he wrote this that he would later have the opportunity to ‘practise’ death in just such a situation following a fall from his horse.

The harshness of Montaigne’s attitude towards uneducated people is particularly striking given the context in which it appears. For, like a seed of the new perspective on death which takes root and blossoms in later chapters, Montaigne’s desire to find peace and tranquillity of mind already articulates the need to transcend literal interpretations of death and ecstasy. The title of the chapter, ‘Que philosopher, c’est apprendre à mourir’, is taken from a phrase in Plato’s Phaedo. Montaigne deliberately lessens the ecstatic nature of this statement - death involves the literal separation of body and soul - by replacing it with the term that Cicero used in his Tusculan Disputations. The first sentence of the chapter reads, ‘Cicero dit que Philosopher ce n’est autre chose que s’aprester à la mort’ (p. 79).² He goes on to say that all the wisdom and reasoned arguments

² Of the two Latin words in question, meditatio and commentatio, to practise and prepare for death
in the world come down to one conclusion, which is that we must learn not to be afraid of dying (p. 80). More specifically, what coming to terms with death really means is learning how to live joyfully and virtuously:

De vray, ou la raison se mocque, ou elle ne doit viser qu’à nostre contentement, et tout son travail, tendre en somme à nous faire bien vivre, et à nostre aise, comme dict la Sainte Escriture. Toutes les opinions du monde en sont là, que le plaisir est nostre but. (p. 80)

Montaigne already knows what he means at a theoretical level, therefore - namely that death becomes life when subjected to the powerful spiritual process inherent in Christian folly. This becomes clearer still later on in the same chapter: ‘la premeditation de la mort est premeditation de la liberté; [...] il n’y a rien de mal en la vie pour celuy qui a bien compris que la privation de la vie n’est pas mal’ (p. 85). In this state of true freedom, Montaigne says,

[L’ame] se peut venter, qui est chose comme surpassant l’humaine condition, qu’il est impossible que l’inquiétude, le tourment, la peur, non le moindre desplaisir loge en elle […]. Elle est rendu maistresse de ses passions et concupiscences […] et de toutes les autres injures de la fortune. (pp. 89-90)

However, at this stage of his spiritual development, he has yet to put these theories about the deeper meaning of death (pertaining to a new way of living) into practice, a fact which is underlined by his continuing tendency to become annoyed at the bestise of simple people. His view is still obscured, it seems, by his inability to see the spirituality in their simplicity.

As we saw in the last chapter, by the time he writes ‘De la physionomie’, Montaigne has enough experience behind him to be able, finally, to praise the way in which common folk go tranquilly to their graves and accept death as an integral part of life:

respectively, Erasmus, unlike Montaigne, chose the first. See Screech, Erasmus, pp. 81-83.
He now has a mental vision of the world capable of identifying the subtle ways in which nature hands out her wisdom to those who are 'naïf' or simple enough to receive it. To recognise the subtle and hidden beauty portrayed, for example, by Socrates, he says - '[qui] faict mouvoir son ame d'un mouvement naturel et commun' (p. 1013) - requires an equally subtle and simple form of sight that is a far cry from the gross and elaborate cleverness in fashion among the educated:

Nous n'apercevons les graces que pointues, bouffies et enflées d'artifice. Celles qui coulent soubs la naivté et la simplicité eschappent aysément à une veuë grossière comme est la nostre; elles ont une beauté délicate et cachée. Il faut la veuë nette et bien purgée pour descouvrir cette secrette lumière. (p. 1013)

And so Montaigne concludes that death is 'bien le bout, non pourtant le but de la vie; c'est sa fin, son extremité, non pourtant son object' (p. 1028). His argument may appear to be the same as that in 'Que philosopher' - that we should not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the prospect of death - but the emotional weight of his words belies the fact that his aggressive resistance to the idea of dying has given way to an acceptance of death's naturalness and, consequently, a discovery of its hidden, inner meaning.

3. Death in practice

One of the experiences which helps bring about Montaigne's new perspective on death is recounted in 'De l'exercitation' (II: 6). Here the notion of practising death takes on new meaning as he tells how he nearly died when he and his horse
came crashing to the ground in a riding accident. Montaigne's ruminations at the beginning of the chapter alert us to the fact that what he has to say differs significantly from his earlier thoughts on the subject of death. Unlike the anxious and strained tone in 'Que philosopher', where he is on the offensive in his attempt to beat death down before it sets upon him, the pace of 'De l'exercitation' is relaxed and gentle. While we cannot know exactly what death will be like until we reach it, he says, 'il me semble [...] qu'il y a quelque façon de nous apprivoiser à elle et de l'essayer aucunement' (p. 351). Although our experience of it cannot be whole and perfect, it can certainly be useful and help to strengthen and comfort us (p. 351). It is not without reason, he continues, that we are encouraged to look more closely at the act of sleeping for what it can teach us about death (p. 351). This is nature's way of showing us the eternal state that awaits us and thus of relieving us of our fear:

Par iceluy [le sommeil], nature nous instruict qu'elle nous a pareillement faicts pour mourir que pour vivre, et, dès la vie, nous presente l'éternel estat qu'elle nous garde après icelle, pour nous y accoustumer et nous en oster la crainte. (p. 351)

With the same warm and relaxed voice, Montaigne tells the story of what happened on the day of the accident. On the way back to the house after a ride, one of Montaigne's men decided to show off and get ahead of the others. Losing control of his horse, he thundered straight into Montaigne and his mount, sending the two hurtling and sprawling to the ground (pp. 352-53). With his face badly cut and bruised, Montaigne was found lying unconscious on his back ('mort, estendu à la renverse') twelve or so yards away (p. 353). Thinking at first that he was actually dead, his men took him back to the house where, two hours later, he regained full consciousness and began vomiting blood (p. 353). So slow was his
entry back into life, Montaigne tells us, ‘que mes premiers sentiments estoient beaucoup plus approchans de la mort que de la vie’ (p. 353).

His experience of this state close to death was so pleasant and peaceful that it succeeded, he says, in reconciling him to his old foe (p. 353). It was like slipping into the gentle and sweet sensation of falling asleep, he explains; he found himself taking pleasure in letting himself go:

Il me sembloit que ma vie ne me tenoit plus qu’au bout des lèvres; je fermois les yeux pour ayder, ce me sembloit, à la pousser hors, et prenois plaisir à m’alanguir et à me laisser aller. C’estoit une imagination qui ne faisoit que nager superficiellement en mon ame, aussi tendre et aussi foible que tout le reste, mais à la vérité non seulement exempte de desplaisir, ains meslée à cette douceur que sentent ceux qui se laissent glisser au sommeil. (p. 354)

Meanwhile, as he was later told, he was talking and reasoning and even had the presence of mind to order that someone bring a horse for his wife, who was struggling along the rugged pathway when he arrived back at the house (p. 356). Thinking he had been fatally wounded in the head by gunfire – there had been shooting going on around them at the time – he also refused to take any medication (p. 357). But Montaigne himself was quite oblivious to all this. While what appeared to be his bodily consciousness reasoned and acted on the basis of the reports of his senses, Montaigne himself - his soul - in the state of ‘douceur’ that he describes, was hardly touched by it:

Il semble que cette consideration [to get a horse brought to his wife] deu partir d’une ame esveillée, si est-ce que je n’y estois aucunement; c’estoyent des pensemens vains, en nuë, qui estoyent esmeuz par les sens des yeux et des oreilles; ils ne venoyent pas de chez moy. Je ne sçavoay pourtant ny d’où je venoy, ny où j’aloy; ny ne pouvois poiser et considerer ce que on me demandoit: ce sont des legiers effects que les sens produisoyent d’eux-mesmes, comme d’un usage; ce que l’ame y prestoit, c’estoit en songe, touchée bien legiement, et comme lechée seulement et arrosée par la molle impression des sens. (p. 356)
Montaigne's lower reasoning faculty appears here to have separated from the seat of his judgement, allowing him to experience in a much fuller way the deeper, relaxed state of being that would normally have to seep through his waking consciousness in less easily perceptible ways. As a critic has said,

L'éclipse de ses fonctions psychiques intellectives lors de sa chute de cheval [...] lui a permis de saisir à l'état presque pur une vérité universelle importante: il existe une sagesse qui naît en nous de façon aussi immédiate et spontanée que la crainte et l'angoisse, mais qui est le contraire de ces passions [...]. Les états d'âme qui surgissent sont tous sensitifs et instinctifs [...], la conscience claire ne les a ni provoqués, ni intensifiés, elle n'a fait qu'en constater, après coup, l'existence.\(^3\)

The 'death' of Montaigne's lower reason thus gives rise to the birth of a higher awareness — 'nous sommes, je ne sçay comment, doubles en nous mesmes' (II: 16: p. 603) — based on the sense of unity with being.\(^4\)

4. **Christian scepticism: A spiritual philosophy**

In the 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' Montaigne presents the method for achieving the mind-set of negative reason in more formal terms. This alternative way of perceiving reality and of living life is shown to be a state of unknowing, an ignorance which reveals itself to be the freedom to be led to the right thought, feeling or action in any given moment:

One of Montaigne's basic assumptions is that ignorance forms part of judgement [...]. By ignorance, Montaigne may mean the failure to know a specific fact. However, he more often assigns to ignorance the meaning of a permanent condition of the judgement in which things are neither fixed nor dogmatic. In a certain sense, judgement is or should be a blank.

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\(^3\) Baraz, 'L'intégrité de l'homme selon Montaigne', in *O un amy!*, ed. La Charité, p. 20.

\(^4\) See Baraz's comment in 'L'intégrité de l'homme', pp. 20-21: 'il est évident que cette douceur dont il ne cesse de s'émerveiller a été pour lui une révélation [...] de la vérité que l'accord avec la nécessité naturelle n'est pas l'invention d'une intelligence capable de forger aussi d'inombrables autres attitudes morales, mais le fond même de notre être, quelque chose d'aussi intime que notre sentiment de l'existence'. On the double self, see La Charité, *The Concept of Judgement*, pp. 75-77.
It should approach matters as a free agent, as an agent whose capabilities are not hampered by personal interest, prejudices, passions, or science. Mirroring the partnership between grace and nature, divinity and humanity, that lies at the heart of the theme of bestise, Christianity and pagan philosophy are smoothly blended together in this method of unknowing. Pyrrhonism, the pagan doctrine of ignorance, and the doctrine of Christian folly are central features of Montaigne’s spiritual philosophy. While St Paul is by himself a solid enough authority on which to argue the case against human presumption, Montaigne safeguards the orthodoxy of his Catholicism further still by drawing indirectly on the negative theology of Aquinas (he is defending Sebond’s notion of the book of nature) and on the writings of Augustine.

The paradox of bestise as it is presented in the Christian and pagan terms of the ‘Apologie’ is that the freedom of goodness and virtue that is the end of all human endeavour is brought about by the removal of man’s freedom, that is, by his obedience to a higher authority:

C’est la seule humilité et submission qui peut effectuer un homme de bien. Il ne faut pas laisser au jugement de chacun la connaissance de son devoir; il le lui faut prescrire, non pas le laisser choisir à son discours; autrement, selon l’imbécillité et variété infinie de nos raisons et opinions, nous nous forgerions en fin des devoirs qui nous mettroient à nous manger les uns les autres, comme dit Epicurus. (p. 467)

Putting this statement firmly into a Christian context, Montaigne says that it is man’s duty to use his reason in the service of God: ‘la premiere loy que Dieu

3 La Charité, pp. 17-18.
6 Montaigne’s ‘method’, according to La Charité, is not to have one: ‘the terms system, systematic, systematize do not apply to Montaigne, because he believes that the varieties of human experience refute all systems. It is for this reason that Montaigne prefers experience in all of its complex variety to any rigid notion of essence. Judgement, the existential experience, is an open-ended, unbound and limitless entity’ (p. 103).
7 On the philosophy of Pyrrhonism and Montaigne’s use of it, see Floyd Gray, ‘Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism’, in O un amyl, ed. La Charité, pp. 119-34.
donna jamais à l’homme, ce fust une loy de pure obeissance; [...] l’obeyr est le principal office d’une ame raisonnable, reconnoissant un celeste superieur et bienfacteur’ (p. 467). In case the reader is in any doubt that the subject under discussion is the doctrine of Christian folly, Montaigne cites St Paul:

La peste de l’homme, c’est l’opinion de sçavoir. Voilà pourquoi l’ignorance nous est tant recommandé par nostre religion comme piece propre à la creance et à l’obeissance. ‘Cavete ne quis vos decipiat per philosophiam et inanes seductiones secundum elementa mundi’. (pp. 467-68)

Betraying its influence just beneath the surface of this section of the text is a passage from St Augustine’s *City of God*, echoes of which reverberate throughout the ‘Apologie’. The text in question, Book VIII, Chapter 9, ‘The philosophy that approximates most nearly to Christianity’, describes the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of the divinity. All created things fall under the authority of their maker, Augustine says here, drawing attention to the fact that some pagan philosophers (themselves part of God’s creation as much as anyone else) also knew this truth.

Thus there are philosophers who have conceived of God, the supreme and true God, as the author of all created things, the light of knowledge, the Final Good of all activity, and who recognized him as being for us the origin of existence, the truth of doctrine and the blessedness of life. They may be called, most suitably, Platonists; or they may give some other title to their school […] . Whoever they may have been, we rank such thinkers above all others and acknowledge them as representing the closest approximation to our Christian position.

The notion that there is a transcendent divinity – the very transcendence of which causes its infinity and immanence, its presence in all things as their origin and source – is crucial to Montaigne’s concept of nature and to the justification of his

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use of pagan sources. Given that man is by definition limited by his human nature, he has no alternative but to turn to nature (providence) for the knowledge of God’s being that his humanity will allow.

5. Faith and doubt: the interplay of opposites

The subject of faith and doubt in the *Essais* appears, at first sight, to present us with an inconsistency. In the ‘Apologie’ we are told that it is ‘une grande simplesse’, in the negative sense, to believe all the appearances that we are not personally qualified to refute (p. 554). We are not questioning enough, says Montaigne, accepting disciplines such as medicine and other practices such as jiggery-pokery, enchantments, prognostications and the casting of horoscopes without the slightest hesitation or contradiction (p. 542). However, in the chapter ‘C’est folie de rapporter le vray et le faux à nostre suffisance’ we find that Montaigne’s viewpoint is the exact opposite on the subject of these mysterious activities. He says, ‘c’est une sotte presumption d’aller desdaignant et condamnant pour faux ce qui ne nous semble pas vray-semblable’ and confesses that this is precisely the mistake that he himself made earlier in his life (I: 27: pp. 177-78). He explains that he used to pity the people who were deceived by unbelievable ‘folies’ such as ‘[les] esprits qui reviennent, […] [le] prognostique des choses futures, [les] enchantemens, [les] sorceleries’ (p. 178).

A closer examination of the text reveals, however, that, far from being an inconsistency, this paradox on the subject of faith and disbelief encapsulates the essence of the process by which the individual is held to be able to reach God and

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*St Augustine, Concerning the City of God against the Pagans, trans. by Henry Bettenson*
establish contact with him through the negative use of his reason. What Montaigne means us to doubt in the first example is our own human knowledge, while what he intends us to believe in the second are the high mysteries of the Christian religion and the authority of the Catholic Church. Only divine things merit our blind belief, he says in the ‘Apologie’:

Les choses qui viennent du ciel ont seules droict et auctorité de persuasion: seules, marques de vérité; laquelle aussi ne voyons nous pas de nos yeux, ny ne la recevons par nos moyens. (p. 546)

When it comes to religion, therefore, it is our duty as Catholics to believe in all orthodox doctrines without exception:

Ou il faut se submettre du tout à l’authorité de nostre police eclesiastique, ou du tout s’en dispenser. Ce n’est pas à nous à establir la part que nous luy devons d’obeissance. (‘C’est folie de rapporter’, p. 181)

When it comes to human affairs, however, the same rule of unquestioning belief no longer applies. In this domain - the domain of morality - doubting takes over from belief as the appropriate mode of thinking and perceiving. The method of doubting is not applied indiscriminately, however. In a controlled and measured fashion it is turned upon one’s own human knowing: ‘l’ignorance qui se sçait, qui se juge et qui se condamne, ce n’est pas une entiere ignorance: pour l’estre, il faut qu’elle s’ignore soy-mesme’ (p. 482). Skilfully turning the words of Lucretius, the presumptuous Roman writer who argued for the infallibility of reason and the senses, back on their author, Montaigne presents the basic tenet of Pyrrhonism: ‘any man who thinks that “nothing can be known” does not know whether he can know even that thing by which he asserts that he knows nothing’

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The approach of the sceptics is wise, Montaigne argues, precisely because they train themselves to suspend their judgement. They register everything, but bestow their assent on nothing, thus cultivating the state of *ataraxie*, or tranquillity of mind, which graces the individual with relief from the anxiety created by the belief in his ability to know (p. 483).

These sceptics do not deny reason a role in the quest for truth, however; they merely limit its scope: ‘ils se servent de leur raison pour enquérir et pour debatre, mais non pour arrester et choisir’ (p. 485). No system discovered by man, says Montaigne of Pyrrhonian scepticism in the ‘Apologie’, has greater usefulness (in supporting religion), nor a greater appearance of truth:

Cette-cy presente l’homme nud et vide, reconnaissant sa foiblesse naturelle, propre à recevoir d’en haut quelque force estrangere, desgarni d’humaine science, et d’autant plus apte à loger en soy la divine, aneantissant son jugement pour faire plus de place à la foy [...]. C’est une carte blanche preparée à prendre du doigt de Dieu telles formes qu’il lui plaira y graver. Plus nous nous renvoyons et commettons à Dieu, et renonçons à nous, mieux nous en valons. (pp. 486-87)

This crucial passage highlights the central feature of the concept of the hidden God that Montaigne had grasped so clearly. In order to know God in the way that he can be known by human beings, the individual must shift his truth-seeking attention from the realm of theology to the realm of morality. Instead of inquiring into doctrine, he must inquire into the workings of his own mind and the workings of providence in the world of nature. As this passage demonstrates, Montaigne’s intention is to transpose the mystical process of ecstatic knowledge of God onto a moral background, giving it the weight and security necessary to reinforce the partnership between body and soul rather than weaken and break it.

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Having emptied himself of his own knowing in this way (by believing religious doctrine and doubting human knowledge), the Christian sceptic can expect, according to Montaigne, to receive the impression of a divine force upon his being. Montaigne’s experiments on or assays of natural phenomena help to shed light on what form this inspired kind of knowing might take. The development of his thinking regarding many supposed miraculous and supernatural events reveals that Montaigne came to understand the ‘miraculous’ and ‘supernatural’ as being often encompassed within the law of nature or providence. As Mathurin Dréano has written,

A partir du moment où il a renoncé à fixer une limite aux forces de la nature, Montaigne ne s’étonne plus de rien, mais il doit justement se demander si le phénomène d’apparence miraculeuse n’est pas l’effet d’une cause naturelle. C’est une deuxième enquête qu’il doit mener. [...] Il va trouver que très souvent l’on a cru distinguer l’action des êtres surnaturels là où elle n’était pas. Beaucoup de faits qui leur étaient attribués ont une cause purement naturelle.**

A miracle that is discovered by science not to be a miracle after all, its hidden mechanisms having been unearthed, is nevertheless reinstated as a phenomenon of divine creation along with all other natural phenomena on the basis that God has established the law of nature in the world in order to be present there through it. Dréano continues,

Pour Montaigne, quelque puissante que la nature lui paraisse, il ne croit pas à un conflit entre elle et Dieu. Il n’a écrit aucun essai sur ‘l’avenir de la science’; mais que la science multiplie ses découvertes, que la nature se révèle de plus en plus riche, Montaigne ne suppose jamais que les forces naturelles enlèveront à Dieu sa souveraineté sur les choses. […] La nature apporte en contribution sa force, mais la direction de l’œuvre et la personnalité n’appartiennent qu’à Dieu.*

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12 Dréano, p. 228.
What the individual is inspired to see, having lived out the process of Christian folly, is the miracle of creation and of life itself. When in ‘De l’expérience’, the final chapter of the *Essais* which reads as an ode to life, Montaigne tells us ‘je me laisse ignoramment et negligemment manier à la loy generale du monde’ (p. 1050), he means us to understand that it is this act of letting go of himself that has brought about his vision of miracles in the book of nature:

*A mon avis, des plus ordinaires choses et plus communes et cognues, si nous savions trouver leur jour, se peuvent former les plus grands miracles de nature et les plus merveilleux exemples, notamment sur le subject des actions humaines. (p. 1059)*

Thus life becomes a divinely inspired poem under the gaze of the man who has entrusted his heart and mind to God. The lower faculty of reason and the senses are eclipsed or suspended as the individual enters a state of rapture and is able to perceive the beauty of the scene directly, through the very sensation of being.

But, as Montaigne explains in ‘Du jeune Caton’ (I: 37), the force of providence proliferates to infinity. As soon as a person is possessed by divine beauty, inspiration automatically passes through him to others by virtue of its magnetic qualities:

*La bonne [poësie], l’excessive, la divine est au-dessus des regles et de la raison. Quiconque en discerne la beauté d’une veuë ferme et rassise, il ne la void pas, non plus que la splendeur d’un esclair. Elle ne pratique point nostre jugement; elle le ravit et ravage. La fureur qui espinçonne celuy qui la sachit penetrer, fiert encore un tiers à la luy ouyr traiter et reciter; comme l’aymant non seulement attire un’aiguille, mais infond encore en icelle sa faculté d’en attirer autres. (pp. 227-28)*

Montaigne is drawing here on Plato’s *Ion*, where Socrates compares the Muse’s bestowal of inspiration on the poet and, through him, on those who listen to him,
to the power of the magnet to pass on its charge through a series of iron rings. Socrates tells Ion,

This gift you have of speaking well on Homer is not an art; it is a power divine, impelling you like the power in the stone Euripides called the magnet [...]. This stone does not simply attract the iron rings, just by themselves; it also imparts to the rings a force enabling them to do the same thing as the stone itself, that is, to attract another ring, so that sometimes a chain is formed, quite a long one, of iron rings, suspended from one another. For all of them, however, their power depends on the loadstone. Just so the Muse. She first makes men inspired, and then through these inspired ones others share in the enthusiasm, and a chain is formed.\(^{13}\)

This description of the all-pervading force of providence, which uses natural phenomena (including human beings) as its instruments in its divinely-given task of uniting all things within the infinite embrace of God, becomes a powerful image in the *Essais*. Not only does the pattern of concentric circles linked *ad infinitum* recur throughout Montaigne’s chapters in a myriad of different forms, weaving the disparate parts of his discussion together by a common thread, but, fittingly, it underlies the work of Charron, who was later to pick up the thread of the hidden God tradition and weave it into a new expression of the ideas in question.

6. Negative reason and the power to change

On the basis that a spark of the divinity is in every aspect of the creation (because the Holy Spirit is present in the world at God’s command), Montaigne, following the negative theology of Aquinas, is able to argue that each individual has within him the power to manipulate the use of his own reason and thus determine to

some degree his position between that of the beasts and the angels. This is not to say that the power in question is human - this would be heresy from a Christian point of view and Montaigne has no intention whatsoever of stepping outside orthodoxy; the point is rather that grace already resides in humanity and in the whole of creation in general because these form part of God’s infinite being. The key statement from Aquinas on this matter is the following:

It must be granted without qualification that God operates in all natural and voluntary activity. Through not appreciating the situation accurately, some have made the mistake of attributing all action exclusively to God and denying that natural things perform by their proper powers, as though fire did not heat, but that God creates heat.14

As the concept of the hidden God articulates, however, reason must be manipulated in a particular way if the grace animating creation is to be perceived.

In the ‘Apologie’, Montaigne dramatises his argument that providence works through negative reason (the good form of bestise) in the style of Erasmus’s Praise of Folly, turning it into a dialogue between Plato and Reason personified. Are we to believe, Montaigne asks rhetorically, that even Plato, who was so familiar with divine things that he has retained the title divine ever since, thought that there was in man, wretched creature that he is, something able to approach such an incomprehensible power? (p. 498). Did he believe ‘que nos prises languissantes fussent capables, ny la force de nostre sens assez robuste, pour participer à la beatitude ou peine éternelle?’ (p. 498). Human reason should tell him on our behalf, Montaigne says, introducing the voice of Reason, that ‘si les plaisirs que tu nous promets en l’autre vie sont de ceux que j’ay senti ça bas, cela n’a rien de commun avec l’infinité’ (p. 498). ‘If there is something of mine’,

14 Disputations, III De potentia, 7, in Gilby pp. 122-23.
Reason says, ‘there is nothing divine’ (pp. 498-99). This, then, is reason’s task: to depreciate its own value and contrast its weakness with the greatness and wisdom of God. How else does human reason know this, the reader is incited to ask, unless, as Montaigne says later in terms highly reminiscent of Thomist negative theology, she participates in divine reason:

Si [la raison] connoit quelque chose, aumoins sera ce son estre et son domicile. Elle est en l’ame, et partie ou effect d’icelle: car la vraye raison est essentielle, de qui nous desrobons le nom à fauces enseignes, elle loge dans le sein de Dieu; c’est là son giste et sa retraite, c’est de là où elle part quand il plaist à Dieu nous en faire voir quelque rayon. (p. 523)

In order to conceive these high, divine promises regarding the immortality of the soul at all, Reason continues, we must imagine them unimaginable, unspeakable, incomprehensible. In short, we must imagine them ‘parfaictement autres que celles de nostre miserable experience’ (p. 499). If ‘conceiving’ these divine promises corresponds to our earthly experience of them – the ‘watered-down’ version of God’s being that is all that human beings can manage – then Reason is suggesting that such an experience is possible on the condition that we change completely:

Et si, pour nous en rendre capables […], on reforme et rechange nostre estre (comme tu dis, Platon, par tes purifications), ce doit estre d’un si extreme changement et si universel que par la doctrine physique, ce ne sera plus nous […]. Ce sera quelque autre chose qui recevra ces recompenses. (p. 499)

Reason tells us, therefore, that in order to receive what we have been promised, we must purge and empty ourselves of what we are at present, dying to ourselves so that a new self might be born.

In this section of Reason’s speech, Montaigne inserts a key verse on the mystery of Christian folly from St Paul’s Epistles (I Corinthians 2. 9): ‘œuil ne
scarioit voir, dict Saint Paul, et ne peut monter en cœur d’homme l’heur que Dieu a préparé aux siens.’ (p. 499). An educated Renaissance reader would have known that Reason is alluding here to the presence of the Holy Spirit in man, for the verses of I Corinthians that this verse immediately precedes read as follows:

But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth [...]. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (2. 10-14)

In order to reinforce the point that the ‘death’ of the self that he is describing is metaphorical and not literal, Montaigne draws special attention in the pages that follow to the notion of sacrifice and the need for it to be understood ‘spiritually’.

The ancients were wrong, he says, literally to sacrifice themselves and their fellow human beings in order to placate and satisfy their gods (p. 502). They were also wrong to lacerate and mortify their flesh in order to atone for their sins, ‘veu que l’offence consiste en la volonté, non en la poictrine, aux yeux, aux genitoires’ (p. 503). A person’s essence resides in his will, therefore, and it is this part of a man’s being that he must sacrifice, not the body, which serves and depends on the will. This point, together with the reference to circumcision, directs us once again to St Paul and his teachings on Christian folly:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. (Romans 2. 28-29)
In the *Essais* as a whole, this notion of sacrificing one’s will translates into the theme of obeying laws. In ‘De l’expérience’, for example, Montaigne says that laws are to be obeyed not because they are just, but simply because they are laws: ‘c’est le fondement mystique de leur autorité’ (p. 1049). The law to be obeyed par excellence is of course the law of nature, which dictates that the mind should be restrained and tamed like a dangerous animal:

Nostre esprit est un util vagabond, dangereux et temeraire: il est malaisé d’y joindre l’ordre et la mesure [...]. On a raison de donner à l’esprit humain les barrières les plus contraintes qu’on peut. [...] N’y a point de beste à qui plus justement il faille donner des orbieres pour tenir sa veûe subjecte et contrainte devant ses pas. (p. 541)

Like the ideal state described in Plato’s *Republic*, the individual’s being must be carefully organised so that his lower faculties submit to the supremacy of his judgement. Only then can he hope to participate in truth and divine goodness.

As a critic has written in a discussion on Montaigne’s ethics:

To be good one’s soul must be an harmonious, smoothly running state with reason at its head. To be good is to be self-controlled, or rather reason-controlled. On the other hand, to be bad or evil is to be uncontrolled, like an anarchic community. [...] To be good or evil is to talk about harmony or chaos within the soul of a ‘moral agent’.  

Still in ‘De l’expérience’, Montaigne explains that it is by following the golden mean in the course of his daily life that he succeeds in maintaining order in his being, and thus safeguarding his mental health:

Ma forme de vie est pareille en maladie comme en santé: mesme lict, mesmes heures, mesmes viandes me servent, et mesme breuvage. Je n’y adjouste du tout rien, que la moderation du plus et du moins, selon ma force et appetit. Ma santé, c’est maintenir sans destourbier mon estât accoustumé. (p. 1057)

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Viewed from this perspective, the 'death' that preoccupied Montaigne in ‘Que philosophe’ is hardly recognisable. What was once the consideration of how to face the literal separation of his body and soul has become a way of living that involves an intimate partnership between his je and his moy, his bodily consciousness and his ‘estre universel’ (III: 2: p. 782).

7. The interaction between judgement and life

Montaigne’s relationship between his lower and higher ‘selves’ or states of consciousness mirrors the relationship between himself and the force of providence in his life. Speaking of his mistrust of the art of divination in ‘Des prognostications’ (I: 2), Montaigne expresses his preference for remaining safely ignorant about the future and describes his trust in the whims of fortune as a wiser alternative:

J’aymerois bien mieux regler mes affaires par le sort des dez que par ces songes. Et de vray, en toutes republiques on a toujours laissée la bonne part d’authorité par le sort. Platon en la police qu’il forge à discretion luy attribue la decision de plusieurs effects d’importance. (p. 44)

As we shall see in the next chapter, for Montaigne, it is precisely in the act of submitting itself to the higher intelligence which orders the events of our experiences that judgement comes to discover its own creative role in the process of divine revelation.
Chapter 5

The Birth of the Inner Man and the Mechanics of Divine Revelation

1. Wisdom: a process and an end in itself

As the material studied so far illustrates, the concept of the hidden God articulates the paradox that the darkness in which God shrouds his creatures by placing them in the natural world is the very means by which he reveals himself to them. According to the concept, therefore, the process by which the divinity reveals itself to human beings implies their own participation in the discovery of a divine principle at work in their very nature, guiding them ineluctably towards the recognition of its presence in their lives. The union of opposites inherent in this revelation translates easily into the idea with which Montaigne plays creatively in the *Essais*, that the arrival at the goal of truth or wisdom is one with the journey towards it. As the theme of *bestise* demonstrates, the individual’s mode of thinking and being, his perspective on the world, is intimately bound up with the process of divine revelation. For it is not the world itself that changes at the moment of inspiration, it is the individual who undergoes a shift in consciousness that reveals the same world in a very different guise. According to the concept of the hidden God, wisdom and truth are always present, but are hidden or revealed depending on the spiritual development of the seeker.

Wisdom, for Montaigne, is synonymous with virtue: ‘le guain de nostre estude, c’est en estre devenu meilleur et plus sage’ (‘De l’institution des enfants’, I: 26: p. 151). As the image of the slave-girl tripping up the philosopher
illustrates so effectively, the simple wisdom that reveals the truth lying at one’s feet is based on a virtue that participates joyfully and wholeheartedly in the act of living. Challenging the scholastic commonplace that truth resides at the top of a steep mountain in ‘De l’institution des enfants’, Montaigne describes the ease and pleasure with which this virtue is found:

La vertu […] n’est pas, comme dit l’eschole, plantée à la teste d’un mont coupé, rabotteux et inaccessible. Ceux qui l’ont approchée, la tiennent, au rebours, logée dans une belle plaine fertile et fleurissante, d’où elle voit bien sous soy toutes choses; mais si peut on y arriver, qui sçait l’adresse, par des routes ombrageuses, gazonnées et doux fleurantes, plaisamment et d’une pante facile et polie, comme est celle de voutes celestes. (pp. 160-61)

Virtue is indeed a vantage-point from which one may view all things, therefore, but paradoxically it is a delightfully gentle and beautifully adorned slope that leads one there. That the road to virtue is not dissimilar to the curve of the celestial vault should not escape our attention. Subtle though they are, Montaigne’s references to providence are deliberately scattered throughout the Essais so as to imitate, it seems, the omnipresence of its creative force.

Learning is as much an affair of the will, Montaigne says, as it is of the mind, and the tutor in charge of a child’s education must inspire him to feel as much love as reverence for virtue (p. 161). The love that befits wisdom is, however, a far cry from the uncontrolled movement of the passions involved in erotic love. The tutor must help the student to understand, he says, that the gods assign toil and anguish to the pursuit of Venus but not to the pursuit of Pallas, the god of wisdom (p. 161). When he is old enough to know his own mind, the student must choose in which direction to engage his will. Casting the respective qualities of wisdom and erotic passion as the heroines of Ariosto’s Orlando
furioso, Montaigne presents his hypothetical pupil with the choice between Bradamante and Angelica. If the boy is wise, he says, he will not be taken in by the soft, dainty but artificial beauty of Angelica, and will choose instead the woman disguised as a youth with a shining helmet on her head (p. 161). The boy should learn to value the ease, usefulness and pleasure to be found in being virtuous – ‘si esloigné de difficulté que les enfants y peuvent comme les hommes, les simples comme les subtilz’ (p. 161) – which contrasts sharply with the strain and effort of vain, egotistical desire. Socrates is offered as the best example of this silenic love of virtue, which leads one to abandon one’s own reasoning powers in order to follow the dictates of nature and reason through the simple use of intuition: ‘Socrate, son premier mignon [de la vraye vertu], quitte à escient sa force, pour glisser en la naïveté et aisance de son progres’ (p. 161).

Virtue is also the ability, therefore, to go with the flow of nature and to study the significance of what fortune brings to one’s own doorstep. Montaigne does just this at the beginning of ‘De l’institution des enfants’ in a passage that highlights the paradox of wisdom or virtue, which appears magically from the midst of the most banal and ordinary circumstances. Discussing the question of borrowing material from ancient writers and, in particular, the failure of French writers to do so successfully, Montaigne describes how when reading a very dull French text the other day he fell upon a passage which ‘ravished him’ and transported him suddenly to the unimaginable heights of another world.

Il m’advint l’autre jour de tomber sur un tel passage. J’avois trainé languissant après des parolles Françoises si exangues, si descharnées et si vuides de matiere et de sens que ce n’estoient voirement que parolles Françaises. Au bout d’un long et ennuyeux chemin, je vins à rencontrer une piece haute, riche et eslevée jusques aux nuës. Si j’eusse trouvé la
Complementing the description of the gentle slope or lack of effort that leads to the elevated dwelling-place of virtue, this passage focuses on the disappearance of time and space that accompanies the rush of inspiration, the mysterious force to which Montaigne entrusts himself and which carries him beyond the bounds of his usual physical environment. As a critic has written perpectively,

Among [the reasons for the richness of this passage is] the way Montaigne eliminates any sense of duration between the three stages: his encounter with the precipice, his flight, and his final station on the summit. He uses no verbs of motion [...] and nowhere says he flies, which would suggest a self-initiated action, merely that he is aware of flying, hinting at subjection to unknown forces. He indicates his arrival at the summit only indirectly, when later he looks down upon the route.¹

Through his skilful use of words and metaphors, Montaigne manages to convey the impression that it is by sitting back comfortably into the experience of life itself that the sense of joy and serenity for which wise men yearn can be obtained. The natural pleasures that life affords enjoyed by a judgement which succeeds in monitoring and controlling the bodily passions thus become the means to discover and practise virtue.²

² Lapp, p. 188, writes: 'rather than listing precepts, [Montaigne] invests the ideal of discipline and moderation with an eroticism that transfers sensual pleasure to the ultimate achievement of tranquillity and serenity. [...] Through Montaigne's poetry, we discover that the joy and the duty are in the end, all one'. For the unity of revelation and self-development in the unfolding of Montaigne's personality, see La Charité, pp. 92-93.
2. Playing the comedy of life

In the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus suggests that it is precisely in the act of immersing ourselves in the fiction of life that the wisdom of Christian folly can be attained. From our position of darkness and ignorance there is little else to be done than play along with the illusion, he says, and enjoy the game that human experience entails:

To destroy the illusion is to ruin the whole play, for it’s really the illusion and make-up which hold the audience’s eye. Now what is the whole life of man but a sort of play? [...] It’s all a sort of pretence, but it’s the only way to act out this farce. A man’s conduct is misplaced if he doesn’t adapt himself to things as they are [...] and asks for the play to stop being a play. On the other hand, it’s a true sign of prudence not to want wisdom which extends beyond your share as an ordinary mortal, to be willing to overlook things along with the rest of the world or to wear your illusions with good grace. People say that this is really a sign of folly, and I’m not setting out to deny it – so long as they’ll admit on their side that this is the way to play the comedy of life.³

Like Sebond’s book of nature, Erasmus’s comedy of life is based on the supposition that there is a supreme author or playwright who, via the agency of providence, directs the infinite number of interconnecting events and circumstances that together compose the tapestry of life. Under the influence of providence, the choices made and the actions carried out by the actors are by definition an integral part of the play, together with the myriad of thoughts and feelings that determine them. The products of the human mind, such as imagined situations and works of fiction, are therefore just as valid as other ‘real’ events or situations on the basis that all of these are ‘scenes’ in the comedy of life, ‘pages’ in the book of nature or, to use another metaphor, ideas passing through the divine mind.

In ‘De la force de l’imagination’ (I: 21), Montaigne muses on the powers of the imagination and makes the point that fiction and reality are equally effective at guiding us towards truth. The chapter, which, fittingly, consists mainly of *exempla*, aims to demonstrate the validity of the dictum presented in the first sentence: ‘fortis imaginatio generat casum’ (‘a powerful imagination generates the event’) (p. 95). Fear of death is capable of carrying people off before the hand of the executioner even touches them (p. 95), Montaigne says, just as the sexual desires of early manhood are often consummated while one is fast asleep in a dream (p. 96). The force of the imagination is also more than likely, he says, to be the cause behind a great many ‘supernatural’ events: ‘il est vrai semblable que le principal credit des miracles, des visions, des enchantements et de tels effects extraordinaires, vienne de la puissance de l’imagination’ (p. 97).

Having discussed at length the many things that have come true through people having believed in them, Montaigne says that it really does not matter whether the stories that he relates are true or not. If human reason has been capable of imagining them, then they are as useful and instructive as real ones:

Les discours sont à moy, et se tienent par la preuve de la raison, non de l’expérience; chacun y peut joindre ses exemples: et qui n’en a point, qu’il ne laisse pas de croire qu’il en est, veu le nombre et variété des accident. […] Aussi en l’estude que je traite de noz mœurs et mouvements, les tesoignages fabuleux, pourveu qu’ils soient possibles, y servent comme les vrais. Advenu ou non advenu, à Paris ou à Rome, à Jean ou à Pierre, c’est toujours un tour de l’humaine capacité, duquel je suis utilement advisé par ce recit. Je le voy et en fay mon profit également en ombre que en corps. (p. 104)

Plutarch had a similar lack of interest in the veracity of the accounts that he made use of in his work, Montaigne tells us at the end of the chapter, and would have
told us no doubt that his job was to tell his stories with a sparkle that would light
the way towards virtue (‘qu’ils soient utiles à la postérité, et presentez d’un lustre
qui nous esclaire à la vertu, que c’est son ouvrage’, (p. 105)). Montaigne’s
interpretation of Plutarch’s opinion here serves to underline his point that it is
how we perceive what appears in front of us that matters. Given that we cannot
experience truth in its raw infinity and eternity, we must be happy with the
appearance that it adopts in our finite world, knowing that our humanity, in all its
diversity and unpredictability, necessarily acts as a screen through the relative
mistiness or clarity of which we view life and experience its adventures.

Just how easily the scenes of real life, painted pictures and written words
translate into one another to create the impression of one substance whose ever-
changing form underlies the whole of reality appears to have been a point of
particular interest for Plutarch:

La peinture [est] poësie muette, & la poësie une peinture parlante. Car les
actions que les peintres monstrrent comme presentes, & alors qu’elle(s) se
font, les lettres les racontent & composent comme aiants esté faictes, & si
les uns le monstrrent avec couleurs & figures, & les autres avec paroles &
dictions, ils different en matiere, & en maniere d’imitation, mais aux uns
& aux autres y a une mesme fin proposée.⁴

Plutarch certainly seems to have contributed to Montaigne’s ‘literary theory’ -
that the world and all its contents compose the utterance of the divinity which can
be read and interpreted - although it seems that his main sources for this idea
were the writers of the hidden God tradition: Aquinas, Lull and Sebond in
particular. At the beginning of his literary endeavour, Montaigne appears not to

⁴ Plutarch, De gloria Atheniensium, III, 346f-347c; Amyot, Si les Atheniens ont esté plus
Grotesque to Silenus: Register and Satirical Self-Depiction in the Essais of Montaigne’
have been aware of the theme that would later become so central to his writings. The first thought that came to him when he began writing the *Essais*, he tells us, was that by setting the 'grotesque' products of his mind on to paper he would be able to bring order to the wild, rampaging movements of his reason that had carried him to the edge of sanity:

> Je trouve que [...], faisant le cheval eschappé, [mon esprit] [...] m’enfante tant de chimères et monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres, sans ordre et sans propos que, pour en contempler à mon aise l’ineptie et l’étrangeté, j’ay commencé de les mettre en rolle, esperant avec le temps luy en faire honte à luy mesme. (‘De l’oisiveté’, p. 34)

However, what began as an exercise to avert the onset of madness soon became much more of an adventure than he had anticipated. The more he wrote about himself, the more insights he gained into the motivation compelling him to write. By the time he writes ‘De l’amitié’, a new awareness of the hidden role of fortune or providence in his interpretation of the *Grotesques* that he has produced can be discerned. Describing his chaotic scribbling as the inelegant border to the exquisite centre-piece of de La Boétie’s literary work, Montaigne uses the imagery of the *Grotesque* (a term usually reserved for the discipline of painting) to hint at the silenic nature of his work.

> Considérant la conduite de la besongne d’un peintre que j’ay, il m’a pris en vie de l’ensuivre. Il choisit le plus bel endroit et milieu de chaque paroy pour y loger un tableau élaboré de toute sa suffisance; et, le vide tout au tour, il le remplit de crotosesques, qui sont peintures fantasques, n’ayant grâce qu’en la varieté et estrangeté. Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crotosesques et corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n’ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite? (I: 28: p. 181)

Montaigne’s description of the way in which the desire to imitate his painter ‘took him’ and his use of the word *fortuite* appear to indicate that he is by now
persuaded that providence has a hand in his own decisions and actions. Viewed from a slightly wider angle, this painting metaphor serves to express the notion of the book of nature in yet another way: human beings can only conceive imperfectly of the 'centre-piece' of God's being by studying their own 'grotesque' nature. By this point, Montaigne may well have begun to use the *crotesque* metaphor with precisely this meaning in mind.

Montaigne's brush with madness taught him that the way to journey out of the Platonic cave of illusion was to descend deeper into it. In the 'Apologie', Montaigne leads us in his enigmatic and silenic way to believe that this was Plato's advice all along. Were nature one day to open her breast and show us the hidden mechanics of her movements, he says, what terrible mistakes and misunderstandings we would discover in our poor science (p. 517). But, infers Montaigne, is it not this very poetry of the natural world and of poets such as Plato that light the pearly way to the truth that we can know ⁶:

> Ay je pas veu en Platon ce divin mot, que nature n'est rien qu'une poësie œnigmatique? Comme peut estre qui diroit une peinture voilée et tenebreuse, entreluisant d'une infinie varieté de faux jours à exercer nos conjectures [...]. Et certes la philosophie n'est qu'une poësie sophistiquée. [...] Platon n'est qu'un poëte descousu. Timon l'appelle, par injure, grand forgeur de miracles. (p. 518)

As we shroud ourselves in nature's enigmatic poetry, Montaigne appears to be saying, whether this be our own experiences of life or those fictional ones that are the creative work of others, a transformation will occur in the way we perceive it:

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⁵ See Ruth Calder, ‘From Grotesque to Silenus’, p. 2.
⁶ The phrase that was crossed out in Montaigne’s manuscript, according to Rat and Thibaudet’s edition of the *Essais*, reads as follows: 'voiez ces authorités de toute la philosophie antienne: tous leurs ouvrages sont estoilez et emperlez de poésie' (*Œuvres*, p. 1566, note 3 for p. 518).
‘l’on finit par s’apercevoir que ce qui dissimule est aussi ce qui exprime et ce qui demande à être non plus supprimé ou traversé, mais respecté et interprété’.  

3. Divine consciousness in a human world: The Socratic daemon

As we have already seen, the notion of ‘middleness’ is central to Montaigne’s interpretation of the concept of the hidden God. On the basis that God’s infinity is inconceivable to human minds, the concept expresses the idea that humans experience divinity via an intermediary force called variously the Holy Spirit, providence, fortune and nature. Montaigne’s theme of bestise illustrates how this notion of a flexible middle can be applied to human experience: each individual has the free will to choose between presumption and humility as his mode of living and perceiving. In the ‘Apologie’, Montaigne’s theory of divine providence in the world is linked directly with the Platonic theme of the daemon, an association which underpins his descriptions of his own experience of divine inspiration with an authority that Renaissance minds would have been loath to dismiss.

The subject under discussion in the section of the ‘Apologie’ in question is man’s use of his reason. Man has taken it upon himself, Montaigne says, to dictate the nature of divinity, the only possible outcome of which could be that, like Horace’s frog, he will burst before he succeeds in doing so:

7 Jean Starobinski, Montaigne en Mouvement (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 361. Commenting on Montaigne’s rediscovery of life after his attempt to retire to his tower, Starobinski adds, ‘quant à l’individu qui se révolte contre la beauté séduisante d’un monde pourvoyeur de mort, que peut-il trouver de mieux, au bout de son refus, que d’acquiescer passionnément à ce même monde mortel et à ses joies de surface? - on ne peut rien leur opposer, rien leur substituer qui les surpasse, car il n’y a rien de plus profond que la surface du monde’ (p. 361).

Somme le bastiment et le desbastiment, les conditions de la divinité se forgent par l'homme, selon la relation à soy. Quel patron et quel modele! Estirons, eslevons et grossissons les qualitez humaines tant qu'il nous plaira; enfe toy, pauvre homme, et encore, et encore, et encore: 'Non, si te ruperis, inquit'. (p. 512)

Citing St Augustine, Montaigne reinforces the Catholic authority supporting his pagan sources: ‘indeed, men cannot conceive of God, so they base their conceptions on themselves instead; they do not compare themselves to him, but him to themselves’ (p. 512). St. Paul’s authority is also integrated into the text: ‘les hommes, diet saint Paul, sont devenus fols, cuidans estre sages; et ont mué la gloire de Dieu incorruptible en l’image de l’homme corruptible’ (p. 510). Taking up the theme of ‘De la force de l’imagination’, Montaigne highlights the creative and powerful nature of this human faculty which is used not, as it should be, to imagine the greatness of God but, inappropriately, to imagine the greatness of man: ‘c’est pitié que nous nous pipions de nos propres singeries et inventions […] comme les enfants qui s’effrayent de ce même visage qu’ils ont barbouillé et noircy à leur compagnon’ (p. 511).

Numerous examples of this ill-advised use of reason are presented in the form of the pagan worship of humanised gods. But Montaigne’s use of the material in his hands begins to change at this point. Among the many gods tailored to meet all human needs there are also, we are told, demi-gods, ‘moyens entre la divine et l’humaine nature, mediateurs, entremetteurs de nous à Dieu’ (p. 515). It is here that Montaigne introduces the voice of Socrates into the discussion. Unlike the other philosophers, who reasoned inexhaustibly on the

10 St Augustine, City of God, XII, 18, trans. by Screech, The Complete Essays, p. 595.
question of the exact nature and composition of the sun, Socrates was of the opinion that it is better not to try and work such things out: ‘c’est, à l’advis de Socrates, et au mien aussi, le plus sagement jugé du ciel que n’en juger point’ (p. 517). Bringing the theme of story-telling into full focus through the introduction of Plato’s *Timaeus* into the text, Montaigne articulates the idea that when man uses his reason appropriately — that is, opening his mind up to the infinite greatness of God — fictional scenes either from life itself or in the form of human art become stories holding messages from the divinity. These stories do not have an absolute, fixed meaning, but rely in part on the intuitive and interpretative powers of the individual (the faculty of the imagination) to help shape them into being.

As this passage highlights, the first step towards receiving the ability to interpret phenomena in a higher, spiritual sense is to surrender one’s own reasoning powers and to believe in a higher authority.

If we take up Montaigne’s invitation to enter the text of the *Timaeus* we find that the reader’s role in interpreting the text also consists of throwing himself into the reality of the stories being told. Plato encourages us to abandon our sense of true and false, fiction and reality, in order better to receive the messages of the *daemons*, our half-human, half-divine ancestors. The general introduction

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11 Romans 1. 22-23.
12 Plato, *Timaeus*, 40 DE.
to Timaeus's account of the creation and nature of the universe transports the reader into a mythical domain where the line between reality and fiction is so blurred that one is no longer sure of the viability of any of the 'facts' being related. Past, present and future are mingled together until they become one eternal moment that may be entered at random from any point in time and history. The dialogue begins as the participants recall the conversation of the previous day in which they constructed a hypothetical ideal state. Socrates expresses his wish that he might hear a story in which this imaginary state is brought to life and made real (19 BC, p. 1155).\textsuperscript{13} Critias then comes forward with just such a story, the origin of which tails so far back into the mists of time that it can no longer be traced. He explains that he heard the story from his grandfather, also named Critias, who in turn heard it from the wise man Solon, who in turn heard it from an Egyptian priest in the district of Sais (20-21 E, pp. 1156-57).

Before ending his introduction, Critias marvels at the inspiration that caused him to recall in such vivid detail a story he had thought he could no longer remember. He says to Socrates, 'and when you were speaking yesterday about your city and citizens, the tale which I have just been repeating to you came into my mind, and I remarked with astonishment how, by some mysterious coincidence, you agreed in almost every particular with the narrative of Solon' (25 E–26 A, p. 1160). With this afterthought on his own inspiration, he hands the story of the ideal city over to Timaeus, whose task it is to 'invent' a reasonable account of the generation of the world including the creation of man: 'the city

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Plato: The Collected Dialogues}, ed. by Hamilton and Cairns. All page numbers in the text refer...
and citizens, which you yesterday described to us in fiction, we will now transfer to the world of reality’ (26 C, p. 1160).

The tone of the dialogue reinforces the attitude of humility which is the implicit prerequisite for the receipt of wisdom. It is made clear that the exercise being carried out is in no way intended to unveil the true nature of the divinity:

Now that which is created must, as we affirm, of necessity be created by a cause. But the father and maker of all this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible. (28 C, pp. 1161-62)

The question proposed for discussion is the nature of the created world. Timaeus is adamant that his words should not be taken as truth itself: ‘enough if we adduce probabilities as likely as any others, for we must remember that I who am the speaker and you who are the judges are only mortal men, and we ought to accept the tale which is probable and inquire no further’ (29 CD, p. 1162). In the spirit of reverence to the divinity he offers a prayer to the gods and calls upon their help, an act of ‘all men […] who have any degree of right feeling, at the beginning of every enterprise, whether small or great’ (27 CD, p. 1161).

When we move into the main body of Timaeus’s speech, we find that the concept of the middle is central to the notion of wisdom being put forward in the text as a whole. For it is the ‘middle’ or soul of the universe that is the domain of providence. Timaeus describes the world, God’s creation, as ‘a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God’ (30 BC, p. 1163). On the basis of this definition of a creature as a living being composed of two parts, body and soul, he goes on to add a third component without which the two cannot be joined:
But two things cannot be rightly put together without a third; there must be some bond of union between them. And the fairest bond is that which makes the most complete fusion of itself and the things which it combines, and proportion is best adapted to effect such a union. For whenever in any three numbers, whether cube or square, there is a mean, which is to the last term what the first term is to it, and again, when the mean is to the first term as the last term is to the mean – then the mean becoming first and last, and the first and last both becoming means, they will all of them of necessity come to be the same, and having become the same with one another will be all one. (31 BC–32 A, p. 1163)

The description of the ‘mean’ given here throws new light on to the importance of Montaigne’s extensive use of the concept of the golden mean. Living moderately and within the limits of human nature becomes the middle channel through which one is able to move closer to God.

Timaeus’s description of the fusion of the body and soul of the universe lays down the next major conceptual foundation of the text. He explains that the corporeal aspect of the universe was created within its soul so that the two - the spiritual and the material - were completely intertwined, meeting centre to centre (36 DE, p. 1166). Though the two worlds - the world of immutable being and the world of generation - appear to be different (one being invisible, the other visible), they are nevertheless united. Reason, Timaeus explains, functions according to both of them depending on the frequency into which it is tuned. Since the two worlds are interpenetrating and joined at their centres, the switch between them requires a subtle adjustment of perception, yielding opinions and beliefs on the contingent level and intelligence and knowledge on the eternal level:

The body of heaven is visible, but the soul is invisible and partakes of reason and harmony, and, being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created. And because she is composed of the same and of the different and of being these three, and is divided and united in due proportion and in her revolutions returns upon
herself, the soul when touching anything which has being, whether
dispersed in parts or undivided, is stirred through all her powers to declare
the sameness or difference of that thing and some other [...], both in the
world of generation and in the world of immutable being. And when
reason, which works with equal truth, whether she be in the circle of the
diverse or of the same — in voiceless silence holding her onward course in
the sphere of the self-moving — when reason, I say, is hovering around the
sensible world and when the circle of the diverse also moving truly
imparts the intimations of sense to the whole soul, then arise opinions and
beliefs sure and certain. But when reason is concerned with the rational,
and the circle of the same moving smoothly declares it, then intelligence
and knowledge are necessarily achieved. (37 BC, pp. 1166-67)

Translated into more easily comprehensible terms — those which Montaigne uses
in the *Essais* — this passage describes the way in which the divinity is present in
its creation through reason. The text appears to articulate the notion that when
human reason is in alignment with the divine reason that is its source and origin,
the channel between the two worlds is cleared and truth or wisdom is received.
The way in which this alignment is achieved is of crucial importance, for it is the
point on which Montaigne lays the most emphasis in the *Essais*. Human reason
is aligned with divine reason through right moral actions; that is, through the
appropriate or natural use of the human partnership of body and soul. Later in
the text Timaeus says precisely this:

> God invented and gave us sight to the end that we might behold the
courses of intelligence in the heaven, and apply them to the courses of our
own intelligence which are akin to them, the unperturbed to the perturbed,
and that we, learning them and partaking of the natural truth of reason,
might imitate the absolutely unerring courses of God and regulate our
own vagaries. (47 BC, p. 1175)

Reason, as we have just seen, is identified by Plato as the flexible middle
or 'hinge' in the universe. Its role is twofold: to maintain the boundary between
the divinity and its creation, the eternal world and the created world, and
simultaneously to maintain the connection between the two. By virtue of this
middle quality, therefore, the divinity can be transcendent and immanent at the same time. The way in which human beings experience reason, the middleness of the universe, is given form in the *Timaeus* through the theme of the *daemon*. The *daemons* are part-mortal, part-immortal gods created by the divinity whose task it is to create the mortal creatures without whom the universe would be incomplete (41 BC, p. 1170). Though the *daemons* are the guardians of human beings, God reserves for himself the task of planting in them the divine seed that will align them to him:

> The part of them worthy of the name immortal, which is called divine and is the guiding principle of those who are willing to follow justice and you – of that divine part I will myself sow the seed, and having made a beginning, I will hand the work over to you. And do ye then interweave the mortal with the immortal and make and beget living creatures, and give them food and make them to grow, and receive them again in death. (41 CD, p. 1170)

According to the *Timaeus*, therefore, man is connected to God through the immortal seed planted in his nature which plays an important part in guiding him to follow eternal justice. But, as the text makes clear – ‘who are willing to follow justice and you’ – the task of creating and guiding human beings is assigned to the beings who represent providence or universal reason: the *daemons*.

What the *daemons* are shown to represent in the *Timaeus* is a heightened level or state of consciousness which enables the individual to follow the directions of the divine part of his being. These directions, the guidance of the *daemons*, cannot be distinguished from the individual’s natural intuitions about how to act. What defines them is the harmony that they bring to the individual’s being as the soul regulates and orders the movements or passions of his body and mind (87 DE–88 A, p. 1207). What man is guided to do, Timaeus says, is to
align his whole being with the truth and goodness of God so that he may partake of eternal happiness:

We should consider that God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one, being that part which, as we say, dwells at the top of the body, and [...] raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven. [...] When a man is always occupied with the cravings of desire and ambition, and is eagerly striving to satisfy them, all his thoughts must be mortal, and, as far as it is possible altogether to become such, he must be mortal every whit because he has cherished his mortal part. But he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and of true wisdom, and has exercised his intellect more than any other part of him, must have thoughts immortal and divine, if he attain truth, and in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal, and since he is ever cherishing the divine power and has the divinity within him in perfect order, he will be singularly happy. (90 A-C, p. 1209)

4. Providence in operation through human reason

In ‘Des prognostications’, having said that he prefers to entrust his affairs to fortune rather than try to meddle in universal concerns through the practice of divination (p. 44), Montaigne describes the gentle inclinations of the soul via which Socrates’s daemon communicated with him:

Le demon de Socrates estoit à l’adventure certaine impulsion de volonté, qui se présentoit à luy sans attendre le conseil de son discours. En une ame bien espurée comme la sienne, et preparé par continuel exercice de sagesse et de vertu, il est vray semblable que ces inclinations, quo y que temeraires et indigestes, estoyent tous jours importantes et dignes d’estre suyvies. Chacun sent en soy quelque image de telles agitations d’une opinion prompte, vehement et fortuite. (p. 45)

Montaigne then explains that the authority he is loath to ascribe to unaided human reason, he is most willing to lend to the powerful emotional agitations which have guided him so usefully in his life:

C’est à moy de leur donner quelque authorité, qui en donne si peu à nostre prudence. Et en ay eu de pareillement foibles en raison et violentes en persuasion ou en dissuasion, qui estoient plus ordinaires en Socrates,
The precision of Montaigne's description here - these *agitations* have something divine about them but are not purely and simply divine - is of the utmost importance. For what he wishes the reader to understand is that they are providential manifestations of the divinity. They represent the immanent aspect of God, not his transcendental essence.

As Montaigne maintains throughout the *Essais*, these directions of providence filter into one's understanding through one's nature and the natural inclinations which can be discerned when the soul is in a state of rest. The process involved in receiving wisdom, which Montaigne embodies in the *Essais*, can be viewed as comprising three marked stages. The individual must first of all detach himself from the outside world so that he may then journey within himself, where he discovers an inner freedom. In the tranquillity of that freedom he is inspired to perceive the activity of providence in his being and in his life.

In 'De mesnager sa volonté' (III: 10), Montaigne discusses the natural ability that human beings have, but rarely use, to control and harmonise the movements of their soul with their reason. He laments the universal tendency to abandon the self and run outside it in all directions: 'voyez les gens apris à se laisser emporter et saisir [...] à ce qui ne les touche point comme à ce qui les touche [...]; ils ne cherchent la besongne que pour embesongnement' (p. 981). It is not so much that they want to go, he says, but that they cannot hold themselves in (p. 981). These people have learnt to let go of themselves, Montaigne says here. They are therefore capable of learning to hold on to themselves, for even though habit often works against us, it can by definition also work in our favour:
‘l’accoustumance est une seconde nature, et non moins puissante’ (p. 987). By his nature, Montaigne tells us (‘je prens une complexion toute diverse’ (p. 982)), he holds himself ‘back’ or ‘in’, refraining even from engaging too much in himself, ‘puis que c’est un subject que je possede à la mercy d’autruy, et sur lequel la fortune a plus de droict que je n’ay’ (p. 980). This state of suspension in which he holds himself is achieved, he explains, by controlling the passions and gliding moderately through life rather than diving head-first into it:

Je me tiens sur moy, et communément desire mollement ce que je desire, et desire peu; m’occupe et embesongne de mesme, rarement et tranquillement. [...] Il faut un peu legierement et superficiellement couler ce monde. Il le faut glisser, non pas s’y enfoncer. La volupté mesme est douloureuse en sa profondeur. (p. 982)

We can see the link here between reason’s ‘moral’ act of governing the passions (what Montaigne describes as keeping oneself in) and the adherence to the golden mean, two ancient precepts firmly embedded in Montaigne’s text.

The fact that it comes naturally to Montaigne to practise the golden mean in this way does not mean, however, that he does not have to discover his own nature by trial and error: ‘pourtant n’est-ce pas à dire [...] que je n’aye eu de la peine souvent à gourmer et brider mes passions’ (p. 996). Like everyone else, he has access to all the information that is necessary to be wise and happy - ‘les lois de nature nous aprenent ce que justement il nous faut’ (p. 986) – a fact which becomes clear enough when one spends some time by oneself:

Ceux qui sçavent combien ils se doivent et de combien d’offices ils sont obligez à eux, trouvent que nature leur a donné cette commission plaine assez et nullement oysifve. Tu as bien largement affaire chez toy, ne t’esloingne pas. (p. 981)

Later in the same chapter, this inner wisdom is explicitly associated with divine inspiration when Montaigne discusses the mysteries at the temple of Pallas in the
ancient world. He imagines, he tells us, that there were mysteries that were shown to the people, and other higher, secret ones that were shown only to initiates (p. 983). It is likely, he says, that among these higher mysteries was 'le vray point de l'amitié que chacun se doibt' (p. 983). Knowing the rules of nature and putting them into practice is precisely what leads one to receive wisdom - that is, divine inspiration:

Qui en sçait les devoirs [de l'amitié salutaire et reiglée, également utile et plaisante] et les exerce, il est vrayement du cabinet des muses; il a attaïnt le sommet de la sagesse humaine et de nostre bon heur. (p. 984)

Again Montaigne emphasises the point that the divine inspiration he is describing is the knowledge of God that has been deemed appropriate for man.

When the chatter of the outside world and of the mind has been calmed and soothed away in the quietness of detachment, new sounds can be heard as a new vision of reality emerges. In 'La fortune se rencontre souvent au train de la raison', Montaigne describes the rustle of providence that becomes audible in the silence. He marvels at the way in which the force of fortune touches our lives in the most artistic of ways ('semble il pas que ce soit un sort artiste' (p. 218)): Constantine, son of Helen, founded Constantinople only for it to be destroyed, centuries later, by another Constantine, son of Helen (p. 218); a man with a fatal tumour throws himself into battle to die valiantly and is run through with a sword that pierces the tumour and gives him back his life (p. 218). This fortune, whose artistic orderliness emerges from the disorderly patchwork of human experiences, is an intelligent power that is far superior to human prudence: 'n'addresse elle pas quelquefois nos conseils et les corrige?' (p. 219). Not only is it intelligent, but it is good and merciful, as can be seen, says Montaigne, in the case of the father and
son condemned to death by the Roman triumvirate. Instead of enduring a shameful death, the men chose to run each other through with their swords. Each blow was fatal but left the men just enough strength to pull the swords from their breasts and die in a loving embrace: ‘en ce fait icy se descendt il pas une bien expresse application de sa faveur, de bonté et pieté singuliere?’ (p. 219).

Having learnt to see the work of providence in the lives of others, in historical events and works of art, the individual must recognise the role it plays in his own life and begin to interact with it by trusting its choice of the experiences and events that he will undergo. Good and bad fortune must be accepted with equal grace, for the individual has no way of knowing what the higher intention behind them is:

L'heur et le mal'heur sont à mon gré deux souveraines puissances. C'est imprudence d'estimer que l'humaine prudence puisse remplir le role de la fortune. Et vaïe est l'entreprise de celuy qui presume d'embrasser et causes et consequences, et mener par la main le progrez de son fait. ('De l'art de conférer', p. 912)

What enables him to read the book of nature in this way, perceiving the divine sense animating the words and sentences of the created world, is the force of inspiration working within his very thoughts and desires:

Je dis plus; que nostre sagesse mesme et consultation suit pour la plus part la conduicte du hazard. Ma volonté et mon discours se remue tantost d’un air, tantost d’un autre, et y a plusieurs de ces mouvemens qui se gouvernent sans moy. Ma raison a des impulsions et agitations journalieres et casuelles. (pp. 912-13)

Not only does this ‘daemonic’ inspiration cause him to see the carefully designed pattern holding the creation together and orchestrating its every move, but it enables him to reproduce the same pattern in his own work. Inspired by Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Montaigne explains in ‘De la vanité’ that the chaotic and
‘unreasonable’ swings of direction in his *Essais* belie the hidden order of poetic fury:

> J’ayme l’alleure poétique, à sauts et à gambades. C’est une art, comme dit Platon, légere, volage, demoniacl. O Dieu, que ces gaillardes escapades, que cette variation a de beauté, et plus lors que plus elle retire au nonchalant et fortuite! [...] Je vais au change, indiscrettement et tumultuairement. Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes. Il faut avoir un peu de folie, qui ne veut avoir plus de sottise, disent les preceptes de nos maistres et encore plus leurs exemples. [...] Le poëte, dict Platon, assis sur le trepied des Muses, verse de furie tout ce qui luy vient en la bouche comme la gargouille d’une fontaine, sans le ruminer et poiser, et luy eschappe des choses de diverse couleur, de contraire substance et d’un cours rompu. (pp. 973-74)

Montaigne’s developed ability to discern the presence of providence and to interpret the meaning underlying its movements came to be of invaluable use in his own life, as he explains at length in ‘De la phisionomie’. In this chapter, as we saw earlier, Montaigne presents Socrates as the example par excellence of the wise man who taught and still teaches others how to be wise through the example of his life:

> C’est luy qui ramena du ciel, où elle perdoit son temps, la sagesse humaine, pour la rendre à l’homme, où est sa plus juste et plus laborieuse besoigne, et plus utile. Voyez le plaider, devant ses juges, voyez par quelles raisons il esveille son courage aux hazards de la guerre, quels arguments fortifient sa patience contre la calomnie, la tyrannie, la mort et contre la teste de sa femme; il n’y a rien d’emprunté de l’art et des sciences; les plus simples y reconnoissent leurs moyens et leurs forces; il n’est possible d’aller plus arrière et plus bas. (p. 1015)

Writing in the spirit of this simple and humble approach to wisdom, Montaigne goes on to present ‘examples’ or experiences from his own life that demonstrate the Socratic precept that to know oneself is to become wise. Socrates’s aim was to provide us with examples and ideas which genuinely and intimately serve our lives, Montaigne says, citing Lucan’s *Pharsalia*: ‘to keep the mean; to hold fast
to the limit; and to follow nature'. What he tells us of his own life, we are led to assume, is intended to serve the same purpose. The experiences in question - blows of ‘misfortune’ which send Montaigne in search of comfort and support - are presented in this chapter as blessings in disguise which encourage Montaigne to trust and consequently discover the role of providence in his daily life. For with no friend intimate enough to be able to help him in his distress, he could turn only to himself, where he found that the wisdom and strength he needed were there all along.

At the point of his life in question, Montaigne explains, he was assaulted by a series of public calamities: ‘j’escrivois cecy environ le temps qu’une forte charge de nos troubles se croupit plusieurs mois, de tout son pois, droit sur moy’ (p. 1017). Among these was the civil war, in which his moderation and honesty made him an enemy in the eyes of both the protestants and the royalists (p. 1021). Another ‘secousse’ was the epidemic of the plague (p. 1021), in which not only did he have to cope with the dire situation at hand as far as he personally was concerned, but he had to take responsibility for the survival and comfort of the entire household as it moved from one place of refuge to another (pp. 1024-26). Despite its negative appearances, however, the experience of the war proved to be extremely valuable and positive for many reasons. Firstly, Montaigne says, it helped him to find himself and to place himself in fortune’s hands, believing in God’s power rather than his own:

En fin, je cogneu que le plus seur estoit de me fier à moy-mesme de moy et de ma nécessité [...]. Et me résolus que c’estoyent utiles inconveniens. D’autant premieremt qu’il faut avertir à coups de foyt les mauvais

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disciples, quand la rayson n’y peut assez, comme par le feu et violence des coins nous ramenons un bois tortu à sa droiture. (p. 1022)

Secondly, it prepared him for what was still to come (the experience of the plague), strengthening his ability to draw himself in and not be too affected by the difficult situations in which he found himself:

Cet accident me servoit d’exercitation pour me preparer à pis [...], m’instruisant de bonne heure à contraindre ma vie et la renger pour un nouvel estât. La vraye liberté, c’est pouvoir toute chose sur soy. (p. 1022)

The similarity between the agitations of Montaigne’s reason which alert him to the guidance of his daemon, his higher consciousness, and the secousses which force him to take refuge from misfortune in the tranquillity of his own being alert us to the presence of a common theme. It seems that in both cases the disruption to Montaigne’s life and thoughts constitutes an avenue of communication between himself and providence, as if he were being tugged at to attract his attention. The chapter as a whole, and in particular the experiences related towards the end, indicate that Montaigne chose to listen to this strange language and to interpret it as fortune’s beneficial contribution to his existence. This contribution is not limited to fortune’s interventions in his daily life, however, but is shown to be omnipresent through Montaigne’s character and natural inclinations. With the aim of showing how his simple, honest and good nature gains him the favour and aid of fortune in times of need, Montaigne tells two stories in which ‘miracles’ have come about through his faith and trust in God, qualities to which he gives particular emphasis:

Et suis homme, en outre, qui me commets volontiers à la fortune et me laisse aller à corps perdu entre ses bras. De quoy, jusques à cette heure, j’ay eu plus d’occasion de me louër que de me plaindre; et l’ay trouvée et plus avisée et plus amie de mes affaires que je ne suis. Nous faillons, ce
It is precisely for this reason, Montaigne adds, that fortune so often thwarts our plans. Its intention is not to make us suffer, but constantly to encourage us to hand it control of our affairs:

Pourtant fourvoyent si souvent nos desseins. Il est jaloux de l'estendue que nous attribuons aux droits de l'humaine prudence, au préjudice des siens, et nous les racourcit d'auvant que nous les amplifions. (p. 1039)

The first story describes the occasion on which a man came to the house claiming that he and his men had been attacked. Montaigne explains that as the group arrived, cluster by cluster, he began to suspect some funny business, remembering that a trick of this kind had been pulled on someone he knew (p. 1038). Realising, however, that were he to act differently all of a sudden he would worsen the situation, he resolved to be his usual kind, sincere and hospitable self: 'je me laissay aller au party le plus naturel et le plus simple, comme je faicts toujours' (p. 1038). The leader of the group, who later admitted to Montaigne his original intention to rob him, was so taken aback by this genuine behaviour that he was unable to carry out his plan, leaving the household intact, but with his courage in pieces: 'souvent depuis, il a dict [...] que mon visage et ma franchise luy avoient arraché la trahison des poinctx' (p. 1039).

The second story tells of the time that, under the false impression that a ceasefire had been called, Montaigne was captured and robbed by a gang of men in a neighbouring forest (p. 1039). In a situation where there had been talk of asking for a ransom and even of killing Montaigne, things suddenly took a different turn when the leader of the group began speaking to him softly and
apologetically, explaining that he was endeavouring to retrieve his scattered belongings and give them back so that he could be on his way (pp. 1039-40). The man took off his mask, revealed his identity and told Montaigne that he owed his freedom to the confidence and sincerity of his countenance and speech, which made him unworthy of such a misfortune (p. 1040). What had impressed him, it seems, was that Montaigne refused to alter the initial terms of his surrender: that the robbers keep the not insignificant spoils already in their possession but free him without a further ransom (p. 1039). Claiming that he still does not know the real reason behind ‘un repentir si miraculeux’, Montaigne admits his suspicion that providence had a hand in the event:

Il est possible que la bonté divine se voulut servir de ce vain instrument pour ma conservation. Elle me defendit encore l’endemain d’autres pires embusches, desquelles ceux cy mesme m’avoyent adverty. (p. 1040)

5. Human experience as the gateway to truth

The concept that the divinity is present in the very centre of human consciousness is itself central, it seems, to Montaigne’s Essais. It is this concept that underpins the theme that truth (as humans are able to conceive it) lies not at the end of the quest for wisdom but in the act of pursuit itself: ‘car nous sommes nais à quester la verité; il appartient de la posseder à une plus grande puissance; […] le monde n’est qu’une escole d’inquisition’ (‘De l’art de conferer’, p. 906).

According to the Essais, God is hidden by the very fact that he is all around us. To know him, we must take to studying the most common and ordinary aspects of our existence. In the last chapter of the Essais, ‘De l’experience’, Montaigne brings these key ideas underpinning his œuvre to the
surface of the text, highlighting the harmonious relationship between the Christian doctrines that inspire and justify them and the pagan classical material that illustrates and reinforces them so elegantly and usefully. A passage from St Augustine's *City of God*, cited towards the end of the chapter, serves as a powerful evocation of the theme of Christian folly which instructs man to live a truly ecstatic life by marrying together his body and his soul:

He who eulogizes the nature of the soul as the sovereign good and who indicts the nature of the flesh as an evil desires the soul with a fleshy desire and flees from the flesh in a fleshy way, since his thought is based on human vanity not on divine truth. (p. 1095)  

It is nature's edict, Montaigne says, that these two components of the human being (representing the human and divine realities that compose the universe) should work together in life, bringing balance and harmony to the individual:

A quoy faire desmembrons nous en divorce un bastiment tissu d'une si joincte et fraternelle correspondance? Au rebours, renouons le par mutuels offices. Que l'esprit esveille et vivifie la pesanteur du corps, le corps arreste la legereté de l'esprit et la fixe. (pp. 1094-95)

Those who fail to carry out this duty plunge straight into the madness of animal-stupidity, he says: 'c'est folie, au lieu de se transformer en anges, ils se transforment en bestes; au lieu de se hausser, ils s'abattent' (p. 1096).

God's divine laws are perfectly clear to us in theory, therefore, Montaigne argues, through the doctrines of the Church, Scripture and the writings of the Church fathers. Nature then provides more specific guidance on how to carry these laws out in practice, both through the experiences that it brings us in the course of our lives and the writings and examples of the ancients. In the latter of the two categories Montaigne cites the lives of some of the great men of

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Antiquity. Epaminondas found that dancing and singing with the boys from his village was altogether compatible with his honourable social role and his outstanding morality. Similarly, Scipio, the wise man thought to descend from the gods, was seen idling graciously along collecting shells like a schoolboy, and Socrates made the time to learn to dance and play instruments (maintaining it time well spent) alongside his more serious activities (p. 1089).

Montaigne argues in ‘De l’expérience’, as he does in other chapters, that self-knowledge and the adherence to the laws of nature – ‘il n’est rien si beau et legitime que se faire bien l’homme et deuëment’ (p. 1091) – are the means to acknowledge God’s absolute sovereignty over us and to submit to his will:

La bonté et capacité du gouverneur nous doit à pur et à plein descharger du soing de son gouvernement [...] Le plus simplement se commettre à nature, c’est s’y commettre le plus sagement. (p. 1050)

But he then goes on to demonstrate in a clear and concise manner how one can put the natural law of self-knowledge into practice, learning from the passions that overwhelm us how to control them, accepting and moderating them with a humorous and benevolent attitude towards our human imperfections (pp. 1051-52). In the spirit of this gentle approach to humanness, Montaigne tells us about his many peculiar habits and foibles: the way he cannot sleep during the day, snack between meals, have sex standing up, or have a haircut after dinner (p. 1061). In accepting these curious characteristics of our hybrid nature, he says, and learning to give rights of passage to misfortunes, passions and illnesses alike - ‘il leur faut ceder naturellement, selon leur condition et la nostre’ (p. 1066) - we succeed in striking a balance between the two opposites of pain and pleasure and thus in bringing the two opposite but complementary partners that compose our
being (body and soul) into balance and harmony. The challenges that life poses us are thus no less a part of nature’s guidance than its support and comfort: ‘Nature est un doux guide, mais non pas plus doux que prudent et juste’ (p. 1094).

The end of ‘De l’experience’, and with it the end of the *Essais* as a whole, directs the reader’s gaze back towards God and to the thought of the union with him that man seeks to experience. The similarity of this ending to that of the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’ naturally draws the two together to form a complementary pair. The ‘Apologie’ is brought to a close with heavy emphasis being laid on the importance of grace in the union between man and God:

Car de faire la poignée plus grande que le poing, la brassée plus grande que le bras, et d’esperer enjamber plus que de l’estanduë de nos jambes, cela est impossible et monstrueux. Ny que l’homme se monte au dessus de soy et de l’humanité: car il ne peut voir que de ses yeux, ny saisir que de ses prises. Il s’eslevera si Dieu luy preste extraordinairement la main; il s’eslevera, abandonnant et renonçant à ses propres moyens, et se laissant hausser et soubslever par les moyens purement celestes. (pp. 588-89)

The final words of ‘De l’experience’ bring the central theme of the *Essais* full circle: it is by journeying within himself that the individual is able to recognise the divine grace that sustains his being and which has led him to this revelation:

La gentille inscription dequoy les Athéniens honorerent la venue de Pompeius en leur ville, se conforme à mon sens:

D’autant es tu Dieu comme
Tu te reconnois homme.

C’est une absolue perfection, et comme divine, de sçavoir jouyr loiallement de son estre. Nous cherchons d’autres conditions, pour n’entendre l’usage des nostres, et sortons hors de nous, pour ne sçavoir quel il y fait. (p. 1096)
It is appropriate to the humble and human spirit of the *Essais*, however, that Montaigne chooses not to end on a note that may be mistaken for a belief in the power of man to bring about the union between himself and God. Instead he asks Apollo, the god of healing and president of the Muses, to safeguard his mental health and preserve his joviality as he progresses further into old age.
Chapter 6

Charron’s Philosophy of the Hidden God: The *Discours chrestiens*

1. The evolution of the concept of the hidden God: from Montaigne to Charron

The journey from the enjoyable, magical world of the *Essais* to the less aesthetically satisfying environment of the works of Pierre Charron requires some adjustment on the part of the reader. Leaving the warmth of Montaigne's company - which he extends, one cannot help but feel, even to the passing visitor - for the more serious and matter-of-fact expression of ideas found in Charron’s work risks turning into something of a disappointment. However, once the attunement from one literary style to another has been made, one discovers that Charron has a significant contribution to make to the history of ideas through his interpretation and expression of the concept of the hidden God. Charron’s strong grasp of the concept led him to want to teach it to others, to elucidate its meaning by giving it a rational, philosophical form and to show people how it could be put into practice in daily life. Unlike Montaigne, who was more than happy to sculpt the concept into a form that slips through one’s fingers at every attempt to rationalise it, Charron wanted to identify it, label it and turn it into a method that people could make practical use of.

Although the essence of the concept, which we have seen to be at the heart of the *Essais*, remains the same in Charron’s works, emphasis is placed on different aspects of it. Thus we find that the concept is transported into a context
in which the relationship between faith and reason - the interaction of the two separate domains of being unified in God’s infinity - is far more pronounced than in the *Essais*, to the point that two of Charron’s works are ‘theological’ in character, while the third is ‘rational’ or ‘natural’. Throughout his work, Charron is concerned with the notion of reconciling faith and reason by recognising the boundary that exists between them. Following the concept of the hidden God, he wishes to lead his reader from the realm of theology to the realm of nature and reason, demonstrating to him or her that it is in the latter realm, the domain of human and moral activity, that closeness with and inspiration by God (wisdom) can be achieved. What characterises Charron’s expression of the concept, above all, is his desire for people to start honouring and serving God in an appropriate manner by acknowledging his transcendence, on the one hand, and interacting with his immanence or providence on the other. As far as Charron is concerned, the best way to accomplish both aspects of this appropriate worship of God is to concentrate on one’s own integrity and goodness and to follow the law of nature by bringing harmony to the different parts of one’s being.

In the analysis of his works that follows I intend to trace the contours of his presentation of the concept, highlighting the central themes and following the evolution of his thought as he moves towards his final expression of the concept in *De la sagesse*. In this chapter I will focus on the philosophy of the hidden God which Charron develops in the *Discours chrestiens* and which underpins his other works. In Chapter 7 I will look more closely at Charron’s conception of the relationship between faith and reason in the individual’s spiritual development through a study of his apology for the Catholic Church, *Les trois veritez,*
highlighting the increasing importance he attaches to the role of morality in this process. Finally, in Chapter 8, I will examine Charron's book of moral philosophy, *De la sagesse*, in the light of his understanding of the concept of the hidden God, emphasising once again the importance of the notion of a psychological process that the individual must be willing to undergo in order to receive wisdom.

2. Pierre Charron, the theologian

Pierre Charron (1541-1603) has proved to be an enigmatic figure for those attempting to understand the nature of his work and his place in the history of ideas. A priest and theologian by profession with a doctorate in canon and civil law, Charron became infamous in the early seventeenth century after the publication of the book for which history usually remembers him: *De la sagesse*. The book presents an essentially philosophical approach to the question of morality, which was interpreted by some of Charron's contemporaries as a danger to Christianity. It is here that the enigma of the 'cas Charron' lies, in part

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3 The Jesuit Garasse was the main figure leading the attack on Charron's *De la sagesse* on the basis that it promoted and encouraged 'libertinism'. For a detailed account of the history of the debate between Garasse and Charron's defenders, see Andrew Erskine, 'Scepticism, Atheism and Libertinism: A Study of the Polemic between François Garasse and François Ogier, 1623-25' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1996).
at least, for Charron was after all a theologian, famous during his own lifetime for his outstanding preaching skills and for a highly acclaimed apology of the Catholic religion and the Church, Les trois veritez.⁴

The fact that Charron was a professional theologian, a detail often obscured in the debate over the validity and meaning of his moral philosophy, is just one of the characteristics that distinguishes him from Montaigne. As well as coming under heavy criticism for the apparent threat that his philosophy poses to religion, Charron has traditionally been regarded as an unimaginative disciple or plagiariser of Montaigne.⁵ A close reading of Charron’s works in the light of the concept of the hidden God reveals, however, that both charges are unfounded. While it is clear that Montaigne was one of Charron’s main sources for his interpretation of the concept of the hidden God, it is also manifest that his approach to the subject was altogether different to that of Montaigne.

As a priest and theologian, Charron could afford to be far bolder than the author of the Essais in his assertion that the concept of the hidden God is fundamentally rooted in the Catholic religion. Reinforced by his ultimately optimistic and somewhat ‘ecstatic’ vision of the human condition, his professional authority as a teacher of the clergy no doubt also played a significant part in his elaboration, in De la sagesse, of a moral code for laymen based on

⁴ Macdonough, in ‘Pierre Charron’, p. 1, writes, ‘critics are still groping for an understanding of Pierre Charron, the man and the writer. The solution to the riddle of the churchman, who was at the same time the author of De la sagesse, the so-called “bréviaire des libertins”, still appears unclear to many’.

⁵ René Pintard, in Le libertinage érudit, p. 43, writes that ‘dans la Sagesse de Pierre Charron, ce rationalisme destructeur de la scolastique, mais menaçant pour le christianisme lui-même, avait poussé des pointes, suggérant mainte explication naturelle’. For a detailed account of the tradition of criticism which questioned the sincerity of Charron’s faith and dismissed him as a mere disciple of Montaigne, see J.-D. Charron, The ‘Wisdom’ of Pierre Charron, Chapter 2, ‘A Survey of Criticism on Charron’, pp. 23-45.
solid Christian theology. As a layman, Montaigne’s aspiration to educate his readers in the art of living was far more subtle and indirect. Charron’s treatment of the concept of the hidden God is further distinguished from that of Montaigne by his use of source material. Like Montaigne, Charron draws extensively on Aquinas and Sebond, but unlike his contemporary (Montaigne was only eight years older than Charron) he makes far more direct use, under the influence of Bodin, it seems, of Jewish and Kabbalistic sources such as Maimonides and Léon Hébreu and of the ideas of Ramon Lull.

Given the crucial importance of Charron’s expertise in the domain of theology, this study will begin its enquiry into the place of the concept of the hidden God in Charron’s works with an analysis of Charron’s theological text, the Discours chrestiens.

3. The Discours chrestiens: Charron’s summa of Christian theology

The Discours chrestiens, about which very little has been written, were published in full in 1604 after Charron’s death. The book has traditionally been considered to be a reworking of Charron’s sermons, or of theology classes that Charron

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6 J.-D. Charron writes that ‘Pierre Charron occupied many canonships in the Southwest with the post of théologal. In 1576 he was elected as théologal to the chapter of Bordeaux and shortly after elevated in addition by the Archbishop to the post of écolâtre’ (The ‘Wisdom’ of Pierre Charron, p. 56). In a note, p. 56, the author adds that “the title of théologal gave a canon the right to teach theology and to preach in the cathedral, and the title of écolâtre gave the right to teach philosophy and humanities and the supervision of all the schools in the diocese”.

7 Parts of the Discours chrestiens were published in 1600 and 1601: L’Octave contenant huit discours du Saint Sacrement avec un autre discours de la communion des saints (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1600); Discours Chrestiens, de M. Pierre Charron, seconde partie (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1601). Neither of these editions is held at the British Library or the Bibliothèque Nationale. Macdonough says that, to his knowledge, the two single copies of these editions are held at the Bibliothèque Municipale at Bordeaux (‘Pierre Charron’, p. 110). The 1604 edition of the Discours chrestiens to which scholars usually refer, and which is used in this chapter, is the following: Discours chrestiens de la divinité, création, rédemption et octave du saint sacrement (Paris: P. Bertault, 1604). To my knowledge, the only study that is devoted entirely to Charron’s work as a theologian and to the Discours chrestiens is that of R. B. Macdonough, cited above.
taught during his career. Although this is probably the case for the ‘Octave du Sainct Sacrement’, it is clear from Charron’s letters to his friend Gabriel Michel de la Rochemaillet that at least one substantial part of the 1604 edition of the Discours was written entirely in the very last years of Charron’s life. On 1 October 1602 Charron sent a letter to La Rochemaillet in which he told him that he had a little book called De la divinité ‘tout prest’, which could be dedicated and sent to the Bishop of Boulogne if La Rochemaillet thought that this was a good idea. But by 28 June 1603, less than five months before his death, it appears that Charron had been rewriting the work that he had ‘tout prest’, adding to it a new section, the ‘Discours de la création’, which he admits to being particularly fond of. He says,

J’ay achevé la première partie de la Divinité, où y a douze discours. Le dernier est ‘De la création’, qui est plus à mon goust que tous les autres, mais les gousts sont différents.

However, what started out as the twelfth ‘discours de la divinité’ soon became the second section of the text as a whole, the ‘Discours de la création’. On 5 August he writes that ‘le dernier discours […] qui est ‘De la création du monde’ […] s’est tellement enflé et grossy que ce sera un juste livret. Toute la physique y est entrée, mais à ma mode’. What seems to be motivating Charron in his writing of this significant part of the text, apart from his strong desire to

Unfortunately this most useful doctoral thesis remains unpublished.

10 Auvray, Letter XLIII, p. 326. Auvray writes in his introduction to the letters that Charron ‘dut, sans doute, soumettre son travail à une complète refonte; car en juin, il dit n’en avoir terminé que la première partie (XLIII), et nous savons qu’il y travaille encore au mois d’août (XLV)’ (p. 313).
obtain an approbation from the Sorbonne for *De la sagesse*, is the intention to highlight the link between natural philosophy (*la physique*) and theology.\(^{12}\) His train of thought appears to have been that if the censors could see the connection between the moral philosophy of *De la sagesse* and the doctrines of theology underpinning them, then the harsh criticism of his philosophical work could be brought to a halt by the granting of an approbation.

The likelihood that this was Charron’s intention is reinforced by his reference, in the same letters, to Bodin’s *Théatre de la nature*. In a state of near-despair due to the difficulties he faces in obtaining the approbation, Charron compares his case to that of Bodin and laments what he clearly views as unfair treatment of him.

Il me semble que ceste approbation se devoit mener, pratiquer et soigner secrètement et sans bruit; car j’en suis presque maintenant en désespoir [...]. Le *Theatrum naturae* de Bodin n’a qu’un comes Augustin approbateur; or ce livre ha cinquante opinions condamnées en l’eschole.\(^{13}\)

Bodin’s *Théatre*, which is composed around the image of God showing Moses his back through his creation of the world, was a crucial source of inspiration for Charron in his writing of the ‘Discours de la création’:

Charron l’a lu dans la traduction française qui en fut donnée par François de Fougerolles en 1597. C’est une encyclopédie des sciences naturelles au XVI\(^{e}\) siècle. Il contient une étude complète du monde depuis l’astronomie jusqu’à l’anatomie humaine, en passant par les plantes et les minéraux [...]. Quand [Charron] a voulu parler de la création, chanter les merveilles de la puissance divine, nous montrer ‘le grand et clair miroir de sa majesté, théâtre de puissance, bonté, sagesse, atelier et boutique de sa

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\(^{12}\) Charron’s letters indicate that the Bishop of Boulogne believed that publishing the D*iscours* before republishing *De la sagesse* would ease the task of obtaining the approbation: ‘Mondit sieur [Claude Dormy] desire que la Divinité précède la Sagesse, afin de faciliter son approbation; ce que je trouve bon’ (Auvray, Letter XLV (5 August, 1603), p. 328 (Naudé’s brackets)). It was Gabriel Naudé who, in 1628, copied the original letters that Gassendi had lent him and which were later lost; see Auvray’s introduction to the letters, pp. 308-09.

\(^{13}\) Auvray, Letter XLIV (15 July 1603), p. 327. Charron’s words lead one to assume that a *comes* is a particularly low-ranking member of the Augustinian order.
providence et de ses merveilles’, il a ouvert le *Théâtre de la nature* de Bodin et il l’a résumé.\(^\text{14}\)

The best Catholic authority on which Charron could base his argument that the divinity reveals itself to human beings through the natural world was of course Aquinas. Aquinas’s influence on Charron in the *Discours chrestiens* cannot be over-stated: more than a mere source for his presentation of the concept of the hidden God, Aquinas’s natural theology underpins the very foundations of Charron’s text. Evidence has been put forward to suggest that what Charron intended when he wrote the *Discours* was to use Aquinas’s great work, the *Summa theologica*, as a model on which to base his own *summa* of Christian theology which would reiterate and reinforce the fundamental tenets of Thomist natural theology:

The *Discours chrétiens*, as they appeared in 1604, are a sixteenth-century *Summa theologica*, left incomplete by the death of its author. What started out in 1600 as a collection of sermons ended up in 1604 as a treatise of theology, in all its dogmatic elements, at least.\(^\text{15}\)

In the dedicatory epistle to the ‘Discours de la création’ in the 1604 edition of the *Discours*, La Rochemaillet explains, Macdonough says, that this *summa*

was to be composed of six parts, dealing with the entire Christian economy of salvation. Beginning with the creation of the world, it was supposed to have progressed through the fall of man, the redemption and the Holy Eucharist, which ‘est le gage que le Fils de Dieu procedant au fait de nostre redemption a laissé à son Eglise’ [p. 2]. Then it was to continue in the last part to the perfection of the world which comes with the resurrection, the universal judgment, the recompense of the elect, and the punishment of the damned [...]. The third and fifth parts, La Rochemaillet indicates in his introduction, remained incomplete.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{14}\) Sabrié, pp. 262-63.

\(^{15}\) Macdonough, p. 125.

\(^{16}\) Macdonough, pp. 124-25. Macdonough explains that this letter dedicating the ‘Discours de la Création’ to the poet Philippe Desportes is not found in the Bibliothèque Nationale, but only in the edition held at the Bibliothèque Municipale at Bordeaux (p. 115). The 1604 edition which I consulted at the British Library does not contain the epistle either.
Just as Aquinas is tacitly omnipresent in Montaigne's 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' and the *Essais* as a whole, so is he omnipresent in the *Discours chrestiens.*

4. **The aim of religion: To know the unknowable God**

In making the adjustment mentioned above between Montaigne's creative and rich use of language and Charron's concise and measured expression of his thoughts, it must be remembered that Charron, like Aquinas and other theologians, was writing in order to elucidate the reader's understanding of complex and fervently debated points of theology and philosophy. He presents each step of his argument with the utmost care and precision and demonstrates a genuine religious passion and devotion to his work which charges his words with a certain excitement. Despite his emotional attachment to the subject-matter of his book, Charron manages to maintain the clarity of his ideas and, within the context of the genre in which he is writing, can be said to write in a refreshingly unpretentious style which often achieves a gentle and sometimes impassioned elegance of its own.

The *Discours chrestiens*, as they were left when Charron died, consist of four parts: the 'Discours de la divinité', the 'Discours de la création', the

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17 Macdonough writes, pp. 257-58, 'among the "modern" theologians inspiring the theology of Charron, one must first and foremost list St Thomas. St Thomas underwent a revival in 1570 when St Pius V ordered that a new edition of the *Summa theologica* be issued with notes and commentary by Cajetan; Charron refers to both St Thomas and Cajetan in the course of the *Discours*. In several of the 'Discours de la divinité' not only is the subject matter inspired by St Thomas, but even the order of the titles'. The author refers the reader to the *Summa theologica* 1a, QQ 14, 19-23, and 25.

‘Discours de la redemption’ and the ‘Octave du Sainct Sacrement’. In the ‘Discours de la divinité’, Charron presents his definition of religion as the intimate relationship between man and God brought about by the existence and actions of providence. His intricately composed argument, which follows the logic of Aquinas’s natural theology at every step, is that God intended man to know him through the agency of providence, because to know him directly is impossible. God is a Deus absconditus, he explains, hidden from man by his infinity:

Or Dieu est infini, une abisme sans fonds, sans rive, sans temps, sans commencement, sans milieu, sans fin: parquoy lon ne le peut trouver, aborder, approcher. Pour cognoistre l’infini, il faut estre Dieu, et Dieu ne peut estre cognu que de soy, ce dict la Philosophie et la Theologie: car il est incomprehensible [...], inaccessible [...], caché, que lon ne le peut voir; Deus absconditus [...], son domicile et sa retraitte est dedans les tenebres. (I: 1: p. 5)

While it is true that God is unknowable, Charron continues, it is also true that there is nothing more knowable than God, for it is being which makes a thing knowable, and all being is in God (I: 1: p. 6). Making the Thomist distinction between the two modes of divine being, eternal and contingent, Charron defines God more specifically: ‘or Dieu a estre, mais plustost est luy-mesme l’estre, tres-parfaictement parfait’ (I: 1: pp. 6-7).

Paradoxically, therefore, it is the ultimate simplicity and unity of God, which, although supremely knowable in itself, renders God too bright, too clear and too omnipresent for us to see without being harmed by the very sight of him:

La trop grande clarté empesche de voir comme les tenebres. Dieu donc est fort cognoissable et de force qu’il l’est, il ne peut estre cognu, ce qui

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19 The first three parts of the text have separate pagination. The pagination of the ‘Octave’ runs on continuously from the ‘Discours de la redemption’. References to the text will indicate the part, the discours (which act as chapters), and the page number following the 1604 edition.
est richement exprimé par l’Apostre disant qu’il habite une lumière inaccessible, c’est à dire cognissable et incognissable. (I: 1: p. 8)

The statement that God is unknowable on the basis of his supreme knowability may appear to lend itself to the charge of agnosticism. In fact, reinforced as it is by the reference to St Paul, this passage and Charron’s hidden God philosophy in general places him squarely in the most orthodox of Catholic traditions. This point is underlined by both Macdonough and Pieper, both theologians:

If Charron is guilty of agnosticism, then he is in good company, because [...] he is following St Thomas Aquinas: ‘Thomas goes even further than to say [...] that we do not know what God is. This statement may be found at the very beginning of the Summa theologica, where it may be read by all [...] “Deo scire non possimus quid sit, sed quid non sit”; “We cannot know what God is, but rather only what he is not”. What is more, Thomas elaborated on this matter, and actually calls ignorance the best part of knowledge itself: “This is the extreme of human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know God,” “quod homo sciat se Deum nescire”.

Why, then, Charron continues, has God and nature given man a desire - to know God - that he cannot quench or satisfy? The desire has been given to him, he replies, in order to induce man to seek God with heart and soul and to cause him to detach himself from all other lowly and unworthy thoughts so that he might give his whole self to his creator (I: 1: pp. 10-11):

Ainsi Dieu par ce desire naturel lequel plus il resveille et reschaufe, nous attire et amorce à soy, pour nous eslever de la lie de ce monde, nous sevrer de la nature, que ne tenions plus que par un petit et par necessité à la terre, afin que par sainctes et vives meditations comme par eslancemens et ravissemens nous nous eslevions à lui. (I: 1: p. 11)

The metaphor of being weaned away from the world by the desire for knowledge of God, which appears here for the first time, becomes a regular feature of the *Discours*. Bringing his oratory skills to bear on the text, Charron is here translating the doctrine of Christian folly into somewhat literary terms. Placing emphasis on the spiritual, psychological dimension of human experience, his intention is to encourage the reader to withdraw from a base, worldly way of living and to place both his mind and his will in God's possession.\(^{21}\)

Closely following Aquinas and Sebond, Charron presents two basic methods for achieving knowledge of God, both of which are based on the principle that God can only be known indirectly or backwards through the creatures:

Les Philosophes et Théologiens nous enseignent divers moyens de cognoistre Dieu, mais qui tous commencent et viennent de la consideration des creatures, comme lon cognoist la cause par les effects, l'ouvrier par les œuvres. (I: 1: pp. 12-13)

The first of these methods is properly negative, 'enseignant ce que Dieu n'est pas', and is therefore the more appropriate since it measures all creaturely imperfections and faults against God's infinity (I: 1: p. 13). The second, which is affirmative in a sense, is more dangerous and should be exercised with caution. It attributes all creaturely perfections to God, but in a way that exceeds human imagination:

L'autre moyen est affirmatif, qui attribuë à Dieu toutes perfections, non seulement celles qui se trouvent és creatures, dispersées par parcelles et à certaine mesure [...], mais encor toutes celles qui peuvent estre en nature et en imagination. A ce moyen appartiennent tous noms attributifs de

\(^{21}\) St Paul is no less of an influence on Charron than Aquinas. Macdonough writes, p. 255, that "St Paul [...] turns out to be Charron's favourite inspired author. [...] The stamp of Pauline theology is everywhere present in Charron: the struggle between the spirit and the flesh, the old and new Adam, original sin, the Church as the Bride and Mystical Body of Christ".

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Aquinas’s concept of the creature’s participation in God’s being is presented time and time again in this section of the text, impressing the reader with the sense of a unified universe whose contingency has its source in an underlying eternal infinity.

Reiterating how difficult it is for man to conceive infinity -

Charron says that the best way to name God consists neither of words nor of precepts: ‘c’est une serieuse, cordiale, humble et silentieuse estimation, adoration qui naist d’une saincte elevation d’ame’ (I: 1: pp. 24-25). When one is absorbed in a state of mystical prayer, he explains, the mind rises, taking its imagination to the highest possible conception of perfection. Then, recognising that this is still nothing at all compared with the perfection and infinity of God, though it can go no higher,

Charron’s praise of divine folly in this passage bears a strong resemblance to the final section of Erasmus’s Praise of Folly, both in its content and in its ecstatic tone. While Montaigne and Charron share in common the fact that they were
both inspired and influenced by this text, Charron’s passionate and fervent expression of his religious feelings – no doubt an important aspect of his highly renowned preaching skills - underlines the essential difference between the two writers.

Immersing himself in the mystical undertones of the concept of the hidden God, Charron refers to Nicholas of Cusa’s doctrine of learned ignorance, which highlights the paradox whereby in surrendering all pretensions to knowledge, the individual is inundated with a deep ‘loving-knowing’ of his creator. Charron writes:

Les parties de cette excellente cognition sont premierement une consciente ignorance [...]. Ignorance tres-docte, qui surpasse toute science, car combien que l’ignorance soit un defaut, une laideur, une place vide et difforme en l’ame, mais en ceste affaire ell’est au throne et lict d’honneur: c’est une souveraine science et sagesse. (I: 1: pp. 25-26)

In a passage strongly reminiscent of Bodin’s allegory at the end of the *Théâtre de la nature* depicting God’s compassionate self-revelation to man through the creation of the world, Charron summarises the *discours* so far saying,

Nous avons dit ci dessus que la grandeur et infinité incomprehensible de Dieu empesche de le cognostre et en parler. Nous disons maintenant que c’est par là que nous le cognoissons mieux [...] car le bien cognoistre, c’est scévoir que lon ne le peut cognoistre. Voyla comment ce qui nous empeschoit et destournoit d’aller à lui et le cognoistre, nous sert maintenant d’eschelle pour monter à luy, et d’aide à le cognoistre. (I: 1: p. 27)

Using an allegory of his own to further illustrate the notion of God’s inconceivability, Charron describes the technique of the painter who wished to express the grief of Agamemnon at Iphigenia’s funeral:

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At the end of this first discours Charron identifies the two ways of approaching knowledge of God that are available to human beings. Synonymous with the two opposite types of folly articulated by the doctrine of Christian folly, one way of thinking about God obscures his presence in the world while the other reveals it. Charron describes superstition as the presumption which causes people to imagine God in a human form, dragging him down to their own imperfect dimensions (I: 1: pp. 30-31). Such superstition is responsible, he says, for ‘tant de fols et insensez erreurs et l’idolâtrie par le monde’ (I: 1: p. 31). Thus all faults and misunderstandings in religion come from not esteeming God enough and not knowing him in the ‘ignorant’ way described. People talk of God as if he were a mere village judge, Charron says, flattering him, bargaining with him and arrogantly attempting to deceive him: ‘bref au lieu d’aller, et monter à Dieu pour le cognoistre, ils le ravallent, le font venir et s’accomoder à eux’ (I: 1: pp. 33-34).

Having described worldly wisdom, or folly in the eyes of God, Charron exhorts his reader to practise true wisdom, which those ‘of the world’ interpret as folly:

Fermant ce premier discours je convie à r’entrer en soy-mesme, et adorer Dieu en esprit et vérité par toutes les plus saïctes et hautes conceptions et imaginations que lon pourra [...], et ce faisant s’offrir et resigner purement et simplement à luy, desier de tout son cœur, et luy demander d’estre en sa grace, car c’est le souverain bien: et cecy est la vraye religion. (I: 1: p. 35)
5. God's providence and the two wills

In the *discours* ('de la divinité') that follow Charron sets out to show that God's hidden, eternal and transcendent nature is expressed in the world in a contingent form through which he can be known - to a limited extent - by human beings. His aim is to show that despite appearances, God's transcendence and his immanence, his eternity and contingency are entirely in harmony with one another. Man does not have access to God's sacred sanctuary, his secret, internal thoughts, Charron explains in the second *discours*, 'de la puissance de Dieu',

> car toute la connaissance que nous pouvons avoir de Dieu ici, est à posteriori, par les creatures, ses œuvres [...]. Quel il est et se porte envers ses creatures les creant, gouvernant, menant à perfection, c'est ce que nous pouvons à certaine mesure, et devons scávoir et estudier afin que nous apprenions à cognoistre Dieu. (I: 2: pp. 36-37)

This contingency is the aspect of God's being that spills out into the universe from the hidden, inner source of God's sufficiency:

> Ceste suffisance divine et sa force et abondance se regorge et repand par tout, fournit universellement tous biens à tous [...], et tout le bien qui est aux creatures n'est qu'un desgoust et une defluxion de cette infinie et divine suffisance. (I: 2: p. 41)

Together with the qualities or perfections of wisdom and goodness, this divine suffisance or power sent out from the source of God's being results in the providence which governs the world: 'la bonté veut et fornit les moyens, la sagesse conduit, la puissance execute' (I: 2: p. 38). As the *discours* that follow illustrate, Charron's intention is to show that it is the force of providence which brings about the resolution of the opposites that constitute God's paradoxical being.

In the third *discours*, 'de la science et sagesse de Dieu', Charron begins to describe God in terms of intelligence and consciousness. The effect of this is to
focus the reader’s attention on the domain of his being in which knowledge of
God occurs: reason, his faculty for knowing and feeling. Adhering firmly to
Thomist natural theology, and no doubt with the ‘psychological’ arguments of
Sebond’s Théologie naturelle in mind, Charron explains that the way in which
God knows the things he has created is such that ‘in him’ they are noble and
incorruptible while ‘in themselves’ they are temporal and corruptible:

La perfection de cette science de Dieu est en ce qu’il cognoist les choses
toutes en soy et par soy, non hors de soy et en elles mesmes; ni par moyen
estranger, mais par son essence propre. Certainement les choses sont bien
mieux et plus richement en Dieu qu’en elles mesmes, car elles y sont en
beaucoup plus noble lieu, d’une maniere plus noble, scavoir eternelle,
incorruptible; en elles mesmes sont corruptibles et temporelles. Mais
encores elles y sont plus vrayement et parfaictement: toute chose ouvrée
est plus parfaictement en l’esprit de l’ouvrier, qu’en soy. (I: 3: p. 65)

This passage expresses the Thomist notion that created things are given and held
in being by the very fact that God knows them. On the basis of this idea, Charron
describes the world and its contents as a weak or diluted copy of the thoughts and
ideas of God suspended and animated in the theatre of God’s creative intellect
and imagination: ‘or tout le monde n’est qu’un extraict et copie collationnée à
l’original, qui est en Dieu et sa science, laquelle est l’Idee de toutes choses’ (I: 3:
p. 65). Truth, according to this conception of God’s being, is the measure of
alignment between the created copy of a thing and the divine idea that is the
source of its existence: ‘la verité, c’est […] la mesure et la regle, au niveau de
laquelle toutes choses sont, et à cause de cette conformité sont dictes vrayes’ (I:
3: p. 69).

Hinting in this third discours at the great importance that will later be
attached to the role of the perfection or quality of wisdom in the relationship
between the divine and human wills, Charron again refers to the doctrine of
Christian folly. This time his allusion to the doctrine is made with reference to
his joint endeavour with the reader to understand Sagesse, the divine perfection
that is responsible for guiding God’s creation of the world. He says that of all the
divine perfections, wisdom is the most subtle and the most obscure, easily
escaping the notice of the most aware and clairvoyant minds; according to St
Paul, ‘elle est secrète et cachée’ (I: 3: pp. 55-56). To recognise God’s power,
goodness and justice, we do not need to be other than we are, he continues, for
we are obliged to recognise and acknowledge his strength through the experience
of our weakness, his goodness through our malice (I: 3: p. 56). But this is not
true of wisdom, he says, because we can never know this divine quality in our
natural state. In fact, without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we would
consider it madness (I: 3: p. 56). Thus, in order to know God one must be touched
by him:

Il faut estre esclairé du ciel, touché de Dieu, en avoir le goust et la
taincture: car elle estant l’œuvre et la perfection de l’entendement, il faut
qu’il en soit tainct et abreuvé, pour le pouvoir cognoistre. (I: 3: pp. 56-
57)

As we wish to talk of wisdom, he adds, we must ask God to touch us with his
Spirit and to send some extraordinary light (I: 3: p. 57). Charron’s prayer for
inspiration, which can be found in all of his works, was perhaps intended to serve
as an example of how the individual can put the theory of an intimate relationship
with God into practice.

In the fourth ‘discours de la divinité’, ‘de la volonté de Dieu’, Charron
lays the foundation which will underpin his moral philosophy by discussing the
harmonious relationship between the eternal and contingent wills of God on the
one hand, and the divine and human wills on the other (the two sets of
complementary opposites are presented as going hand in hand, the one reflecting the other). In reality, he explains, there is only one divine will, but in order to understand things better, we can consider God's unique, pure and simple will — his essence — as double or having two facets: 'l'une interne, secrète, éternelle; l'autre externe, temporelle et manifeste' (I: 4: p. 77). Following on from the previous *discours* in which the creation of the world is presented as the partial and contingent revelation of God's eternal being, Charron explains that

L'interne volonté de Dieu est vraiment proprement tout simplement et universellement sa volonté [...]. L'autre non, c'est plustost une revelation et signification de sa volonté [...]; c'est une particularité et bien petite parcelle et eschantillon de son interne-eternelle, produicte en son temps. (I: 4: p. 77)

While the eternal will is not expressed, and therefore cannot be understood by human beings, the contingent will is made manifest to man by God through words, signs and deeds:

La temporelle est notoire, car il la manifeste et declare; et ce en trois manières: par parole qui contient commandement du bien nécessaire, conseil de bien non necessaire, prohibition de mal qui n’est encore faict, permission du mal present; par signes qu’il faict esclatter au ciel et en la terre, plus ou moins obscures à cognoistre et entendre; et par faicts envoyant Prophètes, peste, famine, guerre, par tous lesquels il dict qu’il nous visite, nous parle et advertit. (I: 4: p. 78)

We can recognise in this passage the notion identified in the *Essais* that God speaks to human beings through the events of real life as well as through Scripture.

As far as the relationship between the two wills is concerned, Charron explains that the eternal will is always superior to the contingent will, for while the inner will is always accomplished and cannot be resisted, the revealed will can be contradicted and resisted by the will of the creature:
In a passage that greatly elucidates the way in which Charron conceived eternity and contingency to be unified in God’s transcendent, infinite being, we are told that the reason the creatures cannot help but fulfil the eternal will is that the hidden, inner will is universal, including and embracing everything, while the temporal will is only partial and particular: ‘la vraye raison est l’universalité, qui comprend et enveloppe tout, et la particularité de l’autre’ (I: 4: p. 81). Charron’s description of what happens when the two wills are viewed together conjures up the image of a patchwork quilt within which the great variety of colours and patterns fall into harmonious alignment:

Il peut advenir que les particularités s’entreheurtent et empeschent, mais estant encloses et enfermées dedans la généralité, elles sont contrainctes et forcées de luy ceder et obeïr. Les particulieres volontés des hommes sont contraires entre elles, et sont contraires à la particuliare de Dieu, et temporelle, mais toutes sont enfermées dedans la generale-eternelle, et luy servent, veulent-elles ou non. (I: 4: p. 81)

In order to render this abstract notion more accessible to the reader, Charron translates it into a series of allegories. In a boat, he says, everyone runs around on deck with contradictory movements and intentions, but they are all carried by the same vessel. Similarly, in an army people fight for all manner of different reasons, but the General commands them all and exploits their diverse passions to obtain a victory (I: 4: p. 82). The same principle can be applied to the death of Jesus, he says, for all involved participated for different reasons contrary to the [revealed] will of God, and yet they all served the great and general will of God who had eternally ordered it to be so (I: 4: p. 82). The apparent good fortune
of the wicked can also be regarded in this way, Charron says finally, for 'le meschant allant contre la volonté de Dieu, et s’eslongnant d’icelle en un sens, luy sert et s’approche d’elle en autre sens: qui fuit d’estre instrument de sa misericorde, l’est de sa justice' (I: 4: pp. 82-83).

In the final section of this fourth discours, Charron applies the principle of harmony between the eternal and contingent will to the relationship between man and God: ‘voicy le lieu de parler de la conformité de nostre volonté avec celle de Dieu, qui est tout nostre bien’ (I: 4: p. 84). Charron’s intention here as elsewhere is to lead the reader into his own being and to demonstrate to him that it is only in the psychological and moral domain of his existence that he can truly know God. In this section we see that, in Charron’s mind, providence is both the will of God in the world and the domain where the two wills (divine and human) meet. Some people deny human will and concede all power to providence, he says, while others deny providence to allow for human freedom (I: 4: p. 88). However, he continues, we see that the two wills do in fact work together through the actions of providence. For example, ‘en des choses grandes, difficiles et dangereuses, nostre esprit s’esleve, une lumière nous assiste tout à coup, qui surmonte ces difficultés et expedie facilement l’affaire’ (I: 4: p. 87). This shows, he says,

et convainc qu’il y a une cause superieure et plus puissante, qui secrettement regente et domine nostre esprit, plie et meut nostre cœur et nostre volonté comme il luy plaist, dont elle n’est pas toute libre et à soy. (I: 4: p. 87)

Providence, the mediator between the divine and human wills, resides within the workings of the individual’s own being, therefore, moulding the human will according to its superior wisdom.
Drawing once again on Aquinas, Charron engages delicately and sensitively in a detailed but concise discussion of the relationship between grace and free will. His aim is above all to protect man’s freedom and psychological well-being within the context of a transcendent divinity that ultimately controls everything: ‘la grande question et difficulté est à bien accorder et joindre la liberté de la volonté humaine et contingence des choses avec le decret infaillible de la volonté divine’ (I: 4: p. 86). What makes this possible is the crucial notion underlying the whole of the Discours that contingent reality is the divinity manifesting itself in a particular form; that is, that fundamentally the two wills (divine and human) are one: the will of God. In the passages that follow, Charron describes the paradoxical process whereby God moves man’s will without taking away his freedom. ‘L’on pourrait dire,’ he says,

que la volonté et operation divine ne meut ni ne determine aucunement la volonté humaine, qui se donne elle-mesme le bransle, mais concurre seulement et se trouve avec elle à l’effect, qui pource est en commun l’effect de tous deux. Par ainsi l’une ne force ni ne determine point l’autre, mais tous deux libres et librement se rencontrent ensemble, si bien que l’effect s’en ensuit qui ne s’ensuivroit si l’une des deux manquoit, qui sont les deux vrayes causes necessaires. Dieu librement a voulu et ordonné eternellement que la volonté humaine demeurast libre. (I: 4: pp. 88-89)

Expanding on this statement, Charron says that it is better and more in accordance with Scripture to say that the divine will does move and push the human will, ‘mais c’est sans la heurter ou violenter tant soit peu’ (I: 4: p. 89).

The divine will is in fact a gentle influence that is received according to the

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23 Aquinas says that ‘if we speak of grace in the sense of the assistance of God moving us towards the good, no preparation as it were anticipating the divine assistance is required on our part; rather, whatever preparation there might be in us derives from the assistance of God moving the soul toward the good. In this sense, that good movement of free choice itself, by which someone prepares to receive the gift of grace, is the action of a free choice moved by God […] The principal agent is God moving the free choice’ (Summa theologiae, Ia2ae. 112.2, cited in Davies,
natural condition and disposition of the human will (I: 4: pp. 89-90). He continues,

Or cette condition et disposition naturelle de la volonté, est une indétermination et liberté par laquelle elle comm’ une carte blanche reçoit et se laisse ou ne se laisse mener à l’object qui luy est proposé par la raison; elle suit et use de la regle de raison ou n’en use. (I: 4: p. 90)

This passage is of particular importance, for it describes the way in which divine grace descends upon and mingles with human free will in terms similar to those used in De la sagesse and the small work written to clarify and defend it, the *Petit traicté*. In the *Petit traicté*, Charron translates the idea of an emptiness within the individual that disposes him to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit into moral terms. He says that

Dieu a bien créé l’homme pour cognoistre la vérité, mais […] il ne la peut cognoistre de soy, ny par aucun moyen humain, et faut que Dieu mesme, au sein duquel elle reside, et qui en a fait venir l’envie à l’homme, la revele, comme il a faict. Mais pour se preparer à ceste revelation, et luy faire place, il faut auparavant renoncer et chasser toutes opinions et creances, dont l’esprit est desja anticipé et abbreuvé, et le luy presenter nud et blanc et le soubmettre à luy tres-humblement. (PT, p. 54)

The guidance which is described as being provided through man’s faculty of reason in the passage from the Discours is shown in the *Petit traicté*, therefore, to be made possible by the act of humbling oneself and cleansing the mind of the prejudices and fixed ideas with which experience has obscured it.

In the remainder of this fourth ‘discours de la divinité’, Charron elaborates on the nature of the freedom or emptiness that is given to man as a natural prerequisite of his being (his right to choose whether or not to follow the

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*The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 338).

24 The *Petit traicté* was first published in Paris by D. le Clerc in 1606. The edition used in this study is *Traicté de sagesse, plus quelques discours chrestiens du mesme aucteur, qui ont esté trouvez après son décez, avec son portrait au naturel et l’éloge ou sommaire de sa vie* (Paris: D. le Clerc, 1608). The abbreviation *PT* will be used in the main text alongside page references to
guidance of reason) in terms that recall the Kabbalistic account of the creation of
the world *ex nihilo*. This freedom precedes not only its own application and
determination, he says, but also the movement or influence of God:

voyre est une disposition à la reception de cette influence divine, laquelle
n’arriveroit qui ne toucheroit point la volonté sans elle, comm’en la
composition des choses naturelles, la privation est une capacité et
disposition à l’entrée de la forme en la matière, sans laquelle elle
n’enteroit pas. (I: 4: p. 90)

According to the Kabbalistic description of the flow of the divinity from eternity
to contingency, the nothingness with which the world is created is chiselled or
engraved out of God’s infinity so that the contingent being of the world may pour
forth from this specially created ‘hole’. As we shall see in the section on the
‘Discours de la Creation’, Charron was aware of Kabbalistic and other Jewish
doctrines and held them in high esteem.

In the three *discours* that follow (V, ‘De la bonté de Dieu’; VI, ‘De
l’amour et misericorde de Dieu’; and VII, ‘De la Haine, du courroux, et des
jugemens de Dieu’), Charron draws some ‘moral’ consequences from his
Thomist description of God – that is, he identifies ways in which his theological
theory is directly relevant to human life. Perhaps the most important of these is
that a universe which emerges from God’s eternal being must by definition be
good on the basis that being and goodness are one. Thus, ‘tout est bon et n’y a
rien de mauvais, car estant l’estre chose tres-bonne et desirable, tout ce qui a estre
est bon’ (I: 5: p. 94) and ‘toutes choses sont bonnes par participation de la divine’
(I: 4: p. 97). Charron attends to the details of how the individual can experience
this wholly good reality in *De la sagesse*. In addition to this comforting idea, the

this edition.
individual can know that in the very act of existing he is loved and known by God, for God loves the universe as an extension of himself which he created so that his love and being might be reflected back to him:

Ainsi Dieu s’aymant parfaictement, ayme le monde, non comme chose estrangere et separée de luy, mais comme une appartenance et dependance de soy, le Theatre, le miroir, l’ouvrage de sa puissance, sagesse, bonté, providence. Ainsi ayme-il le monde s’aymant soy-mesme, comme il cognoist le monde en se cognoissant. (I: 6: p. 109)

The importance of ‘morality’—the study of God’s creation—is that by studying his own small parcel of divine being and goodness, man may come to know God: ‘la bonté morale [...] sera un chemin pour monter à la divine’ (I: 5: p. 94).

6. Providence: the presence of God in the world and in the human mind

In the eighth and ninth discours, both entitled ‘De la providence de Dieu’, Charron continues his exposition of hidden God philosophy by presenting the case for belief in divine immanence, paying special attention once again to the psychological needs of man. He says that having established and recognised the importance of belief in a God who is the sovereign, efficient cause of the world, the first idea that entered the human mind was that ‘il y a quelque rapport, commerce et intelligence entre Dieu et l’homme’ (I: 8: p. 127). This intimate relationship between man and God means, in effect, he says,

que Dieu regarde et considere, a soin et pensement de l’homme; et l’homme le croyant ainsi doit attendre, esperer, desirer du bien de Dieu. Et par ainsi qu’il se passe et se traitte reciproquement quelque affaire entre eux-deux, car autrement s’il n’y a aucune relation et rien de commun entre-eux, il n’y a et n’y peut avoir aucun fondement ny ombrage de religion. La pure et simple creance d’un Dieu ne fait pas religion, mais du rapport et de la communication reciproque de Dieu et de l’homme. (I: 8: pp. 127-28)

25 See Kaplan’s commentary on the Sefer Yezirah, pp. 13-14.
No such thing as religion can exist, therefore, according to Charron, if there is no reciprocal communication and relationship between man and God.

Charron proceeds to give a history of the different philosophical opinions related to the existence of providence, a history which appears to have been inspired by a chapter of Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*. He says,

Aucuns l’ont niée tout à plat, encore qu’ils ayent confessé une Deité, laquelle ils ont dict vivre oysive en sa felicité constante sans se soucier d’autre chose, c’est l’opinion de Democrite, suyvie et confirmée par Epicure, Docteurs d’irreligion […]. Autres l’ont confessée; mais qu’elle ne se soucoit que des choses celestes incorruptibles, esquelles il n’arrivoir aucun defaut et desreglement, que les basses, corruptibles et toutes faultieres sont indignes d’elle; qu’il se cognoist bien que Dieu ne s’en mesle point, à cause des defaux et desbauches qui souvent y arrivent […]. C’est l’opinion de quelques autres Philosophes, entre autres de Ciceron, selon que dict Lactance, et d’Aristote, selon S. Gregoire de Nice. (I: 8: pp. 130-31)

Charron goes on to mention Maimonides by name, demonstrating that he had access, if not to the *Guide* itself - an edition of which was published in Paris in 1520 by Augustini Justiniani - then to a source containing material from the *Guide*:

D’autres par-expres luy ont osté et soustraict six chefs et genres des choses qu’ils ont dict estre maniées et conduites par autres ressorts et conducteurs […]; sçavoir les naturelles […]; necessaires […]; fortuites […]. Les mauvaises par un mauvais Dieu ou Genie selon aucuns Heretiques, Marcionites, Manichees, et generalement tous les petits individus subjects à quelqu’un de ces cinq surintendans selon Rabby Moyse. (I: 8: p. 132)

26 The chapter of Maimonides in question is Book III, Chapter XVII, ‘On Divine Providence’. The first theory on providence presented is that ‘there is no Providence at all for anything in the Universe; the heavens and what they contain owe their origin to accident and chance. This is the theory of Epicurus’. The second theory is that ‘whilst one part of the Universe owes its existence to Providence, and is under the control of a ruler and governor, another part is abandoned and left to chance. This is the view of Aristotle’ (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer, p. 282).

27 The title of the edition of the *Guide* mentioned above is *Dux seu dubitatum aut perplexorum*. 
Finally, he says, "il y en a qui recogoiissent qu'elle gouverne et conduict toutes choses, et en general et en particulier", mentioning the Platonists, Theodoret, Cyrille and Augustine (I: 8: p. 133). This is also the opinion of Christian belief, "laquelle est bien plus recevable, car plus honorable à Dieu, plus utile et consolative à l'homme, qui sont les deux qualités et conditions de la raison" (I: 8: p. 133). Here again we see Charron's concern for man's psychological well-being, which he uses as a rational argument in support of Christian doctrine.

Having established the overall importance of a belief in providence, Charron proceeds to describe its effects, particularly in relation to man. Not only is providence "une sage conduitte des choses à leur fin" (I: 8: p. 128), aligning them with the divine order, but it is the force which cares for every single aspect of the universe, no matter how great or small (I: 8: p. 138). It cares for the stars, it cares for flowers and grass, for droplets of water and grains of sand, Charron says, but it cares especially for man and everything that concerns him: his bones, his steps, his words (I: 8: pp. 138-39). In short, it cares for every aspect of man's existence: his abundance and his poverty, his prosperity and adversity, his freedom and servitude, his glory and his ignominy, his greatness and his smallness (I: 8: p. 139). This does not just apply to his body and his life, Charron continues, but especially to his mind, his good and his salvation,

ayant à ces fins ordonné et destiné à chacun de nous un bon Ange et esprit gardien, surveillant et comme Pedagogue, selon la doctrine des Stoiciens, Platonists, David, Jesus. (I: 8: p. 140)

Like Montaigne, therefore, Charron uses the notion of a 'supernatural' presence (which is simultaneously pagan and Christian) to express the role of providence in the workings of the human mind. It seems that while Montaigne prefers the
image of the Socratic daemon, Charron is influenced by the Jewish idea of a ‘pedagogue’ or guardian angel as described by Maimonides and Bodin. He refers to it again in *Les trois veritez*, where he says that everyone receives ‘pour leur bien et salut, un esprit gardien et pedagogue’, adding that ‘un chacun de nous, qui se veut bien taster, sent qu’il y a un autre esprit que le sien propre, qui le frappe et luy parle, et avec lequel souvent n’est pas d’accord’.

In a climax to the eloquent and literary passage describing God’s attention to the most minute details of human experience, Charron returns to the metaphor based on Christian folly which he uses to encourage the reader to wean himself from the world in order to place himself in God’s hands. He says,

Bref, à cause de cette providence il est appelé Pere, Pasteur, Roy et amoureux des hommes, et nous sommes exhortés de nous reposer au sein et au giron de cette Providence, succer et taster le doux laict de ses mamelles, pour nous soustener, refociller, et recréer en cette vallée de misere. (I: 8: p. 141)

In the last section of this first discours on providence it becomes clear that Charron’s Christian folly metaphor is significantly influenced by Montaigne’s theme of bestise. Not only is belief in providence useful, Charron says, but it is necessary for joyful living. Life is full of so many accidents, adversities and difficulties that if there is no consolation, what is man reduced to? (I: 8: pp. 153-54). Without providence it would have been better not to exist at all, or to have remained beasts, he continues, for that condition is far more gentle and untroubled:

Comment defendrons-nous icy la cause de l’homme, s’il n’y a point de providence? La beste a la bestise: c’est à dire, l’ignorance et stupidité pour un grand sejour et descharge de maux, outre que bien peu de maux ont prinse sur elle. (I: 8: pp. 154-55)

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Man, on the other hand, is subject to all kinds of evils, and his mind renews the ones he already has, creating new ones for good measure. The sharper the mind is, the sharper and more all-encompassing these evils become. Thus,

Qu’aura-il pour sa consolation et son soulagement s’il n’y a providence qui face au moins le même office à l’homme, que la bestise à la beste: mais d’une façon bien plus noble. (I: 8: p. 155)

These crucial passages, which are so important for an accurate understanding not only of this text but of De la sagesse as well, clearly define Charron’s concept of providence. Providence is to man what animal-stupidity is to the beasts: it provides the link that aligns man to God in the same way that the animals are aligned to the divine order through the force of nature. According to Charron, in order to establish this link, one has simply to surrender one’s own will to that of God and thereby receive the inner guidance that flows freely as a consequence of this act. Summing up the eighth discours, Charron reiterates the psychological importance of belief in providence:

Voyla comment par tout elle se trouve, et assaisonne toutes les parties de nostre vie, c’est son sel, son baston, sa lumière, son guide, c’est le trésor de l’homme, son lict de repos, son bouclier acéré et impenetrable à tous assauts. (I: 8: p. 157)

Although providence is so obvious that not believing it is like closing one’s eyes in broad daylight, Charron says, there is in our present state nothing that costs us more than trusting in God and resting in his providence (I: 8: p. 158). Distrust has taken root in us and we do not see that there is little good believing in a God if one cannot trust him, little good serving God if one cannot live more joyously and happily for it (I: 8: p. 158).

In the second chapter on providence, Charron sets out to show that when one does believe and trust in providence, the aspects of human life which
previously seemed negative and unjust are revealed to be positive and beneficial actions carried out by the Holy Spirit for specific purposes. According to this view, 'evil' – the veiling of God's infinite goodness – is brought about by human actions or ways of thinking which go against the current, so to speak, of divine goodness. However, in accordance with Charron's concept of the two wills, though God is not the author of evil, he uses it to implement his plan of expressing his infinite goodness: 'Dieu ne veut point le péché, mais il ne l'empesche, et le convertit en plus grand bien' (I: 9: p. 194). 'Evil' itself is only negative, therefore, if viewed from the human perspective. As soon as one opens one's mind to the force of providence, one becomes aware of a higher perspective of goodness which embraces and transmutes the lower perspective of 'evil'.

Charron argues this point through the example of the apparent injustice that causes the wicked to prosper and the good to suffer. What we are dealing with here, he explains, is a silenic reality:

Nous pouvons ici dire en gros pour tous les deux, prospérité des meschans, adversité des bons, que ce sont choses desguisées, misterieuses, autres au dedans qu’au dehors, comme les sacramens et les paraboles. (I: 9: p. 198)

Inspired here, it seems, by Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, Charron describes how worldly happiness is a mask that hides a store of misery and suffering:

Cette splendeur esclatante, cette prosperité riante des meschans, est une happe-lourde, une pierre fausse, belle mine à mauvais jeu, une farce tragique, où le coquin joué le Roy, faict le fandant, car au dedans ne sont qu’espines, regrets, soins pénibles, desirs cuisans, repentirs aigres. Soubs ce pourpre et cet or n’y a que crainte, frayeur, fiebvre. Au rebours, cette triste et abattue mine des simples et gens de bien, couve et couvre une joye, un repos et contentement indicable. (I: 9: p. 198)

Turning to the other side of the paradox mentioned at the end of this passage, Charron explains that the apparent suffering of good people is 'premierement une
medecine et une diette salutaire, purgative du mal present, et preservative de l’advenir’ (I: 9: p. 199). What these people go through is in fact a strengthening process, he says. Just as metal is brashly rubbed and filed in order to prevent it from becoming rusty, just as the vine is blunted and trees are pruned so that a superior fruit may grow, ‘ainsi par ce que le long sejour et calme alletit, endort et abastardit, l’affliction reveille, tient en bride et en haleine, purifie et derouille l’ame’ (I: 9: p. 199).

God exercises us by challenging us, Charron continues, hardening to pain those he loves and whom he wishes to use in his service (I: 9: p. 200). Using words that appear repeatedly in De la sagesse, Charron speaks here of the ‘strong and male’ way in which God treats the good and of the ‘weak and female’ way in which he treats the wicked:

Dieu se porte envers les bons et ceux qu’il ayme d’une affection paternelle, forte et masle, les traitant rudement et exerçant par peines, difficultés, hazards, à fin qu’ils parviennent aux hauts degrés de vertu et de merite, comme envers les meschants d’une maternelle, douce et molle, les laissant croupir à l’ombre, perdre à l’aise, se noyer et estouffer dedans les voluptés. (I: 9: p. 201)

Thus, paradoxically, adversity leads to virtue and pain leads to magnanimity: ‘la pasture vraye de la constance, patience, fidelité, magnanimité, plus heroïques vertus, est la contradiction, la difficulté, l’affliction, sans laquelle elles ternissent et flestrissent’ (I: 9: pp. 201-02). Drawing us back to the metaphor that encapsulates his literary use of the doctrine of Christian folly, Charron explains that ‘misfortune’ is the tactic used by providence to wean us away from the worldly way of thinking that separates us from true happiness:

C’est un moyen de nous sevrer et tirer du laict et goust fade de ce monde, nostre nourisse pour peu de temps, afin que l’amour que nous luy portons, petits encore et charnels, nous le transferions à nostre vraye paternelle qui
7. The ‘Discours de la création’: From abstract theology to the natural world

Earlier in this chapter we saw that Charron’s aim in adding the ‘Discours de la création’ to the other Discours chrestiens was probably to highlight the intimate connection between his work of moral philosophy, De la sagesse, and his orthodox theological writings. It seems that Charron wished to demonstrate as clearly as possible that the message which emerges from a devout and humble study of Catholic doctrine is that, having opened his heart and mind to God, the individual must turn his gaze to the natural world and its contents (including himself) in order to achieve the knowledge of God that is his by right. In making this claim, and by demonstrating a considerable knowledge of the ideas central to the work of the Christian, Jewish and Kabbalistic writers examined in Chapters 1 and 2, Charron situates himself at the heart of the hidden God tradition.

One of Charron’s main concerns at the beginning of these discours is to emphasise the unity that embraces God’s eternity and contingency. Charron explains that in creating the world, God projected outwards an image of his hidden essence turned inside-out, so to speak, completing his being with the manifestation of its opposite:

Cil qui est sans commencement a voulu faire un commencement; l’Eternel faire le temps; l’Infini créer le finy; l’Invisible se faire voir; l’Univers et tout en soy, produire une image de soy visible, grand et clair

29 There are fourteen discours de la création, the last of which, ‘De l’homme’, is divided into ten parts.
miroir de sa Majesté, theatre de sa puissance, bonté, sagesse; atelier et boutique de sa providence et des merveilles. (2: Preface: pp. 2-3)

In his description of God's creation of the world, Charron places particular emphasis, as do Maimonides and the Kabbalists, on the way in which God created the world from nothingness. Like Rabbi Azriel in his concept of the 'Nought from the Being', Charron identifies God's free decision to emanate as the cause of the flow of his being from eternity to contingency:

Au rien s'oppose tout: Dieu de rien, contre et en despit du rien, a faict le monde, c'est à dire, tout hors soy, qui pource est dit l'univers [...], comprenant toutes choses, et a esté appelé Monde [...] à cause de son ordre, beauté, ornement, duquel le centre est la terre, la circonférence le ciel, le contenu toute la region elementaire, et pource est un: car tout est un, et un est tout. (2: 1: p. 10)

In the margin just after this passage of the *Discours*, Charron wrote 'Leo Heb lib 3', a clear reference to Léon Hébreu's *Dialoghi d'amore* in support of the unity and interconnectedness of the different regions of the universe or aspects of the divine being. Faith inspires us to believe, Charron says, 'que le monde soit temporel et non etemel, mais faict de nouveau', Scripture pronounces it, and 'la premiere et plus vieille antiquité des Chaldéens et Hebreux, desquels sont derivées et respanduës par le monde les plus certaines opinions originaires, le tient aussi' (II: 1: p. 11). Charron clearly has a great deal of respect for the beliefs and ideas of the Hebrews, as his repeated references to them in these *discours* indicate.

The creation of the world as Charron describes it in this section of the text also bears a strong resemblance to Ramon Lull's conception of reality.

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30 Maimonides writes in the *Guide*, 'everything produced comes into existence from non-existence' (II: 27: p. 178).
31 See above, Chapter 2, section 6, for Rabbi Azriel's concept of the Being and the Nought.
According to Charron, the substance with which reality was created was 'chaos', a first-matter which falls somewhere between being and non-being:

C’estoit tout et rien, ou un milieu entre deux, l’estre et le non estre, un estre, mais si imparfait et si bas que c’estoit presque rien [...]. Et toutefois contenant tout, la semence de tout. (II: 2: p. 16)

This chaos was maintained and animated by God’s spirit, Charron adds, ‘comme l’embryon en la matrice, et les œufs sous la poulle qui les couve’ (II: 2: pp. 16-17). Referring to the Kabbalistic notion of the ten sephirot or essences through which God manifests his essence in contingent form, Charron makes it clear that what interests him in these accounts of the creation of the world is the intermediary channel through which God creates and sustains our reality:

L’on cognoist en gros les mouvemens et le nombre des dix cieux, ce que semble avoir voulu signifier ce grand Astrologue et legislateur Hebreu [Moses], au dessein de son temple [...] par les dix cortines couvertes et ornées de figures Angeliques. [...] L’Escriture appelle les cieux œuvres des doights de Dieu pour les signer dix, et les autres choses œuvres de ses mains. (II: 4: p. 35)

Only eight of the ten skies make themselves visible to us through their stars, he adds, citing the opinion of the Kabbalists as to the number of stars: ‘les Cabalistes disent y en avoir 29 mille’ (II: 4: p. 37).

In the encyclopedic description of the natural world that follows – in which we are presented with a contemporary ‘scientific’ account of the elements, meteors, minerals, plants, animals, birds, fish, land mammals, and, finally, man himself – Charron elaborates on this notion of an elemental mode of being underlying visible phenomena. In a passage which is strongly reminiscent of the natural philosophies of both Lull and Sebond, he describes the elements as the physical building blocks of the created world using the analogy of the letters and syllables which form a text.
Element est un corps simple, c'est à dire non composé d'autres corps, mais des premiers et plus simples principes de nature, qui sont matière et forme, comme des lettres est composée la syllable. Et des elemens, comme premiers rudimens [...] tous autres corps sont composés, comme de syllables est composé le mot, et en icheux se resolvent et retournent. (II: 5: p. 45)

This conception of the universe appears to be an amalgam of Sebond’s book of nature, Lull’s elemental astrology and Kabbalistic ideas. As well as having read Bodin’s *Théâtre de la nature universelle*, in which Kabbalistic ideas are prominent, Charron may also have had access to the *Artis cabalisticae*, the collection of Kabbalistic works edited by Johann Pistorii and published in Basle in 1587. This edition contained Johannes Reuchlin’s Latin translation of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, in which the notion of the ten sephirot is accompanied by the idea that the world is brought into being by the twenty-two ‘paths of wisdom’ or letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is to this idea that Charron refers in the fifth ‘discours de la création’. Having described the way in which the elements are created by the harmonious and creative mixing and tempering of the four active qualities – hot, cold, humid and dry – and given life by the celestial force of the universe, Charron explains that

De la differente mesure de cette chaleur et force celeste, et diverse mixtion, trempe et moderation des Elemens, vient une si grande et presque infinie diversité des corps naturels, ainsi que de la diverse transposition de 22 lettres alphabetiques vient une si grande diversité de mots, sont faicts et composés tous les livres, et tous les propos du monde. (II: 5: pp. 49-50)

Charron’s reason for emphasising the malleability of physical reality through his theory of the combination of elements or letters composing the world becomes clear in the thirteenth and last ‘discours de la création’, the ‘Discours de

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32 The *Artis Cabalisticae* also contains Reuchlin’s *Arte cabalistica* and *De verbo mirifico* and
l'homme'. This discours, which is as long as the rest of the 'Discours de la création' put together, was clearly intended to be the centre-piece of Charron's encyclopedia of the natural world in which the link between his negative theology (based on the hidden God tradition) and his moral philosophy could be clearly identified.\(^{33}\) What Charron wishes to show is that on the basis of his middle position in the universe, man, like the elements or letters of the book of nature, is also a malleable substance which can be turned in either of two opposite directions. In the style of Sebond's Théologie naturelle, Charron explains that man is the intermediary between heaven and earth, bringing the whole of the universe together by virtue of his dual nature.\(^{34}\) God made man, he says,

\[
\text{comme une recapitulation sommaire de toutes choses et un abbrégé du monde, qui est tout en l'homme, mais raccourci et en petit volume, dont il est appelé le Petit Monde. Aussi l'univers peut estre appelé le grand homme: comme le Nœud, le Moyen, le lien des anges et des animaux, des choses celestes et terrestres, spirituelles et corporelles; et en un mot, la derniere main, l'accomplissement, le chef d'œuvre, l'honneur et le miracle de Nature. (II: 9: p. 99)}
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Charron's aim, like that of Sebond, is not to celebrate man's superiority in a presumptuous fashion, however. His intention is to highlight the fact that man's greatness stems from the spark of the divine being that is planted in him by God and with which he can connect by the appropriate use of his free will. Using an analogy that reappears in De la sagesse, Charron describes the exercise of free will in terms of the direction in which the soul — the intermediary between the

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\(^{33}\) As Macdonough points out, p. 156, much of this section of the text is taken straight from the second edition of De la sagesse, Book 1, Chapters 1-3.

\(^{34}\) Sebond writes that 'comme les autres creatures sont joinctes et se rapportent à nous pour estre faites à nostre contemplation, ainsi sommes nous attachez et joinct à Dieu par nostre dette et par ceste obligation' (La théologie naturelle, fol. 102'). The debt and obligation mentioned here
divine and bestial parts of man – is pointed. As in the philosophies of Lull and Leon Hébreu, if the soul is pointed in the direction of good, so will the man be good; if it is pointed in the direction of evil, he will be evil. Through the analogy of a monarchical state Charron explains that

L’esprit la tres-haute et tres-heroïque partie, parcelle, scintille, image et defluxion de la divinité, est en l’homme comm’un Roy en la Republique, ne respire que le bien et le ciel où il tend. La chair, au contraire, comme la lie d’un peuple hebeté, le mare et la sentine de l’homme, tend toujours à la matiere et à la terre. L’ame au milieu come les principaux du populaire, entre le bien et le mal, est perpetuellement sollicitée de l’esprit et de la chair, et selon le party où elle se range, est spirituelle et bonne, ou charnelle et mauvaise. (II: 9: p. 104)

Man has the freedom to choose, therefore, whether to enslave his mind to matter, allowing his thoughts and actions to be dictated by the lower aspects of his being, or to harness it to the power of providence and the will of God. How he becomes the master of his own mind so that he can choose between these two options in the most effective and rewarding fashion is the subject of De la sagesse.

8. Christ as the symbol of providence

In the remaining parts of the Discours chrestiens - the ‘Discours de la redemption du monde’ and the ‘Octave du Sainct Sacrement’ - Charron places the entire discussion so far within the context of Christianity and its doctrines. Following Sebond in the second part of the Théologie naturelle, his intention is to show that the notion of God’s presence in the world and in man through providence and reason is encapsulated in the person of Christ, who is a symbol of the union between God and man.

refer to what man owes God for providing him with the rest of the world.
As the title of the ‘Discours de la redemption’ indicates, Charron espouses Aquinas’s argument that God’s gift of Christ to his creation has already operated the redemption of the world. He explains that two of the three major stages of God’s self-unfolding are complete: ‘Nature’ and ‘Grace’ have been granted, he says, but we still await ‘Glory’, which is the perfection of grace (III: 1: pp. 1-2). All three stages are based on the template or model of Christ, who, we are told, is the mediator through which God’s self-expression occurs:

Ces trois œuvres sont faicts, et ces trois biens donnez de Dieu par un mesme moyen et entremetteur, son Fils, duquel il se sert en toutes choses, comme d’une Idée, de patron et modelle: dont à bon droict il est appellé mediateur […]: par luy, comme sa pensée secrette image eternelle, il a fait le monde; par luy mesme humanisé et ja fait une piece de ce monde, il a repara le monde. (III: 1: p. 2)

As this passage illustrates, Charron clearly conceives the person of Christ as the divine thought or channel of ‘elemental’ energy through which the world comes into being and is transformed by the will of God. Christ is the manifestation, therefore, of God’s ‘back’, the image of God’s essence projected outwards in the act of creation:

Voicy la personne du Redempteur batie et accomplie, comme diet est, où il se voit qu’elle comprend tout, c’est tout le monde: tout est en luy, le ciel, la terre, Divinité, humanité, les perfections divines, les imperfections humaines, c’est un sommaire du monde; c’est l’image vivant de Dieu vivant. (III: 2: p. 39)

In asserting that Christ is the channel through which God’s providence is poured into the world, Charron is once again following a well-established and orthodox tradition of thought based on the writings of St Paul. In Colossians, Paul writes that God has

delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible
God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth [...] For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell. (1. 13 - 19)

Erasmus, in his Sileni Alcibiadis, takes up the theme of the symbolic nature of the person of Christ as it is described in the Epistles. ‘Is not Christ the most extraordinary Silenus of all?’, he asks,

for if one may attain to a closer look at this Silenus-image, that is if he deigns to show himself to the purified eyes of the soul, what unspeakable riches you will find there: in such service to mankind, there is a pearl of great price, in such humility, what grandeur! in such poverty, what riches! in such weakness what immeasurable strength! in such shame what glory!

Christ represents what Erasmus describes as ‘that philosophy which alone of all others really does bring what everyone is trying to get, in some way or another – happiness’ (p. 272), that is, the mode of living or behaving which causes the individual to be guided in his thoughts and actions by the Holy Spirit rather than by his own lower passions. Citing the authority behind his discussion of Christian folly, Erasmus describes the ‘philosophy’ of Christ in precisely these terms:

If you divide man according to St Paul into three parts, body, soul, and spirit (I am using his very words), it is true that the common people value highest what is most obvious – the lowest part, condemned by the Apostle. The middle term, which he considers good if it joins forces with the spirit, is approved of by many also. But the spirit, the best part of ourselves, from which springs as from a fountain all our happiness – the spirit, by which we are joined to God – they are so far from thinking it precious that they never even ask whether it exists or what it is, although Paul mentions it so often in his teaching. (pp. 278-79)

Charron also appears to be close to Erasmus in his emphasis on the Church as a symbol of the bond of union between God and all Christians, high

35 Mann Philips, The ‘Adages’ of Erasmus, pp. 271-72. Further references to this work will appear in the text.
36 The Epistle in question is Thessalonians 5. 23.
and low. In the *Sileni*, Erasmus describes the Church as the union of all Christians, highlighting the point that it is more properly Christian to follow the teachings of Christ than the whims of bishops who are prone to succumbing to their lower passions like everyone else.

They [the common people] call the priests, bishops and Popes ‘the Church’, when in reality they are only the servants of the Church. The Church is the whole Christian people, and Christ himself says it is too great to lie down before the bishops who serve it – they would have less obsequious treatment, but be more truly great, if they were to follow Christ in his life and actions as they are his successors in their office – if they were to do as he did, who although he was prince and lord of all, took upon himself the part of a servant and not of a master. (p. 281)

The union between Christ and the Church, God and human nature, Charron says in the ‘Octave du Sainct Sacrement’, is the aim underlying the whole endeavour of the creation. Everything he has said so far, he explains,

> est dict pour donner entrée et faire ouverture au discours que j’ay à faire du mariage d’entre Jesus-Christ avec l’Eglise, c’est à dire de l’union de la nature humaine avec Dieu, laquelle union est vrayement toute telle qu’au mariage [...]. C’est le plus grand affaire que Dieu aye entreprins, et pour lequel toutes autres choses ont esté faictes: auquel il a tout rapporté et faict servir, c’est son chef d’œuvre. (IV: 3: p. 264) \(^{37}\)

In a climax to his theological account of the union between divinity and humanity, Charron describes the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Eucharist as ‘les deux poles, sur et entre lesquels tourne et se remuë tout le globe

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\(^{37}\) Macdonough explains, pp. 219-20, that ‘Charron has written this *discours* [the ‘Octave’] to illustrate this article of the creed: “Credo sanctam ecclesiam catholicam; sanctorum communionem” [p. 181]. The communion with which he is concerned in this series, then, is not simply the eucharistic communion. It is the “comm-union” among all those who form “une grande republique de gens, qui portassent sa marque et son image, et luy rendissent tout’honneur, amour & obeissance” [p. 183]. These are the [...] members of the Church’ (my inclusion of page references from the author’s footnotes). Charron’s concept of the Church also includes the angels and the souls of those in heaven and in purgatory (Macdonough, p. 221). As Macdonough says, ‘the idea of the Church as hierarchy, or as a monolithic organization composed primarily of ecclesiastics, is obviously foreign to such an outlook. This emphasis had been current only since the Council of Trent. Not that theologians denied the more integral concept, but it was de-emphasized in favor of a Counter-Reformation hierarchical approach’ (p. 220).
et la sphere de la Chrestienté' on the basis that they operate the two successive stages of God’s union with man (IV: 5: p. 288). Charron explains:

Ce premier acte par lequel Dieu a pris l’homme, c’est l’incarnation et conception du Fils de Dieu au ventre de la vierge, auquel a esté humanisée la divinité [...]. L’autre par lequel l’homme prend Dieu, c’est la saincte communion en l’autel, par laquelle l’homme reprend celuy qui l’avoit pris, et ainsi est deifié, uny et transformé en Dieu. (IV: 5: pp. 290-91)

Like the Church and the person of Christ, therefore, these doctrines or pillars supporting the edifice of the Christian religion are to be understood, according to Charron, as symbols conveying the message that God wishes his unity with his creation to be known. The way in which the creatures can experience this knowledge as their own, Charron explains at the end of the ‘Octave du Sainct Sacrement’, is to abandon their worldly ways and put their trust in the divine grace that has already been bestowed upon them:

Puis que toutes choses sont ainsi relevées et amandées en ce sainct Sacrement, et qu’il est tout fait pour nous; combien plus sommes nous obligés de nous elever et ennoblir par iceluy, et quittant tous accidens mondains et corruptibles, nous substancier en Dieu, nous transformer, nous deifier? (IV: 6: p. 319)

As we have seen in this chapter, Charron’s overriding concern is to show that the doctrines of the Christian religion are fertile with creative ideas which can and should be put into practice by the individual. Believing in these doctrines, as far as Charron is concerned, is not a wholly passive affair, for the passivity and emptiness with which faith is practised give rise to a new activity of understanding and inspiration bestowed on one by the Holy Spirit. However, Charron is not suggesting that theology - the study of doctrine - is the domain in which human beings may come to know God. As he takes great care to show in his apology for the Catholic Church, Les trois veritez, it is in the domain of moral
affairs, that is, of ordinary life, that a deep understanding of the doctrines of the
Christian religion should be developed and experienced.
Chapter 7

Les Trois Veritez and the Role of Morality as a Base for Religion

1. Charron's search for a common ground on which to heal religion

The second of Charron's theological texts, Les trois veritez, leads us out of the world of abstract theology and into the real-life context of the sixteenth century. As this text illustrates so well, the wars of religion had posed the people of this century with an age-old dilemma: how can one reconcile one's belief in God and the practice of religion with the demands and challenges of ordinary life? Having seen how miserably this question had been answered in his own lifetime, Charron's reaction was to propose the reconciliation of faith and reason encapsulated in the concept of the hidden God as a method for transforming people's conception of religion. In writing Les trois veritez, Charron is motivated above all, therefore, by the desire to cleanse religion of the abuses it had suffered as a result of the fighting between Catholics and Protestants. In harmony with his thinking in the Discours chrestiens, his intention is to make use of the concept of the hidden God in order to restore religion to its natural role as the bond of love between all human beings and between the individual and God.

1 Les trois veritez contre les athées, idolatres, juifs, mahumetans, heretiques & schismatiques (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1593). This work, which was first published anonymously, leading to a number of pirated editions (notably the 1595 edition published in Brussels under the name of the lawyer Benois Vaillant) was republished in Bordeaux by Millanges in 1595 and appeared again in revised and augmented form in 1596 in Lyon, published by Jean Didier. All three of these editions are held by the British Library. The Bibliothèque Nationale holds the following editions in addition to the two just mentioned: Paris: L. Delas, 1594; Paris, 1595; Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1595, 2nd edn with an examination of the response to the Third Truth; Paris: Vve. P. Bertault, 1620, 2nd edn; Paris: R. Bertault, 1623-25. The edition used in this chapter is the 1593 Bordeaux edition. References in the text present the book, chapter and page number respectively.
Charron was acutely aware of the fact that the wars of religion had caused ordinary people to lose sight of the true meaning of religion and he wished to counter the effects of superstition and atheism that had usurped religion’s place by defining the essential nature of Christianity as he conceived it. At the time of writing this work, Charron clearly felt that the best way of helping others to understand what ‘true’ Christianity is was to define it against the ‘false’ version of Christianity being presented by the Protestants. To this end, he had studied the works of the most prominent Protestant writers – Luther, Calvin, Theodore de Bèze and Duplessis Mornay, whose Traité de l’Église he had specifically set out to refute – opposing their ideas in Les trois veritez with the doctrines of St Paul, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas and the arguments of Catholic apologists such as Bellarmin, Hosius, Cheffonds and Florimond.

At this stage of his writing career, therefore, before the publication of De la sagesse and the Discours chrestiens, Charron still felt that the best context in which to encourage people to live according to the religious principles at the heart of Christianity was a religious one. However, if one reads between the lines of Les trois veritez, it becomes apparent that Charron was already beginning to realise that the ‘natural’ domain of moral philosophy was a far more appropriate and effective channel through which to reform the practice of religion. As we

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2 For Charron’s substantial role in the implementation of the Counter-Reformation, see J.-D. Charron, pp. 55-58.
3 See J.-D. Charron, p. 90.
4 Bonnefon writes, in Montaigne et ses amis, pp. 253-54, ‘la première [vérité] nous intéresse davantage, car elle expose mieux la filière des opinions philosophiques et religieuses de Charron […]’. A prendre les choses en gros, c’est ce que Sebonde avait prétendu faire et c’est aussi ce que Montaigne, reprenant le projet de son prédécesseur, avait essayé de faire à son tour: montrer la faiblesse de la raison humaine et la nécessité d’une doctrine supérieure suppléant à notre infirmité’.
shall see, Charron’s intention - which is central to all of his works - to encourage the individual to submit to God’s will and to use his reason to help him in this endeavour can easily be discerned in the text as a whole. These moral and spiritual considerations are complemented by passages appearing in the second and third verités, in which Charron begins to express in more philosophical terms the notion that the individual’s personal connection with God must take place not through a theoretical knowledge of theology, but through the experience of life.

2. The dialectic of opposites

In the last chapter we saw that the doctrine of Christian folly underpins the Discours chrestiens, articulating the notion that the two opposites implicit in God’s manifestation of himself are, despite appearances, in harmony with each another. Humanity, according to this idea, is an integral part of the process of divine self-manifestation, not just despite its imperfections, but also because of them. Similarly, the misfortunes and suffering that plague human experience are in fact encrypted codes which, when deciphered by an inspired consideration of their true meaning, reveal themselves to be precise directions along the road of self-knowledge and human knowledge of God. In Les trois veritez this play of opposites is no less central to Charron’s endeavour. What can be discerned in this text is a movement from the human (reason) towards the divine (faith), and, upon the discovery of an impasse at the threshold of the divine realm, a redescent towards the human (reason’s discovery of the divinity’s presence in experience). Described in terms of different kinds of consciousness, this dialectical process is
a movement from rational knowing (human presumption) to unknowing (humble belief) and then on to a knowing-unknowing (an inspired mode of perceiving the physical world). Given that Charron’s ideas were still in the early stages of their evolution at this point, the third step of this process is indicated in *Les trois veritez*, but not fully developed until the writing of *De la sagesse*.

Charron’s own description of the structure of his apology for the Catholic Church illustrates that what he had in mind was a psychological process which, based on reasoned facts, would lead the individual to a belief in God that assured his salvation. The three truths, he explains, are three principles of one truth and three foundations of the edifice of religion in its entirety:

Le premier montre, qu’il y a un Dieu, qu’il faut reconnoistre, adorer et servir, qui n’est autre chose que Religion; le second que de toutes Religions la Chrestienne est la seule vraie; le troisesme que de tant de creances et opinions, qui se disent Chrestiennes, la Catholique Romaine est la seule vraie. Dont resulte ceste conclusion derriere et ceste grande et universelle verité, qu’il y a un Dieu, lequel s’est manifesté aux hommes par la Religion Chrestienne et Catholique, lequel il faut reconnoistre, adorer et servir, pour parvenir à salut, et que hors ceste verité n’y a par tout que mensonge, imposture et vanité. (Preface, pp. 3-4)

Just as it was man’s psychological comfort and well-being (brought about by a belief in providence) that concerned Charron in the *Discours chrestiens*, so in *Les trois veritez* is it the need for psychological certainty that one is following the right religious path that motivates Charron to write his treatise. The individual needs to know which Church is true, Charron says, and he needs to be able to recognise the signs that direct him to it:

Il est question de trouver une regie certaine pour nous conduire seurement en la Religion, et des marques pour cognoiostre la vрайe Eglise, qui soient si claires et si visibles, que les plus simples s’en puissent servir au besoin. (Preface, p. 8)
What is needed, in short, is a method or a way of perceiving that bypasses the obstacles created by false interpretations of truth. This, for Charron, is right reason, the human faculty of reason when it is in alignment with the divine order. The certainty or truth that results from such a use of reason is not absolute truth, of course - here, as elsewhere, Charron is following the hidden God tradition - but the measure of truth that human beings can attain.

Charron’s conception of reason as it is described in the quotation above and in the first vérité as a whole sends the reader back to the Essais with echoes of the beginning of the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’ ringing in his ears. Like Charron, Montaigne wished to make it perfectly clear that the kind of reason he was encouraging his reader to use is reason in the service of a passionate and whole-hearted belief in God. Defending Sebond against the objection that he uses human and natural reasons to establish the articles of the Christian religion against the atheists, Montaigne writes that

C’est la foy seule qui embrasse vivement et certainement les hauts mystères de nostre Religion. Mais ce n’est pas à dire que ce ne soit une très-belle et très-loüable entreprinse d’accommoder encore au service de nostre foy les utils naturels et humains que Dieu nous a donnez. Il ne faut pas douter que ce ne soit l’usage le plus honorable que nous leur scâurions donner, et qu’il n’est occupation ny dessein plus digne d’un homme Christien que de viser par tous ses estudes et pensemens à embellir, estandre et amplifier la verité de sa creance. Nous ne nous contentons point de servir Dieu d’esprit et d’ame; nous luy devons encore et rendons une reverence corporelle; nous appliquons nos membres mesmes et nos mouvements et les choses externes à l’honorer. Il en faut faire de mesme, et accompagner nostre foy de toute la raison qui est en nous, mais toujours avec cette reservation de n’estimer pas que ce soit de nous qu’elle dépende, ny que nos efforts et argumens puissent atteindre à une si supernaturelle et divine science. (pp. 417-18)

In the last sentence of this passage Montaigne highlights the fact that the supernatural, divine knowledge which constitutes faith is only given to (not
created by) human reason when it recognises its own powerlessness. According to Montaigne, the knowing that reason affords when it is in the flow of grace is an intuitive sense of how to behave towards oneself and others in such a way that the principles of divinity - such as goodness, love, truth and justice - are reproduced as far as is humanly possible in one's own thoughts and actions.

For Montaigne, correct moral behaviour is a natural attribute of humanity insofar as it (humanity) is the creation of divinity, and religion is the aspect of human life that brings that natural sense of goodness to fruition. In 'De la phisionomie', where he expresses this view, Montaigne contrasts this appropriate use of reason in the service of faith with the superstition that adheres to moral-religious principles not because they form a natural part of what it means to be human, but out of fear of punishment and the egotistical desire for reward:

Diray-je cecy en passant: que je voy tenir en plus de prix qu'elle ne vaut, qui est seule quasi en usage entre nous, certaine image de preud'homie scholastique, serve des preceptes, contraincte soubs l'esperance et la crainte? Je l'aime telle que les loix et religions non facent, mais parfacent et authorisent, qui se sente de quoy se soustenir sans aide, née en nous de ses propres racines par la semence de la raison universelle empreinte en tout homme non desnature. [...] Ruineuse instruction à toute police, et bien plus dommageable qu'ingenieuse et subtile, qui persuade aux peuples la religieuse creance suffire, seule et sans les moeurs, à contenter la divine justice. L'usage nous faict voir une distinction enorme entre la devotion et la conscience. (p. 1037)

Like Montaigne, Charron presents his concept of inspired reason - the offspring of the partnership between reason and faith, humanity and divinity - against the backdrop of its opposite: the superstitious and presumptuous mind-set which functions according to purely human means. As we shall see in the sections that follow, Les trois veritez presents the reader with the 'rough version' of the concept of reason that was later to become the central theme of De la sagesse.
3. **Reason’s role as signpost pointing to faith in the first verité**

Charron’s aim in the first verité is a very specific one: to demonstrate by the use of reason that reason’s natural role in the make-up of the individual is to turn his awareness towards God and to instil in him a profound love for and belief in the divinity. If this is its natural role, Charron says in this first book, then human beings have fallen into a thoroughly unnatural state - that is, they have fallen out of alignment with the divine order. For although religion - man’s recognition of and duty and service to God - is the richest and most important gift that God has given man, it is nevertheless the part of men’s lives that is the most nonchalantly and coldly treated, and even rejected altogether by some (I: 1: p. 1). Indeed, he continues, religion is severely troubled by doubts, suspicions and disputes; it is rocked and defamed by divisions and partialities, which cause many not only to disregard it, but to disdain it too,

> si qu’à peu pres il se peut dire, qu’il en advient comme de l’espouse, dont parle Plutarque, que divers poursuivans tirasserent tant, et la deschirerent tellement, qu’en fin chacun la voulant faire sienne, ils en perdirent tous en commun l’usage et possession. (I: 1: p. 2)

Charron’s concern for the survival of religion leads him in the pages that follow to attempt to reinstate in the reader a sense of the personal connection that he believes exists between each individual and God.

In the first passage of many that recall the *Discours chrestiens*, Charron explains that religion is natural to man, so natural in fact that it is the characteristic that distinguishes him from the beasts:

> Or la religion est propre à l’homme, convenant à tout homme et toujours [...]. Les sens et facultez de l’ame ont beau estre en leur vigeur, faire leurs functions, et estre douées de belles qualitez, l’homme ne sera point osté du rang des bestes, si la religion et la lumiere divine n’esclaire en son orison. (I: 2: pp. 5-6)
This, Charron says, is the subject of this first book: to doubt or try to rid oneself of the need for a relationship with God, ‘c’est comme se despouiller de l’humanité et n’estre plus homme’ (I: 2: p. 6). Closely following the points that he will later turn into the ‘Discours de la divinité’ - which may already have existed in the form of notes that he used when he was preaching or teaching the clergy - Charron presents his conception of an unknowable, infinite God that is both transcendent and immanent. What is the point, he says, of having a divinity who has nothing to do with us, no intimate connection to us, ‘car si Ion la croit et imagine nullement soigneuse de nous, et de ce qui nous touche, à quel propos, et à quelle fin religion?’ (I: 2: p. 6). It is this natural, built-in need for an awareness of God’s presence in our lives, Charron says, that must precede the practice of religion: ‘religion donc presuppose et suit necessairement une creance de Deité, providente sur toutes choses’ (I: 2: p. 6).

In opposition to the presumption of the atheists who think they know that God does not exist, and against those irreligious people who imagine a God that takes no interest in the world, Charron explains that the divinity by definition transcends our conception of it: ‘c’est un abuz de penser trouver aucune raison suffisante et demonstrative assez pour prouver et establir evidemment et necessairement que c’est que Deité’ (I: 5: p. 17). As we can see here, Aquinas’s natural theology is Charron’s prime weapon in this argument against the atheists and anyone else who presumes to know more than their human reason entitles them to know (Aquinas states that we can know that God is, not what he is). Man is finite, Charron continues; he is therefore infinitely distant from God:
Deité c'est ce qui ne se peut cognoistre, ni seulement s'apercevoir: du fini à l'infini n'y a aucune proportion, nul passage, l'infini est du tout inaccessible, voire imperceptible. (I: 5: p. 18)

The arguments employed by Charron to undermine human presumption are, as one might expect, very similar to those used by Montaigne in the 'Apologie'.

Like Montaigne, Charron wishes to show here that it is reason's own fallibility which proves to it that it does not have the capacity to know God unaided, thus pointing it in the direction of the source of what it lacks.

True knowledge of God, Charron says, summarising the hidden God philosophy of the Discours, is perfect ignorance of him: 'la vraye connaissance de Dieu est une perfecte ignorance de luy; s'approcher de Dieu est le cognoistre lumiere inaccessible, et d'icelle estre absorbé' (I: 5: p. 24). This 'renouncing' of one's capacity to know may seem to represent complete passivity on the part of the individual, but what Charron draws to the attention of the reader is that the humble gesture of accepting one's limitations can be viewed, in its own restricted context, as a positive and active use of human reason. He expresses this idea in the text through the notion of the human concept of God which each person must continually carve out for himself according to his stage of spiritual development.

'Il est force,' he says,

et ne peut estre autrement en la condition presente de ceste vie, que chacun se face et se peigne à soy-mesme une image de la Deité, à laquelle il regarde, il s'adresse, et se tienne, laquelle luy soit comme son Dieu. (I: 5: p. 25)

This 'idea' of God must be the highest point to which one can raise one's imagination, he explains, although it will always be an imperfect image that cannot help but fall short of the truth. Each individual's conception of truth will
therefore be different from all the others and will itself evolve in time under the influence of its own efforts or by virtue of any guidance it receives:

et ainsi seront toutes ces images différentes, comme diverses. Les ames qui les peignent en leurs portées et capacitez, voire une mesme ame changera souvent d'image, comme elle s'eslevera, s'esvertuera et s'esclaircira plus ou moins, soit par ses propres et naturelles forces, ou bien souslevé et guidée par discipline et instruction prinse d'ailleurs. Dont il y aura ici du plus et du moins: plus belle, haute et riche sera l'ame, plus noble Dieu aura elle, plus belle et plus digne image fera elle. (I: 5: pp. 25-26)

Here again, the influence of Aquinas's *Summa theologica* is discernible in Charron's conception of the extent to which man can know God.⁶

In the chapters that follow Charron presents more arguments designed to demonstrate - as far as reason can - that reason can indicate the path to follow where religion and one's belief in God are concerned. As in the *Discours chrestiens*, Charron's arguments revolve around the importance of demonstrating the existence of providence. The twist added to his reasoning here in *Les trois veritez* - the prime concern of which is to determine the criterion of truth in matters of religion - is that reason itself serves as the first level of proof of the existence of providence. All reasons in favour of the existence of a provident divinity, Charron says, can be fitted into three categories, for they are either

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⁵ See, for example, p. 586 of the *Essais*.
⁶ Étienne Gilson summarises this aspect of Thomist philosophy as follows: 'il est certain que saint Thomas nous accorde une certaine connaissance de Dieu, cette connaissance même que, dans le texte de *L'Épitre aux Romans*, saint Paul nomme celle des *invisibilia Dei*. Mais il faut voir où elle s'arrête. Tout d'abord, s'il s'agissait d'une connaissance de Dieu lui-même, saint Paul ne dirait pas *invisibilia*, mais *invisibile*, car Dieu est un, son essence est une [...]. La parole de saint Paul n'invite donc aucunement à relâcher la sentence qui nous interdit de connaître l'essence divine. D'une telle connaissance, il n'est ici même pas question. La seule que saint Paul nous concède, c'est celle des *invisibilia*, c'est-à-dire d'une pluralité de points de vue sur Dieu, ou de manières de le concevoir (*rationes*), que nous désignons par des noms empruntés à ses effets, et que nous attribuons à Dieu: “De cette manière, l'entendement envisage l'unité de l'essence divine sous les raisons de bonté, de sagesse, de vertu, et autres du même genre, qui ne sont pas en Dieu. Il les a donc nommées les *invisibilia* de Dieu, parce que ce qui répond en Dieu à ces noms, ou raisons, est un, et n'est pas vu par nous”' (**Le thomisme**, p. 156). The text cited is *In Epistolam ad
natural, supernatural or theological (I: 6: p. 28). Supernatural proof includes the presence and activity of good and bad demons and the occurrence of possessions, which is all proof of 'quelque puissance invisible, occulte, spirituelle, plus grande et plus forte que l'humaine' (I: 8: p. 43). Divine or theological proof occurs in the form of miracles, predictions and God's revelation of things through his ministers (I: 8: p. 45).

What concerns man in particular, however, Charron continues, is the natural proof of providence, because human reason, imagination and intelligence provide us with justifiable indications of the truth of its existence:

Ce que le discours de la raison, nostre imagination et intelligence nous apprend et nous monstre, nous le devons recevoir et croire [...]. L'homme ne doit faire difficulté d'arriver par créance jusques où il est mené par intelligence et discours de raison. (I: 8: p. 46)

Having justified the use of reason in the search for knowledge of God, Charron shows how by following the basic tenets of Thomist natural theology, the individual can know the provident aspect of God's being. Reason is able to distinguish, Charron says, between what exists by itself and what exists through something outside itself (I: 6: pp. 28-29). Thus when we look at the world, the mass of opposing, interconnecting and ever-changing substances and objects points to the perfection and unity which is its source: 'ce monde est tout basty de contrarietez enchainées ensemble, chaud, froid, sec, humide [...], ce qui ne peut estre sans un premier, simple, non composé composant tout' (I: 6: pp. 29-30). Charron devotes particular attention in this section to the flexibility of human perception of reality, showing how by allowing for the existence of a transcendent-immanent divinity that embraces all being, one's interpretation of

Romanos, Ch. 1, lect. 6, Parma edition, vol. XIII, p. 16.
phenomena can change dramatically. The atheists oppose everything in order to support their axiom that nothing is certain and that there is no truth, he says, but they do not take into account the bigger picture which would account for supposedly 'useless' or 'harmful' things (I: 10: pp. 60-64). Things deemed useless or harmful by such people are often evidently useful, however, but their stubborn ignorance prevents them from seeing the positive side of the situation:

Encores qu’elles semblent telles par un costé et par une raison particulière, ou bien considérées toutes seules, mais par plusieurs autres raisons, et puis rapportées au gros et à tout l’œuvre entier, à quoy toutes pieces doivent servir, tres-bonnes et utiles. Souvent ce qui est laid tout seul, est tres-beau en compaignie, voire sert à rendre beau le reste, et soy quant et quant. Ce qui semble en soy et tout seul inutile et nuisible à quelqu’un, est utile, appliqué comme il faut. (I: 10: pp. 64-65)

What Charron is emphasising in this part of the text is the importance of man’s free will, the god-given gift which enables him to alter his perception of reality to some degree. Instead of interfering with the free will of human beings, Charron says, God makes his intention (that they follow the divine order) clear to them all, so that they can align themselves with it, and then lets nature take its course (I: 11: pp. 90-91).

When the individual has aligned his free will with the divine order by conceiving of the divinity as a hidden, transcendent God who reveals himself to man through his providence, Charron goes on to argue, he begins to perceive the divine order and the means to adhere to it further through his reason. Here Charron presents a wide range of psychological arguments in the style of Sebond’s *Théologie naturelle* to support this idea. Among these is the argument

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7 Renée Kogel writes, in *Pierre Charron* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1972), p. 83, ‘Charron’s own source for the discussion of psychological benefits of belief was possibly Sebond’s *Natural Theology* [...]. Sebond’s influence on Charron is a general one, while Charron does not borrow
that man is naturally obliged to believe and hold to whatever is truly for his own good, satisfaction and perfection: 'toutes creatures selon ceste reigle employent tout ce qu’elles ont à leur bien, profit et avancement: car c’est un expres commandement de nature, duquel ne peut y avoir dispense ny excuse legitime' (I: 12: p. 92). He also argues that while atheism is ‘une sterilité, une absence, un rien’ (I: 12: p. 93), religion makes man truly happy: ‘la religion apporte infinis biens, l’esprit s’ennoblit, s’enrichit se joignant à l’estre, logeant en soy l’infinité du bien’ (I: 12: p. 93). In a passage that seems to have inspired Pascal in the development of his literary theme of ‘la misère de l’homme sans Dieu’ in the *Pensées*, Charron contrasts the happiness caused by belief in God with the bleakness and despair that afflict the atheist:

Ostez toutes ces considerations, ausquelles consiste la religion, que l’homme demeure seul sans appuy de plus grand […], sans apprehension de quelque grandeur et puissance infinie et tresbonne, quel goust y a il en ce monde? Mesme es choses bonnes et plaisantes […] et aux peines et tourments, quel ennuy et desespoir? (I: 12: p. 94)

This ‘psychological’ section culminates in two final arguments which underscore the considerable importance that Charron attributes to reason’s role in the matter of religious belief. Were it unlikely that God existed, Charron says, man would be better off persuading himself of his existence and the existence of providence so as to live more joyfully. The effect of believing in God is so powerful and positive, therefore, that it warrants a whole-hearted emotional investment:

Il est donc clair que l’homme doit embrasser de tout son cœur la religion, comme son seul souverain bien, et qui lui importe de tant, qu’encores que la chose fut en soi douteuse, et qu’il n’y eut raison aucune,
qui conviast à croire un Dieu et une providence, si est-ce que pour vivre plus à son aise et avoir meilleur party que les bestes, il devroit mettre peine à se la persuader et ramasser tout ce qu’il pourroit pour se la faire croire, et vivre joyeux et content en ceste créance. (I: 12: p. 94)

There is in fact no need for this, Charron adds, because all things demonstrate to man God’s existence and providence: ‘nature mesme luy enseigne et le force de le croire, tout l’univers le presche et crie tout haut’ (I: 12: p. 95). The second of these two arguments is recognisable as the source of Pascal’s wager. What harm can come of believing in God and his providence? Charron asks. But while choosing to believe in God means that one has nothing to lose and everything to gain, disbelieving is a terrible risk to run if one is mistaken:

Bref au pis aller, il ny peut avoir aucun danger à croire un Dieu, et une providence: car quant bien Ion se seroit mesconté, quel mal en peut il advenir? [...] Mais au contraire quel hasard court celuy qui mescroit, et en mescroyant quelle horrible punition a celuy qui se mesconte? (I: 12: pp. 95-96)

Charron brings the first vérité to a close on a note that carries the reader back to the author’s original aim, stated at the beginning of the book, to encourage people to practise religion on the basis of their natural, built-in connection to God rather than to follow the letter of religion out of superstition and egotistical desires. Acting on this natural connection with the divinity means recognising, he says, that going against the divine law of goodness brings only sorrow and suffering: ‘en vivant ainsin, quand il n’y aurait point de Dieu, de justice, de punition après ceste vie, tu es tousjours ennemy capital de toy mesme, de ton bien, de ton repos’ (I: 12: pp. 97-98). The rule is quite simple, therefore, according to Charron: happiness in life (synonymous with knowledge or

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8 See Kogel, p. 83.
experience of God) depends on one’s goodness and moral probity: ‘pour vivre avec joye et plaisir, il faut estre homme de bien’ (I: 12: p. 97).

4. The reversal of opposites: from reason to revelation

Having argued in the first vérité that our natural human state obliges us to believe in God and to worship and serve him – this is Charron’s general definition of religion – Charron goes on in the next book to describe the second truth, which is that ‘de toutes religions la Chrestienne est la meilleure’. Here Charron operates a complete shift of perspective in order to illustrate his premise that when reason investigates the nature of God, it discovers that God is utterly transcendent and unknowable. Following Aquinas, Charron’s intention is to show that philosophy, the domain of reason, is the handmaiden of theology, the domain of faith, and that while the one may lead to the other, theology remains supreme in its authority.⁹

Charron’s argument for the supremacy of the Christian faith over any other rests on the point that, while Christianity is not entirely alone in being elevated above natural religions by the fact of receiving revelations, it is alone in its ability to interpret these revelations spiritually. To judge which religion is best, Charron says, one must look at two points in each: first, the object of worship, that is, God and the way he is conceived and, second, the means for achieving that object, which is the duty and service one must perform (II: 2: p. 106). Most religions do badly on the first consideration, he says, but all except Christianity falter on the second (II: 2: p. 107). He explains:

⁹ See Gilson, p. 18, for a succinct description of this Thomist view.
La raison est que l'on ne sçauoit bien servir Dieu sans son instruction propre. Car qui peut sçavoir comment Dieu doibt et veut estre servy, si luy-mesme ne le dict et ne le revele? (II: 2: p. 107)

What distinguishes Christianity from other religions, therefore, is its capacity to understand the importance of the way in which God is worshipped, that is, the importance of one’s actions as well as one’s intellectual conceptions.

So having articulated the basic opposition between reason and faith - the superiority of revealed religions over natural religions - Charron returns to the other fundamental distinction underpinning his discussion: that between superstition and true belief, modes of perceiving and acting which obey the letter and the spirit of the religious law respectively. In order to cut to the heart of the matter most effectively, Charron follows St Paul and St Thomas (and many others besides) in contrasting Christianity with its predecessor, Judaism. Judaism did indeed receive the revelations, he tells us, and was shown the means to serve God, but it fell behind in its objective to worship and serve him appropriately because it did not penetrate to the true, spiritual meaning of what was revealed: ‘pour ne les entendre [the revelations], ny ne les prendre par le bon bout, comme il faut, ne penetrant au vif, au dedans et spirituel, mais s’arrestant à l’ombre et à l’escorce, [elle] est demeurée en arriere’ (II: 2: p. 108). Christianity, on the other hand, embraced what Judaism had rejected, benefiting from what it did not understand and what it chose to disdain (II: 2: p. 108). It interpreted the revelations it received to mean that the individual should honour God by practising virtue in real life through everyday actions:

Elle [la religion chrétienne] informe et instruict plus exactement à la vertu, enseigne une plus grande intégrité et pureté de vie, reformant et reglant premièrement le dedans, le cœur, la pensée. Les autres disent: Tu ne tueras point, ne desroberas, ne paillarderas: mais ceste-cy dict: Tu ne
What is important according to Christianity, Charron says in this crucial passage, is not so much what you do - a good act can after all be carried out for an egotistical purpose - but the intention that motivates you in your actions.

In teaching this spiritual truth, Christianity’s aim is not to uproot human beings from their own nature, Charron says, but to perfect human nature and to help man to align himself with the laws and natural rhythms established by the divine order:

La vertu Chrestienne et vraye de l’homme, n’aneantit point l’humanité, mais la regle et la dresse au bien: n’aprend poinct d’aller haut, bas, ou à costé, mais tout droict, tout uniment, moderément et doucement. (II: 11: p. 162)

What makes this teaching possible, he continues, is the Christian’s submission to faith, that is, his ability to abandon his own reason and entrust himself to the flow of grace in matters of belief. It is this capacity for ‘blind’ belief represented by the Christian religion that distinguishes it from the others, setting the example against which

se void la bassesse et utilité des autres religions, qui sont receuës et empoignées de l’homme par ses utils naturels et ordinaires de son entendment et de sa suffisance, et par ainsi moindres et inferieurs à l’homme, puis qu’il y arrive de sa propre force. (II: 12: p. 164)

Highlighting the deliberate reversal of modes of perceiving - reason and faith - that he is setting in motion in this text, Charron contrasts the ability of the Christian to submit his reason to faith with the wise man’s straightforward use of reason that was described in the first vérité:
Le sage consulte toujours la raison ou le sens et l’expérience, la prend pour caution en toutes choses, ne s’esbranle point du cours ordinaire et naturel, sinon forcé par quelque preuve ou argument pour le moins équivalent. Le Chrestien croit ce que sa propre raison et tout l’ordre des choses lui désconseillent de croire, et que la nature ne peut supporter: toute sa religion et créance est monstrueuse: ce qu’il croit, ce qu’il espère et en quoi il se fie, il ne sait du tout ce que c’est, sinon qu’il sait que ce sont toutes choses en soy et selon nature et raison non croyables, non esperables, non fiables. (II: 12: p. 165)

Thus, at the end of Book Two, reason is presented as a weak and dangerous faculty: ‘o la grande folie de penser vuyder et decider les choses par raison, et y apporter une certitude et resolution derniere’ (II: 12: p. 166). Why do we seek or desire human reason where there is none? Charron asks; why do we ask to understand what cannot be understood? (II: 12: p. 167). There is a better way to be sure about things than by reason, he replies, moving on to the next stage of his argument, a way that is far more peaceful and gentle: ‘c’est l’authorité du souverain’ (II: 12: p. 168). This ‘souverain’ is the Roman Catholic Church, which protects the individual from all disputes, doubt and inconstancy so that he can live with peace of mind (II: 12: p. 169).

5. Charron’s apology for the Roman Catholic Church

In Book Three, on the third vérité, Charron continues his description of the creative relationship between reason and faith, substituting the kind of faith described in Book Two for the more specific faith in and obedience to the Roman Catholic Church. In this part of Les trois veritez, which was highly esteemed by Roman Catholics, he argues that ‘de toutes les parties qui sont en la Chrestienté, la Catholique Romaine est la meilleure, contre tous heretiques et schismatiques’ (III: Preface, p. 172).
The conception of the Church that Charron presents here is particularly interesting in that it appears to mirror his notion of the division between theology (faith) and morality (reason). As we have already seen to some extent, Charron felt that for a reform of the practice of religion to be possible, people needed to be able to distinguish between the letter of religious doctrines and the intention, the heart-felt meaning with which they are practised and which gives them life. Reflecting this idea of a double level of meaning in the practice of religion - the literal level and the spiritual level - Charron's concept of the Church also presents two levels: the 'spiritual' level of the eternal Church at which doctrines and ideas remain perfect and incorruptible, and the 'physical' level of the temporal Church at which doctrines are vulnerable to corruption by the 'immoral' actions of human beings. (The 'template' for this idea is the notion of the two wills described in the *Discours chrestiens*.) Thus in Chapter 9 of this book, Charron explains that it is not a contradiction to say that the Church is a mystical and spiritual body:

Pour diverses raisons une chose est spirituelle et corporelle, visible et invisible: et pour estre mystique faut estre tous les deux: car la nature, la loy et condition de mystique porte qu'il soit pour une partie visible et corporel, et pour l'autre invisible et spirituel. (III: 9: p. 381)

The sacraments are mystical and mysterious, but nevertheless visible, Charron says here in support of his argument, and so are men called spiritual although they clearly have a physical body (III: 9: p. 381). Likewise,

l’Eglise donc en toutes ses parties, comme dit est, est visible: mais pour le regard de l’esprit de Dieu qui la sanctifie, luy assiste, la conduit comme l’ame le corps, est spirituelle, et pour toutes les deux raisons ensemble est mystique. (III: 9: p. 381)
Like the person of Christ who, according to Charron, lived a real existence but also serves as a spiritual channel through which the energy of God's creation sustains and nurtures the creative lives of the creatures, the Church is simultaneously of this world and beyond it.

The arguments of this third vérité are set in the context of the wars of religion, the ravaging effects of which were still at their peak when Charron was writing. In Chapter One he speaks of the terrible divisions within Christianity that offend and confuse those within its fold, lamenting the degradation of morals caused by the continuous jostling for positions of power:

Il est permis aux seuls Chrestiens d'estre meurtriers, perfides, traistres, et s'acharner les uns contre les autres par toutes especes d'inhumanité [...] moyennant que ce soit pour la seureté ou avancement de son party, et reculement de l'autre [...]. Là se monstrent le zele et l'ardeur à sa religion, hors de là par tout ailleurs en l'observation de la religion, froideur. (III: 1: p. 175).

People are tired of the divisions, he says, and many are abandoning religion altogether, turning instead to atheism and irreligion, the bastard offspring of heresies (III: 1: p. 177). Charron appears to follow Montaigne here in asserting that in the partnership between man and God - man and the eternal Church - that constitutes religion, man is not upholding his end of the bargain. Speaking of the way in which grace enters the individual - not by human means but by divine ones - Montaigne writes in the 'Apologie' that

si elle y entre non seulement par discours, mais encore par moyens humains, elle n’y est pas en sa dignité ny en sa splendeur. Et certes je crain pourtant que nous ne la jouyssions que par cette voye. Si nous tenions à Dieu par luy, non par nous; si nous avions un pied et un fondement divin, les occasions humaines n’auroient pas le pouvoir de nous esbranler, comme elles ont; nostre fort ne seroit pas pour se rendre à une si foible batterie; l’amour de la nouvelleté, la contraincte des Princes, la bonne fortune d’un party, le changement temeraire et fortuite de nos opinions, n’auroient pas la force de secouër et alterer nostre croiance; [...]
Turning to the divine side of the pact between man and God, Charron explains that there is only one true Church, one great and powerful fount of Christianity which is more important and whose origins stretch back further than all the others put together,

demeurant et se maintenant tousjours une mesme par dessus tout le reste, sans changer ou se remuer non plus qu’un colosse s’estendant et se respendant part tout, dont elle est appelee Catholique, c’est à dire universelle, qui est le nom propre, vray, et ancien de la maison noble de Dieu, et le surnom des enfants, qui legitimement y naissent. (III: 1: p. 178)

In order to safeguard his own well-being and the tranquillity of his conscience, thus carrying out part of his duty to God, the individual must have the means to know which is the true Church, Charron says, so that he knows what to believe when the troubles come (III: 1: p. 186).

To this end – that is, so that the reader may be as equipped and prepared as possible in the face of falsehood (primarily those heretical propositions of the Protestants) – Charron presents his reasoned arguments in favour of the supremacy of the Roman Catholic religion. The first of these portrays the Church as the masterpiece of God’s creation of the world. Deliberately contrasting his arguments here with those of the *Discours chrestiens* and the first *vérité* - which present the natural world (including man) as the creative product of God’s self-revelation - Charron explains that when God decided to come out of his eternal infinity, his prime concern was to create not the natural world, but the Church:

aussi Dieu, quand il luy a pieu se produire au dehors de soy, et comme sortir hors de l’abisme infini de sa majesté, pour se mettre en veuë, et

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10 See Macdonough, pp. 219-21, on Charron’s pre-Tridentine concept of the ‘eternal’ Church.
The (eternal) Church is therefore the receptacle of God’s indirect revelation of his being to humanity:

Dieu a revellé au monde les moyens de salut, et autant de sa volonté et de la vérité qu’il est expedient aux hommes de sçavoir. Laquelle sacrosaincte revelation il a consignée et mis en depost en quelque lieu, et à quelques uns fideles, ou elle doit estre conservée saine et entiere, jusqu’à la fin, et ou il la faut prendre et apprendre, qui est son Eglise. (III: l:p. 187)

We might note here Charron’s statement that it is the means of salvation that are revealed through the Church, which represents the discipline of theology. This point takes on particular significance in the light of what follows.

Entering into the thick of the religious debate over the criterion of truth, Charron makes it clear that he regards the eternal Church - as it is represented by the Councils, theologians and the other constituent parts of its ‘physical’ body - as the arbiter of truth which is superior to the two other sources of authority commonly accepted by the schisms that have broken away from the Catholic Church: Scripture and the private inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He says,

La vraye, certaine et souveraine reigle de nos consciences et juge de la doctrine Chrestienne c’est, non l’inspiration privée du Saint Esprit, ny l’escriture seule, mais l’Eglise a qui appartient pour nostre regard emologuer, interpreter, et decider des autres deux, inspiration et escriture. (III: 1: p. 190)

The power to interpret truth in theological matters cannot reside in the individual, Charron explains. If it did, there would be utter confusion: ‘qui ne voit que si chacun a son magister privé, tout ira en combustion? (III: 2: pp. 199-200). The Church must give us the substance of the faith, the means of our salvation, ‘et

Here Charron is making the crucial distinction between the letter of religious doctrines - the theological material provided by the Church with which the individual may in fact do as he pleases - and the 'spiritual' way in which these doctrines are carried out in the domain of ordinary life. While it is for the Church to interpret the doctrines themselves according to the eternal truths of the Catholic (universal) religion, it is for the individual to interpret them in moral terms by living them according to the spirit that sustains them. Charron explains that each individual must ask and implore not to know what he must believe or do (this must be learnt from the Church), but to be able to believe and do what the Church teaches well and properly, adding that this cannot always happen because we often oppose or reject the Holy Spirit (III: 2: p. 199). This last comment reminds one of the ‘Pedagogue’ or spiritual (that is, invisible) guide, whose instructions and advice the individual often resists (I: 9: p. 59).

In the last sections of Book Three, Charron reinforces his reversal of the reason-faith dichotomy by further extolling the supremacy of the Church over human reason. Referring directly to the doctrine of Christian folly, Charron reveals that this is the doctrine motivating his play on opposites:

Toute la sagesse du monde n’est que folie devant Dieu: et au rebours la sagesse de Dieu semble folie au monde. Parquoy le remede unique et seul en cecy c’est la vive voix des Sages [...]. Or cest homme sage c’est la personne de l’Eglise. (III: 3: p. 222)

Thus in sharp contrast with the arguments that will appear later in *De la sagesse*, Charron presents the famous wise man or *sage* as the Church itself, encouraging the reader to shun private opinions that diverge from the beliefs of the great
multitude of Roman Catholics and in this sense (again contrary to that of De la sagesse) to be a 'citoyen du monde':

Celuy là est dit bien sentir, bien croire, qui croit ce qui est receu par tout. Le Chrestien est, comme disoit Socrates, citoyen du monde: celuy-la est suspect et heretique, qui sent et croit de sa teste, et comme dit la sainte parole, qui suit son esprit, qui parle de soy-mesme: voila pourquoi, par son propre jugement il est subverty [...] Car depuis qu'il y a de la restriction, de la particularité, et l'on devoye, ou l'on dement l'université, c'est heresie: c'est schisme: c'est fauceté. (III: 8: p. 350)

It is an act of great presumption, Charron says, to condemn and oppose ancient and universal opinion and belief, brashly overturning sacred laws: 'quelle auctorité humaine le peut legitimement faire?' (III: 13: p. 485). Having closely followed the main argument presented in Montaigne's chapter 'C'est folie de rapporter le vray et le faux à nostre suffisance' throughout this third book, Charron ends Les trois veritez by stating that doubting even a few articles of the faith shakes the entire edifice of religion, opening the way to atheism (III: 13: pp. 487-88). Each part of the religion leans against the others, he says, and it is the act of obedience and belief that holds the different parts together: 'le ciment et l'entretient d'icelle est la pure obedience, simple creance et unanime consentement du monde' (III: 13: p. 488).

6. Faith and reason united: the return to morality as a base for religion

So far we have seen how Charron leads his reader from the realm of reason in the first vérité to the outer limits of this realm where the ineffability and transcendence of God can be viewed from afar (in the second and third verités). The journey does not appear to end here, however, for, as we have already seen to

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some extent, there are indications sown like seeds throughout the text that Charron intended the individual to return to the realm of reason and morality and to devote himself to a knowledge of God through the created medium of everyday life.

The most significant of the passages that demonstrate the direction in which Charron’s thoughts were flowing (in Chapter 4 of Book 3) sees Charron concerned to disprove the argument of the Protestants that Scripture alone is the source of truth to be consulted by Christians. Once again, Charron is adamant that the Church - and not the individual - must interpret Scripture, citing in support of his argument ‘le dire tant celebre de sainct Augustin, qu’il ne croiroit pas à l’Evangile s’il n’y estoit induict et meu par l’auctorité de l’Eglise Catholique’ (III: 4: p. 257). Charron pauses for a moment in the discussion here and makes the same crucial distinction that we noted in the last section: the Church has the authority to rule on theological matters regarding actual doctrines of the faith; it does not, however, have any direct power over the mystical or moral meaning contained in Scripture.

Quant nous disons l’auctorité et puissance d’interpreter, ordonner, et arrester du sens de l’escriture, appartenir à l’Eglise, nous n’entendons pas de tous sens, mais seulement du literal vray et naturel, non du misticq, qui est encore de divers genres. Or y a-il grande difference entre ces deux: le literal et naturel concerne la foy, le misticq sert ou à la contemplation, ou aux meurs, ou à quelque subtile speculation. Cestuy-là est simple et necessaire: cestui-cy est ingenieux, vraysemblable; celuy là est unique, constant, Catholique et universel: cestui-cy est plus libre, divers, scolasticq, et particulier; cestuy-là sert à enseigner, resoudre les doubtes de la doctrine, establir la foy et les dogmes, confuter et condamner les erreurs, dont il doit estre tenu par foy et creance, receu par authority, escouté et suvyi comme un Oracle: cestui-cy est bon à discourir et philosopher, et acquis par estude. (III: 4: pp. 260-61)
What Charron is implying in this passage is that as far as the practice of religion in everyday life is concerned (‘les meurs’), the individual takes over from the Church as the source of authority and decision. The Church can tell the individual what is right according to its doctrines, therefore, but it is man’s free decision whether or not he follows these doctrines, and man’s responsibility if he suffers as a result of a wrong decision. Charron adds that it is the first kind of authority that we are discussing in Les trois verites,


Charron clearly believes that the doctrines and truths in question (by which one can recognise the true Catholic Church), are of a different order from those ideas put forward by theologians such as himself (in the Discours chrestiens and De la sagesse) and others like him who reason in a positive fashion on matters of doctrine (the scholastics, for example).

The same distinction between the authority of the Church and the authority of the individual, between the theological and moral realms, is made in Book Two. Speaking of the reasonings, doctrines and precepts of natural philosophy, Charron says that

L’on peut dire qu’il n’y a rien de beau ny de bon chez eux, qu’il ne s’en trouve autant en substance en la Chrestienne [...], aussi use elle de persuasion et de douceur. La Theologie Chrestienne usant d’autorité paternelle ou de gravité maritale s’y porte plus imperieusement, plus brusquement [...]. La Philosophie est garnie d’artifice, s’insinue plaisamment dans l’ame, employe de l’industrie et de la façon pour se rendre gratieuse, et se faire aimer. (II: 3: p. 113)

Here we can see how Charron conceived of philosophy and theology as working together to carry the individual towards salvation. The masculine nature of
Christianity's authority is shown to be complemented and completed by the feminine nature of philosophy's authority, the one representing God's justice, the other his mercy. In a short passage reminiscent of Montaigne's description of the journey to truth in 'De l'institution des enfants', Charron explains that philosophy leads one pleasurably through the green pastures of discussion and moral inquiry to the gates of the sacred city of Christian theology:

Ainsi ne sera-il que bon de jardiner et s'esgayer un peu par les jardins et faux-bourgs plaisans de beaux discours philosophiques, pour puis avec modestie et reverence monter, et entrer en la haute et saincte cite de la Theologie Chrestienne. (II: 3: pp. 113-14)

Returning to Book Three, we come across a similar distinction made on the subject of the authority of the Church Councils. The chapter in question, Chapter 5, is presented under the heading that the Church is infallible and never errs in the definition and determination of matters concerning the faith (III: 5: p. 275). The spirit of the Church, Charron tells us, is the spirit of truth, which functions as the active agent and internal principle assuring certainty in the world; it is in fact God, or Jesus Christ (III: 5: p. 276). Given that Christ and the Church are indissolubly joined like husband and wife (III: 5: pp. 279-80), in matters concerning the substance of the faith the general Councils of the Church cannot err (III: 5: p. 295). The substance of the faith 'ne reçoit point de contrariété, diversité, changement, et pource nulle correction, reformation, ou amendement, estant toujours immuable, et non reformable' (III: 5: pp. 295-96). However, on matters pertaining to human experience, morality and the details of ceremony and worship, the Church cannot pronounce 'the truth' with such unquestionable certainty and authority. By its very nature, this sphere of life is
subject to flux and diversity, so the Councils do not err when they make amendments with regard to such things:

Aux choses qui sont des meurs, de la police et discipline, des ceremonies, et du culte externe, bref au droit positif, et regime de la vie humaine, il y peut avoir, voire necessairement y a quelquefois diversite et changement, pour la consideration des temps et des lieux, et l’exigence des cas: car ce qui est bon, commode, et expedient en un lieu et en une saison, est dommageable et incommode en un autre. Dont pour changer et diversifier lon n’erre point. (III: 5: p. 296)

Later in the third verité, this distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds is shown to lie behind the decline of morality that is the affliction of the age. Not that the distinction itself is responsible for the corruption of morals; rather, the fact that it is the responsibility of the individual to keep himself in alignment with truth by following the guidance of providence in his ordinary life means that there is ample room for error in his actions. ‘Nous accorderons bien,’ Charron says,

que la longeur du temps a apporté à l’Eglise une grande decadence en la pieté, devotion, zele des personnes; et aux mœurs, discipline, police, une grande corruption. Ce sont choses usuelles ou l’homme a la plus grande part [...]. Et pour ce, qu’il y a besoing de balay, de medecin, de reformation. Mais en la foy et doctrine, dons celestes, presens divins, œuvre de Dieu, non: ce sont choses qui [...] ne peuvent estre entamées ou alterées tant soit peu sans estre du tout destructes, aussi ne peuvent elles estre reformées. (III: 7: p. 340)

To this extent, then, the Reformers are right to call for a revision of religion, but only in its moral application, not in its essence: ‘quant à la reformation tant requise par eux [the Reformers] en ceste Eglise ancienne, Catholique, Romaine, nous l’avouons franchement et souspirons apres’ (III: 7: p. 340). This does not apply to doctrine itself, he reiterates, but to the ‘culte externe, police, discipline, et mœurs’ (III: 7: p. 340).
These passages, in which Charron shows the importance, in his opinion, of distinguishing between the two dimensions that make up our 'mystical' beings (the spiritual and the physical; the theological and the moral), demonstrate that when Charron wrote *Les trois veritez* he was moving ever closer to the conclusion that in order to reform the practice of religion, the discussion would have to be transplanted from the domain of theology to that of morality. The criticism and opposition that Charron received from Protestant writers and theologians after the publication of his apology seems to have convinced him that if there were a chance of uniting all men under the banner of one universal religion ('Catholicism'), such a union would not take place on the battlefield that had seen so much bloodshed. J.-D. Charron writes,

It was evident that the *Trois Verités* had reached an impasse, and any further effort had to be based on something other than the teaching of the Catholic Church, as this teaching was automatically considered by his Protestant adversaries to be perverted because of its very origin. A common basis had to be found from which both Protestants and Catholics could make a fresh start, and it is not by simple coincidence that this is exactly the time that the *Sagesse* started to take shape in Charron's mind.

Charron's apparent intention to help pave the way for a future reconciliation between the two warring factions (and indeed between all men and all religions) by writing *De la sagesse* is further indicated in a passage at the end of *Les trois veritez*:

Il y a deux chefs de tout bien, qui répondent aux deux parties souveraines et plus excellentes de l'ame: l'un qu'il faut croire, et c'est la vérité qui remplist l'entendement, l'autre qu'il faut faire, et c'est la vertu qui orne la volonté, a fin que lon soit sçavant et bon, bien croyant, et bien faisant, et par ainsi parfait. (III: 11: p. 403)

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12 J.-D. Charron, p. 92. See also Kogel, p. 93.
We can see here that Charron was already beginning to conceive the reason-faith dichotomy in terms of the constituent parts of the individual’s ‘reason’. According to this idea, the individual would have to learn to control and organise his reason so that he might align himself with the eternal divine order that is represented in the world by providence. As a critic has written,

Charron’s solution is to establish two parallel modes of behaviour and cognition, one as a Christian and one as a natural wise man. As a Christian, one accepts Revelation on faith and maintains an attitude of unquestioning obedience to God’s word. As a natural moral man, one uses reason in its limited, practical sense to operate in the world, to seek probable truths that are not based on Revelation or any metaphysical truth but rather on universal consent, and to order one’s moral life. Ultimately the two behaviours are joined together through Charron’s belief that human reason is an emanation from the divine and that the natural law implanted in man is a part of the Universal Reason; but practically the two operate as separate wisdoms. Both are brought together through the operation of grace, a pure gift from God, that completes and perfects the natural wisdom and is testimony of the divine wisdom.\(^{13}\)

It is Charron’s concept of ‘reason’ as the offspring of the creative relationship between human reason and grace (faith) that will be the object of our inquiry in the next chapter. This last part of the study focuses on *De la sagesse*, the work

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\(^{13}\) Kogel, p. 99.
that brought to fruition at least one century’s reflection on and reinterpretation of
the concept of divine revelation.14

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14 See Sabrié, pp. 323-24: 'le moyen âge n'a pas connu de morale indépendante, il n'en a même
pas eu l'idée. Il a rattaché la morale à la révélation. Il l'a résumée dans les commandements de
Dieu et de l'Église. Le XVIe siècle, dès les débuts de la Renaissance, a travaillé [...] à séparer la
morale de la théologie, à soustraire la morale à la juridiction immédiate de Dieu. Tout le
poussait à cette tentative, tout l'éloignait de la morale théologique du moyen âge, le culte de
l'antiquité, les circonstances particulières où il se trouvait placé, la conception qu'il avait de
l'homme'.
Chapter 8

The Moral Philosophy of *De la sagesse*: Knowing the Back of God

1. Charron’s concept of reason as the means to turn towards God

In *De la sagesse*, the last of his major works, Charron’s interpretation of the concept of the hidden God culminates in the notion that the practice of moral wisdom is the means by which God intended man to know him.¹ It is precisely because moral wisdom takes centre-stage and appears to obscure the role of religion in the attainment of knowledge of God that Charron’s book of moral philosophy has often been interpreted as a work which is fundamentally hostile to Christianity.² When *De la sagesse* is considered in the light of Charron’s theological works and against the backdrop of the hidden God tradition, it becomes apparent, however, that Charron intended his moral work to present a concept of reason which reconciled Christianity and pagan philosophy, faith and reason.

Charron’s demonstration in *Les trois veritez* of the psychological process by means of which reason can allow itself to be governed by grace is re-presented in *De la sagesse* in a moral-spiritual setting that is designed to appeal above all to

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¹ *De la sagesse livres trois, par M. Pierre le Charron, parisien, chanoine theologal & chantre de l’Eglise cathedrale de Condom* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1601). The work was republished in augmented and corrected form in Paris in 1604 by David Douceur. The editions printed after this date are too numerous to mention individually. In all I counted 17 different editions between 1601 and 1663, held either by the British Library or by the Bibliothèque Nationale. In this chapter I refer to the first edition, in which pagination is continuous between all three books.

² For views on *De la sagesse* as a work which undermines Christian doctrine, see Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit*, p. 43, and Strowski, *Pascal et son temps*, i, *De Montaigne à Pascal*, pp. 188–89 and p. 205. Sabrié writes that Charron’s moral work ‘est restée ce qu’elle était, équivoque au point de vue chrétien et animée d’un esprit naturaliste sourdement hostile au christianisme’ (p.
man’s ‘universal’ nature. Rather than focus, therefore, on the details of religious belief that separate human beings from one another, Charron chooses to concentrate on the ways in which any man can establish a reciprocal relationship with God through his experience of ordinary life. Following the hidden God tradition and drawing on the hidden God philosophy of his *Discours chrestiens*, Charron’s aim in lowering the reader’s gaze to his own activity in the moral domain is to acknowledge and to put into practice the idea that, instead of trying to see God’s face, it is more appropriate for man to accept the sight of God’s back by aligning his own being with the divine order.

2. An eclectic and syncretistic approach to the concept of reason

In Chapter 5, we saw that Montaigne chose to reflect the way in which providence works through all kinds of different things and people by incorporating into his own text the ideas and images either from books or from ‘real’ life that he saw as being in harmony with the truths at the heart of the Christian religion. In *De la sagesse*, Charron does the same, deliberately drawing on pagan and syncretistic ideas to mimic the way in which nature, God’s agent in the world, reflects his eternal being. He explains in the Preface that he has

> questé par cy par là, et tiré la plus part des matériaux de cest ouvrage des meilleurs auteurs qui ont traitté ceste matière morale et politique, vray science de l’homme, tant anciens, specialement Seneque et Plutarque grands docteurs en icelle, que modernes. (p. iv)

One of the contemporary authors whose work Charron makes considerable use of in *De la sagesse* is Guillaume du Vair (1556-1621), the Catholic bishop and
theologian who was also following in the hidden God tradition. Much of the stoic philosophy which is often associated with *De la sagesse* comes not from Montaigne, but from two of Du Vair's moral works, *La sainte philosophie* and *La philosophie morale des stoïques* (Charron announces his debt to Du Vair on pp. 155-56).

In *La sainte philosophie*, which combines Christian ideas with the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus, Du Vair presents the idea at the centre of the hidden God tradition that since absolute truth is beyond our reach in this life, it behoves us to follow the guidance of reason by ordering our souls and our moral affairs in accordance with the law of nature. Man's fall from grace, according to Du Vair, is caused by his decision to turn his back on God by becoming engrossed in the physical world to the point that he is no longer aware of the divine spirit that sustains all material things:

Ainsi l'homme qui, auparavant que tourner le dos à Dieu, estoit plein d'une certaine cognoissance de toutes choses, est demeuré comme abruty, et en luy l'erreur et le mensonge ont pris la place de la vérité. Une bruslante concupiscence s'est logée au lieu d'une réglée et moderée volonté; toutes ses cogitations qui estoient reuësées à la contemplation du Creator se sont esparées dessus les creatures, et ont vagué à l'adventure sans conduite, et sans raison. (p. 6)

For Du Vair, as for the other writers in the tradition, Christ has already come to cleanse and redeem mankind (p. 7). This means that the individual can receive the grace that has been provided and retrieve the human wisdom that is part of his

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3 On Charron's stoicism, see Strowski, *Pascal et son temps*, I, p. 179. On Du Vair's influence on Charron, see Kogel, p. 62, and Sabrié, p. 268. Most of Du Vair's works were composed between 1589 and 1594 (Sapey, p. viii). I use the following edition of his collected works, to which page numbers in the text refer: *Les œuvres de Messire Guillaume du Vair [...], revues par l'auteur avant sa mort, et augmentées de plusieurs pièces non encore imprimées* (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1625). Pagination is continuous from one text to the next.

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nature simply by turning his being towards God, which he accomplishes by becoming a responsible, morally upright human being.

In both *La sainte philosophie* and *La philosophie morale des stoïques*, Du Vair argues that the task of becoming morally responsible is based on the individual’s manipulation of his own will. Having cleared the ground of his being of the weeds and brambles that block out the rays of God’s grace, he says in *La sainte philosophie*, the individual must plant the seed ‘qui en fin produise pour son fruict une vie divine et immortelle’ (p. 13). This seed is our will, ‘laquelle selon qu’elle vient à bien ou mal germer, produit de bonnes ou mauvaises actions’ (p. 13). What guides our will to good actions, we are told, is right reason, the provident aspect of the divinity: ‘la droite raison [...] est la regle qui conduit toutes choses à la fin à laquelle Dieu les a créées’ (pp. 13-14). Du Vair explains that by following the guidance of providence through the workings of reason when it is submitted to grace, the individual is in fact obeying God’s injunction to focus only on the limited aspect of his divine being that he has chosen to reveal to human beings:

Ne faut, ce dit l’Ecclesiaste, chercher curieusement ce qui est au dessus de nous, mais penser à ce que Dieu nous a commandé; car il ne nous est point besoing de voir ce que Dieu a caché à nos yeux. Or l’heur et le souverain plaisir de nostre ame en ceste vie consiste à conformer et addresser son operation à la fin à laquelle elle est créée. (pp. 26-27)

In *La philosophie morale des stoïques*, Du Vair asserts once again that man must follow what is most excellent in him, which is the faculty of right reason, and that the means of doing so is to learn to manipulate his will so that he can turn it in the direction of what is good and true:

Le bien doncques de l’homme consistera en l’usage de la droicte raison, qui est à dire en la vertu, laquelle n’est autre chose que la ferme
disposition de nostre volonté à suivre ce qui est honneste et convenable.
(p. 278)

Drawing on the stoic principle at the heart of Epictetus's *Encheiridion* - that the divine order granted man control over his inner faculties of judgement, but not over the events that befall him - Du Vair states that man’s awareness of the fact that he can control his reactions to his experiences is the golden key in the search for the wisdom he has lost:

La nature vous offre pour bien d’avoir l’esprit disposé à user des choses qui vous sont présentées, et vous passer de celles que vous ne pouvez avoir. [...] C’est une loy divine et inviolable, publiée dès le commencement du monde que si nous voulons avoir du bien, il faut que nous nous le donnions nous mesmes. La nature en a mis le magazin en nostre esprit; portons-y la main de nostre volonté, et nous en prendrons telle part que nous voudrons. Si elle est droicte et bien reglée, elle tournera tout à bien, comme Midas tournoit en or tout ce qu’il touchoit.
(p. 280)

The individual cannot choose what happens to him, therefore, but he can choose how he receives what happens to him and he has the power to turn events that seem bad to his own advantage.

As we shall see in the analysis of *De la sagesse* that follows, this notion of the flexibility of the will is a crucial aspect of Charron’s moral philosophy. Where Charron’s interpretation of the concept of the hidden God differs from that of Du Vair is in the role that human wisdom should play in the life of the individual. At the end of *La sainte philosophie*, Du Vair presents the concept at the heart of the tradition in a passage that is highly reminiscent of the passage at the end of Bodin’s *Théâtre de la nature* in which God reveals his back to Moses, indicating thus that he is knowable only through his creation. In Du Vair’s passage it becomes clear that, for him, the human wisdom he has been describing
serves above all to comfort the individual and to give him hope during life in
anticipation of the reconciliation that he will experience with God after his death:

Puis que ceste derniere et plus parfaite felicité consiste au regard de la
face du Pere des lumieres en laquelle nous verrons la source et origine de
toute bonté et beauté, et qu’il ne veut pas que tant que nous serons
enveloppez és tenebres du monde, nous le voyons face à face, mais
seulement par derriere, et comme en passant, nous nous tairons, et
admirerons en silence ce que nous savons estre, mais ne savons pas
comment; ce dont nous ne pournons parler sinon accusant nostre
ignorance; ce dont nous ne pournons rien affermer, sinon que ce n’est rien
de ce que nous cnoissions par les sens, mais chose qui surpasse sans
mesure toute autre perfection [...]. Que nous reste-il doncques?
L’esperance tres-certaine que si nous nous contentons purs et nets en ce
monde et nous rendons digne de la grace et amitié que nostre Pere celeste
nous offre, ne destournans point nos affections et l’honneur que nous luy
devons aux choses terrestres et mondaines, nous entrerons un jour,
come ses enfants et hérétiers de sa gloire, au thresor de ses richesses
celestes, et joufrons suivant ses promesses de la splendeur de son etemité.
(p. 32)

For Charron, too, as for Montaigne, the human wisdom that trusting in grace
affords is indeed a prelude to the eternal joy that will be experienced after death.
But while Du Vair’s emphasis rests somewhat on the lack of that intense joy in
human life, Montaigne and Charron focus on the fact that this wisdom is what
God has intended man to enjoy as part of being human. Leaving aside the
considerations of what the future will bring, both authors choose to immerse
themselves fully in the shadows cast by God’s back as he shields mankind from
the light of his eternal being.

3. Charron’s De la sagesse

In the preface to De la sagesse, Charron draws attention to the specific nature of
his book, referring to the distinction between the theological realm and the moral
realm that he first set up in Les trois veritez. His aim in writing this work is not
to train a man for the cloister, he says, but to train him for civil life in the world of everyday affairs. This intention frees him from the constraints of arguing from dogma, he explains, granting him a certain Platonic, philosophical freedom to oppose the misguided opinions that obstruct people on the path to human wisdom:

J’ay icy usé d’une grande liberté et franchise à dire mes advis, et à heurter les opinions contraires, bien que toutes vulgaires et communément receuës, et trop grandes, ce m’ont dict aucuns de mes amis; auquels j’ay respondu que je ne formois icy ou instruisois un homme pour le cloistre, mais pour le monde, la vie commune et civile, ny ne faisois icy le Theologien, ny le cathedrant ou dogmatisant, ne m’assujettissant scrupuleusement à leurs formes, regles, stile, ains usois de la liberté Académique et Philosophique. (p. v)

As this passage indicates, Charron was aware of the fact that his criticism of the use of reason practised by certain members of society might not be appreciated by everyone. He was also aware of the charge that might be made against him on the basis that he was presenting a purely human wisdom:

Or des l’entrée nous advertissons que nous ne prenons icy ce mot subtilement au sens haultain et enflé des Theologiens et Philosophes […] pour une cagnoisance parfaicte des choses divines et humaines […], ni au sens trop court, bas et populaire pour […] comportement advisé et bien reglé en toutes choses […]. Mais nous le prenons en sens plus universel, commun et humain. (pp. i-ii)

He knew that some people, anxious to safeguard the power of the Church and the prominent role of Christianity in moral affairs, might think or want to persuade others that he was trying to push God and the Church out of the picture. Discussing his alleged 'Pyrrhonian' scepticism in the *Petit traicté*, Charron draws attention to the religious principles underpinning the psychological process that he argues leads to an appropriate human knowledge of God:

Je veux leur dire que cet advis mien, qu’il leur plait appeller Pyrrhonisme, est la chose qui faict plus de service à la pieté et operation divine que tout
autre qui soit, bien loin de la heurter [...]. La Theologie, mêmement la mystique, nous enseigne que pour bien préparer notre âme à Dieu et à son operation, et la rendre propre à recevoir l'impression du saint Esprit, il la faut vider, nettoyer, despouiller et mettre à nud de toute opinion, créance, affection; la rendre comme une carte blanche, morte à soi et au monde pour y laisser vivre et agir Dieu. Il faut oster une chose pour y faire entrer l'autre, chasser le vieil possesseur pour y établir le nouveau. (*PT*, p. 53)

Contrary to what these people say, he argues in the *Petit traité*, the natural light of reason is the focus of *De la sagesse* because it is the tool that God has given us to be able to submit ourselves to his grace. The knowledge that results from this process of submitting reason to grace is by definition dependent on grace, he explains:

> En tout ce que nous disons avantageusement de la loi de nature et de la sagesse humaine, nous ne prétendons aucunement exclure ou déroger à l'honneur et nécessité de la grace, de l'aide et secours spécial de Dieu, sans lequel nous confessons que l'homme ne peut jamais bien entièrement et parfaitement accomplir toute vertu morale et la loi de nature comme il faut, et encore beaucoup moins l'accomplir meritoirement et salubrement à la vie éternelle, comme vouloit Pelagius [...]. Mais nous disons que l'homme, employant bien ceste lumière de nature, et faisant ce qui est en soi, il se dispose à la grace; que l'observation de la loi de nature est comme un leurre, une amorce et un attrait d'icelle, et que celui qui fait ce qu'il peut aux vertus morales, naturelles et humaines convie et donne occasion à Dieu de l'estrener et gratifier des vertus surnaturelles et divines. Car c'est une équité et règle de bienveillance, qui a esté loyal et bon mensager en peu soit commis au plus. (*PT*, p. 35)

We can see from these passages that the mystical-psychological process that was at the centre of *Les trois veritez* has been uprooted from its theological context and replanted in a predominantly moral one. In his apology for Catholicism, Charron had argued that when it is correctly used, reason leads one to abandon reason and to submit to faith and the authority of the Church. In *De la sagesse*, he presents the same process in a form suited to the needs and preoccupations of a layman, entering into the details of how the individual can
empty himself of his own reason (his beliefs and ideas) and begin to follow the
divine guidance available to him through the faculty of reason (which is the
channel for true, divine reason) when it is aligned with the divine and natural
order.

Thus in the first book he seeks to undermine and destabilise man’s
existing ‘presumptuous’ vision of himself and of the world, using reason to
display its own weaknesses and ultimate powerlessness. In the second book he
takes advantage of the uncertainty and insecurity instilled in the reader to present
a different view of reality, that of man’s inherent connection to God through the
correct use of his faculty of reason, which represents the force of providence
within his own being. In this second book, Charron runs through the different
stages of the process that the individual must carry out in order to achieve his
new ‘wise’ perspective on reality. Finally, in the third book, Charron gives a
demonstration of this new perspective, which is an ability to interpret events in a
positive fashion and to control one’s reactions to them appropriately. As we shall
see, Charron’s intention is to help the reader become a good mesnager, a good
‘housekeeper’ of his soul, on the basis that this is the extent to which the spiritual
resources of a human being can stretch.

4. The incorrect use of reason: the lower mind-set of ‘opinion’

In the Preface to De la sagesse, Charron explains that he wants the reader to
cultivate a genuine moral conscience which depends not on superstition, fear and
egotism, but on the natural desire to be good. The human wisdom that he is
proposing, he says, must include ‘tant la volonté que l’entendement, voire tout
l’homme en son dedans et son dehors, et soy seul, en compagnée, coignissant et agissant’ (p. ii). For this reason, Charron explains, he calls wisdom ‘prude prudence, c’est à dire preud’homme avec habilite, probite bien advisée’ (p. ii). Wisdom is thus a moral aptitude that flows quite naturally from being human. There is, however, a certain manipulation of man’s nature that must be carried out so that man’s natural goodness can flow unimpeded from its source. Wisdom consists of two things, Charron informs us: ‘bien se coignistre, et constamment estre bien reiglé et moderé en toutes choses par toutes choses’ (p. ii). In order to be wise, therefore, the individual must submit his being to the constraints of humility and self-discipline. According to Charron, true wisdom consists of taming the mind (and, by extension, the body) so that man’s spirit or reason (the faculty of reason in alignment with divine reason), the highest part of his being, may use it as a vehicle. In this sense the individual must become a ‘beast’ or a fool, following the doctrine of Christian folly, so that divine grace may be bestowed upon him.

Charron’s definition of self-knowledge, the first step towards wisdom (p. iii), is somewhat more rigorous and didactic than that of Montaigne in the Essais (although the ‘Apologie’ is no less straightforwardly didactic). Not only must the individual know his qualities and his faults and weaknesses, but he must make every effort to correct what nature has left imperfect:

Parquoy nous disons sage celuy qui, coignissant bien ce qu’il est, son bien et son mal, combien et jusques où nature l’a estrené et favorisé et où

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5 As Françoise Kaye argues, ‘La Sagesse a comme but primordial de libérer l’homme des liens qui entraient sa liberté profonde, et de lui apprendre à dominer son malheur […]. Mais cette libération ne peut se faire que si l’on accepte des “freins”, que ce soit tempérance, modération ou prudence, ce qui donne à l’image du lien une double résonance’. See her Charron et Montaigne: du plagiat à l’originalité (Ottawa, Canada: Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1982), p. 188.
elle luy a deffailly, estudie par le benefice de la Philosophie, et par l’effort de la vertu, à corriger et redresser ce qu’elle luy a donné de mauvais; resveiller et roidir ce qui est de foible et languissant; faire valoir ce qui est bon; adjoystre ce qui deffaut, et tant que faire se peut la secourir; et par tel estude se reigle et conduict bien en toutes choses. (pp. iii-iv)

Charron makes it clear that he has every intention of helping the reader know himself in this rigorous fashion. He begins by attacking the presumption that clouds man’s vision and prevents him from receiving the grace that is bestowed only on the humble:

Et toy homme, qui veux embrasser l’univers, tout cognoistre, contreroller et juger, ne te cognois et n’y estudie: et ainsi en voulant faire l’habile et le scindic de nature, tu demeure le seul sot au monde. Tu es la plus vuide et necessiteuse, la plus vaine et miserable de toutes, et néanmoins la plus fiere et orgueilleuse. (I: I: p. 2) ^

Viewing his own changing state of being, Charron says, and becoming aware of how many times he is proved wrong when he thinks he understands things perfectly will help to instil in man a healthy sense of modesty and clarity with regard to his true nature (p. 4). Man’s own being is the best book he will ever read, he adds, following Sebond’s theme of the book of nature:

Bref, nous n’avons point de plus beau et de meilleur livre que nous mesmes, si nous y voulions bien estudier comme nous devons, tenant toujours l’œil ouvert sur nous et nous espiant de pres. (I: 1: p. 5)

This, however, is the problem, he says, presenting Montaigne’s quotation of Persius’s satire in ‘De la praesumption’, for we do not know ourselves: ‘nemo in se tentat descendere’ (I: 1: p. 5). Here lies our great misfortune, because in thinking ourselves clever we are in fact doubly wretched (I: 1: pp. 5-6). Connecting his discussion directly with Montaigne’s theme of bestise in the Essais and thus with the doctrine of Christian folly, Charron explains that if one

^ See Montaigne’s similar approach in the ‘Apologie’, p. 504.
thinks one can see, one is really blind, while if one thinks oneself blind, one actually sees:

Car ceux qui voyent à leur opinion sont aveugles en vérité, et qui sont aveugles à leur opinion, ils voyent. C'est une miserable folie à l'homme de se faire beste pour ne se cognoistre pas bien homme. (I: 1: p. 6)

Charron’s reference to opinion in this passage signals the appearance of one of the major themes of *De la sagesse*. For Charron, as for Du Vair, ‘opinion’ is almost a living entity, a current of thought consisting essentially of presumption and egotism that carries off those who fail to control their faculties of judgement and who thus succumb to bestise.\(^7\) Just as superstition was opposed by true belief in *Les trois veritez*, so ‘opinion’, the lower gear or mind-set in which man’s faculty of reason can function, is opposed here in *De la sagesse* by ‘reason’ or wisdom, a mode of thinking and perceiving that is guided by the influence of the Holy Spirit.\(^8\)

In this first book, Charron’s aim is to portray the unseemly nature of the mind-set of opinion and to demonstrate the ways in which our lower thoughts and desires cause us to be drawn into the rampaging currents of foolish and preconceived ideas that are nothing short of mass hysteria. His negative portrait of the human mind is not an attack on reason *per se*, therefore, but an attack on the bad use of it made by its owner. Charron wishes the reader to see that if the mind can be used in the wrong direction - ‘tou...
Du Vair's *La philosophie morale des stoïques*, Charron describes the pointless worrying in which we indulge as we are agitated and tormented by the mere thought of the most trivial things, more concerned with what others think of us than with what we are in ourselves and with what would be good for us (I: 3: p. 14): ‘le vent emporte le corps, tant l'on est esclave de la vanité’ (I: 3: p. 18).\(^9\)

Man’s inherent weakness causes him to receive everything that happens in a negative way, Charron says, for ‘[il] ne sçait rien tenir ny jouir de bonne façon’, and cannot help but corrupt the best things in life (I: 4: p. 23).

We are driven by our lower instincts, not by our reason, he continues: ‘nous allons après les inclinations de notre appetit et selon que le vent des occasions nous emporte, non selon la raison’ (I: 5: p. 36). And even wise men who judge the opinions of the masses with the disdain they deserve are sometimes carried off by them:

> Il faut estre bien ferme et constant pour ne se laisser emporter au courant, bien sain et préparé pour se garder net d’une contagion si universelle. Les opinions générales receuës avec applaudissement de tous et sans contradiction sont comme un torrent qui emporte tout. (I: 6: pp. 47-48)

Using some of the sceptical arguments from Montaigne’s ‘Apologie’, Charron gives a few examples of the opinions or beliefs that hold the masses under their sway: we condemn foreign things as barbaric and evil simply because they are unknown to us; we value things purely for their novelty, rarity and difficulty and are constantly taken in by the showy exterior of things, failing to value them for their true and often hidden, inner nature (I: 6: pp. 48-49). Here and throughout

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based on the fact that intellectual certainty is unattainable. It is the absence of fanaticism and a tolerant scepticism.\(^9\)

this first book, one can discern the reversal of opposites characteristic of the doctrine of Christian folly.

In this section of the text, Charron lays special emphasis on the specific characteristics of those members of society who have succumbed to bestise. His criticism is of the actions of those men forming the scholastic establishment who in his opinion abuse their considerable power in society by imposing their authority and their own opinions on others - an attack that accounts, no doubt, for some of the vehement criticism that *De la sagesse* received after its publication. As an illustration of the extent of our wretchedness, Charron says, the world is full of three kinds of people who hold highly respected positions in society in great numbers: 'les superstitieux, les formalistes, les pedans' (I: 6: p. 56). Although in different areas of social life, they are cast in the same mould, he says, and are weak-minded and dangerous, 'car ils s'estiment les meilleurs et plus sages du monde, l'opiniastreté est là en son siege' (I: 6: p. 56). The superstitious ones are insulting to God and are enemies of true religion, Charron explains, thinking that God is obliged to them for their false piety (I: 6: pp. 56-57). The formalists attach themselves entirely to the exterior of things, thinking themselves irreprehensible in the pursuit of their passions and pleasures because they adhere to the letter of the law (I: 6: p. 57). Last but not least in the list of people who pose a particular threat to society are the gossiping pedants who plagiarise and pirate the work of others in their books. They parade their booty with mercenary ostentation and simply regurgitate from memory what their judgement has failed to digest (I: 6: pp. 57-58).
Drawing still on Montaigne’s ‘Apologie’ and other chapters of the *Essais*, Charron discusses the presumption that is the mark of such people. Their foolish readiness to believe all things presented to them by opinion degenerates over time, he says, into an incurable stubbornness which causes them to persist in maintaining the things that they understand the least: ‘or affirmation et opiniastreté sont signes ordinaires de bestise, accompagnée de folie et arrogance’ (I: 7: p. 67). Another presumptuous vice follows the ones discussed so far, Charron says; this is the deplorable act of tyranny by which these men seek to persuade others of their beliefs and do not shun the use of force, iron and fire to overcome any resistance they may meet (I: 7: pp. 67-68).

Il n'y a point de principes aux hommes si la divinité ne leur a revelé: tout le reste n'est que songe et fumée. Or ces messieurs icy veulent que l'on croye et reçoive ce qu'ils disent, et que l'on s'en fie à eux, sans juger et examiner ce qu'ils baillent, qui est une injustice tyrannique. (I: 7: p. 69)

Towards the end of this first part of the text aiming at destabilising man’s misguided and presumptuous view of himself, Charron incorporates virtually the whole of Montaigne’s animal material from the ‘Apologie’ into his text. In order to make his reader aware of his own bestise, Charron compares man to the animals and finds that the animals are superior to him because of their innate and spontaneous ability to follow the laws of nature and thus be connected to God:

Il est sans comparaison plus noble, honorable et ressemblant à la divinité d'agir par nature que par art et apprentissage, estre conduit et mené par la main de Dieu que par la sienne, et réglément agir par naturelle et inevitable condition que réglément par liberté fortuite et temeraire. (I: 8: p. 80)

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10 Much of the material in the section of *De la sagesse* on presumption is taken from Montaigne’s chapters ‘De la praesumption’ (II: 17) and ‘C'est folie de rapporter le vray et le faux à nostre suffisance’ (I: 27).
The conclusion that one draws from this comparison, Charron says, ‘est que vainement et mal l’homme se glorifie tant par dessus les bestes’ (I: 8: p. 86).

Here the book of nature provides yet another lesson for man:

L’homme est sage qui les considère, qui s’en fait leçon et son profit; en ce faisant il se forme à l’innocence, simplicité, liberté et douceur naturelle qui reluit aux bestes, et est toute altérée et corrompue en nous par nos artificielles inventions et desbauches [...]. Et Dieu tant souvent nous renvoie à l’escole, à l’exemple des bestes. (I: 8: p. 87)

The theme of bestise lies at the heart of Charron’s attempt to remind man of his place in the universe, therefore. Although he takes a great deal from Montaigne on this subject, Charron’s originality lies partly in placing special emphasis on the way in which bestise or ‘opinion’ - the lower mind-set in opposition to reason - is expressed in the society of the day. As we can see in these last passages, he follows Montaigne in adopting the image of innocent and natural animals as a positive symbol of the empty and humble state of being required to attain wisdom. However, the dominant theme in De la sagesse, illustrating the didactic intention animating this manual of moral philosophy, is that of the need to tame the beast within through the practice of good soul-keeping.

5. Learning to manipulate the will: good ‘soul-keeping’

Towards the end of the first book, Charron begins to widen the picture of his discussion, introducing the notion of reason, the seat of higher judgement, and revealing the motive underlying his attack on the mind when it functions according to the lower mind-set of opinion. The aim behind his sceptical assault, we discover, is to lever the reader away from opinion towards reason. The point of leverage in this process of upgrading the individual’s use of his reason is
shown to be the will, which, as the centre of man's moral life, will determine whether he is good or bad, wise or foolish.

In his description of the make-up of man’s being, Charron draws on St Paul’s division of man into three parts - the body, the soul and the spirit. ‘L'homme comme un animal prodigieux est fait de pieces toutes contraires et ennemies,’ Charron says: ‘l’ame est comme un petit Dieu, le corps comme un fumier, une beste’ (I: 9: p. 89). However, a proper understanding of man’s being requires the consideration of three interconnecting parts in man: mind, flesh and soul (I: 9: p. 89). The slippage that occurs between the different terms used here to describe the workings of man’s being is easily resolved if one bears in mind that esprit, raison and often ame are used to denote both the faculty through which one receives (or does not receive) wisdom and the subsequent wisdom or foolishness that derives from one’s use of the faculty. Charron conceives the soul, which is synonymous with the will, as the catalyst that determines which way the faculty of the mind or reason will function: in accordance with divine reason or against it; that is, according to right reason or according to the corporeal, worldly mind-set. If the duality of body and soul is re-conceived on this three-way template, Charron explains, we find that the soul serves as the common party between the two extremes which will decide whether the overall nature of the individual will be spiritual or corporeal. To express this idea, Charron uses the metaphor of a republic:

\[\text{L’esprit, la tres heroi}'\text{que partie, parcelle, scintille, image et defluxion de la divinité est en l’homme comme le roy en la republique, ne respire que le bien et le ciel, où il tend tousjours. La chair, au contraire, comme la lie d’un peuple tumultueux et insensé, le marc et la sentine de l’homme, partie brutale, tend tousjours au mal et à la matiere. L’ame au milieu,}\]
Charron is still involved at this stage in carrying out a sceptical assault on the use of the mind in the service of the lower half of man, the 'corporeal' part of his being characterised by thoughts and desires based on presumption and egotism:

Voila quelle belle science et certitude l'homme peut avoir, quand le dedans et le dehors est plein de fausseté, et que ces parties principales, outils essentiels de la science, se trompent l'un l'autre. (I: 12: pp. 104-05)

However, it is already clear that his aim is to show that the senses and the lower faculties of the mind (that is, the way in which the faculties function) are dependent on the soul, which he equates with original, natural reason, the spark of the divinity planted in man's being. For Charron, the soul, like God himself, is one in essence but infinitely diverse in its actions (I: 16: p. 107). He acknowledges that it is this fact which accounts for the confusion that arises when one tries to describe man's essential being, his soul, in terms of different faculties. The soul is thus better conceived as essence in motion. Charron explains that 'accidents' (or movements of the soul) such as drunkenness, illness and age do not affect the soul itself, but merely obscure its window on the world so that it cannot function properly and in some cases is forced to abandon the body:

Ces accidents purement corporels ne peuvent toucher ny arriver à ceste haute faculté de l'ame raisonnable, mais seulement aux organes et instrumens, lesquels estant destraqués et desbauchés, l'ame ne peut bien et reglémente agir, et estans par trop forcés et violentés est contraincte de s'absenter et s'en aller. (I: 15: pp. 117-18)
The soul is presented here as the natural storehouse of wisdom; it is already wise and is only impeded in carrying out its functions if its instruments are faulty:

L’ame [...] est de soy toute sçavante sans estre apprise et ne faut point à produire ce qu’elle sçait et bien exercer ses fonctions comme il faut, si elle n’est empeschée, et moyennant que ses instruments soient bien disposez. (I: 15: p. 124)

At this stage in the discussion it becomes apparent that Charron’s concept of reason as a flexible substance - which, according to the way in which it is used by the individual, either obscures or reflects the wisdom of the soul - is working on more than one level. The greatest philosophers have declared ‘que les semences des grandes vertus et sciences estoient esparses naturellement en l’ame’ (I: 15: p. 125), Charron says, referring to the Stoic notion (in harmony with Thomist natural theology) that nature is the manifestation of God’s providence in the world. At one level, the flexible middle is nature or providence itself, therefore, providing the link between the divine and human realms and bending and stretching in all directions to create harmonious interconnections between all things in the sublunar world. At another level, it is man’s mind, which is also capable of bending and stretching in all directions: '[c’est] un outil vagabond, muable, divers, contournable, c’est un instrument de plomb et de cire, il plie, s’allonge, s’accorde à tout’ (I: 16: p. 137). In its natural state, when it is connected to the divine order, man’s mind becomes the channel through which providence can act. It is an ‘image de Dieu vive [...], un esclair celeste auquel

\[11\] As Rice points out, however, p. 193: ‘Charron is no pantheist. He recalls the scholastic distinction [...]. God is nature, God is even the law of nature, but the “natural light” which shines in man, the source of “preud’homme” and wisdom, is a human participation in the divine and uncreated light. It is dependence on the “eternal law which is God Himself and His will”. It is not God, but it is the necessary intermediary between His divine law and the particularities of human law’. On the Stoic notion of nature as the intermediary between humanity and divinity, see Rice, pp. 192-93 and Kogel, p. 112.
Dieu a donné la raison comm’un timon animé pour mouvoir avec reigle et mesure’ (I: 16: p. 133). Through reason, Charron says, ‘y a parentage entre Dieu et l’homme’ (I: 16: p. 133). The interconnecting levels of universal being described here are particularly reminiscent of Plato’s image of iron rings linked together by the magnetic force of inspiration, reinforcing the sense of unity that runs through the work of the various authors participating in the hidden God tradition.

Having thus established the thread or theme that joins the microcosm to the macrocosm - the essential flexibility or ‘emptiness’ of all material in the universe that makes it possible to turn it in any direction - Charron can turn to the importance of discipline in man’s use of his mind. In order to be able to restore the mind to its natural state of alignment with providence and God, using it appropriately, ‘avec reigle et mesure’, we must recognise, Charron says, that absolute truth is not in our grasp:

Car la vérité n’est pas un acquest, ny chose qui se laisse prendre et manier et encore moins posséder à l’esprit humain. Elle loge dedans le sein de Dieu, c’est là son giste et sa retraite. L’homme ne sçait et n’entend rien à droit, au pur et au vray comm’il faut, tournoyant toujours et tastonnant l’entour des apparences, qui se trouvent par tout aussi bien au faux qu’au vray. Nous sommes nais à quester la vérité: la posséder appartient à une plus haute et grande puissance. (I: 16: p. 140)

As the passage from Montaigne by which Charron is inspired here illustrates, what matters if you cannot win the race is how well you run it:

L’agitation et la chasse est proprement de nostre gibier: nous ne sommes pas excusables de la conduire mal et impertinemment; de faillir à la prise, c’est autre chose. Car nous sommes nais à quester la vérité; il appartient

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12 In the *Petit traicté*, Charron describes nature as ‘la raison, l’équité, la lumiere naturelle que Dieu a inspiré en tout homme, et qui comme un astre flamboyant esclaire et brille sans cesse au dedans de luy […]. C’est Dieu mesmes, ou bien sa loy premiere, originelle et fondamentale, estant Dieu et nature au monde comme le Roy et la loy en un estât’ (p. 32).
13 See above, Chapter 4, section 5.
If we cannot know the truth, both writers are saying here, what we are obliged to do by nature is to control and take responsibility for our small and fractured perception of the truth, never letting up in our pursuit of it in daily life. This is the Stoic principle at the heart of Epictetus’s philosophy:

Ce n’est pas la vérité ny le naturel des choses qui nous remuë et agite ainsi l’ame, c’est l’opinion, selon un dire ancien: les hommes sont tourmentez par les opinions qu’ils ont des choses, non par les choses mesmes [...] ; la vérité et l’estre des choses n’entre ny ne loge chés nous de soy-mesme, de sa propre force et authorité. (I: 18: p. 151)

According to this idea, we must set aside false opinions and align the experiences we have to our natural virtue. Experience is itself indifferent; virtue turns everything to good account:

La vertu que nous avons monstré estre le vray bien est de telle nature qu’elle se sert indifferemment de choses contraires, et faict du bien avec la pauvreté comme avec la richesse; avec la maladie comme avec la santé.  

The act of turning one’s mind in the direction of God and submitting it to his providence, therefore, is the correct use of one’s moral faculties. If divine reason is to be able to filter into man’s understanding, the will must take control of man’s whole being and direct it, guide it towards the good.

It is here on the question of mental and emotional discipline, that Charron begins to introduce the notion of ‘soul-keeping’ which is so central to De la sagesse. Just as it is the task of the master or mistress of the house to keep order among the different members and levels of authority within the household, so the

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14 Du Vair, *La philosophie morale des stoïques*, p. 279.
individual must use his will to keep order among the various faculties (or aspects of the unified soul) that make up his being. Of all these different faculties, Charron says, only the will is truly in our command:

La volonté est une grande pièce, de tresgrande importance, et doit l'homme estudier surtout à la bien reigler, car d'elle depend presque tout son estât et son bien: elle seule est vrayement nostre et en nostre puissance. Tout le reste, entendement, memoire, imagination nous peut-estre osté, alteré, troublé par mille accidents, et non la volonté. (I: 19: p. 153)

The will determines the whole man, Charron continues, colouring him with the nature of what he desires: ‘pour entendre et sçavoir les belles, bonnes et honnestes choses, ou meschantes et des-honnestes, l'homme n’est bon ny meschant, honneste ny deshonnesteste, mais les vouloir et aimer’ (I: 19: p. 153). This is so, he explains, taking up Aquinas's description of the difference between the will and the understanding, because, while the understanding is restricted in its ability to understand by its existing capacity and size, the will is completely free to go towards what it desires and is transformed into the nature of the object of its desire (I: 19: p. 154):

Par la volonté [...] l'ame sort hors de soy et va se loger et vivre ailleurs en la chose aimée, en laquelle elle se transforme et en porte le nom, le titre et la livrée, estant appelée vertueuse, spirituelle, charnelle; dont s'ensuit que la volonté s'anoblit aymant les choses dignes et hautes, s'avilit s'adonnant aux moindres et indignes, comme la femme selon le party et mary qu'elle prend. (I: 19: p. 154)15

Charron’s advice for good soul-keeping comes down to two essential factors. First, as we have just seen, the individual must gain control of his will and turn it in the direction of the good. Second, the understanding, which in Charron’s republic analogy is the king, must not allow the passions (the

15 See section 3 on Aquinas in Chapter 1.
magistrates) to disobey its law and take power into their own hands. For if they
do, mutiny will break out in the lower ranks as the senses bring back to the soul
an image of exterior things tainted by corporeal passion and mass-opinion (I: 19:
pp. 157-58). Charron’s technique for encouraging the reader to control his
passions here at the end of the first book is to present them in the grotesque and
unseemly form that they assume when left unchecked: greed, for example, is
described as ‘une gangrene en nostre ame qui [...] consomme nos naturelles
affections pour nous remplir de virulentes humeurs’ (I: 23: p. 171). This
technique is later complemented by a more attractive portrait of the passions
under the control of the wise man’s reason.

6. Laying the foundations of wisdom: attaining inner freedom

Now that the first stage of the process leading to wisdom has been completed and
the reader has been made aware of the importance of self-knowledge, humility
and moral discipline, Charron is ready to lay the first foundations of wisdom:

C’estoit un préalable que d’appeler l’homme à soy, à se taster, sonder,
estudier, afin de cognoistre et sentir ses deffauts et sa miserable condition,
et ainsi se rendre capable des remedes salutaires et necessaires qui sont les
avis et enseignements de sagesse. (II: Preface, pp. 295-96)

The first of these foundations is an inner freedom - of the mind and the will -
which will liberate the individual both from the ‘opinions’ outside him (the
preconceived ideas and beliefs that he may receive from society and those people
close to him) and from the passions within him (uncontrolled movements of the
soul under the impetus of fear or desire). This freedom, the discovery of a space
inside him which is entirely his own, will in turn lead him to discover the spark of
the divine within him in the form of his natural preud’homme or inclination to
virtue and justice. In short, what Charron is proposing in the second book is an alternative to the worldly mind-set of superstition and presumption described in the first book.

In the Preface to this part of the text, Charron once again feels compelled to tell the reader that the task of detaching himself from the ways of the world is not an easy one. The force of the worldly mind-set is so powerful, and the apparent benefits of worldly living - inciting ambition, greed and unbridled passion - are so attractive that it requires great strength and courage to turn one’s back on it:

Nous nous suivons à la piste, voire nous nous pressons, eschauffons, nous nous coiffons et investissons les vices et passions des autres; personne ne crie, hola, nous faillons, nous nous mescontons. Il faut une spéciale faveur du ciel, et ensemble une grande et genereuse force et fermeté de nature pour remarquer l’erreur commune que personne ne sent, de s’adviser de ce dequoy personne ne s’advise, et se resoudre à tout autrement que les autres. (II: Preface, p. 297)

He also wishes to reiterate the point that what he has to say, and the direct way in which he says it, may offend and provoke the angry reaction of those who have succumbed to the worldly mind-set: ‘je dis de bonne foy ce que j’en pense et en croy, clairement. Je ne doute pas que les malicieux, gens de moyen estage n’y mordent; et qui s’en peut garder?’ (II: Preface: p. 298). The middle category of people to which he is referring here, those who, with some learning, think themselves wise - as opposed to simple, uneducated people and the truly wise - are the kind of people likely to succumb to the worldly mind-set. Charron’s description of the three categories (I: 39: p. 221) is based on that of Montaigne in the *Essais*.16

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16 See, for example, ‘Des vaines subtilitez’, p. 299, and ‘De la praesumption’, p. 643.
In his introduction to the discussion of inner freedom, Charron is careful to draw attention to the distinction between theology and morality that underlies his arguments. The freedom in question is freedom from the tyranny of the passions and affections of the world which prevent us from being able to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. The danger from which the reader must protect himself, Charron says,

\[ \text{est la confusion et captivité de ses passions et tumultuaires affections, desquelles il se faut despotuiller et garantir, afin de se rendre vide et net comm’une carte blanche, pour estre subject propre à recevoir la teinture et les impressions de la sagesse, contre laquelle s’opposent formellement les passions. (II: 1: pp. 302-03)} \]

Freedom involves being able to restrain the mind and keep it within the limits of its own ability, Charron explains (II: 2: p. 308). This means retaining the right to suspend one’s judgement and to pose further questions where one might previously have been tempted (under pressure, perhaps, from external or internal influences) to make one’s mind up on a given subject straight away. One must learn to

\[ \text{retenir en surseance son jugement, c’est à dire soustenir, contenir et arrester son esprit dedans les barrières de sa consideration et action d’examiner, juger, poiser toutes choses (c’est sa vraye vie, son exercice perpetuel), sans s’obliger ou s’engager à opinion aucune. (II: 2: p. 308)} \]

It must be remembered, however, Charron says, that the act of suspending one’s judgement applies only to human opinions and beliefs. It does not apply to revealed truths or to the conventions, laws and customs on which our societies are based and unified:

\[ \text{Cecy ne touche point les vérités divines, que la sagesse eternelle nous a revelées, qu’il faut recevoir avec toute humilité et submission, croire et adorer tout simplement; ny aussi les actions externes et communes de la vie, l’observance des loix, coustumes, et ce qui est en usage ordinaire} \]
[...] car en toutes choses il se faut accorder et accomoder avec le commun; rien gaster ou remuer. (II: 2: pp. 308-09)

This form of scepticism does not threaten religion, therefore; rather, it ensures that religious truths are not only protected, but also put into practice appropriately in everyday life. At the same time, it safeguards the respect we owe our fellow citizens and keeps the laws that hold our societies together intact.

As this last passage illustrates, Charron's advice as far as outer laws and customs are concerned is that they should be obeyed externally whether we agree with them or not. This does not mean, however, that we have to enslave our minds and souls to them: 'il en faut rendre compte à autrui; mais les pensées, opinions, jugements sont tous nostres et libres' (II: 2: p. 309). When Charron comes back to the subject of laws later in the second book, he advises the reader to judge and examine all human laws and customs dispassionately and in good faith, 'au niveau de la verité, de la raison et nature universelle, à qui nous sommes premierement obligés' (II: 8: p. 407). Those human laws to which we are only secondarily obliged must merely be observed outwardly, he says (II: 8: p. 331). Thus even if we have to go against the law of nature and reason on the outside, we maintain our obligation to the first law of truth within ourselves, 'tenant nostre jugement et nos opinions justes et sainctes selon elle' (II: 8: p. 407). Charron's intention here is clearly to encourage the reader to be protective of his inner world. Only our inner thoughts and beliefs truly belong to us, he says; the world has absolutely no right over them:

Car aussi nous n'avons rien nostre et dequoy nous puissions librement disposer que de cela; le monde n'a que faire de nos pensées, mais le dehors est engagé au public et luy en devons rendre conte. (II: 8: p. 407)
The freedom that Charron is endorsing is not, therefore, likely to provoke political or social anarchy. Rather, it is an expansion of the mind and a willingness to discover new and different things. Charron encourages his reader to be a ‘citoyen du monde […], embrassant par affection tout le genre humain’ (II: 2: p. 312), knowing that those who have also read his Trois veritez will be aware of the play on opposites that underlies this section of the text. While in theological matters being a ‘citoyen du monde’ involves following and submitting to universal opinion (belief in the Catholic religion), in moral affairs it involves distancing oneself from the narrow-mindedness of the masses. The Socratic approach to life endorsed in De la sagesse, which is tinged with hints of Epicureanism, involves widening one’s perspective on the world and beginning to think in a more universal way. Most people have no other touchstone of truth and reason, Charron says, than the opinions and customs of their own country.

Or il se faut affranchir de ceste brutalité, et se faut presenter comme en un tableau ceste grande image de nostre mere nature en son entiere majesté: remarquer là dedans un royaume, un empire, et peut-être ce monde (car c’est une grande et authentique opinion qu’il y en a plusieurs) comme le traict d’une pointe tres-delicte, et y lire une si generale et constante varieté en toutes choses, tant d’humeurs, de jugements, creances. (II: 2: p. 313)\(^\text{17}\)

The student of wisdom must therefore be open to the notion of difference and diversity. He must not be shocked or troubled by the scenes with which life presents him, for ‘estant l’esprit humain capable de toutes choses’ and due to the fact that ‘toutes choses sont enfermées et comprimes dedans ce cours et revolution de nature’, anything is possible (II: 2: p. 317).

\(^{17}\) The opinion that there are several worlds is taken from Epicurus. See Diogenes Laertius’s ‘Epicurus’, in Lives of Eminent Philosophers, ed. by G. P. Goold, trans. by R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, rev. edn, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press,
Having addressed the question of freedom of the mind, Charron turns more specifically to freedom of the will. In order to give the reader a stronger sense of what he means by this kind of ‘emotional’ freedom, Charron draws attention to two popular beliefs that compromise the inner freedom and integrity which, according to the laws of nature, the individual is obliged to maintain. Drawing on Montaigne, he describes the first misguided belief as the conviction that one must forget oneself for the sake of others, helping individuals and the public in general at one’s own personal cost (II: 2: p. 318). The second belief is that this service to others must be carried out with agitated zeal and affection; if not, you are pronounced cold and uncharitable (II: 2: p. 318). Too liberal with their souls, lives, time, affection and will, Charron says, ‘desquelles seules choses la mesnagerie est utile et louable’, people who adopt these beliefs no longer belong to themselves (II: 2: p. 319). The task of each individual is thus to concentrate on his own soul-keeping. Again reflecting Montaigne, he says:

Il se faut souvenir que la principale et plus legitime charge que nous avons, c’est à chacun sa conduicte. C’est pourquoi nous sommes icy; nous devons nous maintenir en tranquillité et liberté. (II: 2: p. 322)

7. The relationship between preud’hommie and piety

Having established his inner freedom, the student of wisdom is now ready to find the inner sanctuary of his being, which is the source of goodness and probity that will lead him through life's moral maze. It quickly becomes apparent that Charron conceives this ‘vraye et essentielle preud’homie: premiere et fondamentale partie de sagesse’ to be the spark of divine reason that connects the

1931), II, p. 575.
individual to God and the law of nature within his being, infusing him with a sense of what it is appropriate or inappropriate for him to do:

Or le ressort de ceste preud’homme, c’est la loy de nature, c’est à dire l’équité et raison universelle qui luict et esclaire en un chacun de nous. Qui agist selon Dieu, car ceste lumiere naturelle est un esclair et rayon de la divinité, une defluxion et dependance de la loy etemelle et divine […]. Ceste loy et lumiere est essentielle et naturelle en nous, dont aussi est appelee nature, et loy de nature. (II: 3: p. 328)

Addressing the reader directly, Charron tells him that what he has within him is the source from which all the great laws of the world were drawn:

Toutes les tables de droict, et les deux de Moyse, et les douze des Grecs, et toutes les bonnes loix du monde, ne sont que des copies et extraicts produicts en jugement contre toy qui tiens caché l’originel, et feincts ne sçavoir que c’est, estouffant tant que tu peux cette lumière qui t’esclaire au dedans […]. Ce sont tous ruisseaux, mais qui n’ont tant d’eauë ny si vive que leur source et fontaine invisible qui est dedans toy, si tu ne la laissois deperir et perdre. (II: 3: p. 329)

For Charron, it must be stressed, the source of moral probity in question is not the unmediated essence of God’s being, but the guidance of the Holy Spirit in moral affairs. Synonymous with nature, it is the law established in the world through which his providence may act.

Charron explains that connecting with and beginning to use our preud’homme is simply a question of following the natural inclination towards goodness that resides within us. We can learn how to do this by observing simple folk, he says, who live their lives peacefully and naturally:

Nous voyons les gens ignorants, idiots et simples mener leur vie plus doucement et gayement, resister aux assauts de la mort, de l’indigence, de la douleur, plus constamment et tranquilllement que les plus sçavans et habiles. (II: 3: p. 331)

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Drawing substantially on Montaigne’s *bestise* material in this section, Charron explains that Socrates, too, was an exponent of the law of nature, teaching the remedies for life’s evils through the most vulgar and simple language and techniques (II: 3: p. 332). It may not always be easy to live one’s life according to this true, essential *preud’homnie*, but it is possible, he says, if the desire and determination is there to achieve it. The will is, after all, entirely in man’s power:

> La vraye preud’homie est une droicte et ferme disposition de la volonté à suyvre le conseil de la raison. Or cecy est en la puissance de l’homme, qui est maistre de sa volonté; il la peut disposer et contourner à son plaisir, et en cela est le propre de l’homme, ainsi la peut il affermir à suivre tousjours la raison. (II: 3: pp. 335-36)

Those who are not graced with true *preud’homnie* from birth have the aid of moral philosophy to hand (II: 3: p. 337). Though this particular path to virtue is ‘un estude laborieux qui requiert du temps, de la peine et de la discipline’, it nevertheless serves to

> ost[er] les empeschemens, pour resveiller et reallumer ceste lumiere esteincte et languissante, et faire revivre ses semences presque estouffées par le vice particulier et mauvais temperament de l’individu, comme en ostant la taye de devant l’œil, la veuë se recouvre, et la poussiere de dessus le miroir, l’on y voit clair. (II: 3: pp. 337-38)

Charron appears to be referring in this last passage to Matthew 7. 5, where Christ makes self-knowledge a prerequisite for judgement of others: ‘Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye: and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye’. By referring to the fundamental principles of Christianity, Charron appears to be signalling that the concept of *preud’homnie* or inspired reason that he is putting forward here is the spirit or essence of religion presented in a form that ordinary people can understand in a personal way and use in their daily lives.
Charron then proceeds to describe piety as the first duty of the wise man. His decision to place *preud’hommie* or reason before faith has traditionally been interpreted by critics as the crucial moment in his book in which religion is pushed out of the moral equation. This was not Charron’s intention, however. He makes it clear in this section that the target of his attack, far from being religion itself, is the mind-set that has all the appearances of religion, but which is in fact its principal enemy: superstition. It is because men do not approach religion from the solid base of the natural goodness within them, Charron explains, that they make such a mockery of worship of God by dragging him down to their own human level (II: 5: p. 351). What all religions have in common, he continues, is the worldly way in which men all too often receive them. People are taught that God is appeased and won over by prayers, wishes and celebrations; they are taught that the best way to serve and appease God is to harm oneself and cause oneself pain and difficulty (II: 5: p. 352). ‘Quelle alienation de sens,’ he says, ‘penser flatter la divinité par inhumanité, payer la bonté divine par nostre affliction, et satisfaire à sa justice par cruauté’ (II: 5: p. 354).

This is the section of the text which was considered the most suspect by its scholastic censors. What worried them most was the possibility that Charron’s inclusion of Christianity in his general description of the human and superstitious way in which religions are received might cause the reader to think that the

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19 See Busson’s *Le rationalisme dans la littérature française de la Renaissance*, p. 481: ‘comme livre de morale, *[De la sagesse]* est extrêmement grave, renversant les bases religieuses de l’obligation morale, et faisant de la Justice, considérée comme vertu naturelle, le fondement de la religion’. 

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Catholic religion itself is false or somehow responsible for superstitious ideas.\textsuperscript{20} Charron goes to great lengths, however, to make sure that there is no ambiguity in his statements. Drawing much of his material from the beginning of Montaigne's 'Apologie', he berates man for the way in which he distorts religion by forcing it into a human mould. Given that religion is something which surpasses human understanding, he says, it should be received 'par revelation extraordinaire et celeste [...] et comme venant du ciel [...]. Mais à dire vray sans rien flatter ny desguiser, il n'en est rien' (II: 5: pp. 356-57). We are circumcised or baptised Jews, Muslims and Christians before we even know we are men (II: 5: p. 357). If we were just lightly moved by a ray of divinity, he says, nothing in this world would trouble us (II: 5: p. 357).\textsuperscript{21} Placing true piety and superstition in direct opposition, he explains that

Les notables differences des deux, sont que la religion aime et honore Dieu, met l'homme en paix et en repos, et loge en une ame libre, franche et generouse. La superstition craint, tremble et injurie Dieu, trouble l'homme, et est maladie d'ame foible, vile et paoureuse. (II: 5: pp. 359-60)

Having clarified the abuse of true piety against which he is arguing, Charron goes on to describe the kind of worship of God that he expects of the wise man, which will be based on the preud'homme he has already cultivated:

Il semble desja bien que de tant de religions, celles semblent avoir plus d'apparence de verité, lesquelles sans grande operation externe et corporelle, retirent l'ame au dedans et l'eslevent par pure contemplation à admirer et adorer la grandeur et majesté immense de la premiere cause de toutes choses, et l'estre des estres, sans grande declaration ou determination d'icelle, ou prescription de son service; ains la

\textsuperscript{20} In the 1613 edition of De la sagesse (Paris: David Douceur), the changes made by President Jeannin can be clearly seen to temper, alter or remove any words, phrases or passages that make it seem as if Christianity itself is being criticised. See pp. 794-96 of that edition.

\textsuperscript{21} Montaigne writes in the 'Apologie': 'si ce rayon de la divinité nous touchoit aucunement, il y paroistroit par tout; non seulement nos paroles, mais encore nos operations en porteroient la lueur et le lustre' (p. 418).
recognoisssent indefiniment estre la bonté, perfection et infinité du tout incomprehensible et incognoissable. (II: 5: pp. 362-63)

As this and the following passage demonstrate, Charron’s notion of true piety is deeply mystical and personal, involving the development of a relationship between man and God based on man’s humble acceptance of God’s greatness and his own imperfection.

La religion est en la cognoiissance de Dieu et de soy-mesme (car c’est une action relative entre les deux): son office est d’eslever Dieu au plus haut de tout son effort, et baisser l’homme au plus bas, l’abattre comme perdu, et puis luy fournir des moyens de se relever, luy faire sentir sa misere et son rien, afin qu’en Dieu il mette sa confiance et son tout. L’office de religion est nous lier avec l’auteur et principe de tout bien, retrinir et consolider l’homme en sa premiere cause, comme à la racine en laquelle, tant qu’il demeure ferme et fiché, il se conserve à sa perfection; au contraire, quand il s’en separe, il seiche aussi tost sur le pied. (II: 5: p. 363)

Paraphrasing St Paul once again, Charron’s main Catholic authority in this profoundly spiritual section of the text, he explains that man himself is the offering to be sacrificed to God and that his very being is his temple:

L’offrande plaisante à sa majesté, c’est un cœur net, franc et humilié [...]: une ame et une vie innocente [...]. L’homme sage est un vray sacrificateur du grand Dieu, son esprit est son temple, son ame en est son image, ses affections sont les offrandes, son plus grand et solemnel sacrifice, c’est l’imiter, le servir. (II: 5: p. 365)

According to Charron, therefore, preud’hommie or reason is the foundation on which true piety can be developed. The two are but one essence which cannot easily be achieved unless it is viewed as having two separate but interconnecting parts. Seen from this perspective, Charron’s concept of the relationship between preud’hommie and piety mirrors his concept of the relationship between man and God: what links the two together is the invisible

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22 The verse from St Paul is 1 Corinthians 6. 19-20.
but omnipresent force of the Holy Spirit. At the end of this important section, Charron emphasises the importance of submitting entirely to the Church and the details it lays down for the observance of the faith (II: 5: p. 367), and concludes the chapter by stating that it is the law of nature and reason, the force of divine providence in the world, that wishes each individual to perfect *preud'hommie* with piety in such a way that he is good and honest because he truly wants to be:

> Or voicy pour achever ce propos ce que je veux et requiers en mon sage: une vraye preud'homie, et une vraye pieté; [...] je veux que sans paradis et enfer l'on soit homme de bien. Je veux que tu sois homme de bien pource que nature et la raison (c'est Dieu) le veut; l'ordre et la police generale du monde, dont tu es une piece, le requiert ainsi [...]. Je veux aussi la pieté et la religion, non qui face, cause ou engendre la preud'homie ja née en toy et avec toy, plantée de nature; mais qui l'approuve, l'authorise et la couronne. La religion est posterior à la preud'homie qui devroit causer et engendrer la religion, car elle est premiere, plus ancienne et naturelle. (II: 5: p. 302)

Charron may well have been influenced in his conception of the relationship between reason and faith, *preud'hommie* and piety, by II Peter 1. 5-7:

> And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.

### 8. Following the guidance of reason in daily life

What we have seen of *De la sagesse* so far shows that Charron conceived the practice of reason or *preud'hommie* to be the means by which to know God, to the extent that he can be known by human beings. According to Charron, with the spark of the divinity within him, to the guidance of which he has access when his own being is in alignment with the natural and divine order, the individual can achieve the state of tranquillity and happiness in his life that the ancients called
man’s sovereign good. At the end of the second book and in the third book of *De la sagesse*, Charron focuses on the way in which the individual can cultivate the wisdom that has germinated as a result of the process so far and benefit from its presence in his life. The picture of wisdom that emerges from this part of the text is that of an intuitive sense of how to deal with any given situation based on the practice of good soul-keeping that is a central theme throughout the book. Charron sets out to show that by following the advice of reason that filters into the well-balanced mind, the wise man is graced with the ability to see the world and the experiences that he is given by providence from a new and more positive perspective.

In Chapter 6 of the second book, entitled ‘Regler ses desirs et plaisirs’, Charron presents a series of ‘moral truths’ or intuitions gained from listening to reason, all of which run along the theme of following the golden mean and thus practising moderation in all activities. One of these ‘golden rules’ or basic moral truths is that man’s corporeal existence is entirely good and worthy of enjoyment when it is properly controlled and supervised by the ruling faculties of the individual. Contrasting this rule of life with the common opinion that the body is to be spurned and escaped from, Charron presents the elegant statement made by Montaigne in ‘De l’experience’:

Premierement il n’y a rien si beau et legitime que faire bien et deuëment l’homme, bien sçavoir vivre ceste vie. C’est une science divine et bien ardué que de sçavoir jouir loyalement de son estre, se conduire selon le commun et naturel, selon ses propres conditions. (II: 6: p. 374) 

Those who try to run away from nature are the victims of folly and passion, he says:
Similarly, he continues, the opinion that one should show disdain for the world is mistaken, for it is not the world itself which deserves disdain, but the abuse of the natural qualities that it offers. True, good disdain for the world condemns such abuses: 'les vanités et desbauches qui sont au monde [...] [ne sont] pas du monde, ce sont choses contre le monde et sa police; ce sont additions tiennes' (II: 6: p. 376). Another golden rule of nature is that in order to be truly happy and content, one must desire little or nothing at all (II: 6: p. 378). Rather than allow ourselves to desire excessively and thus enslave our minds to our bodies, we should look to ourselves for the fulfilment of our desires and seek to control only those things that are within our limited human power: 'or ce moyen de s’enrichir et se rendre content est tres juste, et en la main de chacun; il ne faut pas chercher ailleurs et hors de soy le contentement' (II: 6: p. 378). Charron is here presenting a summary of the Stoic and Epicurean precepts that he, Montaigne and Du Vair share in common.

Charron challenges mass-opinion’s unnatural approach to life further in Chapter 7, ‘Se porter modérément et également en prospérité et adversité’, where he uses the arguments of the *Discours chrestiens* to demonstrate the hidden benefits underlying misfortune. If one is lowly in virtue, he says, then disasters and accidents can certainly cause one to feel rage and despair (II: 7: p. 386). But the same events can serve to sharpen and exercise the virtue of those who experience them wisely: ‘aux prudents, matiere de bien, et quelquefois planches

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pour passer et monter en toute hauteur et grandeur’ (II: 7: pp. 386-87). By turning things around and seeing them from a higher perspective, Charron says, one is following the fine piece of advice, *faire de nécessité vertu*, a refrain in this last part of the text which contains distant echoes of Rabelais’s rule for the Thelemites, *fay ce que voudras* (II: 7: p. 387). The Christian message shimmering just beneath the humanist exterior of these two injunctions is that the individual should adhere to God’s will through the use of his own natural faculties. Charron draws attention to this crucial point in the *Petit traicté*, where he presents a commentary on Romans 14. 5 intended to emphasise the fact that he is calling upon his reader to trust his intuitions or his heart only on matters of morality, not on matters of religion. Only in religion does authority count for something, Charron says there, ‘comme par tout ailleurs la raison sans elle’ (*PT*, p. 59). We should not be shocked, he adds, if we are not all of the same opinion, for there is nothing more natural to the human mind than diversity (*PT*, p. 59).

And he continues,

> Le sage divin nous met tous en liberté par ces mots. Que chacun abonde en son sens, et que personne ne juge ou condamne celuy qui fait autrement et est d’avis contraire; et le dict en matière bien plus fort chatouilleuse et qui non seulement consiste en faict et observation externe, où nous avons dit qu’il se faut conformer au commun et à ce qui est prescrit ou coutumier, mais encore en ce qui concerne la religion, sçavoir en l’observance des viandes et des jours. Or toute ma liberté et hardiesse n’est qu’aux pensées, jugements, opinions, esquelles personne n’a part ny quart que celuy qui les a chacun endroit soy. (p. 59)

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24 This is a paraphrase of the passage on p. 1096 of ‘De l’experience’.
By profiting from pain and affliction (using the faculty of reason creatively in order to see things differently), Charron says in De la sagesse, thus ‘faisant de nécessité vertu’, sin itself is destroyed and the soul is cleansed and purified:

L’affliction, vray engeance de péché, bien prinse, est sa mort et sa ruine, et fait à son auteur ce que la vipere à sa mere qui la produict; [...] c’est la lime de l’ame, qui la dérouille, la purifie, et l’esclaircit de peché. (II: 7: p. 388)

One only has to take a higher perspective on things (thus aligning oneself with the universal order), Charron is saying here, for the human and divine wills to fall into melodious harmony. Drawing this section of the text to a close, Charron explains that this method of receiving the appearances of misfortune in a positive way also serves to wean us from the worldliness that poisons life and obscures its natural goodness:


In the third book, Charron teaches how the precepts discussed so far can be put into practice more specifically. He does this through a consideration of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. His aim is to provide his student with all the tools necessary to approach any given situation in any given moment with the right state of mind so as never to lose his inner contentment and tranquillity. Prudence, for example, is described as the queen of the virtues and the art of living: ‘c’est l’œil qui tout void, qui tout conduit et ordonne’ (III: 1: pp. 458-59). Each moment of living, Charron tells us, requires the focused attention and consideration of the prudent mind, challenging the wise
man to make snap-decisions in ever-changing circumstances (III: 1: p. 459). Evoking the image of iron rings linked together by the force of the magnet once again, Charron describes the world as a mass of interconnections of time, place, people and events where uncertainty and inconstancy reign supreme; one slight change in just one of these factors changes the whole picture (III: 1: p. 459). In order to decide how to act for the best, the wise man cannot rely on set rules, therefore, but must draw on his own wisdom (the 'magnetic' force of providence flowing into his own reason), supplemented by that of those most qualified to give advice: ‘c’est donc une mer sans fonds et sans rive, qui ne peut estre bornée et prescrite par preceptes et advis, que la prudence’ (III: 1: p. 460). Together with prudence, the virtue of justice involves maintaining order within one’s own being: ‘c’est la premiere originelle justice […], ce commandement de l’esprit sur la partie brutale et sensuelle de laquelle sourdent les passions’ (III: 5: p. 566). Thus wisdom can be defined as the ability to keep harmony in one’s soul, Charron says:

La sagesse est un maniement doux et reiglé de l’ame: celuy là est sage qui se conduit en ses desirs, pensées, opinions, paroles, faicts, reiglemens, avec mesure et proportion. Bref, en un mot, la sagesse est la reigle de l’ame. (III: 14: p. 643)

Having considered man’s various obligations to himself, to his friends and acquaintances, to his spouse, children and parents, to his King, his superiors and his subordinates, Charron provides advice for how to deal with specific ‘misfortunes’ or situations of a challenging nature. Here the virtues of fortitude and temperance come into play, along with the important rule that one must want what happens to happen, aligning one’s will with God’s will: ‘il n’y a point de meilleur remede que de vouloir ce qu’elle [la providence] veut, et selon l’advis de
sagesse, faire de nécessité vertu’ (III: 20: p. 700). What follows in the text is in a sense an illustration of the higher perspective of wisdom in action. Having undergone the mystical-moral process of abandoning the lower mind-set of opinion for the higher mind-set of reason, the reader of the text is accompanied to a vantage-point from which everything previously seeming negative now appears positive. If we are offended by others, Charron says, we must consider that the insults we have received give us the opportunity to recognise and correct genuine faults: ‘ces offenses pretendues naissent peut-estre de nos defauts, fautes et foiblesses; [...] ce n’est pas offense, c’est correction, laquelle il faut recevoir et s’en servir comme d’un chastiment (III: 20: p. 702). ‘Comme bons messagers,’ Charron adds, ‘nous devons faire nostre profit et nous servir de la commodite que nous presentent les injures et offenses’ (III: 20: p. 705). We should also consider, he goes on, that without the great events that we call ‘misfortunes’, the world simply would not be able to function: ‘le monde s’estoufferoit, se pourriroit et perdroit s’il n’estoit changé, remué, et renouvelé par ces grands accidens de peste, famine, guerre, mortalité (III: 21: p. 706). We can in fact embrace these events, he says, as assurances of God’s love and concern for the world (III: 21: p. 709).

In this last section of the book, Charron articulates the point that, when we view common human experiences from this perspective, we are led to discover the inner strength that is a natural consequence of our spiritual nature. Pain and illness, for example, teach us ‘que l’on n’est pas accoustumé de chercher son contentement en l’ame’ and that ‘ce corps n’est qu’une robe empruntée pour faire paroistre pour un temps nostre esprit sur ce bas et tumultuaire theatre’ (III: 22: p.
711). Similarly, corporeal imprisonment of any kind serves to help us discover the freedom of the soul and its inviolate right to existence without constraint:

Il n'y a que le corps, la manche, la prison de l'ame, qui est captive; l'esprit demeure tousjours libre et à soy en despit de tous [...]. Celuy qui sçait se maintenir en sa liberté et user de son droict, qui est de n'estre pas enfermé mesme dedans ce monde, se moquera de ces chetifves barrières. (III: 23: p. 714)

Paradoxically, banishment and exile also reinforce the individual’s sense of his intrinsic freedom and belonging to the universe, if viewed in the appropriate way, Charron tells us. The whole universe is home to the wise man, he says, and the earth provides him with all he needs: ‘l'honneste homme est citoyen du monde, libre, franc, joyeux et content par tout, tousjours chez soy, en son quarré, tousjours mesme, encores que son estuy se remue et tracasse’ (III: 24: p. 718).

Poverty, infamy and grief are interpreted in a similar manner in the next chapters. Charron then turns this positive frame of mind on to the passions, showing the reader the soothing and calming effects of wisdom and how to benefit from them. The remedy against fear, he tells us, is to take time and wait for the misfortunes that we are afraid of. Things change so quickly, he says, that often what we feared would ruin us actually brings us good fortune: ‘un tour de rouë met en haut ce qui estoit en bas, et bien souvent d’où nous attendons nostre ruïne, nous recevons nostre salut’ (III: 28: p. 726). To avoid the destructive effects of sadness, Charron says, we can focus our thoughts on more pleasant things and generate a happier feeling in ourselves (III: 29: p. 729). Anger can be dealt with when it comes upon us, he explains, by keeping quiet and calm for a moment and letting the anger subside (III: 31: p. 733). In short, he says, we must
learn to lift ourselves above the emotion we feel in these situations to a higher point where serenity reigns:

Il faut eslever son ame de terre et la conduire à une disposition semblable à ceste plus haute partie de l'air qui n'est jamais offusquée de nuées ny agitée de tonnerres, mais en une serenité perpetuelle. (III: 31: pp. 734-35)

Charron’s advice against hatred, drawn from Du Vair’s presentation of Epictetus’s Stoic philosophy, is a fitting summary of the freedom of mind that he is encouraging his reader to adopt, humbly and reverently, as his approach to life. Remember, he says, that there are two different handles by which one can receive things: the handle that makes them easy and light and the handle that makes them heavy and difficult (III: 32: p. 736). Let us take things by the good handle, he concludes at the end of *De la sagesse*, and we will find that there is something to like in all that we hate, for there is nothing in the world that is not ultimately for man’s good (III: 32: pp. 736-37).

Wisdom, for Charron, is the act of participating joyfully in the creation of life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the ability to distinguish between what one must simply accept in life and what one is able to change. Above all, Charron’s wisdom is a state of being in alignment with what human beings can perceive of God. We may not be capable of conceiving truth in all its dazzling splendour, Charron says in *De la sagesse*, but we are capable of goodness, honesty, love, self-discipline, tolerance, modesty and other similar virtues. If we play the game of life according to nature’s rules, he tells us, we might just stumble across wisdom where we least expect to find it.
Conclusion

At the heart of the concept of the hidden God is the notion that the discovery of truth or receipt of wisdom is a natural consequence of one's ability to recognise different contexts and to apply the notion of different contexts to any given situation. The writers of the hidden God tradition speak of appreciating the limits of human reason and of learning to remain within the boundaries of nature. In doing so, they suggest, our sense of a wider context or a divine realm of being that sustains and pervades our natural domain will spontaneously begin to grow, revealing new horizons where we thought progress could no longer be made. This deeper sense of the relationship between what is human and what is beyond the human and these new horizons of knowledge emerge, according to the writers of the tradition, in a very specific domain: the domain of 'morality' or human affairs. It is, paradoxically, by concentrating on our own thoughts, feelings and actions, they say, and on the degree of harmony that we sense there to be in them that we gain access to other contexts of being greater than our own.

The conception of the divinity that springs from the hidden God tradition is based on the notion of wholeness. Instead of considering God as one entity and the creation as another, the tradition posits the idea that the creation represents not the essence but the actions of the infinite divinity that is the source of all being. Human beings, therefore, along with every other aspect of the created world, are viewed as belonging to God and as expressing his eternal being in the most intimate sense. Human beings studying themselves and their interactions with their fellow creatures are thus - indirectly - God observing
himself and growing in consciousness of his infinity. The connection between man and God can only be discovered by human beings, the tradition argues, by virtue of the intermediary ‘space’ that separates the two parties; this intermediary space - the force of providence or the Holy Spirit - is both the means by which God hides himself and the means by which he reveals himself. As in a patchwork quilt, providence is the common thread that forms the boundaries of the different contexts of God’s being, but which by definition also leads the observer from one context or patch to the next, and, eventually, from the notion of separation to the notion of union. Since the Holy Spirit is the force of inspiration, the field of inquiry in which the discovery of wholeness is made is the domain of changing states of consciousness which take place as the direct result of moral actions that are in harmony with the universal order.

The concept of the hidden God represents a rich seam of philosophical and literary creativity in the history of ideas. Its richness stems in part from the way in which the ideas in question appear as both the creation of the individuals who participate in the tradition and as manifestations of something greater than themselves. Each author in the tradition claims to be aware of the role played by the force of inspiration in his interpretation of the concept, giving the reader the impression of a wave or current of ‘providential’ activity that swept through the historical period influencing all those who were open to it. Just as the concept of the hidden God articulates the idea that in order to know God man must focus on the context of his own being, so, it seems, does it dictate that its presence will only be identified by studying the specific historical context(s) in which it
emerges - in this case the works of Aquinas and the other members of the philosophical tradition and the key aspects of Jewish mysticism.

In the works of Montaigne and Charron, the concept becomes increasingly associated with the details of 'morality' that the tradition had hitherto discussed in more abstract terms. In the same moment of its evolution, the interactions between the two domains of being about which it speaks - faith and reason - are dramatically played out in real life through the moral dilemmas posed by the wars of religion. It is in this very specific historical context that Montaigne and Charron put forward the timeless notion of a mystical relationship with God (in which the individual submits his human reason to the power of divine grace) and suggest that it take place not in the context of theology and the elaboration of dogma, but in the context of ordinary life. Mirroring the way in which the concept posits the creation as the actions of the divinity, their moral philosophy maintains that it is not the theoretical, static domain of facts and ideas that will take mankind on to the next stage of its evolution, but the dynamic putting-into-practice of those same facts and ideas.

One of the central questions posed by this innovative approach to the discovery of truth is whether Montaigne, Charron and the other writers in the tradition reached and overstepped the limits of the context of organised religion as it was understood at the time. It is clear from their work that Montaigne and Charron were devout Catholics, just as Maimonides was a devout Jew, and that their intention was to support and further the interests of their religions. But in positing that the goodness at the heart of each individual (stemming from his or her participation in divine goodness) comes not from the letter of any particular
law but from the existence of a spiritual connection between that individual - whatever his race, colour or creed - and God, both authors were in fact reaching out to a point that transcends the differences between human beings and between religions. On the basis of the textual evidence presented in this thesis, I would argue that both men felt this transcendence of difference to be the jewel in the crown of the Christian religion that made it, for them, the ideal means of expressing their love of God and of his creatures through the smallest details of everyday life. For them, the concept of the hidden God is entirely in harmony with the practice of Christianity; indeed Christianity is honoured and glorified by the putting-into-practice in daily life of the spiritual truths that it articulates. Organised religion is not done away with, therefore, by their moral philosophy, but it is reinterpreted in a wider context that allows what they saw as the true meaning of religion to come to people’s attention.

The fact that Montaigne and Charron, two of the most influential thinkers of the Renaissance and seventeenth century, were influenced to such an extent by the tradition of the concept of the hidden God is by itself of great importance to the history of ideas. While a number of scholars have been aware of the influence of Aquinas, Lull and Sebond on Montaigne and Charron, much less attention has been paid to the impact of the Jewish tradition on their work. The Jewish side of the ‘Judeo-Christian’ ideas that are the inheritance of all Christians has generally been neglected in work on the ideas of Montaigne and Charron. However, through the writings of these central figures in the hidden God tradition in the Renaissance, the Jewish ideas which history has woven into the fabric of
the tradition radiated out into the next century, influencing many writers whose works in turn would help shape the history of ideas.

The process of ‘laicisation’ which has perhaps caused us to lose sight of this important Judeo-Christian tradition and to detach Montaigne and Charron from this crucial element in the development of their ideas seems also to be responsible for another collective oversight. One of the fundamental ideas at the centre of the hidden God tradition is that the faculty of human reason can be used in two opposing ways: in the service of and therefore as a channel for divine reason on the one hand, and in opposition to or against the grain of divine reason on the other. On the basis of this concept of reason developed by the tradition, Montaigne, Charron and other key writers after them such as Pascal set out to demolish reason; that is, they sought to oppose the bad use of reason that they viewed (following the tradition) as inappropriate behaviour on the part of creatures of an infinitely good and powerful divinity. They wished human reason to be used as they believed God and nature designed it to be used: not as an instrument employed in the service of the individual’s ego, his lower and wholly human self, but as an instrument of God’s grace, enabling the individual to be guided in moral affairs by providence or the Holy Spirit, the spark of the divinity within him. By not putting Montaigne’s work in the context of the tradition that informed it, critics have, generally speaking, tended to assume that Montaigne’s demolition of reason was an end in itself rather than a means to a very specific end: to hand the faculty of reason over to God so that it might be animated by his grace. Similarly, by failure to recognise the influence of the tradition on Charron’s work, it has often been assumed that Charron wished to detach reason
from grace and to encourage his readers to live solely according to nature's laws. What both authors intended, however, was that nature and reason (correctly used) be seen as the doorway to an understanding of God appropriate for mankind. They intended faith and reason to be reconciled, not separated. Following the Christian and pagan injunction to self-knowledge, each writer seeks in his own way to achieve this reconciliation by looking downwards in the search for truth in a gesture of humility typical of negative theology.

This study seeks to reinstate the balance that has been disrupted by the excess of emphasis placed on the demolition of reason, in the case of Montaigne, and on the praise of reason in the case of Charron. At the same time, it seeks to place Charron back in the influential position in the history of ideas that is rightly his, helping to clear up some of the misunderstandings that have obscured our understanding of the nature of his work. It is hoped that our modern view of the landscape of the Renaissance and seventeenth century will be enriched and widened by a more accurate understanding of the work of these two authors and an awareness of the fascinating tradition that underpins their vision of reality.
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