

FROM VICE TO VIRTUE: THE REHABILITATION OF CURIOSITY IN MONTAIGNE AND CHARRON

DO VÍCIO À VIRTUDE: A REABILITAÇÃO DA CURIOSIDADE EM MONTAIGNE E CHARRON

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ABSTRACT: Montaigne and Charron's discourses on curiosity play an essential role in the process of its reevaluation from vice to virtue so characteristic of early modern European culture. Associating curiosity with virtue and wisdom and ridding it of traditional evaluations as vice or sin, Montaigne and Charron change the moral framework of this passion, reassigning it to an ethical field. Building on ancient dichotomies, they create a new form of good curiosity as a tool for fashioning and training the *honnête homme*. Through their works, curiosity acquires the status of a moral virtue and an essential disposition to wisdom and good life.

Keywords: Montaigne. Charron. Curiosity. Virtude. Self-fashioning.

RESUMO: Os discursos de Montaigne e Charron sobre a curiosidade desempenham um papel essencial no seu processo de reavaliação como um vício para uma virtude, tão característico da cultura europeia de início da Modernidade. Associando a curiosidade com a virtude e a sabedoria, e livrando-a de avaliações tradicionais como vício ou pecado, Montaigne e Charron alteram o quadro moral dessa paixão, restabelecendo-a no campo ético. Com base em antigas dicotomias, eles criam uma nova forma de boa curiosidade, como ferramenta para moldar e treinar o *honnête homme*. Por meio de suas obras, a curiosidade adquire o *status* de virtude moral e uma disposição essencial à sabedoria e à boa vida.

Palavras-chave: Montaigne. Charron. Virtude. Automodelagem.

“Cette curiosité ne sera ny vaine en soy, ny importune à autruy”.
Charron, *De la Sagesse*

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The observation and the study of human curiosity play an important part in both Montaigne and Charron's philosophical anthropology, though be it in different ways. Charron's reflections are not so different from Montaigne's on this and other issues². Setting apart the question of Pierre Charron's originality³, it should be stated that *De la Sagesse*⁴ cannot be considered a "repetition" of Montaigne's thought, but rather the result of its deep assimilation. Resuming and reorganizing themes and ideas from Montaigne's *Essais*⁵, Charron clarifies and presents them under a new light. This hermeneutical circle allows us to reveal the meaning and scope of Montaigne and Charron's reflections on curiosity by the comparative study of their works. Finally, we will grasp the moral and social relevance that curiosity has acquired in their thinking by means of re-descriptions that associate this traditionally 'nasty' passion with virtue and wisdom.

1. A human passion and behavior

Examining the physiological and psychological dimensions of curiosity, Montaigne and Charron agree that it is a properly human passion and behavior⁶. In the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond", curiosity appears in a list of emotions and behaviors lacking in animals. Ironically endorsing the rationalist and anthropocentric claim that man stands out from animals by means of his "reason" – i.e. the "discourse" and "capacité de juger et connoistre" –, Montaigne concludes that this is a dearly paid privilege. For in return, men are constantly agitated by infinite emotional, cognitive and practical attitudes that animals ignore: "l'inconstance, l'irresolution, l'incertitude, le deuil, la superstition, la sollicitude des choses à venir, voire, apres nostre vie, l'ambition, l'avarice, la jalousie, l'envie, les appetits desreglez, forcenez et indomptables, la guerre, la mensonge, la desloyauté, la detraction et la curiosité"⁷. Behind his mocking tone, Montaigne is suggesting that curiosity is closely

² This article reprints the text of a lecture delivered at the University of São Paulo (USP) on September 18, 2018 during a session organized by Professor Sergio Cardoso at the Department of Philosophy. The article is a revised version of a paper that first appeared as "A passion for free minds. The honneste curiosité in Montaigne and Charron", in PAGANINI, Gianni (Eds.), *Curiosity and the Passions of Knowledge from Montaigne to Hobbes*. Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei/Bardi Edizioni, 2018.

³ On this point, I agree with Michel Adam's "Plaidoyer pour Charron". Adams's work presents Charron's theoretical activity as a "philosophie baroque" (p. 210), emphasizing its importance for early modern philosophy, ranging from morality to religion and politics. ADAM, Michel. "Plaidoyer pour Charron". In *Études sur Pierre Charron*. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1991. p. 185-224.

⁴ Our quotations are from Charron's *Sagesse*. Cf. CHARRON, Pierre. *De la Sagesse*. De Negroni B. (ed.). Paris: Fayard, 1986.

⁵ Our quotations are from Montaigne's *Essais*. Cf. MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Les Essais*, Villey P. (ed.). Paris: PUF, 2004.

⁶ On Montaigne's philosophy of passions, see FERRARI, Emiliano. *Montaigne: une anthropologie des passions*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014.

⁷ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 486.

related to the cognitive powers of the human mind, exceeding in intensity and extent those of animals. If man is an animal among others, and for Montaigne this is the case, man is nevertheless the “only” animal showing a great range of thinking and imagining possibilities. Animals are able to think and imagine, but only man, Montaigne claims, can array his representations in a free and unbound way to form notions of “truth” and “falsehood”, “being” and “not being”⁸. These are the cognitive bases of human curiosity, the so-called “advantages” which have, in turn, corresponding damaging effects.

In chapter 34 of the first book of *De la Sagesse*, which covers the “Seconde consideration de l’homme, qui est par comparaison de luy avec tous les autres animaux”⁹, Charron takes up the Montaignian theme of the ambivalence of man’s advantages over animals that present, at the same time, disadvantages. If men really do have something more than animals – “principalement la vivacité de l’esprit et de l’entendement, et les grandes facultéz de l’ame”¹⁰, they are subject to plenty of troubling affections and behaviors from which animals are exempt, including curiosity: “inconstance, irresolution, superstition, soin penible des choses à venir, ambition, avarice, envie, curiosité, detraction, mensonge, un monde d’appetits déreglez, de mécontentemens, et d’ennuis”¹¹. In the wake of Montaigne, Charron stresses the cognitive roots of curiosity, associating it with the particularities of the human mind¹².

By considering curiosity as a human passion, together with ambition, jealousy, desire, anxiety over the future and so on, Montaigne and Charron offer clear indications on how to understand its origin and nature. In their respective works, both draw upon the epicurean division of man’s desires, postulating the existence of a kind of desire produced by opinion and fantasy, that is to say by the judgment and the use of representations. This is the case for “curiosity” that we can call, after Montaigne, a “passion of the soul”. While Montaigne and Charron do not build a theory or a definition of curiosity – Charron defines

⁸ “S’il est ainsi que luy seul, de tous les animaux, ait cette liberté de l’imagination et ce deresglement de pensées, luy representant ce qui est, ce qui n’est pas, et ce qu’il veut, le faux et le veritable, c’est un avantage qui luy est bien cher vendu et duquel il a bien peu à se glorifier, car de là naist la source principale des maux qui le pressent: peché, maladie, irresolution, trouble, desesper” (MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 460). If Montaigne suggests here some kind of “difference” between man and animal, this is not an “essential” one and by no means involves the ideas of excellence or the perfection of man. This difference concerns the major complexity and intensity of the cognitive powers of man in regards to those of the animal: it is a difference in degree that assumes a basic continuity. On this point, see my article “L’homme en general: remarques sur l’anthropologie de Montaigne et Hobbes” (2016, p. 29-30) In FERRARI Emiliano, GONTIER, Thierry. (ed.) *L’Axe Montaigne-Hobbes Anthropologie et politique*. Paris: Garnier, 2016. p. 23-45.

⁹ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, I, 34. *Op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. For that reason, Charron argues: “La conclusion de cette comparaison est que vainement et mal l’homme se glorifie tant par dessus les bestes” *Ibidem*.

¹² Thomas Hobbes will inherit this anthropological thesis on curiosity, denying this passion to animals, cf. HOBBS, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Addison Gaskin J. C. (ed.). Oxford, 1998, I, 3, 5, p. 17 and I, 6, 35, p. 37. This topic goes across early modern thought - see for example the critic of Hobbes’s position in Montesquieu’s *Pensées*, p. 288 (quoted In: GOLDSCHMIDT, Victor. *Anthropologie et politique. Les principes du système de Rousseau*. Paris: Vrin, 1974. p. 205.

many passions other than this one –, it is easy to find in their works passages providing an accurate representation of its main features.

For both authors, curiosity primarily means the desire for knowledge. In this sense, its ceaseless investigation makes it the proper passion of the human mind. In the “Apologie” Montaigne writes: “il est malaisé de donner bornes à nostre esprit: il est curieux et avide, et n’a point occasion de s’arrester plus tost à mille pas qu’à cinquante”¹³. This conception of the human mind as perpetual motion and overflowing energy is recurrent in the *Essais*, and sometimes carries negative nuances: “Nostre esprit est un util vagabond, dangereux et temeraire; il est malaisé d’y joindre l’ordre et la mesure. [...] En l’estude, comme au reste, il luy faut compter et regler ses marches, il luy faut tailler par art les limites de sa chasse”¹⁴. In the third book of the *Essais*, the human spirit is described as “insatiable, vagabond et versatile” (III, 13, 1106) and as a “dangereux util en desreglement” (III, 5, 879). These reflections inspire some of Charron’s pages on the operations of the human mind¹⁵. If Charron lingers briefly on traditional praise in honor of the excellence of the human mind and its advantages¹⁶, he explores with greater attention the limits of the mind, offering a description of it “à son desavantage”. The mind – i.e. the joint activities of reason, *ingenium* and judgment – is now presented as a restless cognitive power, a “très dengereux outil”, an “agent perpetuel sans repos”, “aussi universel qui se mesle partout, il n’a point de sujet ny de ressort limité” and “il est prompt et soudain”¹⁷. The mind’s core activity is to research and enquire without rest: “Son action est tousjours quester, fureter, tournoyer sans cesse comm’ affamé de sçavoir, enquérir et rechercher”¹⁸.

In accordance with this first and fundamental connotation, we can understand curiosity as a cognitive activity with an emotional cause: the endless motion of the human mind towards knowledge and inquiry and, at the same time, the insatiable desire motivating it. Both authors also stress the need for directing and ruling the inquisitive power of the mind (“ranger”, “brider”, “contourner”, etc.), which, if neglected, may have harmful consequences for human beings.

In Montaigne’s *Essays*, but not in Charron’s *Sagesse* as far as I know, we find some reflections highlighting two other aspects of the “passion studieuse” that is curiosity. The first considers the effective and positive relation between curiosity of the human mind and

¹³ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 560.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 559.

¹⁵ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, I, 14. *Op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹⁶ If the human mind can be considered, metaphorically, as an “image de Dieu” et an “esclair celeste”, at the same time Charron adds a skeptical caution writing that these expressions are no more than plausible words (“ce sont tous mots plausibles” CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, I, 14. *Op. cit.*, p. 133).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 133-135.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

the progress of the sciences and the arts. Curiosity is presented as a precious and fruitful passion having concrete benefits for human life:

Il est malaisé de donner bornes à nostre esprit: il est curieux et avide, et n'a point occasion de s'arrester plus tost à mille pas qu'à cinquante. Ayant essayé par experience que ce à quoy l'un s'estoit failly, l'autre y est arrivé, et que ce qui estoit incogneu à un siecle, le siecle suyvant l'a esclairey, et que les sciences et les arts ne se jettent pas en moule, ains se forment et figurent peu à peu en les maniant et pollissant à plusieurs fois [...].¹⁹

Furthermore, curiosity is the passion characteristic of the “esprit genereux” in its ceaseless struggle for further knowledge and inquiry. “Ce n'est rien que foiblesse particuliere qui nous faict contenter de ce que d'autres ou que nous-mesmes avons trouvé en cette chasse de cognoissance [...]. Il n'y a point de fin en nos inquisitions [...] Nul esprit genereux ne s'arreste en soy: il pretend toujours et va outré ses forces”²⁰. The second aspect concerns the emotional nature of curiosity. In the *Essais*, the “curiosité de sçavoir”, the “estude” and the “recherche” are presented as mental activities taking place in a “chasse à la vérité” described as “une occupation plaisante [...] qui vient de l'exercitation de l'esprit” and gives a real pleasure – “le plaisir à la chasse” or “le plaisir de [...] chercher”²¹.

Another set of considerations shared in part by our authors on the nature and effects of curiosity deals with the particular relationship of curiosity to temporality. In the *Essais*, curiosity refers to the time to come²², since this passion deals with objects and purposes that are in the near or distant future, existing only through the imaginative projection of human desire and fear. In most cases, these considerations have a moral aim,

¹⁹ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 560. *Ibidem*, p. 560-561. In this same passage, which can be considered a phrase of the progress of the human mind, Montaigne goes on to link the collective dimension of inquiry, its projection into the future, and the accumulation of knowledge for posterity. This confident and positive attitude that Montaigne expresses towards knowledge and research is usually neglected by critics.

²⁰ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, III, 13. *Op. cit.*, p. 1068. Let us consider the passage in *Essais*, III, 13, 1068. Together with this fruitful use of curiosity, we find a futile one associated with affectation, theoretic subtlety and obscurity of language. In this case, philosophical theories resemble fictions and inventions that nonetheless feed into the curiosity of the human mind, no matter their truth and usefulness, for what counts is the pleasure of research, even the most vain and empty: “Pourquoi non Aristote seulement, mais la plus part des philosophes ont affecté la difficulté, si ce n'est pour faire valoir la vanité du subject et amuser la curiosité de nostre esprit, luy donnant où se paistre, à ronger cet os creux et descharné ?” (MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 508, emphasis is mine). In the first edition of the *Sagesse* (1601), Charron considers that when dogmatic philosophers affirm a truth in their books, it is only a question of aspect and words. They get pleasure in entertaining their spirit in agreeable and subtle inventions, titillating at the same time our curiosity: “Et qui croira que Platon aye voulu donner sa republique et ses idées, Pithagoras ses nombres, Epicure ses atomes pour argent contant? Ils prenoyent plaisir à promener leurs esprits en des inventions plaisantes et subtiles, quæ ex ingenio finguntur, non ex scientiæ vi. Quelquesfois aussi ils ont estudié à la difficulté, pour couvrir la vanité de leur subject, et occuper la curiosité des esprits” (CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, II, 2. *Op. cit.*, p. 389; inspired by MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 508, 511-512).

²¹ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 510; *Ibidem*, p. 507; *Ibidem*, 510; *Ibidem*, p. 511.

²² Curiosity of the past is an active passion in the *Essais* – Montaigne's appetite, for example, for ancient moral literature and philosophy –, but it is the future that characterizes the temporary dimension of curiosity on which Montaigne meditates.

for they work as psychological arguments that our authors – especially Montaigne – oppose to the Stoic practice of *praemeditatio malorum* (anticipation of adversity). In Stoic ethics²³, to master fear and pain we must foresee the potential threats of life, and prepare ourselves for the possibility that they should really occur. Montaigne strongly disagrees, for this practice appears to him as a disease of the spirit, which, instead of curing and strengthening the subject, makes him sick and weak. “A quoy nous sert ceste curiosité de preoccuper tous les inconveniens de l’humaine nature, et nous preparer avec tant de peine à l’encontre de ceux mesme, qui n’ont à l’avanture point à nous toucher?”²⁴.

Charron will take up these reflections in Chapter 39 of the First Book of the *Sagesse*, seeing them specifically as a sign of human “misery”. He sees most of the troubles afflicting human beings as nothing but fancies, or imaginary evils that the mind prolongs and intensifies. By means of memory, the mind extends the evils of the past, and, in “anticipation de l’advenir”, those of the future. In the chapter devoted to divination and prediction, Montaigne defines this aspect of curiosity as anticipation and prediction of the future: “La forçenée curiosité de nostre nature, s’amusant à preoccuper les choses futures, comme si elle n’avoit pas assez affaire à digerer les presents”²⁵. According to Montaigne, medicine is representative of such a movement of anticipation and prediction (“prognostique”) which belongs to all sciences, natural and moral: “Ce que je dy de la medecine, se peut tirer par exemple generalement à toute science”²⁶. In describing this movement towards the future, Montaigne unites the passion of curiosity with typical human emotions such as “la crainte, le desir, l’esperance”, thus projecting man into the future and giving him “la prevoyance et sollicitude de l’advenir” (see chapter I, 3, “Nos affections s’emportent au delà de nous”)²⁷.

In Montaigne and Charron’s works, we also find significant observations about the proximity and the distance of curiosity to other human passions. Firstly, and perhaps under the influence of Augustinian thought, Montaigne associates curiosity and glory, that is the desire for fame and greatness that results from excessive self-love or presumption²⁸.

²³ On this topic, see HADOT, Pierre. *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995. p. 212-213.

²⁴ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, III, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 1050. On the moral meaning of these reflections see the entire passage in *Idem*, p. 1050-1052.

²⁵ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 11. *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

²⁶ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, II, 12. *Op. cit.*, p. 491.

²⁷ This moral topic, inherited by Charron (see CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, I, 37. *Op. cit.*, p. 235), is a leitmotif of Montaignian anthropology and will have important outcomes in early modern philosophy (on this point, see FERRARI, Emiliano. *Montaigne: une anthropologie des passions*. *Op. cit.*, p. 201-218; p. 238-256).

²⁸ In book X of Augustine’s *Confessions* the passion of curiosity has two dimensions. The first is bodily, depending on the eyes: it is a lust of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*) which takes delight in forms and colors of natural and artificial objects (*voluptas oculorum*). The second, beginning with the eyes, is a lust of the soul (*concupiscentia animae*) which takes delight not in the senses and pleasures, but in making experiments and knowing (*experiendi noscendique libidine*). This is what Augustine calls *uana et curiosa cupiditas*. It is worth noting that the analyses of curiosity are contiguous to

“La gloire et la curiosité – Montaigne writes –, sont les fleaux de nostre ame. Cette cy nous conduit à mettre le nez par tout, et celle là nous defend de rien laisser irresolu et indecis”²⁹. But unlike Augustine, Montaigne is interested in the epistemological (not theological) consequences of the pair “gloire-curiósite” at the origin of human “dogmatism”, with its pretention to fix the limits of knowledge upon certain, definitive principles, thereby excluding every possibility of doubt and irresolution. The link between curiosity and presumption appears again in the “Apologie of Raimond Sebond” (II, 12, 544) to qualify the extreme self-confidence of scholars and pedants, who claim to know things that are beyond the powers of human reason (in particular, nature, soul and God). Nevertheless, this does not imply a general condemnation of curiosity, as in the tradition of *vana curiositas*, but rather suggests the need for an oriented and critical use of it. At the opposite of moral and intellectual curiosity is the passion of “nonchalance”, which has a positive significance in the *Essais* in its expression of simplicity, indifference, and lack of constraints³⁰. In particular, Montaigne seems to oppose it to the Greek notion of *polypragmosyne* (“Jamais homme – Montaigne says about himself – ne s’enquist moins et ne fureta moins és affaires d’autruy”), that is the tendency to meddle indiscreetly in others’ affairs, which Plutarch describes and condemns in his treatise *De curiositate*³¹.

In the *Essais* and, in their wake, the *Sagesse*, curiosity is also associated with harmful behaviors and affections, threatening both individual and social lives. Curiosity, along with subtleness and knowledge, may provoke “malice” and dissipate innocence, humility and goodness from the human heart (II, 12, 498). At the same time, curiosity in the sense of refinement and sophistication is associated with a taste for “delices” and “oysiveté”, qualities that are rarely present in the “ames simples et populaires” (III, 5, 852)³². This moral connotation is amplified by Charron in the third book of the *Sagesse*, which assimilates curiosity with “luxe”, “desbauche”, “superfluité en vivres, en habillemens,

those of pride and vain-glory, passions falling under the theologically deplorable category of self-love, by which man turns away from God toward the natural world and its creatures. See AUGUSTINE. *St. Augustine’s Confessions*, v. II. London: Loeb Classical Library, 1988. Book X, chapters 34-39.

²⁹ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 27. *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

³⁰ Montaigne seems here to prolong the Aristotelian and scholastic *topos* of the two opposite vices of *negligentia* and *curiositas*, where the virtuous mean is represented by *studiositas*. See KENNY, Neil. *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 42-43, note 52. Nevertheless there is an important difference: Montaigne does not consider “nonchalance” as a vice, rather, one could say, he practices a sort of “curiosité nonchalante” (for an attempt to link these two passions in Montaigne, see BOUDOU Bénédicte; CERNOGORA, Nadia. *Montaigne et la curiosité nonchalante. Camenae*, n. 15, 2013. <<http://www.paris-sorbonne.fr/article/camenae-15>>.

³¹ On this point, see for example ROOSE, Alexander. Le remède est dans le mal: Montaigne lecteur de l’essai Sur la curiosité de Plutarque. *Nouveau Bulletin de la Société Internationale des amis de Montaigne*, I, 2007. p. 85-96. and BASSET, Bérengère. De la πολυπραγμοσύνη à la curiosité: réception du traité de Plutarque De la curiosité à la Renaissance. *Camenae*, n.15, 2013. <<http://www.paris-sorbonne.fr/article/camenae-15>>.

³² Montaigne is speaking of the conditions of a good marriage. See also CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, I, 46. *Op. cit.*, “Du mariage”, p. 307, (where the association of “delices”, “curiosité”, and “oysiveté” is seen as a source of trouble and inconstancy in marriage).

volupté, meurs, et maniere de vivre licentieuse”³³. Mindful of Montaigne’s lessons on the dangers of “delicatesse” for personal health, Charron condemns “la repletion des viandes, la diversité, curiosité, l’exquis et artificiel appareil”, relating them to excess of gluttony and drunkenness and their damaging effects for the body and the soul³⁴. Let us note, finally, the stereotypical association of curiosity with suspicion and jealousy in female behavior³⁵ as well as the idea that curiosity favors choleric reactions due to the anxiety raised by the desire of finding and knowing what is pursued³⁶.

2. Educating the “*honneste homme*”

In this last section, I will deal with the value and function that Montaigne and Charron give to curiosity in their moral science, notably in the training of the “*honneste homme*”. In fact, the expression “*honneste curiosité*” appears at a crucial point in their work, when they come to consider the education of the young man³⁷. In order to understand the ethical meaning and scope of “*honest curiosity*”, we must place the educational thought of Montaigne and Charron in its cultural context, starting with their criticism of pedantry³⁸. Since Charron’s debt towards Montaigne is remarkable on this point, I will confine myself to the broad outlines of education in the *Essais*.

The pedagogical ideas of Montaigne, his *paideia*, are partially inspired by the rejection of dogmatic and authoritarian pedagogical models that he denounces under the name of “*pedantisme*” or, rephrasing the poet Du Bellay, “*sçavoir pedantesque*” (*Essais*, I, 25, 133). In these terms, Montaigne designates a particular conception of knowledge and describes the way of using and relating to it, which is embodied by the erudite schoolmaster, the *magister*. For this figure, knowledge is a ready-made object, a set of

³³ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, III, 2. *Op. cit.*, p. 572.

³⁴ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, III, 39. *Op. cit.*, “Du manger et boire, abstinence et sobriété”, p. 789.

³⁵ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, III, 5. *Op. cit.*, p. 869-871; CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, III, 35. *Op. cit.*, “Contre la jalousie”, p. 778.

³⁶ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, I, 25. *Op. cit.*, “De la colère”, p. 182. Curiosity is among the causes of anger: “Curiosité trop grande, qui nimis inquirat, se ipsum inquietat: c’est aller, quæstus, et de gayeté de cœur se jeter en la cholere, sans attendre qu’elle vienne, sæpe ad nos ira venit, sæpius nos ad illam”.

³⁷ See MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 26. *Op. cit.*, “De l’institution des enfants”; CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, II, 9. *Op. cit.*, “Se bien comporter avec autrui” and *Ibidem*, III, 14, “Devoir des parens, et enfans”.

³⁸ This is a major topic occurring throughout Renaissance humanism and early modern philosophy to be found in various authors and works with different meanings and scopes. The global framework of my analyses is inspired by the classical work of GARIN, Eugenio. *L’Educazione in Europa (1400-1600): problemi e programmi*. Laterza: Bari; 1957. For a presentation of Montaigne’s pedagogical thought, see FERRARI, Emiliano. “Michel de “Montaigne”. In: *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Educational Thinkers*. PALMER-COOPER, J. A. (ed.). Oxon-New York: Routledge, 2016. In the wake of Rabelais, Montaigne and Charron, the criticism of pedantry is also commonplace in seventeenth-century treatises on the “*honnête homme*”, whereby traditional and encyclopedic knowledge is privileged to form a man of action, and not a scholar. On this point, and in particular on Nicolas Faret’s *L’honnête homme ou l’art de plaire à la Cour* (1630), see BURY, Emmanuel. *Littérature et politesse. L’invention de l’honnête homme (1580-1750)*. Paris: 1996.

notions requiring rote learning based on the cumulative study of classical authors and doctrines. Montaigne deplors this way of studying and learning for three reasons: first, it fills memory but leaves empty “l’entendement et la conscience” (I, 25, 136); second, it does not train critical judgment but indeed corrupts it; third, this kind of knowledge is inert, fruitless, and unable to serve the practical purposes of human life. Driven by vanity (“pour cette seule fin d’en faire parade, d’en entretenir autrui”, I, 25, 136), and the pleasure of subtlety and affectation (“subtilité sophistique”, I, 26, 171; “la recherche des frases nouvelles et de mots peu cogneuz”, I, 26, 172), schoolmasterish erudition results in the profound inability to think critically and autonomously, and to rid one’s thinking of the idolatry of *tradio* and the supremacy of the *autoritates*.

The pedant embodies a kind of disordered and ineffective curiosity that Montaigne calls “maladive curiosité” (II, 12, 511) or “temeraire avidité de science” (I, 26, 164), that can be understood as a search for and a production of knowledge devoid of any benefit for human life – “ny alimentant ny salutaire” (II, 12, 511). To put it succinctly, “pedantisme” makes men more learned but not more able³⁹. It is worth noting that the reference made to utility, practice and the conduct of life in both the *Essais* and the *Sagesse* accentuates their role as criteria and tools to limit and reorient, in the correct direction, the curiosity to learn and inquire.

In the “Preface” of the *Sagesse*, Charron has severe words for the pedant, whom he considers the critical target of his book. “Tels esprits faibles de nature, preoccupez, enflez, et empeschez de l’acquis [i. e. of what they have learned through school and study], comme ennemis formels de sagesse, je fay la guerre par exprez en mon livre, et c’est souvent sur ce mot de pedant” (p. 39)⁴⁰. His reasons echo Montaigne’s. They both condemn the pedant’s inability to make good use of knowledge, as well as his pride and corruption of judgment and mind under the weight of formalisms, doctrines and authorities. The pedant is considered by both as the exact opposite of the wise man, who searches and uses knowledge to improve himself in the attempt to learn to live well. As the result of a sick and vain curiosity, pedantry degenerates the true values and goals of study and knowledge. What are then these values and goals according to Montaigne and Charron, and how should they be realized?

The *Essais* and the *Sagesse* contain many passages on the real worth of science and literature and the difference between the wise man and the pedant, or the learned man.

³⁹ “À la mode dequoy nous sommes instruits, il n’est pas merveille si ny les escoliers ny les maistres n’en deviennent pas plus habiles, quoy qu’ils s’y facent plus doctes” MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 25. *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ In the *Petit traicté de sagesse* (1th ed. 1606, posthumous), written by Charron in response to criticisms of the *Sagesse* upon its publication, we find the same opposition between the wise man and the pedant (see chapter 3, in CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse. Op. cit.*, p. 848-854).

For Montaigne and Charron, the main goal of education is to train men to live in the world, not to be a specialist of this or that discipline. Declaring his pedagogical and moral intention, Montaigne writes: “nous [...] cerchons icy, au rebours, de former non un grammairien ou logicien, mais un gentil’homme”⁴¹. The significance of the classical tradition, with its vast legacy of authors and doctrines, is surpassed by the crucial purpose of studying and learning in intellectual and moral education: the making of a “teste bien faite” instead of “bien pleine” (*Essais*, I, 26, 150). The core of Montaignian “liberal arts” is not represented by the *trivium* but by the ancient Delphic and Socratic injunction of knowing oneself, reinterpreted as a path towards moral and intellectual freedom. Speaking about the education of the young man⁴², Montaigne writes: “il me semble que les premiers discours dequoy on luy doit abreuver l’entendement, ce doivent estre ceux qui reglent ses meurs et son sens, qui luy apprendront à se connoistre, et à sçavoir bien mourir et bien vivre. Entre les arts liberaux, commençons par *l’art qui nous faict libres*”⁴³.

If moral training is the cornerstone of the development of judgment and critical thinking, this does not imply that academic learning is useless. It is just an additional step. “Après qu’on luy aura dict ce qui sert à le faire plus sage et meilleur, on l’entretiendra que c’est que Logique, Physique, Geometrie, Rhetorique; et la science qu’il choisira, ayant desjà le jugement formé, il en viendra bien tost à bout”⁴⁴. Liberal arts education occurs later, once the behavior and judgment of the young man have been trained. I cannot examine here the crucial question of the fashioning of manners and judgment in the *Essais*, which would require a book apart. Summarizing, we may say that forming an “honneste homme” involves the practice of self-knowledge, the study of moral philosophy, history and literature (poetry, drama, narrative), as well as conversing, travelling, and exercising the body. It is within this context that Montaigne introduces the topic of the “honneste curiosité” that Charron resumes in the *Sagesse*, further specifying its moral significance.

As Tullio Gregory notes⁴⁵, the experience of the diversity, the discovery of the plurality of intellectual and moral worlds, civilizations and religions, is a fundamental feature of Montaigne and Charron’s thought. The education of the “honneste homme” is

⁴¹ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 26. *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁴² It should be recalled that for Montaigne, and also Charron, young man means a young “noble” man of the 16th century who is usually more devoted to arms than to literature. The pedagogical thought exposed by Montaigne in chapter I, 25 and I, 26 of the *Essais*, requires a social aim: to produce a new ethics for “gentlemen” capable of reconciling action and reflection, honor and ethics, by means of training and documenting the mind in line with practical and mundane needs. Thinking of the ideal education of the noble man, Montaigne also declares his personal way of educating and forming his mind by a method of life-long learning based on reading, writing, judging, doubting, travelling, and so on. This pedagogy is at the origin of the secular ideal of humanity called the “honnête homme” by French authors of the 17th century. We will return to this important issue later.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 159, emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

⁴⁵ GREGORY, Tullio. *Genèse de la raison classique, de Charron à Descartes*. Paris: PUF, 2000. p. 118-119 et *passim*.

alimented by such diversity. The variety of opinions, feelings and values expressed in the ordinary life of individuals, nations and cultures allows the development of free and critical thinking, and an awareness of the limits of human rationality and its intellectual frameworks. It is by means of these philosophical reflections that Montaigne comes to focus on curiosity and its function in the education of the honest man. Let us examine this short and key passage from chapter I, 26 of the *Essais* followed by another one of the same chapter. Thinking on the training of the young man, Montaigne writes:

Qu'on luy mette en fantasie *une honeste curiosité de s'enquerir de toutes choses*; tout ce qu'il y aura de singulier autour de luy, il le verra: un bastiment, une fontaine, un homme, le lieu d'une bataille ancienne, le passage de Caesar ou de Charlemaigne [...].⁴⁶

Au nostre, un cabinet, un jardin, la table et le lit, la solitude, la compaignie, le matin et le vespre, toutes heures luy seront unes, toutes places luy seront estude: car la philosophie, qui, comme formatrice des jugements et des meurs, sera sa principale leçon, a ce privilege de se mesler par tout.⁴⁷

As we can see, the “honest curiosity” involves an increased functioning of judgment, far beyond the time and place devoted to study and learning. As the essayist writes in chapter I, 50, “De Democritus et Heraclitus”, every field of experience offers possibilities for exercising judgment. As the power to examine, observe, ponder and discern the ideas and objects of experience, “judgment” can be applied everywhere – “Le jugement est un util à tous subjects, et se mesle par tout”⁴⁸. As we will see, to observe and judge everything without being attached to it is also one of the distinctive features of Charron’s ethics.

Resuming the Montaignian pedagogy of the “honneste homme”, Charron states frequently that his book addresses the “sage”, the “honneste”, the “habil” (*Sagesse*, III, 14, 686), and not the clergy or the learned men. Yet, in framing these thoughts in a methodical theoretic construction, Charron highlights their meaning and pushes their moral scope far beyond Montaigne’s intentions. In particular, I think that his assessment of Montaigne’s “honneste curiosité” and its commonalities with the major topics of his own moral thought, help us outline the significance of this passion in the arising “science of the honest” of the seventeenth-century, which owes much in general to Charron’s work⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 26. *Op. cit.*, p. 156, emphasis is mine.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

⁴⁸ MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essais*, I, 50. *Op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁴⁹ We call “science of the honest” the complex set of philosophical, moral, political and esthetical ideas and values that inform the reflections of the writers who will develop the culture of the *honnête homme* and its pedagogy during the *âge classique*, roughly from Montaigne and Charron to the chevalier de Méré. On this major topic of the Seventeenth-century French culture and society, see MAGENDIE, Maurice. *La Politesse mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté en France au XVII^e siècle, de 1600 à 1660*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925, 2 vol.; BURY, Emmanuel. *Littérature et politesse. L'invention de l'honnête homme (1580-1750)*. *Op. Cit.*; and POSNER, David. M. *The Performance of Nobility in Early Modern European Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. On the importance of the Italian books of

In book III, chapter 14 of the *Sagesse*, devoted to the “Devoir des parens, et enfans”, Charron develops a comprehensive discussion of the most suitable forms and methods to “former l’esprit, dresser le corps, [and] regler les meurs” of the young man⁵⁰. Mindful of Montaigne’s lesson, Charron has no doubts about the first educational principle: “Le premier chef d’iceux est, comme avons dict, d’exercer, esguiser, et former l’esprit”, or, in other words, “former bien le jugement”⁵¹. For this purpose, education must promote the student’s experience of the diversity of life through travelling, conversing, reading books and stories from all epochs and nations. It is within this moral context that Charron introduces the “advis sur la curiosité honeste”, giving to that passion a highly educational value for the human mind and judgment. Listing the four rules defining “la procedure et formalité, que doibt tenir l’instructeur dela jeunesse”⁵², Charron writes:

Secondement il doit le [i.e. the young man] duyre et façonner à *une honneste curiosité de sçavoir tout*: par laquelle premièrement il aye les yeux par tout à considérer tout ce qui se dira, fera, et remuera à l’entour de luy, et ne laisser rien passer, qu’il ne juge et repasse en son esprit; puis qu’il s’enquiere tout doucement des autres choses tant du droit, que du fait. Qui ne demande rien ne sçait rien, dit on: qui ne remue son esprit il s’enrouille et demeure sot: et de tout il doit faire son profit, l’apliquer à soy, en prendre advis et conseil, tant sur le passé pour ressentir les fautes qu’il a fait, que pour l’advenir, afin de se regler et s’assagir. Il ne faut pas laisser les enfans seuls resver, s’endormir, s’entretenir: car n’ayans la suffisance de se fournir matiere belle et digne, ils se paitront de vanité: il les faut embesongner et tenir en haleine, et leur engendrer *cette curiosité qui les pique et reveille*: laquelle, telle que dit est, ne sera ny vaine en soy, ny importune à autruy.⁵³

As was already the case for Montaigne, the main objet of inquiry for “honest curiosity” is the potentially unbounded field of life. The focus is on developing acuity of observation and analysis, and learning to record and scrutinize in one’s surroundings, all that is said and done. This passage somehow foreshadows the mundane and social curiosity of the seventeenth-century French moralists, beginning with La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyere, up until the anatomists of human life that will follow⁵⁴. What matters here is the fact that Montaigne and Charron consider curiosity as an inspiration for training judgment and the mind, that is to say as a precondition for wisdom. It should be noted that in shaping the

manners and behaviors – starting with *Il Corteggiano* by Castiglione (1528) – for the elaboration of the “honnête homme”, see RICCI, Maria. T. *Du Cortegiano au Discreto: l’homme accompli chez Castiglione et Gracián. Pour une contribution à l’histoire de l’honnête homme*. Paris: Champion, 2009.

⁵⁰ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, III, 14. *Op. cit.*, p. 682.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 685-686.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 696-697.

⁵³ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, III, 14. *Op. cit.*, p. 698, emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ See on this point PARMENTIER, Béangère. *Le siècle des moralistes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000; VAN DELFT, Louis. *Les moralistes. Une apologie*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008.

positive meanings and uses of “curiosity”, Charron is aware of the negative semantic legacy of the word. That is why he needs to point out that honest curiosity stands out from the traditions of *vana curiositas*⁵⁵ (the search for useless and futile knowledge) and of *polupragmosune* (the tendency to meddle in others’ affairs)⁵⁶. As he clearly states: “cette curiosité [i.e. the “honest curiosity”] ne sera ny vaine en soy, ny importune à autruy”⁵⁷.

Moreover, in chapter 9 of book two, Charron notes that in the ordinary affairs of life – “le commerce ordinaire du monde”, i.e. non-selective social relationships occurring in travel, business and daily meetings – one must “avoir une douce et honnête curiosité de s’enquerir de toutes choses, et les sçachant les mesnager, et faire son profit de tout”, and, at the same time, “employer en toutes choses son jugement”⁵⁸. The passion of honest curiosity, also designated as “sweet” here, is presented as an affective force that supports and increases the freedom of judgment. In comparison to Montaigne, Charron appears more aware of the difficulties of carrying out such a rehabilitation of curiosity, demarcating “honest curiosity” from moral and religious traditions.

My thesis is that in describing and presenting the passion of the “honneste curiosité”, Montaigne and more so Charron, bestow upon it a crucial function in the training of the *honnête homme* through the cultivation of its principal qualities: universal mind and freedom to exercise judgment. If curiosity without judgment belongs to the learned man, freedom of judgment and honest curiosity distinguish the wise one.

Our analysis of Montaigne and Charron’s works clearly demonstrates that both authors distinguish curiosity from the moral and religious traditions of *vana curiositas* and *polupragmosune*, and thus give it new meaning and scope. Yet, there is also further evidence to argue that Charron marks this discontinuity more clearly and legibly. First, in both the second and third books of the *Sagesse*, the advice regarding honest curiosity is always preceded or followed by several considerations about the freedom of the judgment and the wide array of its accompanying cognitive activities. If we compare Charronian

⁵⁵ On the medieval meanings and uses of curiosity, see OBERMAN, Heiko. A. *Contra vanam curiositatem: Ein Kapitel der Theologie zwischen Seelenwinkel und Weltall*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974; PETERS, Edward. *Libertas inquirendi and the vitium curiositatis in Medieval Thought*. In: *La Notion de liberté au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident*. MAKDISI, G., SOURDEL, D., SOURDEL-THOMINE, J. (ed.). Paris: PUF, 1985. p. 89-98.

⁵⁶ For a survey of this topic in Greek and Latin literature, see LABHARDT, André. *Curiositas*. Notes sur l’histoire d’un mot et d’une notion. *Museum Helveticum*, n. 17, 1960, p. 206-224; LEIGH, Matthew. *From Polypragmon to Curiosus. Ancient Concepts of Curious and Meddlesome Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁵⁷ Charron is aware of the fact that his discourse on the “honest curiosity” is caught in a traditional network of oppositions that have a strongly theoretical and moral impact. For that reason he stresses carefully that the “honneste curiosité” stands out from them. On the most diffused semantic antinomies associated to “curiosity” in early modern culture (*bona-mala, sana-noxia, pia-impia, utilis-inutilis*, etc.), see for example KENNY, Neil. *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe. Word Histories*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998, in particular chapter 5, “Neighbors of ‘Curiosity’ in early modern discourse”.

⁵⁸ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, II, 9. *Op. cit.*, p. 503.

formulations of the “honest” curiosity to know, judge and examine everything with the “universelle et plaine liberté de l’esprit, tant en jugement qu’en volonté” of the second book (*Sagesse*, II, 2, 385), we realize that the two notions are more than linked, they are almost equivalent. As with honest curiosity, freedom of the mind requires the consideration, judgment and examination of everything without attachment, thus keeping the mind free, universal and open: “juger de toutes choses, n’espouser ny ne s’obliger à aucune, demeurer universel et ouvert à tout”⁵⁹. This attitude of the mind is, for Charron, a fruitful “disposition” to wisdom.

But the condition for keeping this freedom of judgment, “c’est d’avoir un esprit universel, jettant sa veuë et consideration sur tout l’univers”, which is another way of saying a mind driven by an *honneste curiosité*. This is the most appropriate and true privilege of the wise man: “Le sage jugera de tout, rien ne luy eschappera qu’il ne mette sur le bureau et en la balance” (*Ibid.*, 392). Judging and examining everything⁶⁰ through the lens of an active doubt while maintaining judgment in suspense: these are for Charron the main dispositions of wisdom or *sagesse* – dispositions that cannot exist, as Montaigne taught, without educating the self to an “honneste curiosité”.

As these analyses suggest, Montaigne and Charron’s reconsiderations of curiosity play an essential role in the process of its reevaluation from vice to virtue so characteristic of early modern European culture⁶¹. Associating curiosity with virtue and wisdom and ridding it of traditional evaluations as vice or sin, Montaigne and Charron change the moral framework of this “passionate behavior”, reassigning it to an ethical field. Building on ancient dichotomies, they create a new form of “good curiosity” as a tool for fashioning and training the “honnête homme”. Placed at the forefront of the emerging culture of the “politesse mondaine” with its new ideal of civilization, curiosity acquires the status of a moral virtue, an essential disposition to wisdom and good life⁶².

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⁵⁹ CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, II, 2. *Op. cit.*, p. 386.

⁶⁰ That is to say, judging and examining everything apart from the “revealed truths”, which one must receive with humility and submission, lowering his head and arresting the inquisitive motion of the mind (CHARRON, Pierre. *Sagesse*, II, 2. *Op. cit.*, p. 388).

⁶¹ I agree with Neil Kenny’s principal thesis: “The sixteenth and especially the seventeenth century saw an overall (but by no means total) reversal of the pejorative evaluation of ‘curiosity’ that had prevailed for centuries. This reversal is empirically verifiable: the relative proportion of positive rather than pejorative occurrences of *curiositas* was now higher than in antiquity and the Middle Ages” (KENNY, Neil. *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe. Word Histories. Op. cit.*, p. 44).

⁶² It is this moral and social dimension of curiosity that is neglected by Hans Blumenberg in his famous and classical work, which is focused on the study of the “theoretical curiosity” (theoretische Neugierde) of the philosopher or the scientist (see BLUMENBERG, Hans. *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966, the third part).

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