Outline of the *Apology*\(^1\)

I. Prologue: knowledge is very valuable, though sometimes esteemed too highly. F, 319

II. Pierre Bunel’s recommendation of Sebond to Montaigne’s father. His natural theology as an antidote to Lutheranism and the atheism to which it leads. Montaigne’s filial duties and mixed feelings about Sebond. F, 319-21

  Note: Lutheranism is supposed to be dangerous because it destroys respect for authority, which was the only basis people had for their beliefs. Undermining authority leads to skepticism, which in turn leads to atheism. But Montaigne's 'defense' of Sebond will advocate radical skepticism. How can this help?

III. First objection to Sebond: Christians are wrong if they try to support their faith by human reason. F, 321.

  Note:\(^2\) Sebond's *Natural Theology* was apparently written c. 1430 and circulated widely in ms. before it was finally printed. It had already been translated into French in 1551. It was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1558-59, apparently because its Prologue was thought to make stronger claims for human reason than the Church considered orthodox. Specifically, Sebond claimed that

  This science teaches everyone really to know, without difficulty or toil, every truth necessary to Man concerning both Man and God; and all things which are necessary to Man for his salvation, for making him perfect and for bringing him through to life eternal. And by this science a man learns, without difficulty and in reality, whatever is contained in Holy Scripture.

  Montaigne's translation of this passage (publ. 1569) moderated Sebond's claims:

  This science teaches every one to see clearly, without difficulty or toil, *truth insofar as it is possible for natural reason*, concerning knowledge of God and of himself, and of what he has need of for his salvation and to reach life eternal; *it affords him an access to understanding what is prescribed and commanded* in Holy Scripture.

  The emphasis here is due to M. A. Screech.

IV. Reply: Initial statement of fideism. It’s true that human reason is incapable of enlightening us about religious truth, but we should use whatever gifts God has given us, always remembering that faith depends, not on us, but on divine grace. F, 321.


VI. Restatement of fideism. The value of Sebond. By themselves the arguments are barren. But when faith illumines them it makes them solid. F, 326-327.

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\(^1\) I’ve constructed this outline to help students (and myself) find their way through the apparently trackless maze of Montaigne’s *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. It was inspired by, and to some extent follows, previous outlines by Donald Frame (in his translation) and David Lewis Schaefer (in his *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne*). ‘F, 319’ refers to the pagination in Frame’s translation.

\(^2\) I owe the information in this note to M.A. Screech's introduction to his translation of the *Apology*, Penguin, 1993, pp. xi-xiv.
Note: This is, I think, the only passage in Montaigne's *Apology* which tells us anything about what Sebond's arguments actually were.

VII. Second objection to Sebond: his arguments are weak. F, 327.

Note: There's an important but puzzling statement here about the tendency people have to interpret other men's works in accordance with their own prejudices. In particular, readers predisposed to atheism are inclined to misread works innocent of atheism as atheistic. It's not clear what the argumentative point of this statement is.

Perhaps Montaigne is replying to critics of Sebond who charged him with atheism, on the ground that he had encouraged atheism by offering bad arguments for theistic belief. Sebond did make very strong claims for his arguments, and we can imagine a reader responding: these arguments are very poor; if they're the best theists can do, then theism must be, at best, unsupported by reason, and at worst, simply false. Note that Montaigne has previously said (F, 320) that he doesn't think it's possible for anyone to give better arguments for theism than Sebond has given. On this reading, Montaigne would be defending Sebond by claiming that those critics who see his arguments as leading to atheism must have a predisposition in favor of atheism.

Perhaps, though, Montaigne is making a preemptive strike against people who might criticize his own work as leading to atheism. We've already seen one possible ground for that criticism (above, Note to §II). On this reading Montaigne would be defending himself, not Sebond. (These alternative readings do not seem mutually exclusive.)

VIII. Reply: we must crush human arrogance and pride; unaided reason is worthless; Sebond’s arguments may be weak, but they are no worse than anyone else’s. F, 327-418

A. In praise of animals. Their abilities, both intellectual and moral, often equal or surpass ours. F, 330-358.

Note: This portion of the *Apology* is great fun to read, and interesting in its own right, as an antidote to Pico's "Oration," but doesn't seem to me to contribute substantially to Montaigne's overall argument. So I may cut it from the final version of the work. I would welcome advice about that.

B. In praise of folly (1). Man’s knowledge cannot make him happy. The ignorant often have more satisfactory lives than the learned. F, 358-367

Note: In titling this and the following section I am deliberately inviting a comparison with Erasmus. These sections seem very much in his spirit.

C. In praise of folly (2). Man’s knowledge cannot make him good. "Curiosity is the natural and original evil in man." F, 367-370

Note particularly the statement: "To Christians it is an occasion for belief to encounter something incredible. It is the more according to reason as it is contrary to human reason." (F, 368) This suggests a very strong form of fideism: that faith requires belief, not merely in propositions which reason cannot prove or even make probable, but in propositions which reason can *disprove* or at least make highly improbable. I believe this very strong form of fideism – let's call it *radical fideism* – is now regarded as heretical in the Catholic Church.
Whether or not that's true, you can see why radical fideism might be thought to encourage atheism. If someone holds that Christian belief requires you to go, not merely beyond reason, but against reason, he is apparently asking for a sacrifice of rationality which some people might not be willing to make.

Montaigne's pyrrhonism, which is still to be defined, might make radical fideism unnecessary. If the principle of equipollence holds, then reason can't make Christian doctrine even improbable.

D. Man has no knowledge and cannot attain knowledge.  F, 370-418.
Note: this very long section of the work seems to reverse the assumptions which have governed the argument of sections VIII.B and VIII.C, which evidently took knowledge to be possible and merely denied the claim made in the Prologue (§I), that knowledge is valuable, even if overrated.

1. Introduction to pyrrhonism, distinguishing it from dogmatism and academic skepticism. F, 371-375
Note the special meaning attached to the term dogmatism. Anyone who makes any claim to certain knowledge in the sciences counts as a dogmatist. This includes three of the major ancient schools of philosophy: the Peripatetics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. Presumably, though Montaigne does not say this explicitly, it would also include the scholastics, to the extent that they follow Aristotle. Montaigne does not mention Plato here, but later statements (e.g., at F, 377) suggest that he would not count Plato as a dogmatist.

Pyrrhonism is defined by its goal of not making any judgments whatever, apparently because the pyrrhonists find that for any question they consider, the arguments in favor of one answer to the question seem to be as strong as, but no stronger than, the arguments for rejecting that answer. Cf. the quote from Cicero on F, 373. This is what is known as the principle of equipollence. If pyrrhonism is not to be self-refuting, it must treat the principle of equipollence not as a judgment of how things are, but as a statement about how things seem to the pyrrhonist. The pyrrhonist goal of suspending judgment does not require them to refrain from saying how things seem.

Note the reference to Aristotle as "the prince of dogmatists." We get a nice statement here of one of Montaigne's central arguments for skepticism: The widest field for reprehensions of philosophers among one another is derived from the contradictions and differences in which each one of them finds himself entangled, either on purpose, to show the vacillation of the human mind around all matters, or unwittingly, forced by the mobility and incomprehensibility of all matters. (F, 378)
One question we will need to discuss is whether the fact of persistent disagreement among those who claim to have certain knowledge indicates that no party to the dispute has certain knowledge.

3. Vanity and variety of philosophical opinions

a. Concerning God and immortality (F, 380-400)
   Of particular interest in this section are several passages suggesting that a proper appreciation of God’s infinite power would diminish our confidence in various truths philosophers have usually regarded as necessary and a priori certain. These include: the principles that nothing is made of nothing, that God cannot die, that he cannot go back on his word, that he cannot make 2 x 10 be more or less than 20, etc. (F, 389-393, passim) These foreshadow Descartes’ deceiving God hypothesis and his doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths.
   Also of interest here are the long account of what human reason (= Epicurus?) might say to Plato about the immortality of the soul (F, 385-86) and Montaigne’s use of the liar paradox to cast doubt on basic principles of logic. (F, 392)

b. Concerning our knowledge of man and nature. (F, 400-18)
   Of particular interest in this section is Montaigne’s return to the subject of the human soul and its claim to immortality, which seems to conclude that only faith teaches us that we are immortal, that reason teaches our mortality. (F, 405-417)
   Also important are the discussions of the mind-body problem (F, 402-03) and of the problem of identifying principles which can legitimately be taken as first principles (F, 403-405)

IX. Warning to the Princess: pyrrhonism is a dangerous and desperate remedy. F, 418-20
   Here we learn that Montaigne has been writing this work for an unnamed Princess, who is supposed to favor Sebond. Modern scholarship seems agreed that the princess was Margaret of Valois. Particularly noteworthy here is Montaigne’s concession that pyrrhonism is a dangerous weapon to use in defending orthodoxy.

X. Man can have no knowledge, not even the limited, probabilistic knowledge claimed by moderate (academic) skepticism (F, 420-436)

A. Moderate skepticism stated: we have limited knowledge, based on sense perception; though we cannot have certainty, we can at least make distinctions of probability; and we can make progress in knowledge. (F, 420-21)

B. Moderate skepticism rejected: how can men judge likeness to truth if they do not know truth? men are in agreement about nothing; the fact that opinions are constantly changing (both in the individual and in the scientific community) shows that our cognitive faculties
are unreliable; our opinions depend on the state of the body and the passions of the soul; the philosophers disagree about everything, but especially the sovereign good. (F, 421-436)

Note: In the text I circulated I made the break between X.A and X.B come on F, 422, and had §X.B start with the words "The position of the Pyrrhonians..." On reflection I think the rebuttal of academic skepticism really starts a bit earlier, on F, 421, beginning with the words "Man is as capable of all things as he is of any..."

XI. Doubts about pyrrhonism? “What then will philosophy tell us in our need?... I cannot have my judgment so flexible.” F, 436-437

Note: Here Montaigne addresses a classic problem for pyrrhonist philosophers, how can the skeptic live his skepticism? Living our daily lives seems to require us to make judgments about what the truth is. (If I step forward, am I going to go off the precipice which seems to be in front of me?) The classic pyrrhonist solution was to follow custom or the laws of your country. Montaigne seems here to have reservations about that solution.

There is a typo in the first full paragraph on F, 437: for it prince read a prince

XII. Back to pyrrhonism. (F, 437-443)

XIII. On the senses as a basis for knowledge. If there is knowledge, it must come from the senses. But perhaps we lack senses we might have had, senses which would give us a different picture of the world than we have with our existing perceptual apparatus. They might give us knowledge of qualities we now call occult. They might correct perceptions we have on the basis of our existing senses (as we sometimes use one existing sense to correct another). Examples of perceptual error. There is no agreement between us and the animals, or among ourselves. (F, 443-54)

XIV. The problem of the criterion and other foundational issues. (F, 454-455)
The senses cannot decide our disputes: "To judge the appearances that we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle."

But neither can reason, since the appeal to reason leads to an infinite regress.

XV. Changing man can know neither changing things, nor unchanging God. (There are two typos in the circulated subheading for this section.)
Both we and the putative objects of our knowledge are constantly changing (God excepted). Under such conditions we can know nothing. After the first paragraph this is an extensive quotation from Plutarch. (F, 455-57)

XVI. Conclusion: Man is nothing without God. He can overcome his human limitations only with divine assistance.