

Beyond “Plain Death”: Montaigne’s Dialectic of Cruelty and Virtue

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Abstract. The assertion that “Even in justice, all that goes beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty” , put forward by Montaigne in his essay *On Cruelty*, lies at the heart of his reflections on violence and morality. At present, academic studies on Montaigne’s views of cruelty are scattered across three disconnected strands: “the ethics of punishment”, “the cultivation of virtue”, and “psychological mechanisms”. These separate approaches have failed to clarify the inherent connections among “cruelty, virtue, and cowardice”. By analyzing three texts—*Of Cruelty*, *Cowardice*, *the Mother of Cruelty*, and *Of Cannibals*—and combining them with their historical context, this paper argues that Montaigne uses “plain death” as the criterion to distinguish between legitimate punishment and cruelty. Cowardice serves as the psychological root that drives people to cross this line and commit cruel acts, while virtue functions as a practical defense against such “cowardice-driven cruelty”. This integrated analysis not only clarifies the dialectical relationship between cruelty and virtue centered on the concept of “plain death” but also fills the gaps in existing research, thereby providing a historical reference for contemporary discussions on humanitarianism.

Keywords: Michel de Montaigne, plain death, cruelty, virtue, moral dialectics

1. Introduction

During the French Wars of Religion in the sixteenth century, violence was not just an occasional act of war. Instead, it was institutionalized, rationalized, and woven into judicial and governance systems. Punishments like public executions, torture interrogations, breaking on the wheel, and burning at the stake deliberately prolonged the suffering of convicts, and were seen as necessary to uphold order and deter the public [1,2]. Against this historical backdrop where “inflicting pain” was deemed justifiable, Montaigne made a provocative argument in *Of Cruelty*: “Even in justice, all that goes beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty” [3]. This statement does not oppose punishment itself; rather, it tries to draw a clear ethical line between “justified violence” and “unacceptable cruelty”. Unlike the mainstream practice of the time that treated cruelty as a political tool, Montaigne clearly stated that once punishment exceeds “plain death”—a swift, non-torturous deprivation of life—it is no longer justice, but pure cruelty.

Scholars have approached this judgment from several directions. Some studies interpret “plain death” as an early expression of humanitarian punishment, emphasizing Montaigne’s moral criticism

of the torture system and framing his ideas as a precursor to modern thoughts on humane punishment [1,4]. Others focus on virtue ethics, highlighting how Montaigne defined virtue through “self-restraint” and “resisting passion”, and viewed cruelty as a vice to be tamed via moral cultivation [5,6]. Additionally, some researchers take a psychological and human nature approach, noting Montaigne’s insight into the links between fear, insecurity, and violent behavior in Cowardice, the Mother of Cruelty [7,8]. However, these three research paths mostly develop in isolation, with little systematic dialogue between them.

Against this fragmented scholarship, the present article raises three interrelated questions. First, how does Montaigne’s standard of “plain death” define cruelty within its specific historical context and function as a systematic critique of institutionalized torture in the sixteenth century? Second, between cruelty that transgresses the boundary of plain death and virtue that upholds it, what psychological and ethical mediating role does cowardice play? Third, if “plain death—cruelty—cowardice—virtue” is treated as an integrated analytical framework, can it bridge the divisions in existing research between penal ethics, moral cultivation, and psychological mechanisms?

The core argument of this paper is: in Montaigne’s thought, “plain death” is an ethical benchmark for judging cruelty; cowardice is the psychological root that drives people to cross this benchmark; and virtue represents an active practical capacity to resist cruelty driven by fear. Together, these three elements form an internally coherent moral logic rather than a collection of disconnected insights.

Methodologically, the article combines close textual analysis with historical contextualization. It focuses on three essays—Of Cruelty, Cowardice, the Mother of Cruelty, and Of Cannibals—and places Montaigne’s judgments in dialogue with sixteenth-century European practices of torture and punishment. Structurally, the article begins with a literature review that maps the three dominant strands of existing scholarship and identifies their lack of integration, before turning to a textual analysis that reconstructs the internal logic linking plain death, cowardice, and virtue.

Academically, by taking “plain death” as the ethical core and “cowardice” as the mediating link, this paper builds a systematic analytical framework for Montaigne’s dialectic of cruelty and virtue, filling the gap in existing research that fails to integrate punitive, ethical, and psychological perspectives. Practically, Montaigne’s emphasis on “plain death” as the limit of legitimate punishment echoes modern humanitarian law’s ban on torture, offering historical resources for contemporary reflections on regulating state violence.

2. Literature review

Studies on Montaigne’s views of cruelty can be generally categorized into three relatively independent yet interrelated strands: first, research on penal ethics and institutional criticism centered on “cruelty”; second, studies on moral cultivation and self-restraint focused on “virtue”; and third, analyses of psychological mechanisms surrounding “cowardice” and “fear”. Each strand sheds light on a distinct facet of Montaigne’s thought, but precisely because they have developed in isolation, the inherent logical connections among “cruelty, virtue, and cowardice” have long failed to be systematically clarified. This section will review these three research paths in turn and summarize their common limitations.

2.1. Cruelty

In the field of penal ethics research, scholars widely regard Of Cruelty as Montaigne’s most direct political and moral text. Screech [1] argues that Montaigne’s aversion to torture was not emotional,

but rather an institutional critique grounded in reason and moderation, aiming to curb the expansion of legitimate violence. Quint [4] further emphasizes that this ethical stance was not an anarchist call for the abolition of the death penalty, but a principle defining the boundaries of punishment, intended to stop the infliction of pain and cycles of revenge in the name of justice.

Researchers have also conducted analyses from a historical and intellectual history perspective. Montaigne is often situated within the context of the Renaissance “anti-torture” movement and regarded as a crucial revisionist of medieval views on punishment [9]. Although Montaigne did not systematically propose a penal reform plan, his criticism of torture is seen as foreshadowing the emphasis on “necessary punishment” by Enlightenment thinkers such as Beccaria [6]. Nevertheless, such studies place more emphasis on the ideological and political contexts of his thought, and rarely explore why Montaigne believed that humans would actively cross this ethical boundary.

2.2. Virtue

The second strand of research focuses on Montaigne’s conception of virtue. Starobinski [5] points out that Montaignean virtue was not a natural product of perfect rationality, but a continuous “process”, whose value lay precisely in the dynamic resistance to suffering and passion. From an existentialist perspective, Bakewell [7] emphasizes that Montaigne understood virtue as a “practice of coexisting with one’s own weaknesses”, rather than eliminating such weaknesses. Building on this, Hartle [10] systematically analyzed Montaigne’s thought from an ethical perspective, arguing that his conception of virtue was founded on “skepticism”: since individuals no longer blindly follow external dogmas, they must regulate their inner impulses through constant “self-trial”. This view of virtue as a reflective habituation has led some researchers to regard Montaigne as a modern heir to the Stoic tradition [11]. Hadot argues that the classical philosophical emphasis on “philosophy as a way of life” aligns perfectly with Montaigne’s reflections on resisting harmful impulses through spiritual exercises.

However, such studies often remain at the level of individual psychology or self-cultivation, and rarely examine how virtue plays a normative role in specific contexts of violence or punishment. For example, they do not fully answer the question: how does virtue operate concretely in a historical context of violence? This has resulted in the topic of virtue often being divorced from discussions of concrete violence ethics.

2.3. Cowardice

Compared with the previous two strands, discussions of Cowardice, the Mother of Cruelty are fewer in number, but their theoretical potential is gradually gaining attention. Todorov [8] points out that Montaigne’s explanation of cruelty did not resort to “inherent evil”, but instead emphasized the role of fear, insecurity, and power anxiety in the formation of violence. Similarly, Desan [6] argues that Montaigne revealed the psychological motivations behind political violence through the concept of “cowardice”.

Research in psychology and the philosophy of emotions has also provided relevant perspectives. In her analysis of emotions and ethics, Nussbaum [12] notes that fear, as a basic emotion, exerts complex influences on ethical judgment, which resonates with Montaigne’s observations on fear and cowardice. In addition, modern social psychology holds that unstable power is often accompanied by fear-driven overreactions [13], which provides interdisciplinary support for understanding Montaigne’s connection between cowardice and cruelty. Nevertheless, existing studies mostly treat “cowardice” as scattered psychological insights, rather than integrating it into the systematic

analysis of penal ethics or virtue theory, resulting in an ambiguous position of “cowardice” in the overall theoretical framework.

2.4. Summary

To sum up, existing research has outlined the basic contours of Montaigne’s views of cruelty from three perspectives: institutional ethics, personal cultivation, and psychological mechanisms. However, their core limitation stems precisely from this fragmented research approach: cruelty is treated as an institutional issue, virtue as a matter of private self-cultivation, and cowardice as a mere psychological explanation, with a lack of systematic integration among the three.

It is within this research gap that this paper unfolds: by taking “plain death” as the ethical core and “cowardice” as the psychological link, it reinscribes cruelty and virtue within the same analytical framework. This integration not only lays a theoretical foundation for the textual analysis in the subsequent sections, but also helps to more comprehensively understand how Montaigne simultaneously contemplated violence, morality, and human nature.

3. Textual and contextual analysis

Having clarified the theoretical fragmentation of existing research, this part shifts to a close textual and historical contextual analysis, systematically reconstructing the inherent logic of Montaigne’s thoughts on cruelty, virtue, and cowardice. Instead of treating *Of Cruelty*, *Cowardice*, the *Mother of Cruelty*, and *Of Cannibals* as isolated essays, this section reads them as a coherent chain of ideas: first, Montaigne defines cruelty through the criterion of “plain death” and launches a fundamental challenge to the institutionalized torture of his era; second, he further investigates why humans would cross this line, attributing cruel acts to cowardice and fear; finally, he proposes virtue as a practical capacity for self-restraint to resist such cowardice-driven cruelty. This section will unfold this logic step by step, starting with the establishment of “plain death” as an ethical benchmark.

3.1. “Plain death” as an ethical benchmark: defining cruelty

Before discussing cruelty, Montaigne first puts forward not an emotional condemnation, but a seemingly calm yet highly subversive ethical criterion—“plain death”. The significance of this criterion does not lie in denying the legitimacy of punishment, but in setting an inviolable lower limit for it. As Quint [4] points out, Montaigne did not oppose the state’s exercise of necessary authority; instead, he opposed the transformation of such authority into excessive rigor in the name of “justice” or religion. By introducing “plain death”, Montaigne attempts to answer a more fundamental question: when does just punishment turn into pure cruelty?

3.1.1. Textual evidence

Montaigne’s most iconic statement in *Of Cruelty* is the frequently cited judgment: “even in justice, all that goes beyond plain death seems to [him] pure cruelty” [3]. The key to this sentence lies not in “death”, but in “goes beyond”. In Montaigne’s view, death itself signifies the end of life, but torture is the continuous infliction of pain on a still sentient being. The former is a result, while the latter is a process; the former puts an end to sensation, while the latter deliberately exploits it.

This point is particularly evident in his description of Catena’s execution. Montaigne records that when Catena was hanged, the onlookers remained calm; “when they came to quarter him, the executioner struck no blow that the people did not follow with a plaintive cry and exclamation” [3].

Montaigne does not argue that violence against a corpse is more cruel than that against a living person. Instead, he uses this reaction to point out that what is truly unbearable is the imagination of inflicting violence on a “being still regarded as sentient”. This detail reinforces his core argument: the essence of cruelty lies in imposing unnecessary pain on a sentient life.

3.1.2. Historical context

The era when Montaigne wrote was a time of frequent French Wars of Religion, with torture and public executions institutionalized in society. For instance, punishments like burning at the stake and breaking on the wheel were not only legal practices, but also regarded as effective tools to deter criminals. Their purpose was precisely to create deterrence by prolonging suffering [1]. This critique of the “normalization of violence” is deeply connected to the history of early modern penal systems described by Foucault. Foucault points out that in the early stages of modernity, penal systems reaffirmed state authority by displaying physical violence, yet such violence did not necessarily equate to justice [2].

Montaigne personally witnessed the madness of this era. He describes how people took advantage of the license provided by civil wars to “sharpen their wits to invent unaccustomed torments and new forms of death... for the sole purpose of enjoying the pleasing spectacle of... a man dying in anguish” [3]. This quotation reveals the essence of violence at that time: it was no longer a simple judicial punishment, but a “spectacle” that took pleasure in inflicting pain. Desan [6] further notes that Montaigne’s critique was not based on an impulse of sympathy, but on a profound vigilance against the abuse of power—when the state needs to prove its authority through torture, it precisely exposes its internal insecurity. It was against this context of power that Montaigne proposed the boundary of “plain death”, emphasizing how the manner of violence determines its ethical value.

3.1.3. Theoretical significance

Treating “plain death” as the ethical benchmark for defining cruelty not only forms the core logic of Montaigne’s critique of violence, but also points out a crucial ethical issue: the legitimacy of violence does not depend on whether it results in death, but on whether it inflicts additional suffering. This criterion rejects the widespread acceptance of torture’s legitimacy in his society, which explains why later researchers often regard Montaigne as an important precursor of humanitarian thought on punishment [14]. However, merely drawing a boundary is insufficient to explain a key question: if this boundary is so clear, why do humans repeatedly cross it? Montaigne did not stop at defining “what cruelty is”; instead, he further asked “why humans are cruel”. To answer this question, we must shift our focus from the penal system to the psychological state of the perpetrators. This is exactly the core topic to be explored in the next section: in Montaigne’s view, the key force driving people to cross the “plain death” boundary and turn to cruelty is not justice itself, but a more hidden yet pervasive psychological mechanism—cowardice.

3.2. Cowardice as the psychological root of cruelty: from text to psychological mechanisms

In the previous section, “plain death” drew a clear ethical line to define cruelty. Yet in reality, this line is frequently crossed. Montaigne clearly recognized that institutional design or moral principles alone cannot explain humanity’s repeated fascination with cruelty. He thus shifted the focus of his analysis from punishment itself to the inner state of the perpetrators. In Cowardice, the Mother of

Cruelty, Montaigne put forward a highly subversive claim: cruelty is not a sign of strength, but often stems from cowardice. This assertion marks a shift in his discussion of cruelty toward the psychological and moral dimensions [1].

3.2.1. Textual evidence

In *Of Cruelty*, Montaigne first denounces cruelty as “the extreme of all vices” [3]. Later, in another essay, he goes a step further to reveal its root cause, stating plainly: “cowardice is the mother of cruelty” [3]. The core of this statement is not to belittle cowardice, but to redefine the motivation behind cruelty. He further describes that the cruellest people often “are prone to crying over trivial matters”, showing that they may appear weak on the surface but are ruthless when faced with others’ suffering. Such descriptions reveal that cruelty does not come from strength, but from fear and weakness. Montaigne even uses the example of Alexander the Great being unable to watch tragic plays to illustrate his point: a person who can engage in extreme violence yet fears confronting emotional experiences is displaying a lack of true “courage”.

3.2.2. Psychological mechanisms

In Montaigne’s view, true bravery means maintaining self-control in the face of danger, suffering, or uncertainty. Cowards, by contrast, cannot bear fear and thus attempt to end their anxiety quickly by inflicting greater pain on others. Montaigne not only points out this psychological phenomenon, but also reveals the vicious cycle it creates: “The first cruelties are practiced for their own sake; thence arises the fear of a just revenge which afterward produces a string of new cruelties, in order to stifle the first by the others” [3].

This quotation is crucial, as it explains why cruelty escalates endlessly: driven by the fear of revenge, perpetrators have to commit new acts of cruelty to cover up the old ones. As Desan [6] points out, Montaigne does not regard cruelty as a result of rational calculation here, but rather as an “out-of-control defensive reaction”. Meanwhile, Montaigne’s link between cowardice and cruelty aligns surprisingly well with later modern psychological research on fear and aggression. Modern social psychology holds that when individuals feel threatened or afraid, aggressive behavior is more likely to be triggered, because aggression is seen as a strategy to “control fear” [15].

By attributing cruelty to cowardice, Montaigne completes a key theoretical shift: cruelty is no longer merely a behavioral or institutional issue, but a failure of moral character. This means that combating cruelty cannot rely solely on external rules; it must also involve the subject’s self-cultivation and emotional management. Colie [16] notes that it is precisely on this point that Montaigne engages in a profound dialogue with the Stoic tradition—bravery is not the absence of fear, but the orderly endurance of it.

3.3. Virtue as the resisting mechanism

If Section 3.1 established the ethical boundary of cruelty, and Section 3.2 explained why this boundary is repeatedly crossed, then the question naturally moves to the next step: when cruelty stems from cowardice, is it possible for humans to cultivate an opposing moral capacity to resist such loss of control? This section will analyze how Montaigne provides a viable ethical path for humanity to resist cruelty through the concept of virtue.

3.3.1. Textual evidence: virtue is not innate, but a struggle

After tracing the root of cruelty to cowardice, Montaigne did not slide into a pessimistic judgment of human nature. On the contrary, he proposed that virtue is a capacity that must be acquired through resistance. This distinguishes his ethical thinking clearly from the simplistic theory of “original goodness of human nature”. Montaigne explicitly stated that true virtue differs from innate kindness; it requires walking a “rough and thorny road” [3]. He argued that perfect virtue is “dependent upon combating pain” [3]. This means that the existence of virtue must take vice as its adversary. If cowardice is surrendering to fear and unleashing violence, then virtue is the process of this “combating”: it demands that the individual face inner fears or violent impulses directly and actively suppress them. This act of self-struggle directly addresses the psychological problem raised in Section 3.2. Cowards, fearing the persistence of threats, need excessive violence to “ensure an end”; by contrast, virtuous people can maintain moderation under pressure, accept the reality of limited control, and do not have to prove their safety through torture. Bakewell [7] points out that what Montaigne advocated is precisely a moral state of maintaining self-mastery in an imperfect world.

3.3.2. Practical orientation

Montaigne’s conception of virtue has a distinct practical orientation. Desan [6] argues that Montaigne did not put forward a systematic set of ethical norms; instead, he repeatedly reminded readers through specific scenarios that every choice of whether to “go a step further” could determine whether an action slides into cruelty. This ethical logic of “less is more” echoes the Stoic ideas of self-restraint and moderation, yet avoids rigid moral idealism [16]. It can be observed that Montaigne’s core contribution does not lie in redefining cruelty or virtue, but in revealing the dynamic relationship between them: when cowardice weakens self-control, humans tend to compensate for their anxiety through cruelty; when virtue exists as a practical capacity, it can prevent transgression from happening at the behavioral level. Screech [1] notes that this ethics centered on self-management keeps Montaigne’s thoughts relevant and explanatory even in the context of modern moral psychology.

3.4. Summary

Through the systematic textual analysis, the third part has constructed a progressive argumentative framework: first, “plain death” draws the minimum ethical boundary for defining cruelty; second, cowardice, as a psychological mechanism, explains why this boundary is repeatedly crossed; and finally, virtue, as a practical capacity, provides a feasible way to resist cruelty. It is evident, therefore, that Montaigne did not regard cruelty as an occasional moral failure, but rather as a behavioral tendency that can be understood, constrained, and even prevented.

This analysis not only clarifies the internal logical consistency of Montaigne’s ethical thought, but also lays the groundwork for further theoretical discussions. The next part will move beyond close textual reading, place this “boundary–cowardice–virtue” framework within the broader traditions of political philosophy and moral psychology, and explore the enduring significance of Montaigne’s ideas for modern issues of power, violence, and ethical restraint.

4. Discussion

In the preceding sections, this paper has reconstructed an inherent argumentative chain consisting of “plain death–cowardice–virtue” through a systematic close reading of three core essays by

Montaigne. This discussion section will move beyond textual analysis and, centering on this reconstructed framework, systematically address four questions: What theoretical gaps has this paper filled in Montaigne studies? How can this framework engage in interdisciplinary dialogue with political philosophy and moral psychology? What implications does it offer for contemporary violence governance and individual moral practice? And finally, what are the limitations of this research and the possible directions for future expansion?

4.1. Theoretical contributions

The core theoretical contributions of this paper are reflected in two aspects. First, this paper explicitly identifies “plain death” as the core concept of Montaigne’s ethical thought, rather than a supplementary judgment. Existing studies have often framed Montaigne’s critique of cruelty as a humanistic emotional stance or incorporated it into early reflections on the torture system [1]. This paper further argues that “plain death” is not an empirical preference for punishment, but an ethical boundary: it defines what constitutes cruelty and simultaneously delineates the scope for the practice of virtue. By virtue of this boundary, Montaigne was able to distinguish between “necessary violence” and “pure cruelty”, thereby endowing his views on punishment with a clear normative structure.

Second, this paper proposes that “cowardice serves as the link connecting cruelty and virtue”, integrating three relatively scattered strands of existing research—penal ethics, moral cultivation, and psychological mechanisms—into a coherent analytical framework. Previous studies have either emphasized Montaigne’s skepticism and ethics of moderation [17] or focused on his depictions of human vulnerability [5], but few have explained why cruelty repeatedly crosses ethical boundaries. By introducing the mediating concept of “cowardice”, this paper reveals the holistic nature of Montaigne’s moral philosophy: his discussions on punishment, virtue, and human nature have always revolved around the core issue of how to resist unnecessary violence.

4.2. Interdisciplinary dialogue

At the level of political philosophy, the analysis in this paper can be seen as a supplement to the theory of “fear and order”. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes identified fear as the foundation of political order, arguing that the fear of death drives individuals to submit to authority, thus avoiding greater violence [18]. However, Hobbes did not adequately distinguish between “fear necessary for maintaining order” and “fear that slides into cruelty through the infliction of suffering”. Montaigne’s criterion of “plain death” precisely fills this gap: when power is no longer content with eliminating threats, but instead seeks to ensure obedience by prolonging suffering, fear transforms from the foundation of order into the motivation for cruelty. This also provides a psychological mechanism explanation for understanding Arendt’s judgment that “instability of power breeds violence”. Arendt pointed out that violence often emerges when power loses its legitimacy or stability [19]. Montaigne’s analysis further reveals that it is precisely in such states of insecurity that cowardice drives power holders to cross the boundary of “plain death” and resort to cruelty to compensate for their own fears.

At the level of moral psychology, the logical chain of “fear–cowardice–cruelty” proposed by Montaigne resonates across time and space with modern psychological theories on aggressive behavior. Berkowitz [15] noted that fear and frustration significantly increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior, especially when individuals feel unable to control threats. Montaigne’s advantage lies in the fact that he not only described this psychological mechanism, but also proposed a solution: blocking the transformation of fear into cruelty through self-restraint in the

practice of virtue. This endows his thought with both descriptive explanatory power and normative guiding significance.

4.3. Implications

In terms of public violence governance, the ethical criterion of “plain death” provides an important perspective for reflecting on contemporary hidden forms of torture. Although modern states have generally abolished public torture, practices such as prolonged solitary confinement and systematic psychological oppression can still inflict sustained suffering without depriving individuals of their lives. Using the criterion of “whether it exceeds plain death” helps to re-examine whether these practices constitute cruelty. This approach also echoes the principle of prohibiting cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [20], providing an ethically profound historical resource for regulating state violence.

In terms of individual moral practice, Montaigne’s understanding of virtue is equally relevant. He did not require individuals to completely eliminate fear, but emphasized avoiding overreactions through rational reflection, distraction, and impulse control. This scheme of “rational self-restraint” offers direct implications for understanding fear-driven everyday violence in contemporary society—such as cyberbullying, group hostility, or the expression of prejudice. It reminds us that cruelty does not always stem from extreme evil acts, but often arises from unperceived psychological loss of control.

4.4. Limitations

Naturally, this paper has certain limitations. First, the research mainly focuses on three core essays by Montaigne and does not systematically explore the influence of his ideas on later penal theories. For example, whether Beccaria’s principle of humane punishment proposed in *On Crimes and Punishments*, to some extent, Montaigne’s vigilance against cruelty remains to be further investigated [21]. Future research can develop along two directions: first, conduct an in-depth exploration of the potential dialogue between the “plain death” criterion, the “cowardice–cruelty” theory, and modern international humanitarian law; second, carry out cross-cultural comparisons to examine whether non-Western intellectual traditions have similar or fundamentally different ethical approaches to understanding cruelty and virtue. Through these expansions, the universality and limitations of Montaigne’s thought can be further tested.

5. Conclusion

This article examines Montaigne’s essays on cruelty, virtue, and cowardice in order to reconsider the internal structure of his moral thought. Through a systematic analysis of the concept of “plain death,” it argues that Montaigne’s opposition to cruelty is not grounded merely in sentiment or humanitarian sympathy. Rather, he establishes a clear ethical boundary for punishment and violence. Any act that exceeds this boundary by deliberately producing suffering causes justice to slip into cruelty.

Building on this foundation, the article further highlights the pivotal role of cowardice in Montaigne’s moral framework. Cruelty, in his view, is not an expression of strength or decisiveness, but a response rooted in fear—specifically, fear of uncertainty and perceived threat. When individuals or holders of power are unable to endure such fear, they tend to resort to excessive violence in order to secure a false sense of safety. In this sense, cowardice functions as the mediating

mechanism between cruelty and virtue: it explains why ethical limits are repeatedly transgressed and, at the same time, points toward a practical path for resisting cruelty.

By contrast, virtue in Montaigne's thought is not a heroic moral ideal but a practical capacity for self-restraint. Through moderating passions and maintaining sensitivity to the suffering of others, virtue operates at the level of action to prevent fear from turning into cruelty. This understanding gives Montaigne's ethics a restrained and pragmatic character: it does not promise the elimination of violence, but seeks to reduce violence that is unnecessary.

By reconstructing the analytical framework of "plain death—cowardice—virtue," this article demonstrates that Montaigne's moral philosophy is not a collection of fragmented reflections, but a coherent body of thought organized around the question of how to resist cruelty. This framework not only deepens our understanding of Montaigne himself, but also offers a historically grounded yet still illuminating perspective for contemporary discussions of state violence, penal ethics, and individual moral practice.

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