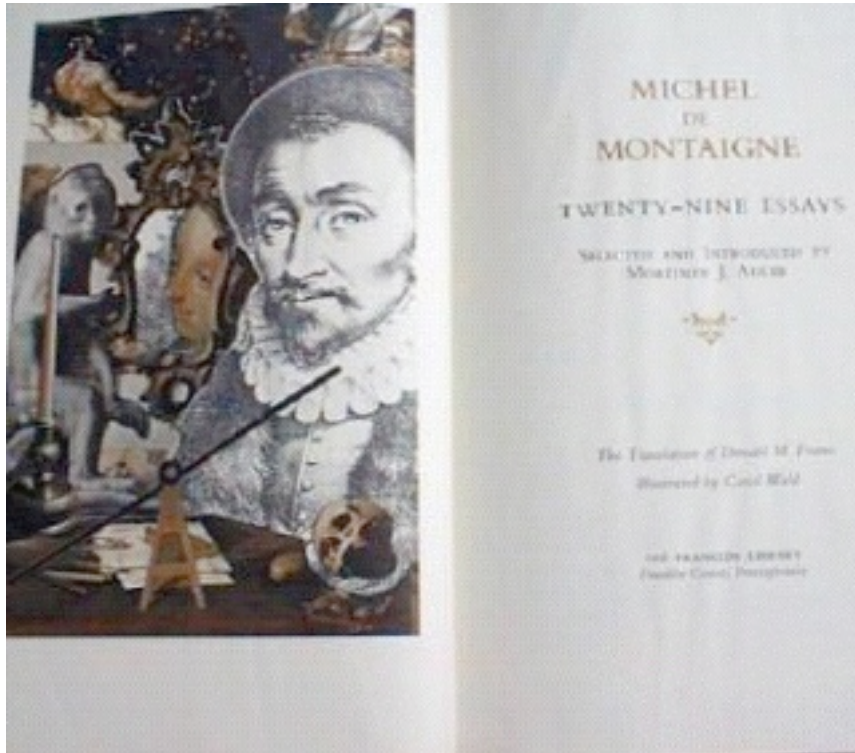


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jun '05

Nº 327



In 1982 Dr. Adler selected *Essays of Michel de Montaigne* which the Franklin Library published as *Twenty-Nine Essays*. Dr. Adler wrote the following Introduction to the book.

INTRODUCTION

If you could not take all of the great books in this series away with you on a long journey, which would you select for the sheer joy of leisurely reading as well as for the gentle stimulation of your mind?

If you were arranging a dinner party to which you could invite only a few of the authors of the great books, who would they be? Which of them would you like to be seated next to as the dinner partner with whom you could engage in conversation?

I have been asked questions of this sort and my answer to them has always been Montaigne. My second choice would perhaps be Plu-

tarch, for among the great books, all of which are worth reading again and again, I have found myself re-reading Montaigne's *Essays* and Plutarch's *Lives* with a larger measure of new surprises and renewed delights. Of the two, I think Montaigne would be the more sprightly conversationalist, more shocking in the questions he would raise, wittier in his rejoinders, and altogether engaging in the manner and substance of his talk.

I would not always agree with his opinions about matters of current or perennial human interest, but I would never dismiss them as unworthy of consideration, nor would I ever find them banal, common-place, or unchallenging. On almost every theme that might arise in the course of a long conversation, he would have delightful and memorable stories to tell, drawn from his own amazingly varied experience of human affairs, peppered by shrewd insights into the vagaries and foibles of human beings. And if I had read the great books written by those authors who preceded Montaigne in time, I would be constantly astonished as well as instructed by his understanding of them, expressed again and again by his extraordinary memory of quotable passages that would throw light on any subject we were discussing.


One volume of this manageable size cannot include all of the essays of Montaigne. The ones that are here selected have been chosen as most representative of the wide range of his thought and the variety of his insights. They are grouped, by topic, into three categories: On Man, On Principle, and On Knowledge and Pride. Most of the essays are very short; a few are more extensive but they remain as pithy and as fast-moving as the shorter ones. In only one case is the essay so long that it is treated as a distinct part of the volume.

That is the essay entitled "Apology for Raymond Sebond," in which Montaigne discusses at length the work of a Christian theologian for whom he had great admiration. Montaigne's discourse is so uninterrupted that it would be a disservice to cut it. What is given here is, therefore, the entire "Apology," in which Montaigne, after explaining his admiration for the treatise by Raymond Sebond, launches into a disquisition on the manifestations of rational thought in the lower animals, which he regards as in striking ways more rational than man. While his views on this subject may be questioned (I, for one, disagree with them), they are so pungently expressed and illustrated by so many fascinating accounts of animal behavior that they can never be forgotten or ignored by anyone who claims, as I do, that man and man alone is a rational animal.

The difference between men and other animals is but one of the subjects currently disputed and widely discussed, to the considera-

tion of which Montaigne makes a timeless contribution. The essays here included range over such other equally current topics of conversation as the problems we face in the education and rearing of children; our perennial concern about the validity and objectivity of our judgments about what is true, good, and beautiful; the extent to which our lives are controlled by the customs of the community in which we live and our tendency to reject customs prevalent in other communities that seem strange and foreign to us; the value of moderation in all things, not only in our desires but also in our judgments, in the making of which we should always exercise the restraints of doubt, often suspending judgment rather than indulging in the excesses of dogmatism; the appeals of friendship and the rewards of virtue; the arguments both for and against a certain measure of idleness in our lives; the role the emotions, especially fear and anger, play in our behavior.

One essay in particular must be mentioned, not only for its exceptional wit and brilliance, but also because of its bearing on our current concern with propriety and impropriety in sexual behavior. That is the essay entitled "On Some Verses of Virgil." It is replete with stories about sexual practices and proclivities that are taboo in some communities while quite acceptable and popular in others. It raises the question whether our judgments about such matters are objective moral judgments or subjective expressions of taste. It touches lightly on the institution of matrimony in its bearing on the line drawn between licit and illicit sex. It gives ample evidence of how diverse, even opposite, are the features that men and women find sexually attractive in different climes and at different times.

In this essay, as well as in many of the others that have been alluded to, Montaigne reveals himself as a comparative cultural anthropologist centuries before that discipline came into existence as a branch of scientific knowledge in our universities. At the same time, and probably for that very reason, he also reveals himself as a gentle but persistent skeptic about blindly accepted shibboleths and prejudices. If one had to characterize his philosophy of life, one would be inclined to describe his thought as a strange mixture of stoicism and pragmatism. But no better summary of the whole collection of his essays can be given than the one Montaigne gives in his preface, when he says that he is himself the subject of his book, adding that there is no reason why the reader should "spend his leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject." On the contrary, there is every reason, for each of us is in turn the subject of his book. The way in which Montaigne exhibits his understanding of himself also enables us to understand ourselves better. 



LEISURE AND RETIREMENT

Mortimer J. Adler

Retiring Does Not Mean One Should Sit and Let Mental
Strength Vanish and Muscles Grow Weak

Leisure time can be spent in many profitable and stimulating ways, but sometimes it is often wasted in less important activities.

After a hard day at work you come home to putter around in your workshop, tend to the garden, or settle back in an easy chair with a good mystery. The television set is your constant companion. Your wife spends her spare time with the women's club playing bridge or planning a bazaar.

All these are fine in moderation, but they are only recreational activities meant to help us physically relax from the pressures and

fatigue of work. Too often, leisure time means time-to-kill, and spare time is spent in some unimportant, trivial way.

The true activities of leisure time are the cultural and intellectual pursuits which are intrinsically good. They help to enrich our lives, ennoble our minds, and contribute to the society in which we live. We earn a living in order to have the means to engage in these activities which are some of the most rewarding and satisfying goals in life.

What happens to you when overnight your free time becomes virtually unlimited? What happens when you retire?

For a while it feels wonderful to be free from the nagging, everyday responsibilities that might have plagued you before. There's a sense of relief at not being under the strains and demands of work. You can take the golf lessons you've wanted so much, bring out the old paint set that's been tucked away in the closet, and even see the afternoon ball games. You'll finally be free to do whatever you desire.

Sometimes it hits you suddenly, other times it's a slow realization. You find yourself missing the intellectual stimulation that work gave. At times business might have been highly annoying by taking up so much time, but your mind was actively engaged in its problems and demands.

It is then you discover that leisure time, in fact life itself, without mental and intellectual nourishment can become dull and boring.

Everyone knows that to keep a body alive you must feed it regularly. No one ever thinks twice about that. You must also exercise it: a body that lies in bed day after day soon atrophies, strength vanishes and muscles grow weak.

What is true of the body is true of the mind. The care and feeding of the mind is just as important as the care and feeding of the body. If the mind is not stimulated and nourished, if it remains unexercised, it grows weak and dull. Just as you know you cannot support the life of your body this week on last week's feeding, so you cannot support the life of your mind on last month's mental nourishment, much less that of last year.

Keeping the mind alive, healthy and growing is a continual process that never stops. It goes on year after year. In fact, the very enjoyment of life is dependent on this perpetual mental stimulation. And the most wonderful thing about retirement is that you are given the

time to do all this exciting learning and living at a stage in life when you are best able to understand and profit from it.

Ceasing to work in the business world is the beginning of a new kind of life, one which can be much more rewarding. Actually, you're just changing one employment for another, far more useful job.

If you go through life before retirement just working at your own profession without developing cultural interests apart from your work, life can indeed become vacant when you achieve the golden opportunity of retirement leisure. The habit of developing these interests can hardly be overemphasized as a factor in the enthusiasm and enjoyment of the second half of life.

When is the best time to cultivate this habit? The earlier the easier; but it is never too late. You never can tell what a stimulating and enjoyable life you're missing unless you try.

Keep up with the world and really develop an interest in life around you. Not just the everyday goings-on of your neighbors, but the events that take place all over the globe. Broaden your horizons by finding out and reading as much as possible about subjects that have never interested you before. Each week hundreds of new books are published that tell about people, places and things that you may not have heard about before.

Perhaps you could choose a course at college in some field totally unrelated to your past work. You can pick anything from anthropology to zoology. The recent launchings of space satellites have sparked a great interest in astronomy and space travel.

Many people have found unsuspected pleasure in going to concerts and attending opera performances, and once introduced to them have begun learning about music and drama.

Once you start exploring, you'll find so many fascinating things to do and learn that it will be a puzzle to you why you never did this before. Throughout our entire lives we should be continually curious and constantly learning about everything this world of ours has to offer.


In other words, when you retire, you're at the best possible stage of life to learn and continue your educational and cultural interests. Being a cultured and educated man or woman is one of the most important and satisfying feelings you can have in life.

Reading the world's greatest literature and ideas and discussing them with your friends is a deeply rewarding, cultural and educational experience, enabling you to grow mentally, morally, and socially at the same time.

Under the Great Books program, many communities have formed groups to discuss the basic writings, philosophies, and ideas that have shaped all of Western Civilization—the basic issues that always have and always will confront mankind.

These discussion groups are an ideal way to spend new found leisure time, a way to nourish the mind and a place for meeting new people and making friends.

Retirement for persons in these groups has taken on a new meaning. A new life lies ahead for those who have the cultural and intellectual interests that challenge their minds, while giving them the opportunity for a new social life.

Such intellectual pursuits have a definite contribution to make not only to those who engage in them but to society as well. Persons no longer producing wealth do not have to regard themselves as socially useless. They are merely shifting from subsistence work to a humanly better type of employment—helping to increase the wealth of human knowledge. 

Originally Published in Eagle, November 1958, pp. 12-13.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Johnson Dunmoye

Scott Monroe

Lisa Mountjoy

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
 Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
 Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
 Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
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