

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

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Michel de Montaigne
(1533 – 1592)

MONTAIGNE: THE ESSAYS

THE GREAT IDEAS PROGRAM

Ethics: The Study of Moral Values

Mortimer J. Adler and Seymour Cain

Eighth Reading

(Part 1 of 3)

MONTAIGNE

The Essays

“That to study philosophy is to learn to die,” “Of moderation,” “Of cannibals,” “That we are to avoid pleasures, even at the expense of life,” “That the relish of good and evil depends in a great measure upon the opinion we have of them,” “Of drunkenness,” “Of cruelty,” “Of glory,” “Of virtue,” “Of anger,” “Of repentance”

Montaigne is one of the most widely read of French authors. Writing in an easy, conversational style about his thoughts and experiences, and reflecting on his particular personality and the events and manners of his own time, he became a universally read writer. There is an appeal in these genial, honest, unpretentious essays that is hard to equal in world literature. And his peculiar matter and manner bring us to an appreciation of man's moral existence which is often more impressive than what we obtain through more sober and systematic works.

Montaigne's general description of how men feel, decide, and act in certain situations, and the intimate details he summons up from his own experience, give us an impression of verisimilitude. We feel that here is a man something like us, describing authentically experiences such as we have had and problems we have had to face. What we get from his writings is the taste of an actual man in the actual world. Montaigne addresses our ordinary condition, our everyday existence.

His affinity with the ancient moralists is indicated by his more or less Stoic doctrine on how to endure the painful aspects of human existence, as well as by his emphasis on reason and will. But his thought is also in the modern temper; indeed, we might label him as the first of the "moderns" in moral philosophy. For one thing, he is keenly aware of the varieties of human manners and morals, which the great age of exploration had revealed. For another, his emphasis on his own personal experience and idiosyncrasies is alien to the ancient mind and congenial to the modern. Also his compassionate horror of cruelty toward fellow men, which was accepted in his time, as well as his belief in the goodness of primitive man—the theme of the "noble savage"—link him with modern trends of thought.

Montaigne emphasizes these moral and intellectual attitudes: moderation, tolerance, compassion, love of peace, gentle irony, an inquiring spirit, and skepticism with regard to absolute judgments.

GUIDE TO

Eighth Reading

Montaigne invented the essay form. "The essay as he gave it," said George Saintsbury, "had no forerunner in modern literature and no direct ancestor in the literature of ancient times." The essay is an open, rambling form, in the mode of personal conversation rather

than of traditional formal literature. It permits an easy, genial camaraderie between author and reader, as the writer pursues a subject in an unconstrained, desultory, even haphazard fashion, without any set plan of what he is going to say, and often with no definite conclusions. The reader is able to participate in the author's tentative gropings, his personal meditations, his "table talk."

Montaigne's writings are notable as the products of a master, as well as the originator, of the essay form. His personal temperament, manner of thinking, and supple literary style fitted him for his creative mastery. He was intensely interested in whatever he read, experienced, and thought, and wanted to set it all down in writing. He was avidly curious about all the varieties and details of human behavior at all times and places. If he had a single subject, it was man—the types and varieties of human motivations, passions, and actions. His tendency to engage in concrete psychological analysis, to discern and describe what actually goes on when we deliberate, decide, are tempted, etc., has been emulated by many other French writers since his time. He was a pioneer in the description of moral consciousness.

Montaigne gets a large part of his material for this analysis from himself, as he confesses in his note to the reader—"it is myself I paint" (p. 1). There are few, if any, writers in *Great Books of the Western World* who use themselves so persistently as their subject matter, or who give us so many details about their own lives in their writings on other subjects. In his note to the reader, Montaigne refers deprecatingly to "so frivolous and vain a subject" (p. 1), but that he actually takes what Saintsbury calls his "meditative egoism" seriously, even and especially for the purposes of moral philosophy, is indicated at the beginning of his essay "Of repentance." His defense there is that Michael de Montaigne embodies the human condition.

Others form man; I only report him: and represent a particular one, ill fashioned enough, and whom, if I had to model him anew, I should certainly make something else than what he is: but that's past recalling.

.....

I propose a life ordinary and without lustre: 'tis all one; all moral philosophy may as well be applied to a common and private life, as to one of richer composition: every man carries the entire form of human condition. Authors communicate themselves to the people by some especial and extrinsic mark; I, the first of any, by my universal being; as Michael de Montaigne, not as a grammarian, a poet, or a lawyer . . . I have this, at least, according to discipline, that never any man treated of a subject he better understood and knew, than I what I have undertaken, and that in

this I am the most understanding man alive: secondly, that never any man penetrated farther into his matter, nor better and more distinctly sifted the parts and sequences of it, nor ever more exactly and fully arrived at the end he proposed to himself, (pp. 388c-389b)

Another characteristic of Montaigne's thought which is revealed in this significant passage is his sense of the changeability of things and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of making absolutely certain statements about anything, particularly about human character and conduct. He wrote a whole book-length piece, "Apology for Raimon de Sebonde" (Book II, Essay 12), dealing with the uncertainty of human reason. In the essay "Of repentance" he accepts this changeability as a condition of his own self-portrait.

Now, though the features of my picture alter and change, 'tis not, however, unlike: the world eternally turns round; all things therein are incessantly moving ... I cannot fix my object; 'tis always tottering and reeling by a natural giddiness: I take it as it is at the instant I consider it; I do not paint its being, I paint its passage . . . from minute to minute. I must accommodate my history to the hour: I may presently change, not only by fortune, but also by intention ... so it is, that I may peradventure contradict myself, but, as Demades said, I never contradict the truth. Could my soul once take footing, I would not essay but resolve: but it is always learning and making trial, (p. 388c-d)

Montaigne lived in an unsettled and troubled time, and he reflects contemporary disturbances in his essays, sometimes commenting on them directly and using them as examples for the points he is making. His fellow Frenchmen were slaughtering one another in a civil war between Catholics and Protestants, which was marked by horrible massacres and tortures. The succession to the throne of France was uncertain and led to a dynastic dispute. The discovery of America had opened up new sources of conflict among the European nations, as well as new vistas in the minds of Europeans as they became aware of new peoples and new lands. Montaigne lived in a transitional era, at the end of the Renaissance and before the advent of the "modern" revolutionary age.

Montaigne's essays have certain characteristics that may prove distracting or irritating if one is looking for a definite doctrine, for instance, a moral philosophy. In the first place, he quotes copiously from the writings of the past, mostly from Greek and Latin authors, to serve as examples of various points of view or as particular instances of some general point he is making. In the second place, he indulges in various digressions from the subject he is dealing with, often without any particular purpose, as he confesses when he recalls himself to the main topic. In the third place, it is often hard to tell just what the main topic of an essay is, since he may start with

one subject and end up with another, and even the title may have little if anything to do with the content of an essay. (The essays in Book III are much more unified than those in Books I-II. See, for instance, the essay “Of repentance.”)

If the reader, forewarned, will be patient and accept Montaigne’s rambling, unconstrained method, he will be rewarded. He will share in the musings of a richly perceptive and keenly intelligent man, who expresses himself with a rare honesty and geniality in some of the most enjoyable writings in the Western tradition. Montaigne himself was intimately immersed in the works and thoughts of the writers of the past, as even a cursory reading of his essays will indicate. Most of the works we have discussed in this reading plan were well known to him and were an essential element in his mental nourishment. It is especially fortunate for an understanding of his moral philosophy that we have already considered Epictetus’ *Discourses*, since Montaigne has a close affinity with the Stoic (and also Epicurean) philosophers. An awareness of this link, for instance, may help us better to understand what Montaigne meant by saying that our judgments of good and bad are influenced by our opinions of things.

The essays that comprise this reading have been selected to bring out the basic principles and themes of Montaigne’s ethical thought and to indicate his agreement or disagreement with the thinkers whom we have previously considered in this reading plan. However, they comprise only a portion of the essays that deal with moral themes. The reader is invited, after finishing these selections, to browse through Volume 25 to discover for himself all that Montaigne has to say about human character and moral action.

II

Some of the essential principles of Montaigne’s moral philosophy, as well as his closeness to the ancient Stoics, are to be found in the first essay in our reading: “That to study philosophy is to learn to die.” The sole end of human reason, says Montaigne, is human contentment, living well, tranquillity of spirit. Virtue enables us “to despise pain, poverty, and the Other accidents to which human life is subject” (p. 2Sd). Above all, it rids us of the worst affliction of all, the fear of death, which is a “perpetual torment” for the unphilosophic and the unvirtuous.

Philosophy paradoxically teaches us to live well by teaching us how to die well, that is, to face death well. Here it differs from common opinion, which advises us to ignore death, not to think about it. Montaigne confesses that he would prefer to follow this

course, but recognizes that it is futile, since death comes inevitably and unpredictably and is most painful for the man who is not prepared for it. The way to overcome and disarm death is to confront it boldly, to become familiar with it, to have it always in one's thoughts. Montaigne advises us to view every accident or mishap, even a pin prick, as a possible death.

Where death waits for us is uncertain; let us look for him everywhere. The premeditation of death is the premeditation of liberty; he who has learned to die, has unlearned to serve. There is nothing of evil in life, for him who rightly comprehends that the privation of life is no evil: to know how to die, delivers us from all subjection and constraint, (p. 31a-b)

He tells how he has methodically disciplined himself to meditate on death, so that what at first brought a twinge of horror and dread has gradually become a familiar idea and image. He is ready to die, without regret, at any moment; this readiness involves a detachment from all relations with others. "Always ... be booted and spurred, and ready to go," he advises, and above all, take care at that time "to have no business with any one but one's self" (pp. 31d-32a).

The main moral aim is to rid the soul of "disquiet, anxiety, or fear, or any other disturbance" (p. 33c). When this is accomplished, the soul becomes

. . . sovereign of all her lusts and passions, mistress of necessity, shame, poverty, and all the other injuries of fortune. Let us, therefore, as many of us as can, get this advantage; 'tis the true and sovereign liberty here on earth, that fortifies us wherewithal to defy violence and injustice, and to contemn prisons and chains, (p. 33c)

Montaigne's main argument against the fear of death, man's greatest fear, is that death is a natural necessity; hence, wisdom lies in accepting it willingly.

"... Your death is a part of the order of the universe, 'tis a part of the life of the world . . . Tis the condition of your creation; death is a part of you, and whilst you endeavour to evade it, you evade yourselves . . ." (p. 34b)

Above all, we must recognize that it is not death which is evil, but not having lived well. It is within our power to make life good or evil. And the goodness and sufficiency of life do not depend on its length.

"Wherever your life ends, it is all there. The utility of living consists not in the length of days, but in the use of time; a man may have lived long,

and yet lived but a little. Make use of time while it is present with you. It depends upon your will, and not upon the number of days, to have a sufficient length of life . . .” (p. 35c)

See also this comment in a latter essay: “ ‘tis the happy living, and not . . . the happy dying, in which human felicity consists” (p. 394c).

This concern with death and the proper way to face it is a theme that runs throughout Montaigne’s *Essays*. (For his view of suicide, see “A custom of the Isle of Cea,” Book II, Essay 3.)

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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