THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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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 2 of 3)

The basic attitude of soul that he espouses in regard to death is more fully developed in the famous essay "That the relish of good and evil depends in a great measure upon the opinion we have of them," a title-theme which Shakespeare rephrased in *Hamlet* as "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Vol. 27, p. 43b). This essay indicates perhaps better than any other, Montaigne's close affinity with the Stoic moral doctrine, as we have seen it expressed in Epictetus' *Discourses*.

The main point in this essay is that we can disregard things that we usually regard as utterly evil—for instance, death, poverty, and

pain—through directing our thought, imagination, and will in a proper manner. Our evaluation of things, Montaigne argues, is in the mind, not in the things.

Men (says an ancient Greek sentence) arc tormented with the opinions they have of things and not by the things themselves. It were a great victory obtained for the relief of our miserable human condition, could this proposition In- established for certain and true throughout. For if evils have no admission into us but by the judgment we ourselves make of them, it should seem that it is, then, in our own power to despise them or to turn them to good. If things surrender themselves to our mercy, why do we not convert and accommodate them to our advantage? If what we call evil and torment is neither evil nor torment of itself, but only our fancy gives it that quality, it is in us to change it, and, it being in our own choice, if there be no constraint upon us we must certainly be very strange fools to take arms for that side which is most offensive to us, and to give sickness, want, and contempt a bitter and nauseous taste, if it be in our power to give them a pleasant relish, and if fortune simply providing the matter, 'tis for us to give it the form. Now, that what we call evil is not so of itself, or at least to that degree that we make it, and that it depends upon us to give it another taste and complexion (for all comes to one), let us examine how that can be maintained, (p. 115b-c)

In this essay Montaigne considers pain, rather than death, as "the worst incident of our being," since it confronts us with something far more immediate than the mental anticipation of death. Our very physical-sensitive nature makes us shrink from pain. But our powers of reason and will enable us, "if not to annihilate, at least to lessen" the pain. The withstanding of pain is one of the chief elements of virtue.

It is the contentment of the soul that matters, and not the suffering of the body. The soul is "the sole and sovereign mistress of our condition" and can be changed in the direction we desire, while the body is unalterably set by natural necessity. Since the soul has

. . . many thousands of biasses ... at her disposal, let us give her one proper to our repose and conservation, and then we shall not only be sheltered and secured from all manner of injury and offence, but moreover gratified and obliged, if she will, with evils and offences . . . Tis plain enough to be seen that 'tis the sharpness of our mind that gives the edge to our pains and pleasures ... (p. 119c)

Reason has been given to us to render us virtuous and happy, not to make us live in fear and anxiety about what may happen to us. We

should not use our great gift of understanding to "lose the tranquillity and repose we should enjoy without it," and to set ourselves "against the design of nature and the universal order of things" (p. 118a). Hence, in dealing with our "fancies" about pleasures and pains, "let us at least help to incline them to the most agreeable side," for, given a disciplined and controlled will, pain "has no more room in us than we are pleased to allow it" (p. 119d).

Montaigne testifies from his personal experience that plenty and poverty are a matter of opinion: he never felt so anxious financially as when be was hoarding a good deal of money, nor so well off as when he was living on borrowed money. He concludes,

> Plenty, then, and indigence depend upon the opinion every one has of them; and riches no more than glory or health have other beauty or pleasure than he lends them by whom they are possessed. Every one is well or ill at ease, according as be so finds himself: not he whom the world believes, but he who believes himself to be so, is content; and in this alone belief gives itself being and reality. Fortune does us neither good nor hurt; she only presents us the matter and the seed, which our soul, more powerful than she, turns and applies as she best pleases; the sole cause and sovereign mistress of her own happy or unhappy condition. All external accessions receive taste and colour from the internal constitution . . . The things are not so painful and difficult of themselves, but our weakness or cowardice makes them so. To judge of great and high matters requires a suitable soul; otherwise we attribute the vice to them which is really our own. A straight oar seems crooked in the water: it does not only import that we see the tiling, but how and after what manner we see it. (p. 124c-d)

Also in line with this Stoic emphasis is the essay "Of glory," in which Montaigne argues against the view that glory, reputation, or public approbation is a good to be prized and sought by virtuous men. He agrees explicitly with the ancient Stoics and Epicureans that the inner awareness of one's virtue should be prized, to the exclusion of public recognition and acclaim. We may divide his argument into a theoretical and a practical part.

He argues theoretically that virtue is essentially an inward thing, a matter of the proper "operation of the soul" which is to be pursued for itself alone. Virtue is its own reward. He argues practically that reputation is a matter of chance, a will-o'-the-wisp, which it is ridiculous to chase at all costs. Besides, public opinion, "the voice of the people," of the ignorant rabble, is not the proper judge of virtue. Reason should be our sole judge and our guide, not "this windy confusion of the noise of vulgar reports and opinions" (p. 303d). Montaigne offers a very practical argument for following this course —that it usually leads to happiness.

> Even though I would not follow the right way because it is right, I should, however, follow it as having experimentally found that, at the end of the reckoning, 'tis commonly the most happy and of greatest utility . . . (pp. 303d-304a)

Montaigne also admits that reputation has certain good side effects, practically speaking, since it brings us good will and protects us from insults; and he is aware of the pragmatic value of glory and honor in stirring men to pursue virtue and to do their duty.

> If this false opinion, nevertheless, be of such use to the public as to keep men in their duty; if the people are thereby stirred up to virtue . . . let it by all means increase, and be as much as possible nursed up and cherished amongst us . . . (p. 306a-b)

However, strictly speaking, there is something ridiculous in putting such great store in external judgments, which are necessarily uncertain and erroneous, in preference to the "certain testimony" of our own self-knowledge. Yet men are so pleased at hearing their names on other men's lips that they are even willing to be talked about in a derogatory way; they do not care what is said about them so long as something is said.

> This is very common; we are more solicitous that men speak of us, than how they speak: and it is enough for us that our names are often mentioned, be it after what manner it will. It should seem that to be known, is in some sort to have a man's life and its duration in others' keeping. I, for my part, hold that I am not, but in myself; and of that other life of mine which lies in the knowledge of my friends, to consider it naked and simply in itself, I know very well that I am sensible of no fruit nor enjoyment from it but by the vanity of a fantastic opinion . . . (pp. 304d-305a)

I I I

Montaigne's insistence on the virtue of being able to withstand or disregard pain is not coupled with any espousal of the virtue of asceticism—quite the contrary. "The main thing at which we all aim, even in virtue itself, is pleasure, "he says in the first essay we considered. (See p. 28b.) The main virtue for him is moderation, which he discusses in the essay "Of moderation."

Any kind of excess is wrong for him, and he holds, as opposed to Aristotle, that there can be an excess of virtue. "A man may both be too much in love with virtue, and be excessive in a just action" (p. 89b). He is shocked at any case of immoderate zeal, or "savage virtue," as he calls it, such as in the ancient tales of parents who

executed their sons for minor failings. He agrees with Callicles, in Plato's *Gorgias*, that philosophy, if it is followed too far, brutalizes a man and uproots him from his natural way of life. Anything good can become bad if it is pursued immoderately.

Conjugal love provides him with a good example of this reversal. Instead of the "sober and serious delight" which is proper, couples may seek to fulfill "indecent and inordinate desires" in marital intercourse. But while cautioning against the "intemperance and excess" which is possible even in "just and lawful" pleasures, Montaigne also inveighs against ascetic disciplines which try to deprive man of his good and natural pleasures. There is a more wholesome and a more natural way to cure intemperance than through "watchings, fastings, hair-shirts, remote and solitary banishments, perpetual imprisonments, whips and other afflictions" (p. 91a). Such macerations and mutilations of natural desires are comparable to the human sacrifices offered to the gods in ancient religions.

We can find contrary advice in other essays, as in the one entitled "That we are to avoid pleasures, even at the expense of life" (Book I, Essay 32). There Montaigne seems to approve of Seneca's advice that we should withdraw from all worldly ambitions and pleasures, and that if this proves impossible, we should commit suicide. And he claims to find corroboration for this "Stoical roughness," though "with Christian moderation," in such famous churchmen as St. Hilary, who, according to legend, persuaded God through his prayers to take his wife and daughter out of this life, so they might share in the "eternal and heavenly beatitude." However, it is difficult to tell whether or not Montaigne is writing this essay with his tongue in his cheek.

More to the point, as regards Montaigne's views on temperance, is the essay "Of drunkenness, "in which he points out that all vices are not of the same level. Murder and treason are certainly much worse than idleness and lasciviousness. Some vices have more human qualities in them than others— "more soul," more generosity, or even "a mixture of knowledge, diligence, valour, prudence, dexterity, and address" (p. 16:2d). However, drunkenness, the vice considered here, is not of these. It is "a gross and brutish vice . . . totally corporeal and earthly" (p. 162d), overthrowing the understanding and dulling the body.

Because it puts man in the worst state of all, "that wherein he loses the knowledge and government of himself' (p. 163a). Montaigne considers it a deplorable vice. However, in comparison with some

other vices, it is not so bad; for although "unmanly and stupid," it is not "malicious and hurtful" to other men. Indeed the ancients considered such overindulgence as providing a wholesome relaxation and recreation for the soul. But Montaigne cautions against following this line of thought too far, for even a wise man may be disordered by too much wine, since he is a mere man with the same psychophysical constitution and weaknesses as everyone else.

He must shut his eyes against the blow that threatens him; he must tremble upon the margin of a precipice, like a child; nature having reserved these light marks of her authority, not to be forced by our reason and the stoic virtue, to teach man his mortality and our weakness; he turns pale with fear, red with shame, and groans with the cholic, if not with desperate outcry, at least with hoarse and broken voice:

Humani a se nihil alienum putet.
[Nothing human is alien to me.] (p. 166a; see also p. 118b-c)

Here Montaigne contradicts the Stoic doctrine that thinking controls our reactions to things. He goes on to express his suspicion of any extraordinary act of asceticism or bearing of pain. In such acts a man is beside himself, entirely out of his natural place; he is mad, in an ectasy which contrasts with sober wisdom, with the "regular government of the soul, which is carried on with measure and proportion" (p. 166d). Against all such "wild sallies" Montaigne holds up the middle way of moderation, between asceticism and overindulgence.

All actions exceeding the ordinary bounds are liable to sinister interpretation, forasmuch as our liking no more holds with what is above than with what is below it. (p. 166a)

See also this statement in a later essay:

The virtue of the soul does not consist in flying high, but in walking orderly; its grandeur docs not exercise itself in grandeur, but in mediocrity, (p. 391b)

Montaigne's advice on how to handle anger is typical of his attitude toward the passions. In the essay "Of anger," he finds it to be one of the most dangerous and irrational of passions, since it deprives men entirely of rational judgment, turning them against even evident truth and goodness, The naturally choleric man requires tremendous will power to restrain his anger. However, Montaigne points out, anger, if it is held back, only increases and irritates a man still more beneath the surface. "A man incorporates anger by concealing it" (p. 346c). Montaigne offers the practical advice to make good use of our anger, not to waste it but to direct it to some purpose. In order to have any effect—in the family or other realm

where a man has authority—it must be managed judiciously, or otherwise people will not take it seriously.

In another essay, however, Montaigne appeals to his personal experience for evidence that an urgent passion, such as intense sexual desire, may be successfully curbed, even in the ultimate moment of "ecstasy and rapture."

> I know very well it may be otherwise, and that a man may sometimes, if he will, gain this point over himself to sway his soul, even in the critical moment, to think of something else; but then he must ply it to that bent. I know that a man may triumph over the utmost effort of this pleasure; I have experienced it in myself, and have not found Venus so imperious a goddess, as many, and much more virtuous men than I, declare, (p. 205a)

I V

Montaigne's general discussion of the nature of virtue is to be found in the essay "Of cruelty." He makes a basic distinction between mere good nature and the virtue that is won through hard self-discipline. True virtue does not come naturally; it is fostered and tested by difficulty and struggle. Was Socrates, who was apparently without vicious inclinations and completely ruled by reason, therefore not virtuous? Were the Stoics, who were utterly unperturbed by evil and unaffected by pleasure, hence devoid of virtue?

Such questions lead Montaigne to distinguish three types or levels of virtue. The highest type is the state in which virtue has become man's second nature, a fixed and settled habit of soul. The second type is the state in which a man struggles successfully with very urgent and powerful natural impulses. The third is a state of natural innocence and goodness, which can hardly he called virtue since it is effortless and which is sometimes difficult to distinguish from cowardice and unmanliness.

(See also the essay "Of virtue," where Montaigne distinguishes between "the starts and sallies of the soul, and a resolute and constant habit" [p. 340a], The latter is the true virtue, since it is something lastingly imbedded in the soul. But the sudden, "miraculous" sallies of the heroes of ancient legend are so far beyond our natural power that it is hard to see how they can become "ordinary and natural" in a man.)

Montaigne confesses that he himself has been credited with a prudence, courage, and patience which he does not possess, and that he belongs on the lowest level of virtue. "My virtue is a virtue, or

rather an innocence, casual and accidental" (p. 203c-d). fie is fortunate to have been born with a good disposition, though without the strength, he avows, to resist vehement passions if he had them. The fact that he, like Epicurus, is more virtuous in his actions than in his opinions leads him to ask the odd question, "Must it be true, that to be a perfect good man, we must be so by an occult, natural, and universal propriety, without law, reason, or example?" {p. 204b).

As for those vices he does have, Montaigne proceeds in the prudent practical way we have become familiar with. His policy is to restrain the vices lie has and to keep them from combining with other vices. "I follow some Vices, but I fly others as much as a saint would do" (p. 204c). He disagrees that there must be a unity of vice or virtue, appealing to Aristotle for corroboration that "a prudent and just man may be intemperate and inconsistent" (p. 204c). (However, Aristotle does not agree with him, if we are to judge by the discussion of prudence [practical wisdom] in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.)

The vice that upsets Montaigne most is cruelty (and here we finally get to the title-theme), for it goes against his innate tenderness, which makes him recoil from the sight of a chicken being killed or a hare being caught by a dog. He is extremely sensitive to seeing pain inflicted on others; hence the executions of criminals, in the form current in his day, fill him with horror. The tortures of the condemned man-drawing, quartering, and slow burning while still alive—seem barbarous and inhuman to him, far worse than the cannibals' roasting and eating of men who are already dead. "All that exceeds a simple death appears to me pure cruelty" (p. 205c). If desecrations of the body are intended to strike fear into would-be criminals, doing it to dead bodies of the executed would be dreadful enough, he argues. "Those inhuman excesses ought to be exercised upon the bark, and not upon the quick" (p. 206a). Referring to the barbarous cruelty of his own time, engendered by the wars of religion, he says:

> I live in a time wherein we abound in incredible examples of this vice, through the licence of our civil wars; and we see nothing in ancient histories more extreme than what we have proof of every day, but I cannot, any the more, get used to it. I could hardly persuade myself, before I saw it with my eyes, that there could be found souls so cruel and fell, who, for the sole pleasure of murder, would commit it; would hack and lop off the limbs of others, sharpen their wits to invent unusual torments and new kinds of death, without hatred, without profit, and for no other end but only to enjoy the pleasant spectacle of the gestures and motions, the lamentable groans und cries of a man dying in anguish. For this is the utmost point to which cruelty can arrive ... (p. 206b-c)

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