



**Michel de Montaigne**  
(1533 – 1592)

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## MONTAIGNE: THE ESSAYS

### THE GREAT IDEAS PROGRAM

#### *Ethics: The Study of Moral Values*

**Mortimer J. Adler and Seymour Cain**

#### **Eighth Reading**

**(Part 3 of 3)**

Montaigne's sensitive compassion, his intense fellow feeling for the pain suffered by others, extends to animals as well as men. He sees in the cruelty men inflict on beasts, as in hunting, the natural root of the cruelty they inflict on their fellows. Those natures that are sanguinary towards beasts discover a natural propension to cruelty" (p. 206c). He describes vividly his own pain at seeing beasts pursued and killed, and argues that his sympathy is well grounded in the fact that they are fellow creatures of God. He is inclined to admit that there is a close resemblance between men and beasts, but even if this were not true, he argues,

. . . there is, nevertheless, a certain respect, a general duty of humanity, not only to beasts that have life and sense, hut even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and graciousness and benignity to other creatures that are capable of it; there is a certain commerce and mutual obligation betwixt them and us. (p. 207c)

(See also the essay “Cowardice, the mother of cruelty,” Book II, Essay 27.)

The unfavorable comparison between civilized and primitive society made in the essay on cruelty is developed fully in the famous essay “Of cannibals.” Montaigne’s opinion of the ethical quality of man in a state of nature contrasts sharply with that of Hobbes. In this time, fascinating accounts of the peoples in the newly discovered lands were being brought back by explorers and travelers, He bases his opinion on information he has received from a man who had lived in the New World for many years.

Montaigne’s interpretation of this information rests on certain basic assumptions. One of these is that it is the natural or primitive that embodies right order and the artificial or civilized that is degenerate, corrupt, and disordered. The so-called savages, says he. are still governed by the laws of nature, and still live in that Golden Age, that “happy state of man,” envisioned by poets and philosophers of antiquity. (See also in his note to the reader the remark about the nations that still “dwell under the sweet liberty of nature’s primitive laws” [p. 1].) The purity of life in this natural state, free from the inequities that exist in civilized society, far surpasses Plato’s dream of an ideal republic. Indeed, “the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, pardon, [are] never heard of” (p. 94a).

Montaigne discerns two main virtues in the ethics of these “savages”: valor in war and love of their wives. As for cannibalism, it is merely the ultimate revenge against enemies captured in battle. Though admitting “the barbarous horror of so cruel an action,” Montaigne argues that it is far less inhumane than the horrible executions of living men—often merely for disagreement in religious matters—by his fellow countrymen in “civilized” France. He also argues that, though there may be some excuse for cannibalism in certain situations, the familiar vices of civilized society—“treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty”—can never be excused.

He also compares the savages favorably with civilized men in their wars, which are “throughout noble and generous,” impelled solely by the desire to demonstrate valor, never by the desire to take other men’s lands and goods. In their primitive felicity, the}’ “only covet

so much as their natural necessities require,” and possess “this greatest of all goods, to know happily how to enjoy their condition and to be content” (p. 96a).

In this essay Montaigne discusses courage, a virtue which plays a central role in primitive ethics. He insists that courage is to be judged purely by what belongs to a man himself, to his soul, not by physical or mechanical powers and equipment. Moreover, it is to be judged by motivation, not results.

We have sufficient advantages over our enemies that are borrowed and not truly our own; it is the quality of a porter, and no effect of virtue, to have stronger arms and legs; it is a dead and corporeal quality to set in array; ‘tis a tum of fortune to make our enemy stumble, or to dazzle him with the light of the sun; ‘tis a trick of science and art, and that may happen in a mean base fellow, to be a good fencer. The estimate and value of a man consist in the heart and in the will: there his true honour lies. Valour is stability, not of legs and arms, but of the courage and the soul; it does not lie in the goodness of our horse or our arms: but in our own. He that falls obstinate in his courage—*Si succiderit, de genu pugnatur*—he who, for any danger of imminent death, abates nothing of his assurance; who, dying, yet darts at his enemy a fierce and disdainful look, is overcome not by us, but by fortune; he is killed, not conquered; the most valiant are sometimes the most unfortunate. There are defeats more triumphant than victories . . . The part that true conquering is to play, lies in the encounter, not in the coming off; and the honour of valour consists in fighting, not in subduing, (pp. 96c-97a)

## V

Montaigne’s essay “Of repentance” is one of the most direct, congenial, and lucid presentations of his moral philosophy. It opens with the acknowledgment that he himself is the main subject matter of his essays. (See the citations above in Section I.) As regards the title-theme, he feels bound to tell us, “I very rarely repent . . . my conscience is satisfied with itself (p. 389c), and then launches into a discussion of repentance on the basis of his own experience, in the context of his time.

Vice (and in this Montaigne includes what is condemned by law and custom as well as by reason and nature) always offends the guilty man and “leaves repentance in the soul, like an ulcer in the flesh, which is always scratching and lacerating itself” (p. 389c). He contrasts this with the inner glow of satisfaction that accompanies virtue. The opinion of others, as we have seen, is no substitute

for this authentic satisfaction, and especially, remarks Montaigne, in “so depraved ... so corrupt and ignorant an age” as the one in which he is living. A good conscience is far more precious than the good opinion of other men when “the licence of the time permits and teaches every one” to engage in all kinds of reprehensible vices. (See p. 389d.) We must rely on a settled pattern in ourselves to judge our actions rightly. With this, and with the intimate self-knowledge which no one else can have, we know when we are guilty of wrong acts or attitudes. This is where repentance comes in.

Repentance, however, which Montaigne defines as “a recanting of the will and an opposition to our fancies” (p. 390c), cannot follow immediately after sin when it is a matter of long habituation. Repentance involves the redirection of natural inclinations, which is no easy task. Education and external reforms have little or no effect on our inclinations, merely concealing them for the time being. Each of us has “a particular and governing form of his own, that jostles his education, and wrestles with the tempest of passions that are contrary to it” (p. 392a).

Our natural propensities, longstanding practice, and the desire for pleasure are among the many obstacles to true repentance. Where such factors are involved (Montaigne gives “the enjoyment of women” as an example), it is hard for us to recognize that what we are doing is wrong or to stop it. Nevertheless, where vices are “often repeated, deliberated, and contrived,” Montaigne is convinced that they are performed with the assent of a man’s reason and conscience. Hence, he is skeptical about the authenticity of “sudden” repentance<sup>3</sup> with its supposed inner grief and remorse, especially if it is not accompanied by any correction or interruption of the acts the person claims to repent of. Repentance is a matter of action, not of mere thoughts or wishes; it involves the whole man. “I know no repentance, superficial, half-way, and ceremonious; it must sting me all over before I can call it so” (p. 393b).

Montaigne is scornful of the so-called repentance that comes with the slackening of the natural faculties in old age, when reason has to contend only with temptations “so broken and mortified, that they are not worth its opposition.”

Miserable kind of remedy, to owe one’s health to one’s disease! ‘Tis not that our misfortune should perform this office, but the good fortune of our judgment. I am not to be made to do anything by persecutions and afflictions, but to curse them; that is for people who cannot be roused but by a whip.’

.....

I repudiate, then, these casual and painful reformations. God must touch our hearts; our consciences must amend of themselves, by the aid of our reason, and not by the decay of our appetites; pleasure is, in itself, neither pale nor discoloured, to be discerned by dim and decayed eyes. We ought to love temperance for itself, and because Cod has commanded that and chastity; but that which we are reduced to by catarrhs, and for which I am indebted to the stone, is neither chastity nor temperance; a man cannot boast that he despises and resists pleasure, if he cannot see it, if he knows not what it is, and cannot discern its graces, its force, and most alluring beauties; I know both the one and the other, and may therefore the better say it. (pp. 394b-395a)

Thus reason and will are central in Montaigne's interpretation of repentance. We can repent only for what is in our power and initiated by us. We may regret that we are not better endowed by nature than we are, but it is ridiculous to repent our nature. Nor can we repent bad turns of fortune in the uncertain affairs of human life. We may curse our luck, but it would be foolish to blame ourselves. Repentance has to do only with the small private sphere of personal responsibility and freedom.

Repentance should be directed to the future, to what can be changed, not to the past, which Montaigne regards for all practical purposes as determined. He regards repentance as prospective, not retrospective.

In all affairs that are past, be it how it will, I have very little regret; for this imagination puts me out of my pain, that they were so to fall out: they are in the great revolution of the world, and in the chain of stoical causes: your fancy cannot, by wish and imagination, move one tittle, but that the great current of things will not reverse both the past and the future, (p. 394a)

Montaigne looks back on his own life with satisfaction, not regret.

Were I to live my life over again, I should live it just as I have lived it; I neither complain of the past, nor do I fear the future; and if I am not much deceived, I am the same within that I am without, (p. 394c-d)

## VI

*Does Montaigne think that good and evil are merely a matter of opinion?*

To answer this question judiciously requires a careful reading of the essay on learning to die and most of the other essays that we have considered, as well as the essay on the "relish" of good and evil. In the first essay mentioned, Montaigne states that reason has

been given us to secure happiness, welfare, and tranquillity, and that virtue enables us to disregard such “accidents” as pain and poverty and, above all, death. May we assume, then, that in his mind happiness, etc. are really good, and such things as the fear of death are really evil?

If so, what is the criterion by which we distinguish good and evil? Is it peace of mind on the one hand, and disturbance and anxiety on the other, as it seems to be in Epictetus’ Discourses? Is what makes for the one “good” and what makes for the other “evil”? If so, where does “opinion” come in?

Montaigne obviously includes in the term “opinion” our ideas, images, anticipations, and attitudes. If these are properly directed and controlled, he argues, we may face all the negative aspects of human existence, including death, courageously and tranquilly, and lead a good life. Since external and physical ills are unavoidable, he advocates that we should discipline our minds and attain the only kind of contentment and pleasure that matters—an inward state of soul.

How do “opinions” accomplish this? In the case of pain, we “incline them to the most agreeable side”; in the case of death, we simply become familiar with it and come to view it as natural. At times, it seems that Montaigne is making our estimation of good and evil in things merely a matter of subjective feeling, as in the case of his tranquillity while living in debt and his anxiety while possessed of great sums. Would it be fair, though, to say that Montaigne does consider pain an objective evil, since he purposes by controlling opinions to lessen if not to annihilate it?

What would be the difference between Montaigne’s position and that of a man who affirmed that death, pain, and other ills were real evils, that it is awful to die and suffer physical pain, and the like; but who also affirmed that, since these evils are unavoidable, we must face them courageously, disciplining ourselves to live nobly and virtuously, nevertheless? Would Montaigne agree with this? Does his remark that “one person, peradventure, admits them [things] in their true being” (p. 115d) amount to an admission that we may see things as they are? See also, on page 124d, the comparison between the moral judgment of a man of weak character and the distorted appearance of the oar in the water.

*Does Montaigne believe that our conduct should be governed by the moral standards of our place and time?*

We have referred in Section I to the times in which Montaigne lived and the impression they made on him. But it is rash to go on from there to the easy judgment that Montaigne was simply reflecting the temper of his time. He was able to find support for his skepticism about human reason in many minds of the past; his study was decorated with carefully selected inscriptions from Ecclesiastes, Horace, Lucretius, Sextus, Empiricus, and other ancient skeptics. As for the morals and manners of his time, when he refers to them in the selections we have read, does he set them up as a model to be emulated?

We have seen in the essay “Of glory” how little he values public opinion and approbation, the temporary and unsubstantial acclaim of the present hour. In the essay “Of repentance” we have seen how he despised the morals and manners of his time and appealed against this to a settled pattern of right and wrong in our hearts. And in the essay “Of cruelty” we have seen how horrified he was by the cruel modes of execution prevalent in his time (“I cannot . . . get used to it” [p. 206b]), and how he proposes reforming them to conform with a standard of human decency.

Does such an austere ethical position contradict his avid interest in the varieties of human behavior and customs? See, for instance, his essay “Of custom” (Book I, Essay 22), where he describes all kinds of customs, including cannibalism, without invidious moral comment, and points out the strong influence of custom in social life. How are Montaigne’s anthropological and ethical concerns balanced in his essay “Of cannibals”? Is he merely providing a simple anthropological description and interpretation of the savages, or does he also give us an ethical judgment about whether their life is good or bad? Does he consider civilized society as only one variation among others in human history, or does he make a moral judgment about it? Montaigne explains the socio-cultural reasons why the savages eat their fellow men. Does he advance any ethical judgment about cannibalism?

In the instance where he makes an analogy between asceticism and the live sacrifices of archaic religions, is he making an ethical judgment on the ancient practice? Do ethical judgments transcend religious sanctions? Scholars in the archaic and primitive religions are convinced that human sacrifices and cannibal feasts were religious rites aimed at keeping up the vital economy of the universe. Would the fact that cannibalism was the fulfillment of a religious responsibility make it immune from ethical judgment?

Assuming that there are universal ethical norms, just how are they related to the variations in custom which Montaigne so avidly noted? Is the type of dress (or undress) regulable by universal ethical norms? What about marriage customs, such as monogamy, polygamy, and polyandry? What about sexual mores, dietary customs, and economic practices? What about theft, murder, and lying? What about cruelty?

Are the cruel modes of execution that Montaigne discusses a matter of permissible variation? Are they merely the understandable expressions of particular cultures? In medieval Europe such forms of punishment were accepted by the Church and applied to religious dissidents. Does this indicate that even the official repositories of moral judgments are deeply influenced by the customs of their time? If so, does this mean that cruelty is not evil—a matter of taste in a particular time and place?

*Is man good in a state of nature?*

On the basis of what his informant has told him, Montaigne paints a glowing picture of primitive society as a serene “heaven.” On the basis of what Montaigne says, we may question just how “natural” his cannibals are and just how good they are, by his own standards. His savages are not isolated individuals like Hobbes’s, but members of a social group, living according to a social code and sharing common beliefs. Their very cannibalism is the fulfillment of the social code, not of animal hunger. And the same may be said of their supreme virtue—courage.

As for the pristine goodness which the civilized reader is called upon to envy, the details in the essay on cannibals seem to contradict the laudatory reference to them in the essay on cruelty. Psychological tortures in an attempt to break the prisoners’ spirits are described, which apparently include graphic descriptions not only of eating the prisoners, but also “the torments they are to suffer” before dying. Apparently the psychological and physical tortures are all part of the game of making the prisoner beg for his life, a game in which the victim accepts the rules and plays it out to the end. But how does this socio-cultural explanation absolve the savages from what Montaigne considers one of the most vicious vices of all—cruelty? (For Montaigne’s own awareness of the horrible cruelties perpetrated in the new “pure and virgin” lands, see p. 91b.) And we might note that the hunting of animals has been an accepted activity in most primitive societies. Would the natural man shrink, like Montaigne, from the sight of a stag at bay?



Just how good does Montaigne really think man is by nature? He speaks of “a natural propension to cruelty,” and adds: “Nature has herself, I fear, imprinted in man a kind of instinct to inhumanity” (p. 206c), that is, to cruelty. Is compassion, then, an artificial development opposed to natural instinct? Is man naturally cruel or naturally compassionate? Or is he by nature able to be either?

Is the Stoic attitude which Montaigne advocates a natural or artificial development? Do men naturally shrink from pain and other ills, and then discipline themselves, through their reason and will, not to recoil? Are reason and will—on which Montaigne places so much emphasis in his account of moral virtue—then opposed to the natural? Or are they a specific human development of the natural? What function do reason and will serve, in Montaigne’s view, in relating man to the natural universe?


*Is a man’s treatment of animals subject to ethical judgment?*

Many traditional moralists have limited ethics to a man’s relations with his fellow men; others have also included his treatment of himself. Montaigne, in addition, emphasizes man’s treatment of beasts. Is this acceptable? If a man treated his fellow men justly and lived a personally virtuous life, would his cruelty toward animals be a matter of indifference, from an ethical viewpoint? Is cruelty—the deliberate and unnecessary infliction of pain—evil? If so, is it evil when inflicted on animals? If so, on what grounds? Montaigne’s grounds are that animals are our fellow creatures and even very near our kin. Do you agree that these are sound grounds for compassion toward them? Could you accept the maxim that we should not harm any living thing? Would you include plants in this interdiction?

Practically speaking, what would cruelty toward animals do to a man’s character? Is it plausible that a man might be just and virtuous, and at the same time be cruel to animals, as in our hypothetical case?

*Does Montaigne have a social ethics?*

Certainly, in the essays we have read, Montaigne opposes vigorously doing harm or injustice to other men. Does he go beyond this to what our positive concerns and acts toward others should be? Or is his ethics basically an individualistic ethics, centered on the fulfillment and contentment of the self? What would be Montaigne’s attitude toward political action or social reform? Why does he ad-

wise us not to get involved with other men and their problems? 

### SELF-TESTING QUESTIONS

The following questions are designed to help you test the thoroughness of your reading. Each question is to be answered by giving a page or pages of the reading assignment. Answers will be found on page 303 of this Reading Plan.

- 1 What were the hour and day of Montaigne's birth?
- 2 What was the Egyptian manner of reminding men of death?
- 3 Why does Thomas Aquinas forbid marriages between close relatives?
- 4 What did Chrysippus and Zeno think about eating dead men?
- 5 What was it about civilized society that amazed the visiting savages?
- 6 To what tortures do women submit themselves for the sake of beauty?
- 7 In what sense are vices all alike:1
- 8 At what age, according to Plato, is it all right to get drunk?
- 9 Whose good opinion does Montaigne seek?
- 10 Why is it wrong to use the term "honor" for a lady's virtue?

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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