Montaigne's Essays

Montaigne's Essays:

Tackling It

By

Frederic Will

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AN INTRODUCTION TO MONTAIGNE AND HIS ESSAYS

Tackling what? The random being of being here, of what Is, of what it is when we wake up into it in the morning. That's what Montaigne tackles. And what about his tackling do I offer in this book? It is not a commentary. I don't know enough nor am I smart enough to do that. I offer a tag-along effort of a quiet, ordinary wordsmith, responding from my small world to what Montaigne offers me. Sometimes I let myself go from my own world into Montaigne's. Sometimes I try an "elucidation" of the text of the *Essays*. I try in every case to remain alert to the promise of ordinary being, as it unremittingly accepts me.

The formulator of the phrase "What do I know?," Michel de Montaigne, entered life as a scion of ambition and care. His father, who was his mentor and guardian angel, sent him out for the first three years, to learn what life is, as an infant presence in a local peasant family, where the basics of life, and the simple equality of all people, impressed themselves permanently on the young child. Montaigne's grandfather was very wealthy, and his father, for whom ambition was endless, had worked hard to get the Montaigne family line into the registry of noble families in their home near Bordeaux, in the Aquitaine region of France. Montaigne's family were on the whole staunch Catholics, although a number of family branches ascended into Spanish and Spanish Jewish heritage. Of note, Montaigne was devoted to his father, but only mentions his mother on two occasions, perhaps because she added little to the family claims to nobility.

Montaigne's father had in mind, in housing him with a peasant family, an opportunity to begin a program of instruction in Latin for his young son and his tutor, and for the entire Montaigne family, which would be obliged to speak only Latin in the chateau. (The grown man praised the educational system that stimulated his freedom of spirit, and through games and family sports "associated the study of Latin and Greek with agreeable rhythms and musical harmonies.") Montaigne went from home to a distinguished boarding school, the College de Guienne, whose headmaster was one of the era's great classicists, George Buchanan. From that point on the young man went into the study of law – in which he never greatly advanced – and before

long found himself as a courtier to Charles IX. He was present at the Siege of Rouen in 1562, and received a medal of the Order of Saint Michel, an important step in the young man's identity formation. Back in Bordeaux, Montaigne formed a deep and close relationship with his dearest life friend, Étienne de la Boétie, whose death in 1563 was a great blow to Montaigne. (An astute critic has suggested that this loss may have been the spur for Montaigne writing his essays.)

In 1565 Montaigne married. He had six children, of whom only the second, a girl, survived.

In 1570 Montaigne moved back to the family chateau. This was the beginning of a virtually lifelong withdrawal into his study, and his life of prodigious writing, cut off from his family and family matters. His library of 1,500 books gave him the basis for the initial pieces of his essays, which would first be published in 1580.

In 1578 Montaigne developed a terrible case of kidney stones – a family curse – and in 1580–1 he travelled extensively in Italy and France, taking the waters, hunting for medical cures.

In 1581 Montaigne was elected Mayor of Bordeaux, a position that necessitated much more social contact than he had experienced at the time of retirement into his tower. In 1585–6, during his second term as Mayor, the bubonic plague drove Montaigne back to his tower.

At the age of fifty-nine Montaigne died of quinsy at his chateau. Paralysis of the tongue, one by-product of the disease, withdrew from the writer the power to converse, which he considered the highest of social pleasures. He died shortly after, while participating with fellow landowners at a private mass in his house.

The *Essays* are the story of the Tower. We have to imagine most of their writing taking place in this lofty, valley-scoping, book-lined many windowed corner of Montaigne's family chateau, where for twenty years the master of the house made himself virtually unfindable. His moderate scepticism is a natural foundation for his writing. His stance is to look around in puzzlement, as he does in questioning what he knows; to adopt a fine-tuned curiosity about any topic in question; to peruse several interpretations or ways of looking at an issue; and to leave it to the reader to complete the dialogue. (There was of course much writerly planning going on around those essays, word-meaning trials or even experiments. There was the ordering of paper, the communication with publishers, the fussing

over pens and inks. But it was inside the writer's head that the desire to share the surprise of worldly existence came to flower and develop.) We can hardly say that there was a thematic unity to the whole, but this flowering of experiments leaves us more alive than ever to the variable richness of life.

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BOOK ONE

ESSAY ONE:
THAT MEN BY VARIOUS MEANS ARRIVE AT THE SAME END

Introductory

Montaigne chooses to open on a loose topic: what kinds of resolution are there for a situation in which you deal with a person (or foe) who is angry with you or has been offended by you, or in which you are an aggressor determined to get rid of your enemy, and seemingly have no pity for them? By and large, the author chooses to consider different kinds of resolutions to such situations: passive resistance that turns the mood of the aggressor; violent strike-back from the aggressed that shocks or startles the aggressor into re-examining his attitude; unexpected attacks of compassion or forgiveness on the part of the figure of power.

Examples that illustrate Montaigne's way into his theme

Compassion: Edward the Black Prince furiously assaults a French city, determined to obliterate the inhabitants. As he enters the city, however, he sees three brave and defiant French Cavaliers walking the streets and obviously refusing to surrender. The Prince is so touched and impressed by the defiance of these three men that he spares the city.

Compassion: Emperor Conrad III of Germany sacks an enemy city, and in his fury proposes to wipe it out. So comprehensive is his fury that he orders even the women and children to leave the city, taking with them all they can carry on their backs. To the Emperor's amazement, the women leave through the city gates, taking their husbands with them on their backs. The Emperor's fury disappears and he spares the city.

Conclusions

Sometimes a shocked response to oppression will dispel it, while at others the oppressed can effectively win the compassion of an aggressor. Montaigne observes that there are various ways to peace and resolution.

Montaigne's conclusion

From the instances of surprising behaviour, which Montaigne finds in his examples of the various means by which people arrive at the same end – peace, resolution or quiet – Montaigne concludes that "man is a marvellous, vain, fickle, and unstable subject," and from that conclusion follows directly to his reflection about himself: "I have a marvellous propensity to mercy and mildness, and to such a degree that I fancy that of the two I should sooner surrender my anger to compassion than to esteem …"

Essay Two:
On Sorrow

Introductory

Montaigne opened his first essay with a discussion of the various ways in which conflict situations can be resolved. He is especially concerned with the unpredictable elements in human character that lead us at one time to be inexplicably compassionate, and at others to be brutal. This discussion of the uncertain focus of our emotions flows into the discussion of essay two, in which Montaigne turns to the emotion of sorrow, and the unpredictable and fickle ways in which it manifests itself.

A bevy of examples support Montaigne's scorn for the "foolish and base" emotion of sorrow, which seems to him another playground for the unstable and unreliable nature of humankind. "No one is more free from this passion than I," says Montaigne, as he goes on to add that, to the ancient Stoics – he is referring to his favoured ancient wisdom sources in Zeno (fifth century BC), Seneca (1–65 AD) and Epictetus (d. 135 AD) – sorrow was a particularly objectionable emotion.

Examples

Father's sorrow one: The fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus includes in his *History* many instances of perplexing and irrational behaviour. In one instance a father, caught up in the mind-numbing sandblast of war, notes the deaths (corpses) of his son and daughter, but in some way processes the sight. He endures it without undue emotion. A short time later, however, the father passes the corpse of a "familiar friend," also a battlefield victim but of no special intimacy to him, and breaks down with grief. The cumulative power of exposure to death is too much for him; it overweighs whatever is plain common sense about the unparalleled shock of seeing one's own children dead. The emotion of sorrow is a poor judge.

Father's sorrow two: Sorrow can change its character like a chameleon, rendering it a fickle guide to the true nature of whatever has provoked it. A man sorrows for a slain soldier on the battlefield, then, on looking closer,

discovers it is his son. His emotion is still sorrow, but it is sorrow intensified to a high and nuanced power of itself. Montaigne tirelessly dwells on the imprecision of sorrow as an emotion.

Harmful sorrow: Sorrow can lead us to torture ourselves needlessly. Diodorus was humiliated by being bested in a contest of dialectic. His sorrow was inexpugnable. He could not be consoled. He was a passive victim of his sorrow. He was helpless, and to no good end.

Excessive grief: Contrast two ancient models. There is Niobe, whose nine children were slain by Leto the goddess for her excessive hubris. Driven to an excess of sorrow, Niobe went nine days without eating. Finally, transformed by extremes of sorrow, she was turned to stone. Her sorrow overcame her. On the other hand – and this is a personal example, given by Montaigne – there is the case of being so overburdened by sorrow that the increment irrationally dispels the stockpiled emotion, and one feels freed. Niobe was freed by petrification, while Montaigne was freed by excess, the trespass on the limits of endurance. An emotion (sorrow) which can lead to such paradoxical results – two antithetical kinds of freeing – is of little value to the human animal, which must rely on emotions as guides on the path towards reality.

Conclusions

Montaigne seizes on this last example to characterize himself (though not by boasting) as a person not subject to sorrowing after such loss: “I am for my part of a stubborn apprehension, which also, by reasoning, I every day harden and fortify.”

Montaigne, as we are seeing, constructs an incremental autobiography through inserting his own opinions into the relatively new essay form. (Par excellence, the early-modern temper of Montaigne’s time was just positioning itself for the kinds of self-awareness that were to eventually facilitate the novels of Proust, Kafka and Mann, for whom the self was to become the most direct theme of one’s work.) Montaigne tends to work around a broad philosophical humanism, grounded in the reading of the ancient classics. (He was raised speaking Latin, trained by the best classical tutors of his time, and carried out his studies at the University of Bordeaux, where he was taught by outstanding Renaissance Humanists).

Montaigne is a sceptical thinker, a lover of life but of reason in life, and a shrewd analyst of human behaviour and emotions. It is from the latter

stockpile that he draws the fine distinctions that flesh out most of his essays. The very finesse with which he distinguishes sorrow from compassion, committing himself to the latter but distancing himself from the former, indicates his inclination to make fine distinctions in language, which mirror the intricate modifications to which the fickle animal human is prey.

ESSAY THREE:
THAT OUR AFFECTIONS CARRY US BEYOND US

Introductory

The autobiography. We let Montaigne construct his autobiography incrementally. He does so with great care, and example-filled adjustments, and though he may seem chiefly to be pursuing philosophical arguments – a broad critique of humankind as faulty, fickle and unreliable, for example – the deeper intention of the author is to "record some traits of my character and of my humours." At this point we should say that a fragile unity emerges from the "traits" of Montaigne's character. Compassionate, suspicious of sorrow, a friend of living in the present: the traits accumulate slowly and enrich themselves as a complex self-portrait. Looking ahead, there will be three books of essays, 107 chapters, by the completion (in 1592) of the project, by which time Montaigne will live before us as a full and often self-contradictory "modern man." History was bringing to birth, almost simultaneously, two unprecedentedly prescient personalities: Shakespeare and Montaigne. Shakespeare gave back to the world what he learned, while Montaigne kept endlessly fingering the newly discovered world.

Reminder

It will be remembered that – in the first two essays – attention was drawn to the unstable, unreliable, even vile condition of the human being. This dark view of human nature ran parallel to the various modes by which we resolve serious conflicts, to the indication of what sorrow is, and of what value there is to the human. In the course of exploring these specific instances, Montaigne let us in on his own inclinations to compassion (rather than assets) and emotional control, rather than sorrow. This, we begin to see, is the way Montaigne constructs his autobiography, by increments embedded in a discussion of largely ancient examples. The broad tenor of the discussion is humanist sceptical, the work of a creative observer of life too smart to be taken in by appearances. The third essay addresses peculiarities of thought and behaviour as they pertain to our thoughts about death, our

preparations for death, and, more generally, the mindset which leads us to reach in fear towards the future, rather than dealing with the present which is up close and pertinent.

Platonic perspective

Montaigne contrasts the distractive human-value system with the mindset Plato recommends. Plato puts it concisely: "do thine own work, and know thyself." (For Plato, as the author explains, each part of his adage implies the other: in doing your work you will know yourself, while in knowing yourself you will do your own work.) The operative practice, for most of us, is never to be "present with, but always beyond, ourselves; fear, desire, hope, push us toward the future." We lack the gift of what today in the West we praise as 'mindfulness.' For Montaigne, this gift was precious; he saw its roots in examples from ancient classical spirituality rather than (like us) Eastern Buddhism.

The text of the third essay

Once again, Montaigne's text abounds in germane examples, largely drawn from Greek and Roman sources. What do the examples have in common? They all deal with our thoughts, plans and arrangements concerning death, a condition in the wake of which we will no longer be here. In what ways does Montaigne show us projecting out from the present so as to deal with death? How does he thereby illustrate the ways in which our affections get out ahead of us?

Montaigne urges us to live in the present and follow Plato's prescription that we should know ourselves and do our work well, without being distracted by thoughts of the future. Naturally one consequence of the Platonic position is that we free ourselves from anxiety about death, which is a useless preoccupation.

Examples

Live the present: Epictetus, the fifth-century Athenian sceptic, established an academy of sages. But he dispensed his highly disciplined students from any obligation to think about the future, which has no existence.

Shame: Emperor Maximilian, ashamed (like Montaigne himself, who regularly exposed his "male problems"), could not endure being seen

urinating, so when the need was on him he slipped away to do it in private. Particularly eager not to be seen naked in death, the Emperor ordered that he should be entombed in his shorts.

Death 1: count no man happy until you see him dead. This dark-light view of death was vigorously expressed both by the lawgiver Solon and the bitter fifth-century BC lyric poet Theognis. It gives paradoxical expression to the idea that happiness and death can coincide. Like the Epictetus example, this one illustrates an effective thinking-about-death strategy, which allows the thinker to live in the present.

Death 2: contrary to Epictetus' principle – example one – was the practice of the ancient Lacedaemonians, as reported by Herodotus. Upon death, the Lacedaemonian hero was the object of elaborate ceremonies involving the rending of garments and wailing. Death is not a condition here but a tragedy. It is an absolute instance of living in the anxieties caused by worry about death.

Death 3: Edward I, King of Scotland, ordered that upon his death his flesh should be boiled and his bones collected by his son as a talisman for future battles. The man's presence was devoted to the ongoing furies of the next life.

Death 4: Socrates is not surprisingly the most inventive of those whom Montaigne cites, as thinkers thinking their own death but without living for what is not. Take your time to spend yourself creatively in death, says Socrates: "Happy, are those who can gratify their senses by insensibility, and live by their death." This imaginative prospect of living your own death is Montaigne's suggestion of a response to the Platonic advice about living in the present. By making the present your living point, you are always in it; when dead you are in the present, and can live joyfully there, as – a modern instance – do the Irish and the Nigerians, who live joy (dance, drink, babble) in festive funerals.

ESSAY FOUR:
THAT THE SOUL EXPENDS ITS PASSIONS UPON FALSE OBJECTS, WHERE THE TRUE ARE WANTING

Introductory

For Montaigne, the thinking that goes into the study of universal propositions – his essay titles – is also the thinking that generates his growing sense of who and what he is – his character and humours. As writerly consciences, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Montaigne turned, in the Renaissance, to the distinctive new and contemporary form of the essay, with its informal inquisitiveness. They simultaneously freed from within themselves a new and conversational presence to their intimate thoughts. These intimate thoughts differed from the more formal thinking of a Descartes or even a Pascal, as well as the "literary," imaginative thinking of a Shakespeare or Moliere. With the essay, a new kind of thinking, as well as a new kind of autobiography, was being created.

Self-revelations as a *compassionate* man, of disciplined emotions – say, when it comes to sorrow – and as a believer in living carefully in the present, rather than in fantasies of a future, these self-revelations emerge in tandem with a highly sceptical view of human nature, which Montaigne views as false, fickle and easily carried away. By and large the traits and humours Montaigne finds in himself are the negatives of the traits he finds dominant on the street. In the fourth essay he proliferates extensive exempla showing that "the soul expends its passions on false objects, where the true are wanting," which, in demystifying, Montaigne finds fascinating avenues for a self-presentation that, though never boastful, broadens his emergent autobiographical portrait.

Passions. We have a super-abundance of passions. The same pets we adulate, on occasion, are not always bundles of love. When wounded by a natural object, like a root or stone, they are likely enough to take out their fury on the offending object, which has no awareness. False objects are attacked, when true objects are not available.

The soul is a cauldron of passions, which want expending on the objects that attract its attention. We have in our souls, for instance, an abundance of affection, more than we can properly expend on other humans. Therefore we turn to pets to absorb our excess of passions. Our contemporary pet industry or the scene at any major pet cemetery take us straight to Montaigne's thinking.

Examples

Irrationality 1: Plutarch provides an example from the philosopher Bion. Bion observes a man who is extremely upset, and who is, as we say, tearing his hair out. Bion says, "I didn't know that baldness was a cure for grief."

Irrationality 2: Gamesters grow furious when they lose their money at dice, and sometimes express their fury by chewing up their losing cards or swallowing their losing dice, as though the cards and dice had stolen their money.

Irrationality 3: Emperor Augustus, after losing a great battle, smashed his head against the walls of his palace.

Irrationality 4: Caligula, the brutal and often half-mad Roman Emperor, had a great palace destroyed because of the pleasures that his mother had had there.

Irrationality 5: the wild Thracians, when enraged with the gods after a serious military loss, shot vengeful arrows into the sky.

Irrationality 6: to a bereft maiden: "It is not your lovely tresses you should attack, but the bullet that shot your brother."

Conclusions

Montaigne himself is an astute and persistent observer of human nature and its weaknesses. Does the weakness targeted in the present essay – the need to strike out when wounded, even if the cause of your wounding is not to be found, even if you must accept an inappropriate object for your wrath – does that weakness enter the account of humankind as basically vile and unstable? Yes. Montaigne is consistent in his mistrust of human nature, which is very far, let us say, from the thinking of a Romantic poet such as Wordsworth, for whom "nature hath ample power to chasten and subdue." Our need to find a cause or explanation for what wounds us prevents us

from discovering our own responsibility for our failings: “we can never enough decry the disorderly sallies of our minds.”

Montaigne’s larger point is accurate and arguably of universal application. Sulking is a universal name for this vengeful response to events which seem provided by fate to thwart us. It rains on my party and I curse the gods. The world bypasses my dream of inscribing history with the name of my greatness. My teenage son is beaten up just as he is about to take his SAT exams. How can I not feel that the universe is against me? How can I not bang my head against the wall?

Essay Five:
Whether the Governor of a Place Besieged Ought Himself to Go Out to Parley

Introductory

Montaigne frequently begins his essays with an open question to be discussed: how can conflicts be resolved?; how can we live in the present?; how can we direct our passions to valid objects?; how best can we deal with sorrow? The essay is a form in which the author, while speaking with frankness with their own voice, can address broad human issues. In this fifth essay, Montaigne turns his attention to a matter that at first seems closely tied to military issues: whether the governor of a besieged fortress should himself descend to negotiate with the enemy, or whether he should remain in his fortress. Ultimately, though, the essay is about human behaviour and human choice.

Examples

Strategy: Quintus Marcus, in fighting King Perseus, asked his opponent for extra time to fix the battle for an appropriate moment and place. He was thereby deceiving his foe, buying time to build up his army. Montaigne apparently shares what was at the time the preferred strategy, to avoid any guile in military affairs: to leave that kind of deceptive strategy to those like the wily Greeks. We take a look ahead in this discussion to the virtue-based conclusion of Montaigne himself.

Honour: Montaigne – and this follows from the point in the first example – clearly admires those military strategists of old, for whom a battle was a pre-arranged contest of valour, who staged the upcoming battle with clearly defined ground rules, and who fought openly like those heroes of Homer's *Iliad* who engaged in pitched two-person battles that spring up and occupy the entire narrative screen. Montaigne's heart is with the man who, besieged and called on to exit and give up, replies that so long as he has his sword he is neither besieged nor ready to take orders.

Prudence: Montaigne is always on the side of good sense, and urges on the governor inclined to emerge: discuss terms, stick close to your fort and stay under shelter until firm protective conditions are in place for you.

Conclusions

Montaigne raises a question for debate, and yet we know that he will slyly insinuate his own take at the end. We know how self-aware he is in constructing his autobiographical portrait, of which we have already seen diverse traits: that he is critical, a severe judge of such human foibles as severity, thoughtless commiseration, preoccupation with the future, vengefulness towards the empty air, false objects that stand in for obstacles to the greedy human I.

Montaigne, noted for scepticism and raising the question of his own identity – Who am I really?; What do I know, really, for sure? – has shared with us a few instances of spontaneous virtue, e.g. unexpected compassion or sorrow at the random death of a man on the street, with his firm belief in the present and joy (Platonic or Socratic style). Sceptic Montaigne remains but is not a dark pessimist in the fashion of a Schopenhauer, who feels the universe has been created counter to the human, or in the fashion of Joseph Wood Krutch who in *The Modern Temper* (1929) sees us irremediably lost to the spirit of belief.

The issue of the current essay – whether the governor of a besieged city should go down for parley in order to discuss terms and conditions with the enemy – seems at first not to provoke a discussion of what kind of person Montaigne is, or of Montaigne's moral values. But in fact we will get to what kind of person he is at the very end, when Montaigne tells us how he would answer the guiding question of the essay. He raises the question of how he would behave, as governor of a besieged city, in the case where the enemy has informed him that they have sapped the foundations of the besieged castle so that it will collapse momentarily. (In other words, so that the governor, believing his foe's claim and warning, should get out fast before the structure collapses.)

Montaigne's response to the situation is characteristically subtle. He thinks of the consequences for his honour, if he were to be thought to be running like a rat, to save his life: "I could, and do, with great facility, rely upon the faith of another; but I should very unwillingly do it in such a case, as it should thereby be judged that it was rather an effect of my despair and want

of courage than voluntarily and out of confidence and security in the faith of him with whom I had to do."

In other words Montaigne would prioritize the question of honour, and even put the appearance of this honour before the possibility of being blown up. I might do the same thing.

Montaigne will follow the dictates of common sense, but not at the expense of his honour.

ESSAY SIX:
THAT THE HOUR OF PARLEY IS DANGEROUS

Introductory

It will strike us that many of Montaigne's themes and examples are drawn from the experience of warfare. The fifth and sixth essays centre on military behaviours carried out during siege warfare, especially as it involved parleys, negotiations and agreements between armed camps or a besieging army and the civilian population it is overcoming. (Even in the first two essays, the examples are regularly drawn from the battlefield, while in the third essay he develops such war-pertinent examples as those touching Caligula or Augustus, in which we see evidence of the collusion of power and madness.) War and power moves were of course at the forefront of social experience in Montaigne's moment, which saw a flurry of religious conflicts, efforts of the old landholding society to retain what remained of the medieval life of formalized intra-nobility land grabs, and the actual growth of the first urban power centres in northern Italy and France. Among these centres of influence and power, it is not surprising that issues of peace treaties, conditions of surrender and underlying questions of trust would inform many influential situations. Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, declares that the foremost duty of the ruler is war and arms.

Examples

Treachery 1: Montaigne's first example draws on an event from ancient Roman society and involves a dilemma facing the Roman general Lucius Regillus. Lucius was determined to establish a justifiable treaty pact with the citizens of a city he had just conquered. His proposal was accepted by his former foe, but then, while Lucius's attention was elsewhere, his people – the mobs attending his army – cut loose and ransacked the defeated city, treacherously undermining Lucius's intentions.

Treachery 2: The Greek general Cleomenes settled on a peace treaty with a defeated enemy. Little did that enemy know that the Greek general believed integrity irrelevant to the rigors of war. The two sides established a peace treaty applicable for five days, but on the third night the forces of Cleomenes