

Montaigne: The Eclectic Pragmatist

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UNLIKE MY FELLOW CONTRIBUTORS, I am not an expert on Montaigne, so what was I doing at the roundtable where these presentations were originally given? As someone who works on the history of ancient philosophy, I had read enough Montaigne to know that he was steeped in Greek and Roman philosophical authors, and so I was attracted by the invitation by the organizers of the 2007 conference “Experience and Experiment in the Early Modern World” to present some reactions to the great man’s essay *De L’Expérience* “from the perspective of philosophy and the history of epistemology.” I have taken this to mean that I should respond to this essay in terms of my academic background and interests, and say where I situate it in relation both to classical antiquity and developments in philosophy subsequent to the time of Montaigne himself.

The first thing that strikes me about this text is its refusal to let the reader settle down. Montaigne affirms “human ignorance” to be “in my opinion, the most certain fact in the school of the world,”¹ but he stuffs this essay with psychological, social, and literary information. Reason vs. experience, truth vs. uncertainty, similarity vs. difference, habit vs. adaptation, body vs. mind, spontaneity vs. deliberation, pleasure vs. pain, anti- and pro-philosophy—these are just some of the many polarities with which Montaigne juggles and disconcerts us. Just as we think we have grasped what he is after and where he is going, he reverses course. Skeptic, Socratic, Stoic, Epicurean—he seems to be all of these at once, and none of them securely or consistently.

The essay establishes this destabilizing, even contradictory, stance from the outset. Montaigne begins with a near quotation (though unacknowledged) from the ringing sentence with which Aristotle starts his *Metaphysics*: “There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge,” and he continues:

¹ *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 824 (hereafter cited as *Complete Works*).



We try all the ways that can lead us to it. When reason fails us, we use experience . . . which is a weaker and less dignified means. But truth is so great a thing that we must not disdain any medium that will lead us to it.²

Thus far, Montaigne seems to be proposing a more or less Aristotelian agenda: that is to say, a general claim about our natural inquisitiveness as human beings, with reason and experience taken to be conjoint sources of knowledge, with preference given to reason, and with a final paean to the supreme value of truth. What immediately follows undermines all these claims:

Reason has so many shapes that we know not which to lay hold of; experience has no fewer.

Montaigne explains this cognitive impotence:

The inference that we draw from the resemblance of events is uncertain, *because they are always dissimilar*. There is no quality so universal in this aspect of things as diversity and variety.³

At this point a reader who knows the ancient skeptical tradition might reasonably suppose that Montaigne is presenting himself as a hard-line skeptic. But read on a few pages, and we come to the following claim:

As no event and no shape is entirely like another, so none is entirely different from another. An ingenious mixture on the part of Nature. . . . All things hold together by some similarity.⁴

So much for the previous claim that “events are always dissimilar.”

Were Montaigne writing a rigorous essay on epistemology, one would have to give him a low grade. Instead, I take comments such as the following to cut more deeply to his project in this essay:

There is little relation between our actions, which are in perpetual mutation, and fixed and immutable laws.⁵

A spirited mind . . . is an irregular, perpetual motion, without model and without aim.⁶

I speak my meaning in disjointed parts, as something that cannot be said all at once and in a lump. . . . I leave it to artists . . . to check our inconsistency and set it down in order.⁷

If Montaigne does not present himself as a rigorous skeptic, why does he sound off so often about ignorance, consciousness of error, and the difficulty of admitting that one knows nothing? One way to answer this question could invoke his preoccupation with cultural relativism. Another way might approach it as a primarily literary ploy, an ironic move that enables him to play with the reader in ways I have already indicated. The line I will adopt here is to take the skeptical gesturing together with the claim to be deliberately inconsistent as a foil to his dominant themes of experience and trust in an untheorized and artless nature.

In the early pages of the essay, he attacks contemporary jurisprudence at length, but his objections to its scholasticism and remoteness from common sense extend beyond jurisprudence

² Ibid., 815.

³ Ibid. (emphasis mine).

⁴ Ibid., 819.

⁵ Ibid., 816.

⁶ Ibid., 818.

⁷ Ibid., 824.

to theology and official philosophies. Against bookishness, interpretative pedantry, and formal reasoning, he pits observation, questioning, aggregation of examples, and above all self-study and self-diagnosis. He claims to be giving a “record of the essays of my life” both for the purpose of “spiritual health,” but also for “bodily health,” on the subject of which he writes:

No one can furnish more useful experience than I, who present it pure, not at all corrupted or altered by art or theorizing.⁸

He devotes several pages to his kidney stone malady and what it has supposedly taught him, along with details about his other bodily conditions and proclivities. Experience, in his use of it, is then conceptually tied to his “trust to nature,”⁹ meaning the way he feels pleasures and pains, supposedly without medical interventions and dogmatic preconceptions. Nature, as so understood, is instructive, providing us “laws,” such as the association of suitable actions with pleasure. Nature, he tells us, needs to be stripped of the misleadingly normative connotations attached to it by the Academics, Peripatetics, and Stoics.¹⁰ Even then, living “naturally,” far from being easy, involves the acquisition of “the most difficult knowledge.”¹¹ “It takes management to enjoy life.”¹²

Because Montaigne’s stance in this essay is not precisely that of a skeptic, what should we say about his empiricism with its supposed grounding in nature? The material I have just presented has clear affinities with some of the opening pages of the first book of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus.¹³ Montaigne knew this work, which had recently been translated from Greek into Latin.¹⁴ Pyrrhonian skepticism was already having a major influence on European thought and is strongly approved by Montaigne in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*.¹⁵ In our essay, however, I detect Pyrrhonism’s presence not with reference to skeptical “suspension of judgment” (*epoche*) as such but in its affinity with Montaigne’s notions of experience and nature. The Pyrrhonian skeptic, says Sextus, suspends judgment about objective truth, but he guides his life by “following appearances.”¹⁶ This regimen includes the guidance of nature, the constraint of the passions, adherence to the transmitted laws and customs, and training in arts and crafts. In the *Apology*, Montaigne actually refers to this passage.¹⁷ In *On Experience*, he fully endorses the first three items of this four-fold criterion. His practice as an erudite lawyer and student of classical antiquity attest to his intellectual expertise, which fits the last of Sextus’ four guidelines.

Much like Montaigne, the Pyrrhonist reports on his own experience, as distinct from taking over the opinions of others; finds contentment in his moderate mentality; and seeks to be useful

⁸ *Ibid.*, 826.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 822.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 855.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 852.

¹² *Ibid.*, 853.

¹³ Sextus, a Greek living probably in Alexandria, flourished in about A.D. 200. For a brief account of his work with bibliography, see my article in *A Companion to the Philosophers*, ed. Robert L. Arrington (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 509–11.

¹⁴ See Michael R. Allen, “Humanism,” in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 295.

¹⁵ *Complete Works*, 374–75.

¹⁶ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.22–23, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9.

¹⁷ *Complete Works*, 374.

by undermining cultural prejudice and dogmatic certainty.¹⁸ Ethically Montaigne's stance in this essay seems to me to be closer to Pyrrhonism than it is to any other ancient philosophy. Epistemically he recalls it too, especially in such comments as "I judge myself only by actual sensation, not by reasoning."¹⁹ A third way he betrays Pyrrhonian influence is in the range of examples and anecdotal material he reports, with a view to undermining universal judgments or cultural prejudice. Sextus catalogued such material in a detailed series of "modes" for inducing suspension of judgment. These focus on cultural variations, differences between humans and other animals, different reactions of the healthy as compared with the sick, and so forth. The purpose of the catalog is to show how all supposedly objective judgments are purely relative to one's spatio-temporal, physiological, and mental condition.²⁰

Unlike Sextus, however, Montaigne's empiricism is largely and emphatically what he claims to find within himself and what he reports in the first-person singular. I take this to be one of his salient contributions to philosophy. Note his self-deprecating comment: "In the experience I have of myself I find enough to make me wise, *if I were a good scholar*."²¹ Could we take this to be an anticipation of Descartes' introspective methodology in the *Meditations*? I think not. Descartes targets himself in the *cogito* in order to establish an epistemic foundation that can overcome hyperbolic doubt. Montaigne, by contrast, characteristically qualifies his introspective route to wisdom with the caveat "if I were a good scholar," which he has previously told us he is not.

If Montaigne needed a model for his first-person style, he would have found it excellently represented in Seneca's so-called *Moral Letters*. In spite of being formally addressed to his friend Lucilius, Seneca also used the epistolary form in order to converse with his readers, in much the same way as Montaigne uses the second-person singular in his essays.²² And in both authors the methodology has the philosophical and educative function of inviting readers to test their own understanding of themselves and the world against the experience presented by the author. To be sure, Seneca differs from Montaigne in owing allegiance to a single philosophy—Stoicism. Still, there are a good many Stoic moments in our essay, as for instance with Montaigne's propositions: "We must learn to endure what we cannot avoid,"²³ and "Greatness of soul is . . . knowing how to set oneself in order and circumscribe oneself."²⁴ Socrates, Montaigne's favorite ancient philosopher, was the Stoics' chief paradigm too. And Seneca, though officially giving allegiance to Stoicism, was sufficiently eclectic to draw heavily on the Epicureans and on Plato as well.

We know that Seneca was one of Montaigne's favorite authors. Still, notwithstanding the affinities I have mentioned, Montaigne strikes me as no more (though perhaps no less) a latter-day Senecan than he was a latter-day Pyrrhonist. Viewing *On Experience* from the perspective of classical antiquity, I find Montaigne an essentially (early) *modern* author and thinker, and that impression, paradoxically, is heightened by his constant references to Greece and Rome. No ancient writer is as ostensibly self-revealing as Montaigne in his reflections on his medical condition, sleep, diet, and other quotidian likes and dislikes. Montaigne seemingly presents himself in

¹⁸ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.4, 30; 3.280.

¹⁹ *Complete Works*, 840.

²⁰ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.35–163.

²¹ *Complete Works*, 822 (emphasis mine).

²² See "Seneca on the Self," in Anthony A. Long, *From Epicurus to Epictetus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), chap. 17.

²³ *Complete Works*, 835.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 852.

these ways in order to be an experiential model for his readers to imitate, as they reflect on his frankness and liberation from social constraints and scholarly perversities.

My final take on this essay is to invoke its Janus-like quality. On the one hand, as I have indicated, *On Experience* looks back to Greek and especially Roman antiquity with an astonishing array of citations and allusions. In this regard, I am fascinated by Montaigne's secularism and the little that he says about his own society. One could almost imagine that he wanted to present himself as a *confrère* of Socrates or Epicurus or Seneca or Pyrrho. Although he cites China and the New World for his cultural relativism, he could as easily have supported that position by reference to the modes of Sextus Empiricus. I am also struck by his innocence of anything we could call science. This too separates him strongly from Descartes and aligns him with classical antiquity.

Yet Montaigne's essay also looks forward, as it seems to me, far beyond the early modern philosophy of Descartes or even Hume, to Nietzsche's recourse to himself in such essays as *Ecce Homo*. Montaigne shares Nietzsche's extraordinary familiarity with classical authors. And while he has none of Nietzsche's manic genius as a cultural iconoclast, he seems to relish a somewhat similar role for himself, especially in his refrain about giving the body its due and in mocking the French legal system. Still, the last word one would apply to Nietzsche is genial, whereas it seems entirely pertinent to Montaigne. Going beyond Nietzsche then, I am tempted, with all due qualification, to propose Richard Rorty as a modern philosopher one might appropriately set alongside Montaigne.

Rorty can be called a pragmatist, a naturalist, an ironist, "a bourgeois liberal, who believed in piecemeal reforms advancing economic justice and increasing the freedoms that citizens are able to enjoy."²⁵ *Mutatis mutandis*, I find all of these positions adumbrated in Montaigne's essay. Rorty's politics, to be sure, belong to a quite different context from Montaigne's aristocratic milieu. Yet, while distrusting claims to detachment, objectivity, and essentialism, each of them recognized that we almost unavoidably prefer our own cultural practices to those of other people, contingent though we need to see those practices as being.

Montaigne, as I have already said, does not have science to contend with. His postmodernism, if I may offer him an anticipation of that overworked idea, is prescientific. In spite of this essay's saturation in the classics, I find it a remarkably prescient challenge to the idea that we inhabit a world that is structured independently of our own assumptions and individual opinions. If I have to give a label to Montaigne, on the basis of this fascinating essay, I would call him an eclectic pragmatist. [A]

²⁵ See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Richard Rorty," <http://plato.stanford.edu/search/searcher.py?query=rorty>.