Michel de Montaigne, his life and Opinions

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2 A few facts you may not have known about Montaigne:

I have based this paper largely on Sarah Bakewell’s recent book, “How to Live”, and on her commentaries which were published in the Guardian last year,

3 but I have also enjoyed reading his account of his travels.

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5 Michel Yquem de Montaigne 1533-92
Michel Eyquem de Montaigne proposed no theories, put no trust in reason, and showed no desire to convince readers of anything. In his vast book of Essays, he preferred specifics to generalities, embraced uncertainty, and followed his thoughts wherever they led. Was he a philosopher at all?

In his own view, he was, but only of an "unpremeditated and accidental" kind. He wrote about so many things, he said, that his essays were bound to coincide with the wisdom of the ancients from time to time. Others have seen him not just as a philosopher but as the world's first truly modern thinker, because of his intense awareness that he was complex and self-divided, always double in himself, as he put it. In Bakewell’s opinion, Montaigne was the first and greatest philosopher of life as it is actually lived, and perhaps the one who has the most to offer the 21st century.

Montaigne liked to present himself as an ordinary man, distinguished from others only by his habit of writing things down. His life was privileged but unremarkable.

Born in 1533, the same year as Elizabeth I of England, he lived on his family estate amid the vineyards of south-western France until 1592, when he died aged 59, of kidney-stone complications.

The family was rich: his grandfather, Ramon Eyquem, had made a fortune as a herring merchant and had bought the estate in 1477. His father, Pierre Eyquem, was a soldier in Italy for a time and had also been the mayor of Bordeaux. His mother, Antoinette López de Villanueva, was from a wealthy Sephardic Jewish family.

As an infant, Montaigne was farmed out to a wet nurse and lived in a peasant’s cottage till he was three. This was normal, but the next stage of his upbringing was bizarre. His father had decided that the baby’s first language should be Latin, and his mother was obliged to learn it too, in order to communicate with her son. Even the servants had to
talk Latin to the child. Greek was taught through games and conversation rather than books. Music was played any time the boy became bored or tired. When he wasn't in the mood for music, he could do whatever he wished: play games, sleep, or be alone.

This régime continued until the child was about 6, when he was sent to a prestigious boarding school in Bordeaux, the Collège de Guyenne, under the direction of the greatest Latin scholar of the era, George Buchanan. Montaigne mastered the whole curriculum by his thirteenth year. He then studied law in Toulouse and entered a career in the legal system. He was a counsellor of the Court des Aides of Périgueux and, in 1557, he was appointed counsellor of the Parlement de Bordeaux (a high court). From 1561 to 1563 he was courtier at the court of Charles IX; he was present with the king at the siege of Rouen.

Then he was awarded the highest honour of the French nobility, the Order of St. Michel. While serving at the Bordeaux Parliament, he became very close friends with the humanist poet Étienne de la Boétie,
whose death in 1563 deeply affected Montaigne. Two years later, Montaigne entered – not very willingly – into a marriage with Françoise de la Chassaigne, arranged by their parents.

For 13 years, he was a magistrate in the city of Bordeaux. He also ran diplomatic missions for the king and local princes, notably the future Henri IV. He married, and had six children, of whom five died in infancy.

All this time, though, what he truly liked doing had nothing to do with either work or family. He would go walking or riding in the local forests, thinking inquisitive thoughts about himself and the world; at home, he would read, and write, and talk to people. In 1571 he converted a tower at one corner of his property to be his library, a collection of about 1,500 works.

Here he had the following inscription crown the bookshelves of his working chamber:

'In the year of Christ 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, on the last day of February, his birthday, Michael de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life, now more than half run out. If the fates permit, he will complete this abode, this sweet ancestral retreat; and he has consecrated it to his freedom, tranquility, and leisure.'
Montaigne's Library

There, Montaigne started writing down the hundred or so lively, rambling pieces which he called his Essays, in a scholarly atmosphere where the thoughts of great writers and philosophers of antiquity were blazoned on the beams.

Montaigne was influenced by Heraclitus, Sextus Empiricus, Seneca, Plutarch, Socrates and Cato. Later, he influenced writers the world over, including Shakespeare, Descartes, Nietzsche, Emerson and Gore Vidal to name but a few.

During the time of the Wars of Religion, Montaigne acted as a moderating force, respected both by the Catholic King Henry III and the Protestant Henry of Navarre.

In 1578, in his 40s, Montaigne, whose health had previously been excellent, started suffering from painful kidney stones, a sickness he had inherited from his father's family. From 1580 to 1581, Montaigne travelled in France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy, partly in search of a cure but also indulging his curiosity about how other people lived.
He kept a detailed journal recording various episodes and regional differences. It was published much later, in 1774, under the title Travel Journal.

While in the city of Lucca in 1581, he learned that he had been elected mayor of Bordeaux; he returned and served until 1585, again moderating between Catholics and Protestants. The plague broke out in Bordeaux toward the end of his term.

Since the death of his best friend and throughout his conventional but unexciting marriage, Montaigne had enjoyed no intense relationship until he met a kindred spirit in 1588, while on a mission for Marie de Medici.
Marie de Gournay was a secret admirer who had read his works in her teens. She had taught herself Latin and Greek. She translated works by Sallust, Ovid, Virgil, and Tacitus. She wrote verses about her cat, Léonore (also the name of Montaigne's daughter) and Joan of Arc, adapted Ronsard, wrote on the instruction of princes, and criticized the Précieuses. She was also a gifted author in her own right, writing a novel and a number of other literary compositions.

When Marie met Montaigne in Paris, she was 23 and Montaigne 55 years old. She enchanted him by her brilliance and originality and became his "fille d'alliance" or "adopted daughter". Montaigne later visited her at her residence in the Château de Gournay.

King Henri III was assassinated in 1589,

and Montaigne then helped to keep Bordeaux loyal to Henri of Navarre,

who was to become King Henri IV.

After her mother's death in 1591, Marie moved to Paris. Montaigne died the following year, at the age of 59, at the Château de Montaigne and was buried nearby.
His heart is preserved in the parish church of Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne and his widow provided Marie with a copy of the Essays and charged her with its publication. Marie and Montaigne enjoyed each other’s company – on and off – for 4 years: about the same length of time as his friendship with La Böetie. Etienne had left his books to his best friend; now Marie inherited some of them, along with others from Montaigne’s library.

In Paris, Marie found herself protectors by writing for Queen Margo, Henri IV, Marie de Médici, Louis XIII, and many other notables including Cardinal Richelieu. She was thus able to publish her own work. Richelieu awarded her a modest royal stipend. She never married and supported herself. She died in 1645, aged 79, and is buried at the Church of Saint-Eustache, in Paris.

Montaigne’s one surviving child, Leonore, gave him two granddaughters from her two marriages. The first died very young, in childbirth, and her brother-in-law married her younger half-sister, Marie, who was the comfort in age of Montaigne’s widow. Her descendants continued into modern times. The bulk of Montaigne’s library was left to the Bishop of Auch by his daughter.

Montaigne’s statue stands in front of the Sorbonne University in Paris. To most this could seem totally fitting, but history begs to disagree. I even think the statue might be a way for the Sorbonne to try redeeming itself.

Montaigne was very strongly criticised by the catholic Sorbonne, as despite being Catholic himself, he believed that Huguenots and Catholics could live together in peace. As such, he was labelled as a "politic", meaning "diplomatic", something that of course should not be allowed when dealing with heretics! Montaigne wrote a lot about scepticism, a concept which the Catholic establishment believed went against religious faith.
Notice how the shoe is polished. Students today touch it for good luck before an exam. The statue shows Michel de Montaigne wearing the medal of the Order of Saint-Michel.

PART TWO

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What is it to be a human being, Montaigne wondered? Why do other people behave as they do? Why do I behave as I do? He watched his neighbours, his colleagues, even his cat and dog, and looked deeply into himself as well. He tried to record what it felt like to be angry, or exhilarated, or vain, or bad-tempered, or embarrassed, or lustful. Or to feel bored with your responsibilities. Or to love someone. Or to have a brilliant idea while out riding, but forget it before you can get back to write it down – and then feel the lost memory recede further and further the more you hunt for it, only to pop into your head as soon as you give up and think about something else. He was, in short, a brilliant psychologist, but also a moral philosopher in the fullest sense of the word. He did not tell us what we should do, but explored what we actually do.

He published the results for the first time in 1580,

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and saw his Essays become an instant bestseller and an outstanding example of the Humanism associated with the Renaissance. Subsequent editions did even better, and grew larger, for he kept adding material to old chapters as well as writing new ones. Their appeal has continued unabated through the centuries, largely because his investigations are not merely random; they all centre on one great question which concerns us all: how does one live? How does one make wise and honourable choices, understand oneself, behave as a fully human being, treat others well, and acquire peace of mind?
In his own time, Montaigne was admired more as a statesman than as an author. The tendency in his essays to digress into anecdotes and personal ruminations was seen as detrimental to proper style rather than as an innovation, and his declaration that, 'I am myself the matter of my book', was viewed by his contemporaries as self-indulgent. In time, however, Montaigne would be recognized as embodying, perhaps better than any other author of his time, the spirit of freely entertaining doubt which began to emerge at that time.

Montaigne was an admirer of Socrates. Socrates was always conscious of how much he did not know, and claimed superiority to unthinking men only in that he was aware of his own ignorance. Montaigne, having adopted the Socratic view, is well known to have continually asked the question -- "Que sçais-je?" ("What do I know?") Remarkably modern even to readers today, Montaigne's attempt to examine the world through the lens of the only thing he can depend on implicitly—his own judgment—makes him more accessible to modern readers than any other author of the Renaissance.

Montaigne, as a young man, had an excessive fear of death, and it made it almost impossible for him to enjoy living. This was partly the result of a fashion of the time, which stated – following some of the ancient philosophers – that the best way to be at ease about your own mortality was to think about it constantly. Dwell on your death every day, went the theory, and you will become so used to it as an idea that it cannot scare you when it arrives in reality.

Not surprisingly, the results could be quite the opposite. Brooding on death could make the fear worse, not better. That was certainly what Montaigne found when he tried it. It did not help that, as he entered his 30s, he suffered a series of bereavements. His best friend,

Etienne de La Boétie, died of the plague in 1563. Next, his father died of a kidney-stone attack; then a younger brother suffered a fatal hemorrhage after being hit on the head by a
tennis ball. This last freak accident particularly horrified Montaigne. "With such frequent and ordinary examples passing before our eyes," he wrote, "how can we possibly rid ourselves of the thought of death and of the idea that at every moment it is gripping us by the throat?"

At around the same time, he had a near-death experience of his own, and it was just what he needed to release him from his fear. It happened as Montaigne rode out one day in the forests around his home. A faster rider tried to pass, but collided with him and sent Montaigne flying from his horse. He landed some metres away and was knocked out. He came around, groggily, only as he was being carried home by his companions – who later told him that he was vomiting blood and clawing at his chest, violently, as if to tear himself from his body.

While he was doing all that, however, his own experience was of a very a different kind. He seemed to be floating on a cloud of pure pleasure. It was like drifting off to sleep, but even more sweet and luxurious. The pleasure faded only when he returned fully to consciousness, and felt the pain of his bruises.

As he recuperated, he reflected on the experience and deduced that death must hold very little to be scared of. The ancients proposed thinking about it in the midst of vigorous life, so of course it seemed terrifying, but in fact when death approaches we are already half gone. Nature takes care of everything: our own human nature, that is. However distraught we look to others, within ourselves we feel tranquil.

Thus, if we have spent our lives preparing to meet death like an enemy on a battlefield, we have been wasting our time. As Montaigne now put it, with a superb flourish of nonchalance, "Don't bother your head about it".

For Montaigne, this old trick (he borrowed it from the ancient Epicureans) was more than just a therapeutic tool. It was the very foundation of philosophical wisdom. By expecting too much of ourselves, he thought, and trying to remain in control of every experience, we actually undermine that control. We lose contact with our nature, and thus we lose our ability to understand or judge situations correctly. This makes us foolish as well as miserable. Not understanding ourselves, we can understand nothing else either.
It is much better to look for what is natural in ourselves, and accept it. And so, as he summed it up on the final pages of the Essays,

31  "It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own … Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump."

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This is a wisdom born of faith – a faith in our own nature. Montaigne had other kinds of faith too, including faith in God – but of a very unusual sort.

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Montaigne was a good Catholic. He was also a man who doubted almost everything; the most influential sceptic of his day. He devoted long sections of his Essays to exploring reasons why nothing could be certain and everything was up for question – yet he claimed to accept whatever the church decreed without reservation. Was this just doublethink? Did he really mean it?

We can only understand exactly what he meant by making a great leap from our world to his, and discovering a kind of scepticism different from the one we are familiar with.

A modern sceptic may trust firmly in reason and direct observation. In Montaigne's time, the lines were drawn differently: reason and observation were the very things a sceptic was most likely to be sceptical about, yet one could still be devout.
But Montaigne was born a Catholic, and, in a time of religious wars and the burning of heretics, you could not wave aside faith so easily. Nor did he want to. Montaigne accepted the right of the church to govern his actions and even his personal beliefs. "It is not by reasoning or by our understanding that we have received our religion", he wrote, "it is by external authority and command". Religion came from God and tradition: he had to submit.

Some have suspected a cop-out here, for, of course, anyone who says that faith lies beyond reason, discussion or question can then safely leave it out of the picture, and go on to talk about the world exactly as an atheist might. This suspicion is supported by Montaigne's tendency to ignore the details: he has almost nothing to say about Jesus, most Christian saints, or even the principle of life beyond death.

I don't think he was an atheist, and I think his faith was vague but real. But it also seems that his desire to give up control to the church had a lot to do with his own odd, quietly subversive personality. He simply liked giving up control in general, especially in areas that did not stimulate his curiosity. He would be quite content, he said, if someone elbowed him aside in the running of his estate, because he found this a bore anyway. "Happy the people who do what they are commanded," he wrote, "who let themselves roll relaxedly with the rolling of the heavens."

Meanwhile, letting the church take care of his spiritual destiny freed him to think about more complicated matters: about human experience, character and judgment, and about the endless shifting landscape of ideas and emotions down here on earth.

This was an area in which Montaigne's scepticism opened up thrilling possibilities. It allowed him to consider that the world might have more facets than any one individual could ever grasp, and even that his dog might perceive more about reality than he did.

One of Montaigne's favourite hobbies was imagining the world from different perspectives. To remind himself how strange human behaviour looked if one's vision was
not dulled by familiarity, he collected stories from his reading: tales of countries where men urinated squatting and women standing, where people blackened their teeth or elongated their ears with rings, where hair was worn long in front and short behind, or where boys were expected to kill their fathers at a certain age.

It was not just that these were marvels in themselves. Montaigne loved such stories because they lent him an altered point of view from which to look back on his own culture and see it afresh. Most human beings judged what was merely habitual to be what was natural. Montaigne tried to wake himself from this dream.

He took a special interest in the newly encountered "cannibals" of the New World,

reading travellers' accounts and acquiring South American artifacts: hammocks, ropes, wooden swords, the arm-coverings warriors used in fighting, and "the big canes, open at one end, by whose sound they keep time in their dances".

He even met a couple of Tupinambá people, who had travelled to Europe from Brazil in a French ship. Through a translator, he asked them what they thought of France. They replied, among other things, that they were amazed to see rich Frenchmen gorging themselves at feasts while their "other halves" – the beggars outside their houses – starved. Europeans felt shocked because the Tupinambá ate their enemies after a battle, but the Tupinambá were shocked because Europeans found it easy to ignore the suffering of the living.

Montaigne did his best to feel equally amazed at both – and to think himself into both positions. "This great world", he wrote, "is the mirror in which we must look at ourselves to recognise ourselves from the proper angle".

At home, he extended his perspective-leaping to other species. "When I play with my cat", he wrote,
"who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?" He borrowed her point of view in relation to him just as readily as he occupied his own in relation to her. And, as he watched his dog twitching in sleep, he imagined the dog creating a disembodied hare to chase in its dreams – "a hare without fur or bones", just as real in the dog's mind as Montaigne's own images of Paris or Rome were when he dreamed about those cities. The dog had its inner world, as Montaigne did, furnished with things that interested him.

"We have formed a truth”, he wrote, “by the consultation and concurrence of our five senses; but perhaps we needed the agreement of eight or ten senses, and their contribution, to perceive it certainly and in its essence.” The dog is missing some of these; we may be missing more.

Thinking oneself into the experience of others also opens the way to a system of ethics based on communication and fellow-feeling, even between very different kinds of beings. Once you have seen the world from someone else's perspective, it becomes harder to torture, hunt, or kill them.

Montaigne is sometimes thought of as living a cold, solitary life, because he liked to spend time looking into himself, or occupying what he called his "room behind the shop" – his private mental space. He also claimed to cultivate emotional detachment, a technique the Stoic philosophers recommended as a means to tranquility.

In truth, he was neither solitary nor detached.
He lived in a large public household with his wife, his mother, and his one surviving daughter (out of six), plus the huge retinue that came with a Renaissance château: valets, grooms, maids, secretaries, hangers-on, itinerant entertainers, and of course agricultural workers. Animals were everywhere; the courtyards were always noisy, and many travellers passed through.

Montaigne often entertained colleagues, neighbours and friends, of whom he had many (though he never fully recovered from the loss of his closest one, Etienne de La Boétie.

He loved conversation – not so much the serious intellectual kind as "the sharp, abrupt repartee which good spirits and familiarity introduce among friends, bantering and joking wittily and keenly with one another". When he travelled, he talked to everyone he met, hoping to learn more about their lives. "My essential pattern is suited to communication and revelation", he wrote. "I am all in the open and in full view, born for company and friendship." He sought wisdom, but it was a "gay and sociable wisdom", not the cool, remote balance of the Stoic sage.

Philosophical detachment went against Montaigne's grain because of his natural tendency to empathise with others, and to sympathise with them – in the full, original sense of this word, meaning "to feel with". Watching a human or animal in pain, Montaigne felt some of that pain himself.

This made it impossible for him to collaborate in the cruel judicial procedures of the day.

As a magistrate and mayor of Bordeaux, he was expected to order tortures and public killings, but refused to do so. "I am so squeamish about hurting that for the service of reason itself I cannot do it. And when occasions have summoned me to sentencing criminals, I have tended to fall short of justice". In any case, he knew torture to be useless as an investigative procedure: people will say anything at all to stop the pain. As for
burning witches, "it is putting a very high price on one's conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them".

Not suprisingly, he disliked hunting, although his position as noble host occasionally obliged him to start a deer hunt in his woods for guests:

he mentions doing this once for Henri of Navarre, the future Henri IV. Similarly, he was expected to supply meat to his cooks for his sociable table, and did so – yet he could not watch a chicken having its neck wrung in the yard.

He writes, for example:

"There is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it. There is some relationship between them and us, and some mutual obligation."

In 1580, just after publishing the first edition of his Essays, Montaigne had an audience with Henri III in Paris.

Henri said he liked the book very much, to which Montaigne reportedly replied, "Sir, then your majesty must like me". For, as he always maintained, he and his essays were one. "I have no more made my book than my book has made me", he wrote, "it is a book consubstantial with its author".

Bakewell concludes with a quotation from the closing chapter of Montaigne’s Essays:

"There is nothing so beautiful and legitimate as to play the man well and properly, no knowledge so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live this life well and naturally."
And the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being." And she writes, “I can think of worse ways of going into the second decade of the 21st century than with such thoughts in mind.”