

Montaigne's Humanity

by Theodore Dalrymple



Ours is an age of ideological hatred, stronger than at any time I can remember. In the good old days—or perhaps I should say, in my good old days—the ideological choice was simple: you were either a Communist or an anti-Communist. Nowadays, though, we have feminists, ecologists, antiracists, multiculturalists, transsexual activists, and many others to contend with. People who disagree on various matters now find it hard to be in each other's company, viewing the other not merely as mistaken but morally defective, even evil (I do not altogether exclude myself from these strictures, for I am the product of my time, too). Bad temper seems practically universal, the default setting of all debate, which tends rapidly to degenerate into name-calling. This tendency preceded the advent of Donald Trump as president, and I suspect that it will survive his departure.

Against the baleful atmosphere of bitterness and vituperation in which we now live, the essays of Michel de Montaigne can act, if not as a complete remedy, at least as a soothing balm: for Montaigne (1533–92) was the least ideological of writers. He said that he wrote for himself and only about himself: but

this does not mean that he is self-obsessed in the way that the patient of psychoanalysis, say, is often self-obsessed. Observing the contradictions within himself, his swiftly changing moods and vacillations of opinion, Montaigne concludes that the world itself is complex and changeable, and therefore not to be apprehended by a single principle or two. "The world," he says in "Of Drunkenness," "is nothing but variety and dissimilarity."

He invites us to examine ourselves. "If," he says, "we sometimes looked more inwardly, and employed the time in probing ourselves that we spend in examining others and learning about things exterior to us, we should easily discover how much our own fabric is built of failing and fragile pieces." Infinite variety, changeability, contradictoriness—these were not only the subject of his seemingly disparate essays, but his delight; not for him the dull certainties of the *grands simplificateurs*, of whatever bent.

Montaigne repeatedly warns us against too great a certainty about our knowledge and our conviction that our way is the only right way. He warns against pride in our own learning and intelligence. "I do not share that common error of judging another by myself," he says, in his essay on Cato the Younger. "I easily believe that another man may have qualities different from mine. Because I feel myself tied down to one way or opinion, I do not oblige everybody to espouse it." And speaking of the folly of estimating the true and the false, the possible and the impossible, entirely from one's own knowledge and experience, he admits that an empty mind more easily accepts the first thing presented to it with plausibility, but he also says that people who believe themselves to be especially knowledgeable will often disdain or condemn as false whatever does not seem likely to them—a foolish presumption.

In the recent history of medicine, we encounter a striking

example of this tendency, when two Australian researchers proposed—with good evidence—that the great majority of peptic ulceration was caused by infection with a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori*. How could this be, when experts had studied the disease for years and knew it to be associated with smoking, a certain kind of hard-driving personality, and the stomach's production of either too much or too little hydrochloric acid? Besides, were not all bacterial diseases already known and fully described? The two researchers faced the incredulity of those for whom the new could not be true because if it had been true, they thought that they would already have known it.

“We must judge with more reverence the infinite power of Nature,” said Montaigne, “and with more consciousness of our ignorance and weakness.” However much we come to know, in other words, knowledge is always finite, while ignorance remains infinite. As Sir Isaac Newton, a man not always given to modesty, put it a century and a half after Montaigne, “I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.” Montaigne would have approved.

We flatter ourselves that we live in unprecedentedly hazardous, conflict-ridden, and changing times: but probably we have always lived in such times, and the memory of a safe, peaceful, and stable period is a trick of memory or the result of a defective grasp of history. Certainly, Montaigne could reasonably claim that he lived through the most momentous changes and the most perilous times. The dangers of his epoch were incomparably greater and nearer to the individual than those most of us like to frighten ourselves with today.

Intellectually, Europe still had not fully absorbed the shock of the discovery of the New World and its inhabitants, who

seemed so different from Europeans that some denied that they were fully human, even claiming that, being natural slaves, they were incapable of self-government and therefore rightfully conquered and dispossessed. The controversy of Valladolid took place when Montaigne was 17 or 18 years old—Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda arguing for the natural incapacity of the Indians and Bartolomé de las Casas taking the opposite position, each believing that he had won the dispute. Montaigne was decisively on Las Casas's side. One could almost call him the first multiculturalist, as well as a believer in the happiness, if not the nobility, of the savage—that is, of Man before he became civilized.

Sepúlveda had contended that many of the Indian customs were so abominable—the hecatombs of humans sacrificed by the Aztecs, for example—that it was not only morally permissible, but morally obligatory, to destroy their civilization and replace it with a superior, kinder, gentler one: that of the conquistadors. This was for the good of the Indians themselves. Montaigne rejected the argument completely and suggested that those using it look more closely at their own record. “I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts,” he says, speaking of the supposed habit of Brazilian Indians of tearing their prisoners of war to pieces and roasting and eating them, “but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own.”

Here we should recall that Montaigne lived through the French Wars of Religion, during which Catholics and Protestants inflicted untold torture and death on each other, such that millions were killed or died of resultant famine over the course of several decades. (Montaigne did not live to see the conclusion of these wars—usually dated from the Edict of Nantes, promulgated by Henry IV, allowing for toleration of Protestants—and must therefore have thought that they would be without end.) During these wars, burnings at the stake were

not uncommon: the ambassadors of the Ottomans to Paris—an alliance between France and Ottoman Turkey was then being negotiated—were treated in 1534 to the spectacle of the burning at the stake of Protestants, for posting anti-Catholic placards across the city. Anne de Bourg, the university teacher of Étienne la Boétie, Montaigne's great friend, was burned at the stake for his Protestantism.

Therefore, Montaigne speaks with some asperity, derived from reflection on the times in which he lived, when he says:

I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only to read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.

Montaigne invites the reader to examine more closely his own record, or that of his country, and not to come to too swift and censorious a view of others. It is perhaps better to ensure that one's own behavior is without blemish than to demand perfection of others or seek by force to reform them.

In his essay "Of Custom," Montaigne castigates our tendency to believe that our way is the best or the only way, simply because the way we do things now is the way we have always done them. He provides a list, several pages long, of different customs throughout the world as it was then known. Here is a sample of his enumeration, which even today might retain its ability to startle:

There are places where there are public brothels of men, and even marriages between them; where the women go to war alongside their husbands, and take their place not only in the combat but also in the command. Where they not only wear

rings in the nose, lips, cheeks, and toes, but also have very heavy gold rods thrust through their breast and buttocks. . . . Where it is not the children who are the heirs, but the brothers and nephews; and elsewhere the nephews only, except in the succession of the prince. . . . Where they sleep ten or twelve together in bed, husbands and wives. . . . Where the wives who lose their husbands by violent death may remarry, the others no. . . . Where husbands can repudiate their mates without alleging any cause, the wives not for any cause whatever.

The point here is not whether all of Montaigne's anthropological examples exist in reality, much less whether his list of human customs is exhaustive, but that, once apprehended, the variety of customs, the existence of which nobody could deny once it is pointed out, must naturally make us examine our own ways of living and reflect on ourselves with greater objectivity.

In what is usually taken as the central essay of his book *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne asks his most famous question: What do I know? (This question became the title of a famous series of short books in France, published by the Presses Universitaires de France, on a huge number of subjects.) The occasion of the essay is a theological treatise by an obscure and forgotten Spanish theologian who taught in Toulouse in the fifteenth century, which Montaigne translated at his father's request; but Montaigne uses it as a pretext to ask not only what he knows but also to ask what the value is of knowledge itself—whether, for example, it makes a man happier or wiser or better—to which he gives a mainly negative answer.

Pride in knowledge is foolish. Another intellectually disquieting or disorientating factor during Montaigne's lifetime was the Copernican Revolution, which overthrew the immemorial assumption that Earth was the center of the

universe and that the sun revolved around it. If something "known" for so long, which seemed so obvious, could turn out to be mistaken, what indeed could we know?

Not being a systematic thinker, Montaigne offers only philosophical hints or suggestions. His mind is allusive rather than analytic; we find in him thoughts that prefigure later developments but nothing that resembles a doctrine more than a general attitude. His skepticism, both in moral and empirical matters, is not thoroughgoing or metaphysical but rooted in observation. You cannot, after all, use evidence to claim that all evidence is doubtful. When he tells us that the customs and moral conceptions of mankind vary in time and in place, he does not doubt his belief that there really are places, for example, where "they cook the body of the deceased and then crush it until a sort of pulp is formed, which they mix with their wine, and drink." Nor is he a complete moral relativist: if he were, he would not be able to say such things as that there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead. Customs may vary, but barbarity is barbarity.

In other words, he calls us not to complete agnosticism as to whether a real world exists external to our thoughts, or whether nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so, but to a certain modesty: to remember always that we might be mistaken, which is not the same as saying that we always are mistaken. The concept of mistakenness depends on the possibility of attaining truth; if every thought were error, then that thought itself would be error and therefore untrue. "Anyone," he says, "who shrewdly gathered an accumulation of the asininites of human thought would have wonders to tell"; but, of course, he would have asininites to tell only if he could recognize them as such. The condition of man in the face of stupidity is thus not entirely hopeless.

Montaigne is himself sometimes wrong. He does not entirely free himself of the superstitions of his age. He believes, for

example, that ostriches hatch their eggs by looking at them. And he was himself a source of the damaging superstition later taken up by Rousseau:

The Brazilians [that is to say, the native peoples of Brazil] died only of old age, which is attributed to the serenity and tranquillity of the air. I attribute it rather to the tranquillity and serenity of their souls, unburdened with any tense or unpleasant passion or thought or occupation, as people who spend their life in admirable simplicity and ignorance, without letters, without law, without king, without religion of any kind.

Not only is this a very unlikely description of any group of human beings that has ever lived, but Montaigne himself contradicts it by describing Brazilian wars and head-hunting, evidently having forgotten what he himself had written. But the myth of the noble savage persisted despite its inconsistencies, and probably it persists in most of us in a diluted fashion when we long for the simpler life that we never achieve, or even take the first steps toward.

Montaigne also fails to make some necessary distinctions. He asks what we can know of the world when we know so little of ourselves. This is only an apparent paradox; and when he says, in support of his argument, that “we [humans] are no more versed in the understanding of ourselves in the physical part than in the spiritual,” he does not foresee the immense advances in understanding of human physiology that would take place in the centuries following him. Whether we will ever advance much in the understanding of what Montaigne calls the spiritual part of humanity remains to be seen—myself, I doubt it, and secretly hope not, for the knowledge once obtained would certainly be abused, but, Montaigne-influenced, I admit that I might be incorrect. Only time, not dogmatism, will tell.

Montaigne is full of pregnant thoughts, the very pregnancy of his thoughts suggesting that an underlying human reality exists that does not change much, at least over prolonged periods. "The impression of certainty," he says, "is a sure token of folly and extreme uncertainty." I don't think that anyone capable of the least detachment would fail to recognize the applicability of this truth to our present cultural situation. Montaigne had seen where the conflicting religious certainties of his age, all only flimsily arguable, could lead. We must hope that we have enough wisdom to avoid a repetition of the French Wars of Religion.

Four centuries before Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous inaugural address, Montaigne wrote in "Of Fear" that "the thing I most fear is fear." He tells us that it is possible to be too polite, that we can incommode people by too elaborate a politeness, when the whole point of manners is to put people at their ease. He tells us of our desire, for reasons of vanity, to talk of things other than those in which we are genuinely expert. He recognized the importance and power of the placebo (and nocebo) effect. He grasps that child's play is not just child's play but an important stage in growing up; that travel is, or ought to be, a philosophical experience; that judgment is more important than knowledge; and so on.

Or again, foreshadowing a modern school of philosophy, the object of which is to show the fly out of the fly bottle—to release mankind from the false puzzles into which its misuse of language leads it—Montaigne says:

Our speech has its weaknesses and its defects. . . . Most of the occasions for the troubles of the world are grammatical. Our lawsuits spring only from debate over the interpretation of the laws, and most of our wars from the inability to express clearly the conventions and treaties of agreement of princes. How many quarrels, and how important, have been produced in the world by doubt of the meaning of that syllable Hoc!

An exaggeration, no doubt, as was Pascal's assertion that all unhappiness arises from an inability to sit quietly in a room, alone: obviously false if taken literally. But no one—certainly no one ever involved in a protracted lawsuit—would deny the element of truth in what Montaigne wrote, or that conflict over the meanings of words can be bitter.

If Montaigne was unsure of the value of what he knew, what did he really believe? He was an observant Catholic throughout his life, but I doubt that he believed very deeply in the dogmas of the faith. He was content, I think, to accept the religion of his forefathers because he did not believe in any individual's capacity to work everything out for himself. He regretted Protestantism not because he thought it in error, or wicked, but because it had stirred up hatreds that resulted in untold misery and death.

We cannot derive a coherent doctrine from Montaigne. He was skeptical about the profound finitude of human knowledge but believed in facts, which he used to establish points that he wanted to make. He was not a rationalist but did not disdain logic to make an argument, and was therefore not an irrationalist, either. Rather, his skepticism was a call to intellectual modesty, and his appreciation of the immense variety of the human and natural world a reminder that the ocean of truth lies all before us and will forever do so.

First published in