

The following text was originally published in *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIV, no. 1/2, 1994, p. 107–19
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MONTAIGNE

(1533-1592)

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[A] ‘and just as women left alone may sometimes be seen to produce shapeless lumps of flesh but need to be kept busy by a semen other than her own in order to produce good natural offspring: so too with our minds. If we do not keep them busy with some particular subject which can serve as a bridle to reign them in, they charge ungovernably about, ranging to and fro over the wastelands of our thoughts.’ [a] *et comme nous voyons que les femmes produisent bien toutes seules, des amas et pieces de chair informes, mais que pour faire une generation bonne et naturelle, il les faut embesoigner d’une autre semence : ainsi en est-il des esprits. Si on ne les occupe à certain sujet, qui les bride et contraigne, ils se jettent dereglez, par-cy par-là, dans le vague champ des imaginations.’*²

[B] ‘I love terms which soften and tone down the rashness of what we put forward, terms such as “perhaps”, “somewhat”, “some”, “they say”, “I think” and so on. And if I had had sons to bring up I would have trained their lips to answer with [C] inquiring and undecided [B] expressions such as, “What does this mean?” “I do not understand that”, “It might be so”, “Is that true?” so that they would have been more likely to retain the manners of an apprentice at sixty than, as boys do, to act like learned doctors at ten. Anyone who wishes to be cured of ignorance must first admit to it: [C] Iris is the daughter of Thaumantis: amazement is the foundation of all philosophy; inquiry, its way of advancing; and ignorance is its end. [B] Yes indeed: there is a kind of ignorance, strong and magnanimous, which in honour and courage is in no wise inferior to knowledge; [C] you need no less knowledge to beget such ignorance than to beget knowledge itself.’ *[[b] J’aymes ces mots, qui amollissent et moderent la temerité de nos propositions: A l’avanture, Aucunement, Quelque, On dict, Je pense, et semblables. Et si j’eusse eu à dresser des enfans, je leur eusse tant mis en la bouche cette façon de respondre, [c] enquesteuse, non resolute : [b] “Qu’est ce à dire? Je ne l’entens pas, Il pourraist estre, Est-il vray?” qu’ils eussent plustost gardé la forme d’apprentis à soixante ans que de représenter des docteurs à dix ans comme ils font. Qui veut guerir de l’ignorance, il faut la confesser. [c] Iris est fille de Thaumantis. L’admiration est fondement de toute philosophie, l’inquisition le progresz, l’ignorance le bout. [b] Voire deja il y a quelque ignorance forte et genereuse qui ne doit rien en honneur et en courage à la science, [c] ignorance pour laquelle concevoir il n’y a pas moins de science que pour concevoir la science.’*³

The place of Montaigne

Michel de Montaigne, who died a century after Christopher Columbus’s first transatlantic voyage, lived in a period in which European identity was deeply disturbed by the dynamic forces at work in a variety of fields. No longer identifying itself with Christendom alone, Europe was making a radical break with the set of references that had for centuries guided its development. The splitting up of the linguistic areas in which culture developed might be regarded as the clearest evidence of this. Although in the sixteenth century literary and scientific works were still being produced in Latin, national literatures were established everywhere and the greatest masterpieces were then

written in the vulgar tongues. The *Essays* are a particularly good illustration of the cultural mosaic of Renaissance Europe: Montaigne's prose is interlarded with Latin quotations—often translated in turn from the Greek—, but also compounded with expressions drawn from a popular heritage. This diversity expresses both the convergence of a variety of experiences leading to a philosophy of existence based on a strong concern with comparisons, and the inappropriateness of dogmatic judgements in most real-life situations.

This being so, interpretations of his work have inevitably wavered between 'the formulation of a wisdom' made up of tolerance and humanity and reliance on the absolute value of Classical literary culture, on the one hand, and a melancholy and disillusioned scepticism, on the other, produced as much by his experience of the religious conflicts of his day as by the Socratic knowledge that it is impossible to make virtue the rule of life in organized communities. These two interpretations shared a common dimension, which has since become the accepted opinion: Living at the time of the invention (by the bourgeoisie) of the individual, and the literary exploration of the innermost recesses of one's own mind, Montaigne is regarded as a precursor of the modern spirit. In this respect, the pages he devoted to education, referring as they do both to the virtues of book learning and the need for teaching methods based on the exercise of judgement and continuous dialogue, have become the emblem of an open conception of education.

Actually, not many of the objectives, or even the methods, formulated by educationists could be justified by any of Montaigne's remarks, not because of eclecticism on his part, but rather because he had seen through the social and psychological forces which in the long run make education a form of conditioning instead of an awakening to the world. For this very reason we should not be content with classing his texts as a fund of general maxims; if we are to reach an exact reading, we must first measure the distance between Montaigne and the present.

The paradox of Montaigne

Let us not delude ourselves: looking for the lineaments of an educator in Montaigne is truly paradoxical. Not only did his century, in the main, precede the generalization of formal education, but Montaigne was not one of those who advocated its development: 'Those who follow our French practice and undertake to act as schoolmaster for several minds diverse in kind and capacity, using the same teaching and the same degree of guidance for them all, not surprisingly can scarcely find in a whole tribe of children more than one or two who bear fruit from their education' [*Ceux qui, comme porte notre usage, entreprennent d'une mesme leçon et pareille mesure de conduite regenter plusieurs esprits de si diverses mesures et formes, ce n'est pas miracle si, en tout un peuple d'enfans, ils en rencontrent à peine deux ou trois qui rapportent quelque juste fruit de leur discipline.*⁴]. What is more, Montaigne's scepticism is far removed from the Cartesian formulation of 'the method of rightly conducting the reason and searching after truth in the sciences' [*méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*] (1637), and is scarcely consistent with the standard-setting dimension which seems inseparable from all education.

Admittedly, Montaigne shares the concerns of his contemporaries: the emphasis on history, on accounts of newly discovered lands and the customs of their inhabitants, and the references to education through recreational activities, such as play-acting and physical training, are in keeping with the first courses of study offered in the Jesuit colleges of Gascony between 1560 and 1590. The modern breakaway was effected in two steps. First, to the reading of the Classics, set up as models, was added history, which 'teaches us how to live' [*enseignante de la vie*]. Montaigne makes this clear at the beginning of his essay, 'On educating children' [*De l'institution des enfans*], by ranking historians along with poets at the top of the hierarchy of references. At a later stage, the heterogeneous nature of this education was to make way for a reform of institutions of learning: from the 1640s on, the Cartesian revolution set aside the humanistic approach and Montaigne was

regarded as a particular moment in thought when the Latin humanities of Erasmus, already giving way to a culture of historical accounts closer to the experience of the time, had not yet been subjected to criticism on the part of the scientific modernism which established itself as the educational norm in the course of the seventeenth century.

Montaigne's conception, despite its similarities with the curricula of the first Jesuit colleges, is rather different; and it is appropriate to recall here the opinion expressed by Durkheim: 'Montaigne is not far from ending up with a sort of educational nihilism of relative consistency. In fact, his view is that the educator has no hold on what constitutes the basis of our nature. There is no question of a real culture of the intellect, of a culture designed to train the mind as such'.⁵ This opinion, despite its exaggerated character, might be reconciled with a reading of Montaigne as an educational thinker—not so much a precursor of the modern school as the founder of a tradition of critics of educational institutions, a necessary counterbalance to the educational systems. Though elegant, this interpretation is contradictory, as Durkheim pointed out: How can one reconcile a belief in teaching methods calculated to develop learning with a sceptical view according to which our nature is not governed by rational rules of conduct? Rather, we are carried along by our characters, which lie at the root of our essential attitudes, and it is these which combine with the logics of mimicry to determine all manner of conditioned outbursts in social life.

So Montaigne calls for a more radical interpretation. Learning provides no positive standard; it merely enables us to know how far the conduct of individuals departs from what a wise nature would prompt. Besides being incorrigible, faculties are distributed at random. Education serves above all to bring them out so that the best characters can be discovered. This is what Montaigne has in mind when he jestingly recommends that the tutor should quickly strangle the unworthy pupil when nobody is looking or apprentice him to some trade which will keep him occupied. Education would thus mainly serve a negative purpose, seeking to cast out vices likely to develop and become a danger to human society. Unconvinced of the influence education was supposed to have on us, Montaigne has no difficulty in showing how the natural disposition comes out under all circumstances or sets impassable limits to everyone's behaviour, even if that natural disposition is concealed by disguises and masks which give it false colours and belie it.

While Montaigne can be regarded as a precursor of Rousseau's negative attitude to education, it would be much more tricky to trace back any theory of Descartes or Pascal to a tradition inspired by Montaigne, despite their textual and thematic borrowings. The ideas on which the development of schools in France is based might even be legitimately considered as sufficient proof of the little influence Montaigne's thought has had on the structuring of studies in his own country, the correspondence of Montaigne's thought with deeper aspects of French culture notwithstanding. Descartes, in whom the metaphysics of the *Cogito* provides the foundation for a scientific method of knowing things—and knowing oneself as being made up of a *res extensa* and a *res cogitans*—, or Pascal, for whom the revelation of the Mystery of Jesus influenced lived temporality once and for all, would seem more representative' to anyone wanting to draw up a history of institutional educational thought. Montaigne's specificity will therefore be sought in what is incompatible with the Cartesian project or Pascal's thought—no revealed historicity, no method to direct the mind, but consideration of the relative docility with which the natural disposition adopts learned behaviours, some deliberately, others not. This seems to rule out the traditional reading of the *Essays*. There is no longer any question of confidence in human beings: any constituted disposition vanishes, leaving a mosaic of faculties combined at random in a person more often than not powerless to act on his or her destiny.

Montaigne's own life confirms this approach. After retiring from public affairs shortly before the outbreak of the Wars of Religion in France (Massacre of St Bartholomew, 1572), he devoted himself to writing. The first two books came out in 1580; the third was added in the 1588 edition. Right up to his death Montaigne made many augmentations [*allongements*], which were usually very significant in that they clarified the trend of his thought. Throughout these years

Montaigne explained his ideas and expanded on his own cast of mind to the extent of reflecting as much his mood of the moment as the evolution of his character.

On educating children'

The texts devoted to the upbringing of children are grouped together in the vicinity of the essay, 'On educating children' [*De l'institution des enfans*] (I.26). This set of well-linked practical proposals is a part of the complex series following the famous essay, 'To philosophize is to learn how to die', [*Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir*] (I.20). After discussing the aims people can assign to life—[C] 'Life itself is neither a good nor an evil: life is where good or evil find a place, depending on how you make it for them.' [*[c] la vie n'est de soy ny bien ny mal: c'est la place du bien et du mal selon que vous la leur faictes*⁵]

—, Montaigne tackles the themes essential to any philosophy of education by dealing with the imagination and habit: How is the human mind affected by its inner urges and by elements from the outside world? Our imagination produces many effects in reality and provides the most telling evidence against the primacy of the will in human behaviour. Our bodies are in many instances not subordinated to our wills; by and large, the body is more accessible to the imagination than governable by the will. One has only to reflect on the first love story that comes to mind—Montaigne can argue even more conclusively from the various symptoms which affect everyone and which psychoanalysis was later to describe—phobias, lapses of memory, recurrence and fixations of all kinds. In animals, too, the influence of ideation is evident—e.g. domestic animals dying from grief over the deaths of their owners and, more convincingly, animals immobilizing their prey by holding their gaze.

Habit, even when based on a figment of the imagination [A] 'gradually and stealthily slides her authoritative foot into us; then, having by this gentle and humble beginning planted it firmly within us, helped by time she later discloses an angry tyrannous countenance, against which we are no longer allowed even to lift up our eyes'. [*[a] établit en nous, peu à peu, le pied de son autorité : mais par ce doux et humble commencement, l'ayant rassis et planté avec l'ayde du temps, elle nous descouvre tantost un furieux et tyrannique visage, contre lequel nous n'avons plus la liberté de hausser seulement les yeux*].⁶] Whereupon Montaigne concludes that [B] 'our greatest vices do acquire their bent during our most tender infancy, so that our formation is chiefly in the hands of our wet-nurses'. [*[b] nos plus grands vices prennent leur ply de nostre plus tendre enfance, et que nostre principal gouvernement est entre les mains des nourrices*]⁷] The hold which imagination and habit acquire over children's attitudes can therefore be judged from their earliest expression. If children are not taught to detest their natural vices, 'whatever mask they hide behind' [*"quelque masque qu'ils portent"*]⁸], what is the use of educating them?' Whatever our opinion on the matter, we must realize that all behaviour, all value judgements, are based to some extent on habit, or custom, for the habits, or customs, of the place where you were born, widely though these may differ from one place to another, rule your conscience. This line of thought is continued in the brief essay on credulity, 'That it is madness to judge the true and the false from our own capacities' [*Que c'est folie de rapporter le vray et le faux à notre suffisance*]: [A] 'How many of the things which constantly come into our purview must be deemed monstrous or miraculous if we apply such terms to anything which outstrips our reason!'. [*(a) Si nous appellons monstres ou miracles ce où nostre raison ne peut aller, combien s'en presente il continuellement à nostre veüe?*]⁹]

The essence of any education is thus the way in which it inculcates moral principles consistent with the goal of wisdom and calculated to develop a conscience enabling us all to bring our behaviour in line with incontestable standards. For this reason Montaigne mercilessly mocks teachers who, unable to get the children to assimilate what they are taught, are content with puffing them up with it, making them conceited and arrogant: [A] 'Learned we may be with another man's learning: we can only be wise with wisdom of our own'. [*(a) Quand bien nous pourrions estre sçavants du sçavoir d'autrui, au moins sages ne pouvons nous estre que de nostre propre*

*sagesse.*¹⁰] Hence [A] ‘since I would prefer that he turned out to be an able man not an erudite one, I would wish you to be careful to select as guide for him a tutor with a well-formed rather than a well-filled brain’. [(a) *ayant plutost envie d’en tirer un habil’ homme qu’un homme sçavant, je voudrois aussi qu’on fut soigneux de luy choisir un conducteur qui eust plutost la teste bien faicte que bien pleine.*’¹¹]

Only on this condition can we rediscover the Socratic method of teaching by means of exercises in which the pupil shows his capacity for discernment. However difficult this may be, it is possible [C] ‘to judge how far down the tutor needs to go to adapt himself to his ability. If we get that proportion wrong we spoil everything; knowing how to find it and to remain well-balanced within it is one of the most arduous tasks there is. It is the action of a powerful elevated mind to know how to come down to the level of the child and to guide his footsteps’. [(c) *ravaler pour s’accommoder à sa force. A faute de cette proportion nous gastons tout: et de la sçavoir choisir, et s’y conduire bien mesurement c’est une des plus ardues besongnes que je sçache : et est l’effeict d’une haute ame et bien forte, sçavoir condescendre à ses allures puériles et les guider.*’¹²] Education seen in this light is aimed not so much at burdening the memory as developing a keen mind. Here Montaigne takes inspiration again from Plato, advocating teaching by means of a dialogue in which the variety of examples and cases gradually leads to the building up of an idea or the working out of an approach or a problem. With this method, questioning must become a set of reflexes’ so ingrained that they appear innate, because what we have really digested is entirely our own: [C] ‘To follow another is to follow nothing’ [...] [A] ‘the boy will transform his borrowings; he will confound their forms so that the end-product is entirely his: namely, his judgement, the forming of which is the only aim of his toil, his study and his education.’ [C] ‘Let him hide the help he received and put only his achievements on display’. [(c)] *Qui suit un autre, il ne suit rien. Il ne trouve rien, voire il ne cherche rien.[a] ainsi les pièces empruntées d’autrui, il les transformera et confondera pour en faire un ouvrage tout sien: à sçavoir son jugement. Son institution, son travail et estude ne vise qu’à le former [c] Qu’il cele tout ce dequoy il a été secouru, et ne produise que ce qu’il en a faict.*¹³]

Since principles of judgement are neither abstract nor general but always relate to the essence of the objects concerning which judgement is exercised, variety in such exercises is paramount. This intention comes first in every subject, indicating the need for basing pupils’ autonomy on an increased capacity for discernment and endurance. The attention paid to physical training has a direct bearing on this: [C] ‘Pain and discomfort in training are needed to break him in for the pain and discomfort of dislocated joints, of the stone and of cauterizings—and of dungeons and tortures as well’. [(c) *Il le faut rompre à la peine et à aspreté des exercices, pour le dresser à la peine et aspreté de la desloueure, de la colique, du caustere, et de la geaule, et de la torture.*’¹⁴]

‘The indispensable school of conversation among men’ [*l’école du commerce des hommes*] is the subject of recommendations concerning the attitude to adopt in company—reticence and modesty, but eagerness to learn. Montaigne warns strongly against pledging one’s freedom of judgement for personal gain. This aspect shows how easily his advice concerning education can be applied to attitudes in politics. He wants the pupil to be prepared for the making of lucid decisions whenever a decision may have consequences for the pupil or for others. Montaigne had no intention of painting the world in brighter colours than it deserves and so an important part of education was being able to forget general principles and to concentrate on singular and exceptional cases which could either serve as examples to be admired or arouse disgust. The object of this approach, which is fostered by the reading of the historians, is to enable the pupil to reject ruling opinions. The ability shown by the young La Boétie in discerning in Plutarch elements which he was to take as the theme of his *Discours de la Servitude volontaire* (On willing slavery) is held up here as an example.

When in society the pupil will compare individual attitudes and there will be [A] ‘engendered in him a desire for the good ones and a contempt for the bad’. [(a) *s’engendrera envie*

des bonnes et mespris des mauvaises.^{15]} In this we must not rush things, for the purpose of this experience is to educate the desire and the natural faculties and not to inculcate any moral rigidity. There is no question of adding to the confusion of things by imagining that their course can be amended: history teaches us how much blood has been shed on account of this illusion; what matters is to endure what does not depend on us and ‘to restrict our life’s appurtenances to their right and natural limits’. [*restreindre les appartenances de nostre vie à leurs justes et naturels limites*’.^{16]} This is the essential, convergent as it happens with the teachings of philosophy, which takes first place in this education and which in turn recommends introduction to some of the positive sciences, under the direction of specialists on whom the tutor can call for assistance.

Scepticism and human nature

[C] ‘I am offering my own human thoughts as human thoughts to be considered on their own, not as things established by God’s ordinance, incapable of being doubted or challenged; they are matters of opinion not matters of faith: what I reason out *secundum me*, not what I believe *secundum Deum*—like schoolboys reading out their essays, not teaching but teachable, in a lay not a clerical manner but always deeply devout.’ [*c] Je propose les fantaisies humaines et miennes, simplement comme humaines fantaisies, et séparément considérées, non comme arrêtées et réglées par l’ordonnance celeste, incapables de doute et d’altercation : matière d’opinion, non matière de foy; ce que je discours selon moy, non ce que je croy selon Dieu, comme les enfans proposent leurs essais : instruisables, non instruisants; d’une manière laïque, non clericale, mais très-religieuse tousjours*’.^{17]} Inserted after the last edition to appear during the author’s lifetime, this statement is equivalent to a legacy: his affirmations are to be judged not so much on their substance as on the thoughts which they arouse. The different nature of human thoughts and things established by God’s ordinance is assumed: the former do not coincide with the latter except by chance. To deny this, in the absence of tangible proof to the contrary, would be presumption, ‘the natural, original distemper of man’ [*maladie naturelle et inevitable*’.^{18]} Thus we see in what way Montaigne’s scepticism is something quite different from relativism: it rests on a study of Man in which capricious and unruly thinking is found to be the natural disposition of the mind. This is particularly evident in the Apology for Raymond Sebond’, which contrasts the habitual behaviour of the various animate creatures with the arcana of science. Any opinion will be more soundly based on actions rather than principles contrived for the occasion. The same is true for theological morality: [C] ‘The distinctive mark of the Truth we hold ought to be virtue, which is the most exacting mark of Truth, the closest one to heaven and the most worthy thing that Truth produces.’ [*c] la marque peculièrre de nostre vérité devrait estre nostre vertu, comme elle est aussi la plus celeste marque et la plus difficile, et que c’est la plus digne production de la vérité*’.^{19]}

Since we embrace perforce the faith of our birthplace, it behoves us to act in such a way that those who do not share it gain respect for it by observing the virtue of those who profess it. So Montaigne’s relativism is above all a realism which avoids fictions that conflict with experience. Turning anthropocentrism around, he seeks the signs of God’s greatness in the world: [A] ‘So let us consider for a while Man in isolation—Man with no outside help, armed with no arms but his own and stripped of that grace and knowledge of God in which consist his dignity, his power and the very ground of his being’. [*a] Considerons donq pour cette heure l’homme seul, sans secours estranger, armé seulement de ses armes, et despourveu de la grace et de la connaissance divine, qui est tout son honneur, sa force et le fondement de son estre*’.^{20]} Pascal will have only to copy such statements to fit them into his reasoning. Montaigne bases his remarks on a reductive operation: the qualities peculiar to Man are discerned outside any pre-established framework, their description being limited to that of deeds and their relationship with motivations. Any certainty is referred back to this metaphysical reductionism intended to preserve the human mind from the presumptuous illusion that the world should be under the domination of Man: [A] ‘The vanity of

this same thought makes him equal himself to God; attribute to himself God's mode of being; pick himself out and set himself apart from the mass of other creatures'. *[[a] c'est par la vanité de cette mesme imagination qu'il s'egale à Dieu, qu'il s'attribue les conditions divines, qu'il se trie soy-mesme et separe de la presse des autres creatures'.^{21]}* What comes naturally to animals (things for which we have to be educated) shows that they attest to the greatness of God in Nature. Montaigne's comparative approach is not limited to human behaviour; it is extended to all forms of life. It is the organization of our actions that matters, not the way we explain them to ourselves.

The exercise of doubt will shed more light than any dogmatic knowledge: [A] 'There is a plague on Man: his opinion that he knows something.' *[[a] La peste de l'homme, c'est l'opinion de savoir.^{22]}* It is wiser to remain in a state of uncertainty than to adhere to a poorly established dogma. It is because language reveals this presumption—I doubt' is still an affirmation—that Montaigne adopts as his motto, 'What do I know?' *[Que scay-je?]*, a question which reminds us of our ignorance of the reasons behind all things, however enlightened we may be regarding this or that particular point. Since we are apt to give credence to the theories that we are continually thinking up, we must refrain from putting forward any that have not been weighed up with convincing arguments. The most diverse philosophical principles being open to question and Montaigne's own principles being formulated in fragments here and there, he says of himself: [C] 'A new character: a chance philosopher, not a premeditated one!' *[[c] Nouvelle figure : un philosophe imprémédité et fortuite!^{23]}*

This subverting of philosophical values is not without its parallel in Nietzsche. The most traditional philosophical theories, those relating to the soul in particular, reflect our fears and hopes rather than our reason, which can be bent to any end, as Pascal was to reaffirm. Chance alone leads us to some truth: through this powerlessness which we confess we render thanks to God without attributing to ourselves a greatness that is not ours. [A] 'Our minds are dangerous tools, rash and prone to go astray: it is hard to reconcile them with order and moderation. We rein it in, neck and throat [the human mind], with religions, laws, customs, precepts, rewards and punishments (both mortal and immortal), and we still find it escaping from all these bonds, with its garrulousness and laxity.' *[[a] Notre esprit est un util vagabond, dangereux et téméraire : il est malaisé d'y joindre l'ordre et la mesure. On le bride et garrote de religions, de lois, de coutumes, de science, de preceptes, de peines et recompenses mortelles et immortelles; encores voit-on que, par sa volubilité et dissolution, il eschappe à toutes ces liaisons.^{24]}* The variations to which our sense organs are subject, sense organs which condition our relationship with the world and our humour in general, afford countless examples of the difficulty of perceiving people's qualities objectively. A striking argument can be drawn from premonitory dreams, which occur when our minds are at the farthest remove from the lucidity with which the philosophers credit them.

Human customs are so heteroclitic that any attempt to find a common denominator is defeated: [B] 'It is quite believable that natural laws exist: we can see that in other creatures. But we have lost them; that fine human reason of ours is always interfering, seeking dominance and mastery, distorting and confounding the face of everything according to its own vanity and inconsistency.' *[[b] il est croyable qu'il y a des lois naturelles, comme il se voit es autres creatures; mais en nous elles sont perdues, cette belle raison humaine s'ingerant partout de maistriser et commander, brouillant et confondant le visage des choses selon sa vanité et inconstance.^{25]}* Consideration of the senses completes this panorama of our mistaken ideas. Examples are given of kinaesthetic confusion: the fear of heights seizes us when we are perfectly safe; we have only to cross our fingers when touching an object to lose all sense of its shape; illness causes all manner of sensory disorders. These changes are decisive in the absolute primacy accorded to movement and transition in the human condition. Bodin, whom Montaigne appreciated, is accused of limiting the believable to the plausible: the classical example of the young Spartans' endurance of pain serves as a basis for comments that prefigure Spinoza's 'no one knows what a body is capable of' or the 'I can' of the phenomenologists.²⁶

Phenomenology in Montaigne

It remains to show how Montaigne's scepticism anticipates the phenomenological reduction practised by Husserl. The reputed humanist and teacher of moderation must make way for a Montaigne whose writings are all the more philosophical inasmuch as they are not scholastic, and open a phenomenological path to the study of the mind. He supports his reasoning with contemporary and classical texts—those of Lucretius in particular. He proceeds by comparing his most vivid impressions with similar experiences described in the works of the principal authors. Not admitting any dogmatism, Montaigne explores a method of eidetic description obtained by establishing a parallel between real-life experiences and conceptual propositions. The approach adopted in the composition of the *Essays* is to go ever more directly to the heart of the matter and fill out with further examples the rigour of the descriptions and the essences' derived therefrom. That is why Montaigne refrains from cutting out earlier passages when he adds to the text: the reading ties up with his experience as it has actually developed and the book becomes consubstantial' with its author, book and author growing up together in one and the same movement. The *Essays* record an existential and methodological discovery of which they are the protocol: seen in this light, Montaigne can rightly be regarded as an educator, the fact that he scorned book-learning not invalidating this point of view.

One of the essays which has varied the most, the one 'On books' [*Des livres*], affords clear evidence of this way of thinking: [A] 'What you have here is purely an assay of my natural, not at all of my acquired, abilities. Anyone who catches me out in ignorance does me no harm: I cannot vouch to other people for my reasonings: I can scarcely vouch for them to myself and am by no means satisfied with them. These are my own thoughts, by which I am striving to make known not matter but me.' And again: [C] 'Where my borrowings are concerned, see whether I have been able to select something which improves my theme: I get others to say what I cannot put so well myself, sometimes because of the weakness of my language and sometimes because of the weakness of my intellect. I will love the man who can pluck out my feathers—I mean by the perspicacity of his judgement and by his sheer ability to distinguish the force and beauty of the topics.' [[a] *C'est icy purement l'essay de mes facultez naturelles, et nullement des acquises; et qui me surprendra d'ignorance, il ne fera rien contre moy, car à peine respondroy-je à autruy de mes discours, qui ne m'en reponds point à moy; ny n'en suis satisfait. Qu'on ne s'attende pas aux matieres, mais à la façon que j'y donne [c] Qu'on voye, en ce que j'emprunte, si j'ay su rehausser mon propos. Car je fay dire aux autres ce que je ne peux si bien dire, tantost par foiblesse de mon langage, tantost par foiblesse de mon sens J'aimeray quelqu'un qui me sçache desplumer, je dy par clairté de jugement et par la seule distinction de la force et beauté des propos.*²⁷] This type of reading, which he seeks to the extent of deliberately omitting the sources of certain references so that the reader will not be biased for or against, is in keeping with the emphasis on the educational value of poetry and the theatre, which illustrate the transition from one situation to another,²⁸ and show the psychological and educational need for experimenting with all kinds of attitudes, for putting ourselves in someone else's place to feel what it is like ('On educating children') [*De l'institution des enfans*], and for preparing ourselves by asceticism for the changes which will affect us (I, 39, 'On solitude') [*De la solitude*]. Contrary to all forms of behaviourism, Montaigne's conception of doubt holds variety in the subjects reviewed imperative: in every case there is an opportunity of rounding out descriptions aimed at going closer to the heart of things.

More basically, eidetic variation complements in the field of psychology the method of reduction developed by Montaigne in respect of knowledge: [C] 'In the study I am making of our manners and motives, fabulous testimonies—provided they remain possible—can do service as well as true ones. I can see this and profit by it equally in semblance as in reality. There are often different versions of a story: I make use of the one that is rarest and most memorable. There are some authors whose aim is to relate what happened: mine (if I could manage it) would be to relate

what can happen.’ *[[c] en l’estude que je traite de noz meurs et mouvemens, les tesmoignages fabuleux, pourveu qu’ils soient possibles, y servent comme les vrais Je le voy et en fay mon profit également en ombre qu’en corps. Et aux diverses leçons qu’ont souvent les histoires, je prends à me servir de celle qui est la plus rare et memorable. Il y a des auteurs, desquels la fin c’est dire les evenemens. La mienne, si j’y sçavoie advenir, serait dire sur ce qui peut advenir.*^{29]} Attentive to movements and to the unforeseen element in them, Montaigne considers properties that suggest variation and categorizes possible outcomes rather than relating what happened. We must pass over the boundary of the credible and the imaginable—Montaigne insists on this above all else. The essay ‘On practice’ *[De l’exercitation]* thus shows the possibility of a near experience of death even though death is beyond all experience: *[A][...] ‘we can advance towards it; we can make reconnaissances and if we cannot drive right up to its stronghold we can at least glimpse it and explore the approaches to it.’ [a] nous la pouvons approcher, nous la pouvons reconnoistre; et, si nous ne donnons pas jusques à son fort, au moins verrons nous et en pratiquerons les advenuës.*^{30]} A lengthy loss of consciousness caused by a riding accident enabled Montaigne to testify to this, for the process of coming round (which he recalled) was very slow: ‘To me it seemed as though my life was merely clinging to my lips. It seemed, as I shut my eyes, as though I was helping to push it out, and I found it pleasant to languish and to let myself go. It was a thought which only floated on the surface of my soul, as feeble and delicate as everything else, but it was, truly, not merely free from unpleasantness but tinged with that gentle feeling which is felt by those who let themselves glide into sleep.’ *[C’estoit une imagination qui ne faisoit que nager superficiellement en mon ame, aussi tendre et aussi foible que tout le reste, mais à la verité non seulement exempte de desplaisir, ains meslée à cette douceur que sentent ceux qui se laissent glisser au sommeil.*^{31]} Montaigne dwells on his pleasant sensations at the time—the pain came after he recovered consciousness, and that was another face of death. The memory of the accident itself came back to him later—it was absent from his first recollections. The last edition brings enlightening comments that give the account general significance: *[C] ‘No description is more difficult than the describing of oneself; and none, certainly, is more useful. I am chiefly portraying my ways of thinking, a shapeless subject which simply does not become manifest in deeds. I have to struggle to couch it in the flimsy medium of words I am all on display, like a mummy on which at a glance you can see the veins, the muscles and the tendons, each piece in its place. It is not what I do that I write of, but of me, of what I am.’ [c] Il n’est description pareille en difficulté que la description de soy-mesme, ny certes en utilité Je peins principalement mes cogitations, subject informe, qui ne peut tomber en production ouvrager. A toute peine le puis je coucher en ce corps aérée de la voix. Je m’estalle entier: c’est un skeletos où, d’une veuë, les veines, les muscles, les tendons paroissent, chaque piece en son siege. Ce ne sont mes gestes que j’escriis, c’est moy, c’est mon essence.*^{32]} Between the first edition and the subsequent additions Montaigne’s intention became more radical: what was at first the formulation of an experience bordering on death developed into an eidetic of personal existence continued from one text to another. The essay, ‘We can savour nothing pure’ *[Nous ne goustons rien de pur]*, thus takes things to extremes in a speculative experience: *[C] ‘When I picture a man besieged by all the enjoyments which he could desire—say that all his members were forever seized of a pleasure equal to that of sexual intercourse at its climax—I see him collapsing under the weight of his joy; and I can perceive him quite incapable of bearing pleasure so pure, so constant and so total: truly, once there, he runs away and naturally hastens to escape from it as from some narrow passage where he cannot find solid ground and fears to be engulfed.’ [c] Quand j’imagine l’homme assiégé de commoditez desirables (mettons le cas que tous ses membres fussent saisis pour toujours d’un plaisir pareil à celui de la generation en son poinct plus excessif) je le sens fondre sous la charge de son aise, et le vois du tout incapable de porter un si pure, si constante volupté et si universelle. De vray, il fuit quand il y est, et se haste naturellement d’en eschapper, comme d’un pas où il ne se peut fermer, où il craint d’enfondrer.*^{33]} If too much joy is unbearable it is because admixtures are our lot.

While in the first edition Montaigne was content with a literary and moral approach to this subject, this kinaesthetic fiction added in the last version shows the turn taken by his project.

Book III, written for the second edition, is particularly significant of this line of inquiry, which is clearly stated in the first essay, 'On the useful and the honourable' [*De l'utile et de l'honneste*]: [B] 'Our being is cemented together by qualities which are diseased. Ambition, jealousy, envy, vengeance, superstition and despair lodge in us with such a natural right of possession that we recognize the likeness of them even in the animals too—not excluding so unnatural a vice as cruelty; for in the midst of compassion we feel deep down some bitter-sweet pricking of malicious pleasure at seeing others suffer. Even children feel it: If anyone were to remove the seeds of such qualities in Man he would destroy the basic properties of our lives.' [*b*] *Notre estre est simenté de qualitez malades; l'ambition, la jalousie, l'envie, la vengeance, la superstition, le désespoir logent en nous d'une si naturelle possession que l'image s'en reconnaît aussi aux bestes; voire et la cruauté, vice si dénaturé : car au milieu de la compassion, nous sentons au dedans je ne sçais quelle aigre-douce poincte de volupté maligne à voir souffrir autrui; et les enfants le sentent Desquelles qualitez qui osteroit les semences en l'homme, détruirait les fondamentales conditions de notre vie.*³⁴]. The trend of the Essays has become more radical: exploration of the mind backs up the considerations on violence. After these remarks Montaigne adds: [B] 'The public interest requires men to betray, to tell lies [C] and to massacre.' [*b*] *Le bien public requiert qu'on trahisse et qu'on mente [c] et qu'on massacre.*'] His object therefore is not so much directly moral as phenomenological—to describe the behaviour of minds in situations in which they can act on one another. Violence on all sides affords evidence that a misappreciation of its limits is inherent in human nature. Composite in its make up, attaining nothing that is unalloyed, human nature is not endowed with any essence separable from its acts. It is for this reason that Montaigne adopts an existential approach when presenting a weird array of those acts. This approach is confirmed at the beginning of the essay, 'On repenting' [*Du repentir*]: [B] 'Others form Man; I give an account of Man and sketch a picture of a particular one of them who is very badly formed and whom I would truly make very different from what he is if I had to fashion him afresh. But it is done now. The brush-strokes of my portrait do not go awry even though they do change and vary. The world is but a perennial see-saw. Constancy itself is nothing but a more languid rocking to and fro. I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming: not the passage from one age to another (or, as the folk put it, from one seven-year period to the next) but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must adapt this account of myself to the passing hour. I shall perhaps change soon, not accidentally but intentionally. This is a register of varied and changing occurrences, of ideas which are unresolved and, when needs be, contradictory, either because I myself have become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subjects.' [*b*] *Les autres forment l'homme; je le recite et en represente un particulier bien mal formé, et lequel, si j'avoy à façonner de nouveau, je ferois vrayement bien autre qu'il n'est. Mais'hui, c'est fait. Or les traits de ma peinture ne forvoyent point, quoy qu'ils se changent et se diversifient. Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne. La constance mesme n'est autre chose qu'un branle plus languissant. Je ne puis asseurer mon object. Il va trouble et chancelant, d'une yvresse naturelle. Je le prens en ce point, comme il est, en l'instant que je m'amuse à luy. Je ne peints pas l'estre. Je peints le passage : non un passage d'aage en aage, ou, comme dict le peuple, de sept en sept ans, mais de jour en jour, de minute en minute. Il faut accommoder mon histoire à l'heure. Je pourray changer, non de fortune seulement, mais aussi d'intention. C'est un contrerolle de divers et muables accidens et d'imaginacions irresoluës et, quand il y eschet, contraires : soit que je sois autre moymesme, soit que je saisisse les subjects par autres circonstances et considérations.*³⁵]

In his essay, 'On three kinds of social intercourse' [*De trois commerces*], Montaigne explains that his mind requires no bookish subject to occupy it. Once again it is a matter of

judgement rather than memory, of meditation rather than book learning. Those who have it exhibit such bad faith in discussion that this method of learning is again criticized in the essay, ‘On the art of conversation’ [*De l’art de conférer*]: Valuable though it may be, [B] ‘in the kind of men (and their number is infinite) who make it the base and foundation of their worth and achievement, who quit their understanding for their memory and can do nothing except by book, I loathe [it] (dare I say it?) a little more than I loathe stupidity. In my part of the country and during my own lifetime school-learning has brought amendment of purse but rarely amendment of soul’, *[[b] en ceux-là (et il en est un nombre infiny de ce genre) qui en establissent leur fondamentale et suffisante valeur, qui se rapportent de leur entendement à leur memoire et ne peuvent rien que par livre, je le hay, si je l’ose dire, un peu plus que la bestise. En mon pays, et de mon temps, la doctrine amande assez les bourses, rarement les ames*,^{36]} for the use made of any learning depends on the motivations of the user—[B] ‘they clobber you with the authority of their experience: they have heard this; they have seen that; they have done this: you are overwhelmed with cases’. *[[b] Ils vous assomment de l’autorité de leur experience : ils ont ouy, ils ont veu, ils on fait; vous estes accablés d’exemples*.^{37]} This distrust is extended to any academic institution setting its own standards but unconcerned about those who personify its missions and should be judged not so much on their technical competence as on the resulting quality of judgement: [B] ‘the fruit of a surgeon’s experience lies not in a recital of his operations unless he knows how to extract from them material for forming his judgement.’ *[[b] le fruit de l’experience d’un chirurgien n’est pas l’histoire de ses pratiques, s’il ne sçait de cet usage tirer dequoy former son jugement*.^{38]} As for those who rule over us, of those who hold the world in their hands, [B] ‘they are far beneath us if they are not way above us. Since they promise more, they owe much more too’. *[[c] ils sont bien loins au dessous de nous, s’ils ne sont pas bien loing au dessus. Comme ils promettent plus, ils doivent aussi plus*.^{39]} We must particularly distrust words whose allegedly general significance obscures the feeble hypotheses on which they are based. Montaigne was therefore the progenitor of a philosophy of eidetic description backed by personal experience. Many of the remarks scattered through the essay on education reappear in these texts. They are not so much educational’ as bound up with the anthropological descriptions which were the source of the writing of the *Essays*. For instance, [B] ‘the infancies of all things are feeble and weak. We must keep our eyes open at their beginnings; you cannot find the danger then because it is so small: once it has grown, you cannot find the cure.’ *[[b] de toutes choses les naissances sont faibles et tendres. Pourtant faut-il avoir les yeux ouverts aux commencements, car comme lors en sa petitesse on n’en descouvre pas le dangier, quand il est accru on n’en descouvre plus le remede*.^{40]} Reduced to its original structure, every modality of existence has a more basic formulation than could be reached by mere empiricism. Nor by over abstract knowledge, for theorization is concerned only too often with phenomena the reality of which is not vouched for by a rigorous description: [B] ‘We, who are never-endingly confused by our own internal delusions, should not go looking for unknown ones.’ *[[b] Ne cherchons pas des illusions de dehors et inconnuës, nous qui sommes perpetuellement agités d’illusions domestiques et nostres*.^{41]} ‘I realize that if you ask people to account for “facts”, they usually spend more time finding reasons for them than finding out whether they are true. They ignore the *whats* and expatiate on the *whys*. They skip over the facts but carefully deduce inferences.’ *[[b] Je vois ordinairement que les hommes, aux faits qu’on leur propose, s’amusent plus volontiers à en chercher la raison qu’à en chercher la verité : ils laissent là les choses et s’amusent à traiter les causes. Ils passent par dessus les effects, mais ils en examinent curieusement les consequences*.^{42]}

The passages from Books I and II of the *Essays* quoted here consist in the main of elements added by Montaigne in later years. The extracts from Book III, on the contrary, consist of passages that Montaigne did not retouch at all: they represent a definitive formulation of his opinion. The quotations heading this article are an illustration of the way in which that position gained assurance. The first draft of the text refers to a natural order and notes its absence in the case of the human mind. Left to its own devices, its activity is purposeless and disorderly. Control of the imagination

seems to be a possible answer; the fixing of limits seems to suffice to keep it in check. This is what is invalidated at the next stage of the draft: as each field of positive knowledge contains the seeds of further presumption, it is only from a sceptical attitude that some moderation can be expected. However, the continual resurgence of violence due to the disregard for limits demands of that scepticism that it found a method of study of the mind by itself so that a philosophical limit can be set. Montaigne's protophenomenology then becomes more radical and, going beyond the pragmatic intention, he explores more deeply the constructions peculiar to the mind. Understanding ignorance demands a specific method whereby Montaigne manages to define precisely what he was setting out to do. Self-knowledge presupposes confronting oneself both with the representations of the mind and with one's words and actions, here again not in order to become absorbed in oneself, but with a view to studying the forms of the mind and exploring its to-ing and fro-ing. This is the exercise to which Montaigne invites the reader, and in this sense an educational intention is indeed at the root of his thought.

It was owing to a retreat for meditation that Montaigne came to embody an approach essential to our understanding of the modern figure of the writer. Basically he is not an educationist except inasmuch as he inculcates an attitude of phlegmatic distance. Nevertheless, the texts devoted to children, animals, 'savage' nations, attitudes in conversation, books, etc. present a veritable doctrine, provided that it is referred to the underlying thought, which becomes more and more radical as the writing of the *Essays* progresses. According to this conception of anthropology, disregard for the natural limits of our faculties is the mainspring of violence. Montaigne's quasi-phenomenological method of describing states of mind shows education as learning to know oneself, one's strengths and weaknesses, and becoming tough enough to accept our mortal condition. Curiosity concerning the world is evidence of the vacuity of a conscience not endowed with the treasures of the whole of humanity, which means that it is for education to build a genuine conscience.

Notes

1. Gerard Wormser (France) Responsible for philosophy and the social sciences for *Éditions Encyclopaedia Universalis* and senior lecturer at the Institut d'Études Politiques, Paris. His research is more especially concerned with the question of judgement in phenomenology—from Husserl to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Author of a number of articles on Montaigne.
2. Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes*. Edited by Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat. Paris, Gallimard, Collection La Pléiade, 1962. *Les essais*, I, 8, p. 33. The symbols [A], [B] and [C] used in current editions of the *Essays* refer to the three successive versions of the text, published in 1580, 1588 and 1595 respectively. The English translations of the passages quoted in this article are taken from Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, translated and edited with an introduction and notes by M.A. Screech, published in the Penguin Classics in 1993.
3. *Essais*, III, 11, p. 1007 (1165).
4. *Ibid.*, I, 26, p. 149.
5. Durkheim, *L'évolution pédagogique en France*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, p. 258.
6. *Essais*, I, 20, p. 91.
7. *Ibid.*, I, 23, p. 106.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
10. I, 27, p. 178.
11. I, 25, p. 137.
11. I, 26, p. 149.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
17. I, 56, p. 308.

18. II, 12, p. 429.
19. Ibid., p. 418.
20. Ibid., p. 427.
21. Ibid., p. 429.
22. Ibid., p. 468.
23. Ibid., p. 528.
24. Ibid., p. 541.
25. Ibid., p. 564.
26. Cf: II, 32, p. 811, and also I, 27, p. 217.
27. II, 10, pp. 387-388.
28. [A] 'the sacred inspiration of the Muses, having first seized the poet with anger, grief or hatred and driven him outside himself whither they will, then affects the actor through the poet and then, in succession, the entire audience.' [*a*] *ayant premierement agité le poète à la cholère, au deuil, à la hayne, frappe encore par le poète l'acteur, et par l'acteur consecutivement tout un peuple.*' I, 37, p. 228.] It is with a reference to the theatre that Montaigne concludes his essay, 'On educating children', and the only institution he recommends setting up is public theatres.
29. I, 21, p. 104.
30. II, 6, p. 351.
31. Ibid., p. 354.
32. Ibid., p. 359.
33. II, 20, p. 656.
34. III, 1, pp. 767-768.
35. III, 2, p. 782.
36. III, 8, p. 905.
37. Ibid., p. 909.
38. Ibid.
39. p. 910.
40. III, 10, On restraining your will' [*De mesnager sa volonté*], p. 998.
41. Ibid., p. 1009.
42. III, 11, p. 1003-1004.

Further reading

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