

Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Education: A New Lesson and a New Way of Teaching

According to Montaigne, “la plus grande difficulté et importante de l’humaine science semble estre en cet endroit où il se traite de la nourriture et institution des enfans.”¹ The importance of the education of the young derives from its power to form their minds and characters. The difficulty consists in deciding how to form them. What qualities of mind and character should be fostered, and by what means? Montaigne’s book of *Essais* as a whole might be considered an implicit meditation on the theme of education, but two of the essays in particular — *Du pédantisme* (I.25) and *De l’institution des enfans* (I.26) — focus explicitly on the subject and give a sustained and rather thorough account of his views. *Du pédantisme* describes the education prevalent in Europe in Montaigne’s own day, compares it with the thought and practice of other times and places, and concludes that all education so far has been defective. *De l’institution des enfans* expounds the “nouvelle maniere” — the new way of teaching — and the “nouvelle leçon” — the new lesson — that Montaigne wishes to introduce.² Although the two essays draw upon traditional sources such as Plato and Cicero, and reflect the ideals of humanist educators such as Vittorino da Feltre, Erasmus, and Vives, they represent a radical break with the past. Indeed, Montaigne is the first writer on education to develop a recognizably modern theory of education. The particular blend of scepticism, individualism, hedonism and utilitarianism that informs his educational views has come to dominate the theory and practice of democratic education in our time. Thus it behoves us to know Montaigne in order to know ourselves. In *Du pédantisme* and *De l’institution des enfans*, the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of modern education can be discovered at their roots.

The defect of Renaissance European education, as *Du pédantisme* presents it, lies in its emphasis on learning as an end in itself rather than as a means to a good life. In spite of the ideals of the humanists, Montaigne claims, their love of antiquity led in practice to pedantry: “Nous nous enquerons volontiers: ‘Sçait-il du Grec ou du Latin? escrit-il en vers ou en prose?’ mais s’il est devenu meilleur ou plus avisé, c’est-toit le principal, et c’est ce qui demeure derrière”.³ Learning develops the memory but not the judgment or character; we learn what Aristotle or Cicero thought, but never learn to think for ourselves. Montaigne

objects to such education because it encourages a servility that infects character as well as intellect, paralyzing the springs of action. Students who cannot think for themselves cannot act independently, and thus pedantry corrupts the entire life of a nation. Pedants render their pupils "incapable de charges publiques" and so enfeeble them that they lose even the ability to defend themselves.⁴ *Du pedantism* lays special stress on this last effect. The essay concludes with a reference to the opinion held by French noblemen that Charles VIII's conquest of Italy was so easy because "les princes et la noblesse d'Italie s'amusoient plus a se rendre ingenieux et sçavans que vigoureux et guerriers."⁵ Apparently Montaigne does not disagree with this opinion. The servile spirit of an education that values learning above everything else destroys the military value upon which the independence of nations depends.

Montaigne's criticism of contemporary European pedantry indicates implicitly the qualities that a proper education should inculcate: intellectual independence and a capacity for effective, independent action — especially political and military action. In order to stress the decadence of humanist Europe, Montaigne contrasts it to other cultures whose educations have nurtured more desirable qualities. The first of these is antiquity as represented by its philosophers. Like the merely learned men of his own day, the philosophers of antiquity have often been the objects of mockery. To common people they seem ridiculously impractical: "Les voulez-vous faire juges des droits d'un procès, des actions d'un homme? Ils en sont bien prests! Ils cherchent encore s'il y a vie, s'il y a mouvement, si l'homme est autre chose qu'un boeuf; que c'est qu'agir et souffrir; quelles bestes ce sont que loix et justice."⁶

In Montaigne's judgment, however, modern men of learning, the humanists, and the ancient philosophers should not be confused. The former are beneath "charges publiques"; the latter are in a real sense above them. Behind the comic formulations — Is man "autre chose qu'un boeuf"? — lie serious philosophic questions that not only test the limits of human knowledge but also have an important bearing upon the conduct of public life. How can one truly judge the merits of a case or the actions of a man unless one knows whether man is something other than an ox, what it is to act and to be acted on, what laws and justice are? It is the proper business of philosophy to ask the radical questions that probe beneath the texture of public convention, and Montaigne testifies to the legitimacy of such questions by raising them himself throughout the *Essais*. Furthermore, Montaigne makes clear that the strenuous intellectual activity of philosophy does not incapacitate students for politics and the life of action in general; on the

contrary, philosophy fits them for success in this field if they can be persuaded to turn away from contemplation. Montaigne points to Archimedes, who when called upon to help defend his country, produced engines of war such as had never been seen.

It seems, then, that philosophy in the manner of the ancients could develop the qualities that Montaigne requires in a good education: independent thought and effective action. Unfortunately, however, the philosophers disdain the active life at which they might excel: "Parlent ils du magistrat, ou parlent ils à luy? C'est d'une liberté irreverente et incivile."⁷ Archimedes considered that in defending his country he had corrupted "la dignité de son art,"⁸ and Montaigne warns that the radical questioning of convention that constitutes the essence of philosophical education may lead not to intellectual accomplishment but simply to dissoluteness and rudeness: "Aristo Chius avoit anciennement raison de dire que les philosophes nuisoient aux auditeurs, d'autant que la plus part des ames ne se trouvent propres à faire leur profit de telle instruction, qui, si elle ne se met à bien, se met à mal."⁹ Montaigne's view of the ancient philosophers is that they were wise but not prudent. They understood but took no interest in the necessities of practical life.

Unlike either Montaigne's contemporaries or the ancient philosophers, the ancient Persians and Spartans, to whom he turns near the end of *Du pedantisme*, directed education almost entirely towards practical ends. From Persian and Spartan schools, where instruction consisted of asking questions about "le jugement des hommes et de leurs actions,"¹⁰ sprang the great Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, and the Spartan citizens whose virtue became legendary. According to Montaigne, Persia and Sparta exhibit the best education for the active life that the world has seen; they provided the public spirited training in justice and military virtue that the ancient philosophers neglected.

Nevertheless, the Persian and Spartan educations do not represent Montaigne's ideal. Admirable though they are, they instill active virtue not through intellectual independence, but at its expense. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Montaigne's recounting of the well-known story about the way in which Cyrus was instructed in justice. Cyrus's tutor asked him to judge a dispute that arose when "un grand garçon, ayant un petit saye, le donna à un de ses compagnons de plus petite taille, et luy osta son saye, qui estoit plus grand."¹¹ When Cyrus decided that the big boy was justified and that each boy should keep the coat that fitted him, the tutor had the future conqueror whipped in order to impress upon him the idea that it is unjust to take by force what belongs to another. Rival principles of justice — both worthy of a philosopher's

attention — are involved in this incident, but Persian education tolerated no debate: the acceptable view of justice was enforced by whipping.

Possibly, moreover, Montaigne intends a deeper criticism. If Cyrus had taken this particular lesson to heart he never would have become the great man of action that he was: the founders of empires resemble big boys whose coats are too small for them. *Du pédantisme* suggests that Cyrus's greatness derived not only from his education but also from the intellectual independence that he preserved in spite of that education.

The view of the history of education to which *Du pédantisme* leads is that the best educations that have existed have been incomplete; none has managed to combine intellectual virtue — philosophy — with active virtue — a capacity for “charges publiques” and martial toughness. None, therefore, has managed to solve “la plus grande difficulté et importante de l'humaine science.” In *De l'institution des enfans*, therefore, Montaigne introduces his own solution — the “nouvelle maniere” and the nouvelle leçon” that will provide the proper combination of philosophical and active virtues.

The new style of teaching that Montaigne advocates is designed to stimulate individualism and scepticism. Montaigne argues that a teacher should avoid teaching by precept, but should draw out the thoughts of students, make them talk, make them interpret their lessons and apply them to life. Thus, Montaigne claims, the student will learn to think honestly and clearly, without depending on authorities. Furthermore, such intellectual development will promote, not retard, the student's capacity for action. The teacher should understand that in addition to books and discussion, direct experience of the world — especially acquaintance with the different levels of society and with foreign customs — will stimulate independent thought. Finally, the teacher should introduce the student to public duty, making the student a “très-loyal serviteur de son prince et très-affectionné et très-courageux.”¹² For the practical part of education, the student must be separated from parents: “Ils ne sont capables ny de chastier ses fautes, ny de le voir nourry grossierement, comme il faut, et harsardeusement. Ils ne le sçauroient souffrir revenir suant et poudreux de son exercice, boire chaud, boire froid, ny le voir sur un cheval rebours, ny contre un rude tireur, le floret au poing, ny la premiere harquebouse.”¹³

Coming to *De l'institution des enfans* from *Du pédantisme*, one might conclude that Montaigne's new way of teaching simply incorporates the best features of ancient philosophical education with those of the education of Persia and Sparta. Montaigne's full originality becomes

apparent only when he reveals the “nouvelle leçon” that complements his “nouvelle maniere”. This new lesson amounts to a new, hedonistic and utilitarian understanding of virtue: the student must be made to see ‘que le prix et hauteur de la vraye vertu est en la facilité, utilité et plaisir de son exercise, si esloigné de difficulté, que les enfans y peuvent comme les hommes, les simples comme les subtilz. Le reglement, c’est son util, non pas la force.’¹⁴ The student who has been formed by the hedonism and utilitarianism of Montaigne’s “nouvelle leçon” will love nothing too much: virtue “sçait estre riche et puissante et sçavante, et coucher dans les matelas musquez. Elle aime la vie, elle aime la beauté et la gloire et la santé. Mais son office propre et particulier, c’est sçavoir user de ces biens la regléement, et les perdre constamment.”¹⁵ Indeed, the student who exemplifies this type of virtue appears to be a detached man, a man without deep commitment to anything except to the “facilité, utilité et plaisir” afforded by his virtue. Ancient virtue, on the other hand, whether that of the philosopher or that of the participant in politics, required commitment of a strenuous kind. Philosophy’s radical questioning is not easy for children or “les simples”, and the discipline of a Spartan citizen or the achievements of a Cyrus can hardly be described as easy or pleasant. Montaigne’s new lesson involves a profound alteration of the traditional understanding of both philosophy and the active life.

The key to Montaigne’s transformation of the idea of philosophy lies in his promotion of a dogmatic and vulgar form of scepticism that is quite a different thing from proper philosophic scepticism. Although he extols the value of independent thought, he asserts that the teacher must make certain that such thought will lead the pupil in the right direction:

Qu’il [the teacher] luy face tout passer par l’estamine et ne loge rien en sa teste par simple autorité et à credit; les principes d’Aristote de luy soyent principes, non plus que ceux des Stoiciens ou Epicuriens. Qu’on luy propose cette diversité de jugemens: il choisira s’il peut, sinon il en demeurera en doute. Il n’y a que les fols certains et resolus.¹⁶

Unless one wants to be counted among the fools, it seems, one must remain in doubt. Tacitly, Montaigne condemns Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans, who found in doubt an inducement to further thought, and indicates that philosophy understood as a dedicated pursuit of the truth is vain. According to Montaigne, philosophy consists in exposing the dogmatic errors of fools from the dogmatic point of view that no certainty is possible except the certainty of scepticism. Thus philosophy becomes no longer a spur to arduous thought, but a powerful tool for detaching students from any commitment except a commitment to one’s own “facilité, utilité et plaisir.”

Montaigne's transformation of the aims of active life derives from the dogmatic scepticism that informs his teaching about philosophy. If only fools are "certains et resolut", what motive could bring a student to prefer the rigors of Spartan virtue or of Cyrus's pursuit of empire to ease, utility and pleasure? It is consistent with Montaigne's new lesson that the stipulation that a student should become "un très-loyal serviteur de son prince et très-affectionné et très-courageux" is tempered by a warning against too strong an attachment lest the prince's favour jeopardize the young man's freedom.¹⁷ The student of Montaigne's new education will emerge not as a subject or citizen of any particular nation or regime, but as a citizen of the world. Montaigne claims that the cosmopolitanism that he wishes to encourage is Socratic: "on demandoit à Socrates d'où il estoit. Il ne repondit pas: 'D'Athenes', mais: 'Du monde'. Luy, qui avoit son imagination plus plaine et plus estandue, embrassoit l'univers comme sa ville, jettoit ses connoissances, sa société et ses affections a tout le genre humain, non pas comme nous qui ne regardons que sous nous."¹⁸ However, this attempt by Montaigne to appropriate Socrates as an ancestor utterly neglects — almost surely deliberately and consciously — the importance of Socrates' citizenship as expressed in the *Apology* and *Crito*. Socrates was not only a philosopher whose life was dedicated to the pursuit of truth, but also a citizen of his city who accepted the requirements of that position even when it led him to an unjust death. In this, it would seem, he deserves Montaigne's contempt as one of the fools who are "certains et resolut."

Even the experience of the world and physical training that Montaigne recommends aim not at traditional virtues but rather at making sceptical and hedonistic cosmopolitanism effective. The student must become mentally and physically tough enough to endure vicissitudes and to adapt to every circumstance and every regime: "Le corps encore souple, on le doit, a cette cause, plier a toute facons et coustumes." A young person must be made apt not only for virtue but also for vice — "voire au desreglement et aux exces, si besoing est."¹⁹ Montaigne expresses special admiration for "la merveilleuse nature d'Alcibiades, de se transformer si aisement a facons si diverses": when it was useful for him, he could outdo the Persians in luxury and pomp or the Lacedaemonians in austerity and frugality; at need, he could be "autant reformé en Sparte comme voluptueux en Ionie."²⁰ Of course, Montaigne does not advocate dissoluteness and excess for their own sakes, nor does his admiration for Alcibiades extend to that gentleman's turbulent ambition. The student whom Montaigne wishes to fashion will know how to make use of dissoluteness and other vices, as well as vir-

tues, but self-interested detachment will be the essence of character. It is fitting that Montaigne's final recommendation for students is that they be instructed in the art of acting.²¹

One of the most striking facts about both *Du pedantisme* and *De l'institution des enfans* is that they have practically nothing to say about religion. Conceived in the context of one of the most turbulent and fertile periods of religious history — the late sixteenth century — Montaigne's new lesson simply ignores the religious basis of all European education in his own time. Surprising though it is, this silence provides one of the clearest indications of the modernity of Montaigne's educational proposals. The sceptical, hedonistic citizen of the world whom Montaigne aims to cultivate has as little in common with the Christian saint or churchman as with the ancient philosopher or hero or citizen. However, it would have been imprudent for Montaigne to call attention to this point too openly; the praise of acting that concludes *De l'institution des enfans* calls attention to the fact that Montaigne himself has learned important lessons from that discipline of role playing and masking.

In one way or another, Montaigne's new lesson and new way of teaching inform contemporary education in the West and in other parts of the world to which Western educational ideas have spread: Montaigne is unmistakably our ancestor. Like him, we tend to dismiss as mere pedantry rote learning and acquisition of facts, and we emphasize the individuality of our students, preferring when possible to teach them in small groups and tutorials. We want to make them think for themselves, to be sceptical of all authority and to distrust all answers that claim to be the truth. In one way or another and to one degree or another, moreover, all our educational institutions accept the standard of utility as relevant even to the teaching of art, literature, and philosophy. As a result, students are encouraged to view studies that might be valued as ends in themselves rather as the means to acquiring the qualities necessary to survive in a rapidly changing society. Finally, of course, we want them to be happy, even in school and university. We have taken to heart Montaigne's new lesson about virtue — that "le prix et hauteur de la vraie vertu est en . . . [le] plaisir de son exercice." Montaigne might be pleased to observe the moderate, detached and flexible graduates of our educational systems. They are typically thoughtful, but not passionately devoted to thought; they have studied philosophy but are not philosophers. They may go to church, but the temper of their minds is sceptical; first and foremost, they value open-mindedness. They are public-spirited, but resemble neither the Spartans nor Cyrus; their cosmopolitanism emulates not Socrates, the philosopher and

citizen of Athens, but that distorted image of Socrates that Montaigne presents — the mere citizen of the world.

Through Montaigne we can grasp the sense of past failures and the hope for new solutions that attended the birth of our peculiarly modern form of education. At the same time, given the perspective of nearly four centuries, returning to our roots can give us a clearer insight into what has been lost through the triumph of Montaigne's new lesson and new way of teaching. In spite of its obvious success, the progress of the new way has been problematic. To recent critics starting from very different philosophical, political and religious positions, and writing from the perspectives of different national experiences, the moderation of our education can appear timid, its sceptical and hedonistic individualism heartless, and its utilitarianism shallow.

Montaigne's cosmopolitan man of the world is in danger of becoming rootless and alienated. In various forms, yearnings for philosophical education that pursues the truth, political education that stresses self-sacrifice and heroism, and even religious education, which Montaigne sought to bury in silence, are apparent among the young and even among their teachers. Something in human nature, it seems, has not been satisfied by the kind of education that Montaigne proposed. Apparently, "la plus grand difficulté et importante de l'humaine science" requires our continued attention.

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NOTES

1. Montaigne, Michel de, *Essais*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969. I. 196. All references to the *Essais* are to the volume and page numbers of this edition.
2. I. 198 and 209.
3. I. 184.
4. I. 182.
5. I. 192.
6. I. 182.
7. I. 182.
8. I. 183.
9. I. 189.
10. I. 190.
11. I. 190.
12. I. 202-203.
13. I. 201.
14. I. 209.
15. I. 210.
16. I. 199.
17. I. 202-203.
18. I. 205.
19. I. 214.
20. I. 215.
21. I. 224-225.