

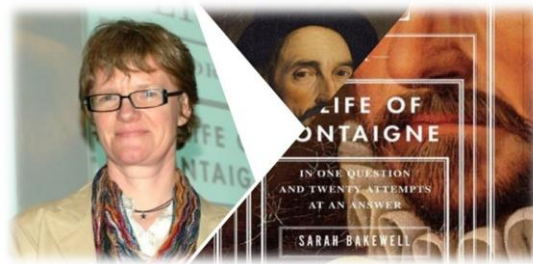
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #187

October 2024

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'How to Live'



Why read Montaigne?

For that matter, who is Montaigne?

Why, almost 450 years after he died in 1592, do people still read the musings of a 16th century aristocrat who has been called the world's first blogger?

In a wonderful attempt at a biography of Montaigne, Sarah Bakewell's bestselling *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* answers all three of those questions. Bakewell tells us who he was, what he did, and why for almost five centuries readers of every

imaginable stripe have found him enlightening. It is a comment I think Montaigne, who admitted to some vanity, would appreciate. Although not a person of the Enlightenment, he was one of its most important precursors.

Amazon.com “Reader Reviews” are not usually my first stop when researching a topic. Yet, after first reviewing the centuries long intoxicating reception Montaigne has received from both the famous, among whom Bakewell notes Pascal, Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Andre Gide, and the obscure, essentially meaning you and me, she remarks that it continues into the present as “buyers on the online bookstore Amazon.com still” still enthuse about him. [1]

So, I decided to check. And, yes, readers still love Montaigne. Not only do they love him, but they also *get* him. Two samples:

His philosophy was to be moderate, to be ordinary and to appreciate the smaller things of life. He was not consistent, not methodical, not heroic, not pretentious, not prudish and not serious about life. Nor were his essays any of these things ... he tried to persuade people ... to grant other people their humanity. His greatest gift was the gift of empathy.

Bob _____ in an Amazon.com review [2]

Andrew Sullivan chose the Bakewell book for his online book club. Here’s how he describes Montaigne: ‘Everything he wrote was really about his own life, and how best to live it, and he does it all with such brio and detail and humanity that you cannot help but be encouraged to follow his lead. He proves nothing that he doesn’t simultaneously subvert a little; he makes no over-arching argument about the way humans must live.’ ... He slips past all those familiar means of telling other people what’s good for them, and simply explains what has worked for him and others and leaves the reader empowered to forge her own future – or rather (this is Montaigne), her own present.

Quoted in an Amazon.com review by Paul Froehlich.
[3]

What is it that they *get*?

Twenty-first century bloggers, social media devotees, and TikTokers streaming their life for public consumption might be astonished to know that their genre, if we can call it that, was invented by a 16th century Frenchman. In his *essais* (French for essays, a literary form he invented), Montaigne not only invented a new literary form – the personal essay in which one writes about the world through the lens of one’s own experience – he also invented a new way of seeing the world. As Bakewell says:

This idea – writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognize their own humanity – has not existed forever. It had to be invented. And, unlike many cultural inventions, it can be traced to a single person: Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, a nobleman, government official, and winegrower who lived in the Perigord area of southwestern France from 1533 to 1592. [4]

He wanted to discover how to live.

Which, as Bakewell points out, is a different question than the ethical question of how one ought to live. While he was not uninterested in ethics, he was more interested in what people actually did, because, “He wanted to know how to live a good life – meaning a correct or honorable life, but also a fully human, satisfying, flourishing one.” [5] As *Madame Bovary’s* creator, Gustave Flaubert, said, “Don’t read him as do children do, for amusement, nor as the ambitious do, to be instructed. No, (you) read him in order to live.” [6]

In Bakewell, Montaigne found a kindred spirit to tell his story. In 2010, she published *How to Live* after picking up a copy of Montaigne’s essays in a Budapest train station, where it was the only book in English.

Quick Aside: Essay, or in its original French *essai*, at first meant as a noun “an attempt or effort” and as a verb, “to attempt or to try.” So, to *essay* something was to attempt or try. Montaigne called his writings “*essais*,” as he understood them to be his attempts or tries to understand himself. After he published them, the written artifact was called an essay. In short, Montaigne invented the essay as a literary genre.

To her surprise, Bakewell found his essays, his attempts to understand himself and the life he lived, endlessly fascinating. As she says:

How do you avoid pointless arguments? How do you get over the death of someone you love? How do you balance the need to feel safe against the need to feel free? How do you deal with fanatics? How do you make the most of every moment?

Such questions arise in most people’s lives. They are all versions of a bigger conundrum: How do you live? This subject obsessed renaissance writers, none more than Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, considered by many to be the first truly modern author. [7]

Bakewell points out that Montaigne did not write “pedantic treatises, but *essais* as attempts or experiments upon himself.” [8] He was just trying to figure out what was going on. His characteristic persona is humble, more than willing to

admit he might be wrong. As he rewrote his essays over the years, he continually corrected them and/or simply changed his mind and took a different tack. Although he took his writing seriously, he never took himself too seriously. Modesty and keeping an even keel, it turns out, are two of the paths to a good life.

Given that his chief (*only?*) subject was himself (how he reacted to the world and how the world reacted to him), ironically after experiencing his meandering journey into *self*, Montaigne and his readers emerge deeply attuned to the world and its people. Or, as Amazon reader Bob says, Montaigne's greatest gift is the gift of *empathy*.

Empathy not only means being sensitive to the feelings of others; it also means the ability to enliven an object by projecting one's own imagined feelings onto the world. In short, empathy means the ability to be ***present-to-the-present***. ***Book Notes*** readers should recall my repeated assertions that the greatest artists in any medium help us be more ***present-to-the-present***. To use an old expression, great art is an exercise in consciousness raising. Consciousness of what? The world around us. As Susan Sontag said, "Art is a form of consciousness" because "All great art contains at its center contemplation, a dynamic contemplation." [9]

What did Montaigne contemplate? A glance at his essays' titles reveals both the sweep and the humility of his interests:

"By diverse means we arrive at the same end"

"Of sadness"

"That intention is judge of our actions"

"Of fear"

"Of the education of children"

"Of sleep"

"Of drunkenness"

"Of virtue"

"Of anger"

"Of giving the lie"

"Of vanity," and his last, his grand summation of what he learned,

"Of experience" [10]

Similarly, Bakewell's chapters, her 20 attempts ("essays") to answer the question "how to live" discover for us what Montaigne's experience taught him.

Question: How to Live:

(parenthetical comments are my asides, not Bakewell's!):

- 1) Don't worry about death;
- 2) Pay attention;
- 3) Be born (by which he means become aware and don't be afraid to experiment);
- 4) Read a lot, forget most of what you read, and be slow-witted (i.e., don't jump to conclusions, savor your experiences, and consider the possibility you might be wrong);
- 5) Survive love and loss (his meditation upon the death of his dearest friend La Boetie);
- 6) Use little tricks (deflect pain and master the art of avoidance; Montaigne never claimed to be a hero);
- 7) Question everything (as Montaigne said, "All I know is that I know nothing and I'm not even sure about that");
- 8) Keep a private room behind the shop (Virginia Woolf's room of your own – or was that Doris Lessing?);
- 9) Be convivial: live with others; and,
- 10) Wake from the sleep of habit (open one's eyes and reject conventional wisdom and parochial "truths");

The next 10 begin with:

- 11) Live temperately (a true classicist and Stoic, Montaigne believed in moderation and balance);
- 12) Guard your humanity (living in a time of brutal religious warfare between Protestants and Catholics, Montaigne rejected extremism and zealotry seeking the common ground, the common humanity of all people and found it to be most dangerous terrain);
- 13) Do something no one has done before (a proto-modern, Montaigne believed in the quest for the new – not novelty for its own sake, but to experiment with life's possibilities);
- 14) See the world (travel – which is part of he and Bakewell's kindridness);
- 15) Do a good job, but not too good a job (a variation on the Churchillian maxim to not let better be the enemy of good enough, or don't succumb to perfectionism or you'll never accomplish anything);
- 16) Philosophize only by accident (Montaigne was a philosopher of an ancient sort – he asked the big questions; he wanted to know how to live and not endlessly parse, as post-modern philosophers do, their methodology and in the process miss the forest for the trees – to use a cliché, which Montaigne rarely did and when he did he admitted it);
- 17) Reflect on everything; regret nothing (live, he would say, live and if you stumble at least you lived – he would love Edith Piaf singing "Je ne regrette rien");
- 18) Give up control (relax, let go);
- 19) Be ordinary and imperfect (we all are, so why fight it); and,

20) Let life be its own answer (or, as Paul McCartney sang, “Let it be” or, to use an older pop culture reference, “Yes, Peggy Lee, this is all there is – isn’t it amazing?”) [11]

Part of Montaigne’s appeal is his ability to find in the deeply personal a reflection upon the larger world. In “Of giving the lie,” Montaigne slides from the purely personal to an observation about society’s need for truthfulness. Regarding himself, he gives himself a jibe for having the temerity to write these essays. He says, “It ill befits anyone to make himself known save him who has qualities to be imitated, and whose life and opinions may serve as models.” He brushes that aside, saying “I am not building here a statue to erect at the town crossroads. ...” [12] He says he is only trying to understand himself and even if no one reads him he has not wasted his time. And then he casually slips in the justification for journaling, writing diaries, and engaging in self-reflection, which are the keys to self-understanding. He says,

In modeling this figure upon myself, I have had to fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out, the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer to my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me – a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life.” [13]

In short, in examining his own life, he has fashioned it – he has created himself. And in so doing, although he did not realize it, he invented individualism.

But then he quietly pivots to show that what is true of him is also true of the world. Sometimes Montaigne can seem as fresh, as contemporary as the evening news. For example, when he slips in a paragraph that makes one think that across the centuries he is observing 2024’s American presidential election. An election in which the Republican Party’s candidates for president and vice president have admittedly adopted “the lie” as a legitimate political tactic, Montaigne may have asked:

But whom shall we believe when he talks about himself, in so corrupt an age, seeing that there are few or none of whom we can believe. ...The first stage in the corruption of morals is the banishment of truth; for as Pindar said, to be truthful is the beginning of great virtue and is the first article that Plato requires in the governor of the Republic. Our truth nowadays is not what is, but what others can be convinced of. [14]

Montaigne, like Shakespeare asking “To be or not to be” or Camus asserting one only begins to live when one accepts that you will die, says the key to living well involves a negative and a positive. The negative is don’t worry about death; you can’t practice for it, and you don’t know when it will come. The positive is to learn to pay attention.

As a young man, Montaigne suffered a severe riding accident. Thrown from his horse, he lay thrashing about on the ground, oblivious to his condition. He threw up blood and tried to rip off his clothes. He remembered none of that. He remembered that he thought he was dying. And it was peaceful. He said:

It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, but in truth not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling that people have who let themselves slide into sleep. [15]

Montaigne’s experience differed from what he had read and been told. It was sweet. So, since one can’t practice dying, Montaigne’s advice is not to worry about it. He says, “If you don’t know how to die, don’t worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don’t bother your head about it.” [16]

Having accepted the reality of his inevitable death, what did Montaigne do? What does he suggest we do?

Live!

How?

By paying attention. It is the long view of Samuel Johnson’s famous dictum that “nothing focuses a person’s attention like the prospect of a hanging.” Since you can’t escape death, you might as well enjoy living.

Again, how?

By being ***present-to-the-present***.

For Montaigne that meant at first seeking tranquility. He then began to focus on the busyness of his mind flitting from topic to topic, so he struck upon the idea of writing, of what we would call journaling. In what he called his *essais*, he attempted to capture the flow of his thoughts, the flow of his life, and capturing them understand them. What he discovered is that the more he attended to

himself, the more he learned not only about himself but about the things he was experiencing. Which led him to a contemplation of nature. In contemplating nature, he discovered that he found himself reflected back on himself. So, he trained himself to concentrate, which is to say he disciplined himself to be conscious of his consciousness, to be conscious of what he was doing here and now.

To borrow an anachronism from our time, he trained himself “to be here now.” Our 21st century word for this is “mindfulness.” But Montaigne was there first. He said, “When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep.” [17]

Or, more prosaically, whatever you are doing, do nothing else. Multitasking is an illusion. Give whatever you’re doing your full attention. And, attending to it fully, you become fully alive. You’ve answered yes to “To be or not to be/that is the question.”

All the rest is details.

Montaigne wants you to enjoy them.

Afterall, as Peggy Lee implied, what else is there?



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End Notes

1. Bakewell, Sarah. **How to Live, or the Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer** (New York: Other Press, 2010), p.7.

2. Bob _____, “*This is a book I would have wanted to write myself, if I had the skill*” in **Reader Reviews at Amazon.com** available at [Amazon.com: Customer reviews: How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer](#) accessed Oct. 3, 2024.
3. Froehlich, Paul, “Why Montaigne as fascinated readers for four centuries” in **Reader Reviews at Amazon.com** available at [Amazon.com: Customer reviews: How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer](#) accessed Oct. 3, 2024.
4. Bakewell, **cited above**, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p.11.
7. “*How to Live: A Life of Montaigne*” at **Sarah Bakewell.com** available at [How To Live: A Life Of Montaigne | Sarah Bakewell](#) accessed Oct. 6, 2024.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Susan Sontag, quoted by Maria Popova in **The Marginalian** available at [Susan Sontag on Art: Illustrated Diary Excerpts – The Marginalian](#) accessed Oct. 6, 2024.
10. Montaigne, “*Contents*,” in **The Complete Essays**, tr. Donald Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), pp. xix-xxiii.
11. Bakewell, **cited above**, pp. vii-ix.
12. Montaigne, “*Of giving the lie*,” in **The Complete Essays**, tr. Donald Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), pp. 503-504.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 505
15. Montaigne, “*Of practice*,” in **The Complete Essays**, tr. Donald Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 269.
16. Montaigne, “*Of physiognomy*,” in **The Complete Essays**, tr. Donald Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 804.
17. Montaigne, “*Of experience*,” in **The Complete Essays**, tr. Donald Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 850.

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