

Montaigne and the Values in Educating Judgment

David T. Hansen

Teachers College, Columbia University

Michel de Montaigne's influential essay, "On Educating Children," pivots around the idea that the development of good judgment is the *raison d'être* of education. This idea informs his views of pedagogy, of curriculum, of the relationship between teacher and student, and more. To capture his outlook, Montaigne employs an analogy familiar to his sixteenth-century contemporaries. "Bees ransack flowers here and flowers there," he writes; "but then they make their own honey, which is entirely theirs and no longer thyme or marjoram" (I:26, 171).¹ In likeness, the child will "transform" all that he engages, from books to objects in nature. "He will confound their forms so that the end-product is entirely his: namely, his judgment, the forming of which is the only aim of his toil, his study, and his education" (171).

Montaigne underscores the challenge in educating judgment when he claims that "the greatest and the most important difficulty known to human learning seems to lie in that area which treats how to bring up children and how to educate them" (167). In other words, Montaigne characterizes the task of educating as more difficult to grasp than how to practice medicine, law, or government (activities with which he was deeply familiar, as I touch on below). However, Montaigne's interest in understanding and cultivating good judgment is more than theoretical or scientific. Rather, it springs from, in part, his passionate concern for how to generate tolerance and political humility in an era of grim religious and civil strife. For much of his life, his native France was wracked by civil wars, provoked largely by antagonism between Catholics and Protestants, but also by various nobles *cum* warlords. These bitter conflicts bred widespread cruelty and violence, conditions that, for Montaigne, not only militated against the formation and expression of humane judgment, but also made it hard to even address the topic. In surveying the scene, Montaigne could hardly help but wonder: Where is the forum in which to bring the warring parties together, so that they might examine themselves rather than keep bulling their way forward out of hardened conviction or avarice?

Montaigne responded to this state of affairs in two ways. On the one hand, he accepted the urging of thoughtful Catholics and Protestants, themselves sickened by the recurrent strife, to act as a mediator. He successfully negotiated a number of armistices and, in other circumstances, acted as peacemaker and reconciler.² On the other hand, he generated his own forum, in the book he called the *Essais*, which countless thinkers have engaged time and again during the last four hundred years in order to find insight and new perspectives on the human prospect.³

In this essay, I examine Montaigne's wide-ranging views on how to cultivate good judgment. I will center the analysis around his essay on educating children, an essay which anticipates, often in striking ways, the educational philosophy of writers as different as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and

Nel Noddings.⁴ I will keep the discussion attuned to the underlying political and ethical concerns that so deeply troubled Montaigne, and will return to them in the conclusion. These concerns led him to seek words to portray how persons might fuse judgment with qualities such as tolerance, compassion, and solidarity as bearers and enactors of the human condition.

ON THE TEACHER: RECOGNIZING AND FUELING JUDGMENT

Montaigne's first concern in elucidating the education of judgment is identifying the qualifications of the teacher. He emphasizes that the teacher must not be a pedant, eager to stuff the child with the products of scholarship. That "erudite" approach to pedagogy, he argues, converts the child from a distinctive individual into an empty vessel of clay, to be crammed with facts and theories, and shaped, in effect, into a "parrot" who merely squawks the pedant's words (I:25, 154). Montaigne insists that the teacher understand that his duty lies in helping the child become his own person. He summarizes his advice to those who hire educators by stating:

Since I would prefer that [the child] 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. Let both be looked for, but place character and intelligence before knowledge; and let him carry out his responsibilities in a new way (168).⁵

Character and intelligence rank first, for Montaigne, because the teacher's primary role is not providing the child information, but rather assisting the child to develop judgment. That task calls on virtually every aspect of the teacher's personhood: his experience, knowledge of the world, insight into human variability, tolerance, humility, patience, imagination, and more. The task presumes the teacher to be a person engaged with the world: curious, keenly observant, potentially interested in whatever might come into view. In other words, according to Montaigne, the work of educating calls on the fullness of the teacher's own intellectual and moral judgment. He writes,

It is good to make [the child] trot in front of his tutor in order to judge his paces and 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 (169).

According to Montaigne, an "elevated" mind is an intelligent mind, formed, but not "filled," by extensive study and contemplation of humanity and nature. In an almost literal sense, the teacher "minds" how he works, as he engages the child in a deepening, expanding contact with the world. In contrast with pedants, who "are for ever bawling into our ears as though pouring knowledge down through a funnel" (169), the teacher never "forces" the child's bent in one direction or another (167). Rather than *throwing* subject matter at the child, the teacher *engages* the child with it. That activity generates situations in which the child can exercise his emerging judgment, all the while stimulated by helpful questions and insights from the teacher.

The corollary to these points, for Montaigne, is that the mind of the teacher must be animated by a moral consciousness. To "come down to the level of the child" means staying in touch with the child, seeking always to relate the child's activity

and experience to the emergence of his ability to judge well of things and people. Moreover, Montaigne argues, the teacher's "new responsibility" includes a pedagogy of "severe gentleness" (185), a mode of personal relation opposed to the use of threats, bullying, and corporal punishment. For Montaigne, the latter simply replicate the conditions of civil strife in the larger society. The relation is "severe" because the teacher does not coddle or patronize the child, but "gentle" because education should constitute an invitation, not a torment (199).

In sum, a "well-formed" teacher appreciates the stakes involved in education. A well-formed teacher knows how to observe carefully, to listen attentively, and to speak honestly with the child. Such a teacher seeks insight into the distinctness and variability of the young and of the world they jointly inhabit. This capacity entails pondering the process of learning, so that the teacher can recognize and support the emergence of judgment in students. According to Montaigne, being well-formed takes precedence over being well-filled not because facts or knowledge are unimportant—quite on the contrary, as I illustrate below—but because the teacher's sense of judgment helps him or her perceive the potential meaning and value in the present moment, the moment when child and subject matter (the "world") intersect. Montaigne also implies that the teacher should not press too hard to develop pedagogical judgment, as if the matter were like lifting weights to build a muscle. Otherwise, the teacher might become filled with, rather than well-formed by, considerations about being well-filled versus well-formed. As with subsequent writers on education—earlier, I mentioned Rousseau, Dewey, Greene, and Noddings—Montaigne's view of how important education is, finds expression in the multicolored, ethically oriented portrait he paints of the teacher.

ON THE CURRICULUM: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD

Like many classical writers, whom he read incessantly, Montaigne focuses on the student's deeds as much as he does on his words. He urges the teacher to seek more from the student than merely "verbal accounts" of learning.

Let him judge how the child has profited from it, not from the evidence of his memory but from that of his life. Let him take what the boy has just learned and make him show him dozens of different aspects of it and then apply it to just as many different subjects, in order to find out whether he has really grasped it and made it part of himself (169).

Montaigne speaks of attending to the child's "trot" (French *trotter*), a symbol of the child's conduct *in* the world (169, 188). He emphasizes engaging the child with "things" (*choses*), a metaphorical term that stands for concrete experience of what the world brings, sometimes willy-nilly, into a person's life, as well as what it offers if the person responds with an open mind and open senses (169, 189, 193-94). W.G. Moore writes that Montaigne aims at having the things of the world *more* engaging to the student at the end of his lessons than they are at the beginning—"the contrary in fact," Moore adds, "of much educational method" both then and now.⁶

The teacher needs to be adept at selecting and putting things—or "flowers," to recall the analogy with bees—in the child's path. These things include books, explorations of nature, and more. But the teacher also needs to let the child pick his own subjects: "The tutor should sometimes prepare the way for the boy, sometimes

let him do it all on his own. I do not want the tutor to be the only one to choose topics or to do all the talking: when the boy's turn comes let the tutor listen to his pupil talking" (169). He emphasizes his view by quoting Cicero: "For those who want to learn, the obstacle can often be the authority of those who teach" (169). Then, he warns against quoting Cicero uncritically. "Which tutor," he exclaims, "ever asks his pupil what he thinks about rhetoric or grammar or this or that statement of Cicero?" (171).

Montaigne asks the teacher to be mindful about the use of books and book knowledge. He makes use of an organic image to describe the futility of cramming the young with book-learning: "Spewing up food exactly as you have swallowed it is evidence of a failure to digest and assimilate it: the stomach has not done its job if, during concoction, it fails to change the substance and the form of what it is given" (169). In terms that comment not only on teaching but on his own essay—laced, as it is, with quotes from his favorite authors,—Montaigne places the child and books side by side, as if they were conversational partners, as if both were animate and in perpetual motion. Just as the child's initial strivings and gropings are not "oracles" of his or her future, and thus should not be kowtowed to (167), so it is with books (171). As always, the teacher's judgment is on call in these sometimes subtle, delicate interactions.

According to Montaigne, reading and discussing others' writing should help the child develop reasoning powers and a sense of judgment. "For if it is by his own reasoning," he writes, that the child

adopts the opinions of Xenophon and Plato, they are no longer theirs: they are his... He should not be learning their precepts but drinking in their humours. If he wants to, let him not be afraid to forget where he got them from, but let him be sure that he knows how to appropriate them. Truth and reason are common to all: they no more belong to the man who first put them into words than to him who last did so. It is no more *secundum Platonem* than *secundum me*: Plato and I see and understand it the same way" (170-71).

Montaigne employs, once again, an organic analogy to describe the kind of learning he has in mind. The child should "drink in" an author's "humours." The latter term points to *how* an author thinks and writes, not solely to *what* the author says (cf. III:8, 1051). It captures the spirit and the sensibility of an author. For Montaigne, to drink in an author's humours is to taste the author's sense of judgment and perhaps absorb it into one's own. And because the child will repeatedly be exposed to the *teacher's* "humours," and thereby subject to their influence, the teacher must be that much more reflective, self-aware, and careful. In enacting his own sense of judgment, the teacher constantly portrays to the child how he might orient his own.

Montaigne also invites the teacher to help the student appreciate the value of entertaining uncertainty and doubt. "Let the principles of Aristotle not be principles for him any more than those of the Stoics or Epicureans," he writes. "Let this diversity of judgements be set before him; if he can, he will make a choice: if he cannot then he will remain in doubt" (170). The teacher must have the patience and the vision to accept and nurture this outcome, even while continuing to engage the student with the world. "Only fools have made up their minds and are certain," Montaigne blurts out, and promptly quotes from Dante's *Inferno*: "For doubting

pleases me as much as knowing" (170). Doubt, prudence, waiting, contemplation: for Montaigne, these terms describe conditions for the formation of sound judgment as much as do terms such as decisiveness, action, and commitment. The latter trajectories might be dangerous without the former. As noted in the introduction, Montaigne writes intensely aware of how "decisive" and "committed" the warring religious parties and nobles are in his country.

Knowledge of facts plays a dynamic role in developing judgment, although Montaigne addresses the point more directly in other essays. For example, Caroline Locher shows why the well-known essay, "On the Cannibals," can be read as a meditation on the nature of evidence and warranted belief. She documents how Montaigne urges extensive study of the facts of a situation before expressing judgment. If the facts are ambiguous, the judgment must be toned down (cf. II:10, 469).⁷ This temperate approach applies to the teacher. Consequently, Montaigne acknowledges, "let [the teacher]" be both well-formed and well-filled (168). Book learning and pedantry are not synonymous, despite the tendency, Montaigne objects, of pedagogues to confound them.⁸ It would take another essay to illustrate adequately just how well-read and knowledgeable of worldly affairs Montaigne was himself. To use Dewey's terms, Montaigne has "at his fingertips" his subject matter: his intimate reading of books, of people, of his times, of himself.

Montaigne resists the focus, still current in his era, on the trivium and quadrivium (178, 190).⁹ "Only after showing the boy what will make him a wiser and a better man," he writes, "will you explain to him the elements of Logic, Physics, Geometry, and Rhetoric. Since his judgment has already been formed he will soon get to the bottom of any science he chooses" (179). Montaigne criticizes scholars who advance claims about the nature of the universe without also exhibiting the quest for self-knowledge that he regards as central to a wholesome mode of human being (II:17, 721). In undertaking that quest, which entails at one and the same time the cultivation of judgment, Montaigne commends history, poetry, and philosophy (164, 175, 180). The study of history, particularly biography, brings the child face-to-face with the dynamics of judgment in human conduct. The study of poetry assists the child to deepen his attentiveness and receptivity to the distinctiveness of things, and, correspondingly, to the diversity and expressiveness of words. Poetry and philosophy alike, in conjunction with history, engage the child with the manifold substance and range of judgment. Moreover, with the teacher's guidance these readings help the child learn how to articulate ideas and views about human affairs. According to Montaigne, to speak well goes hand-in-hand with conducting oneself well. He quotes repeatedly Greek and Roman philosophers whose finely wrought sayings, in his judgment, evoke the harmony of word and deed. He emphasizes the contrast between this kind of integrity in word and action and the harsh, judgmental, hypocritical public talk he sees as widespread in his time.

In the broadest sense, for Montaigne, learning and living are not processes of applying knowledge, but rather of absorbing and enacting it. "'Knowing' something," he contends, "does not mean knowing it by heart, that simply means putting it in the larder of our memory. That which we rightly 'know' can be deployed without

looking back at the model, without turning our eyes back towards the book” (171). He dramatizes his meaning by suggesting that when it comes to knowledge, “we must marry her” (199). He raises the image of learner and subject matter, in “marrying,” giving birth, or continual rebirth, to the person, to the self—especially, to a person of expanding, deepening, thoughtful judgment.

ON THE FORMATION OF JUDGMENT, PERSONS, AND PEACE

According to Montaigne, the everyday business of what today we call curriculum and instruction—for example, reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and interacting with others—boils down to an education in judgment. He hopes the child will become a good reader and a good judge of the world in its totality. “Good,” in his outlook, comprises balance, knowledge, tolerance, compassion, and hopefulness. The teacher can help children develop the ability to judge well by drawing them further into the life of things, so that, indirectly, they come to understand themselves and the larger human condition which they embody and inhabit.

Montaigne juxtaposes his view of education with a relentless critique, undertaken throughout the *Essais*, of human pretension, vanity, self-illusion, cruelty, and more. His tacking back and forth between positive opinion and skeptical criticism, combined with his innovative style and expressiveness, constitutes one explanation for his enduring influence on other writers *cum* stylists of the written word and of the ethical life. I have in mind writers such as William Shakespeare, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Virginia Woolf, and others whom we know to have been deeply affected by the *Essais*.¹⁰ These writers, in their own time and place, were acute critics of human folly, arrogance, blindness, and dogma. They were, or became, profound if troubled lovers of the possibilities in humanity. They echo, in highly distinctive ways, Montaigne’s passionate appeal to respect the variability, the fragility, and the promise in human being.

Montaigne’s final essay in his book, entitled “On Experience,” concludes with the thought that “It is an accomplishment, absolute and as it were God-like, to know how to enjoy our being as we ought” (III: 13, 1268). For Montaigne, the development of good judgment culminates in this mode of enjoyment (a term which, for him, is deeper than pleasure alone). He writes of a joyful acceptance of the human—although neither as it is often presumed to be, nor as it allegedly could become according to some unquestioned religious or secular metaphysical account. It is an acceptance that, in practice, reaches beyond the passive connotations of the term to a grasp of possibilities that lie at humanity’s feet, if only it would deign to look down at and appreciate the values in everyday life (III: 13, 1227-28, 1258; II: 12, 604), and if it would look at the values in the present moment rather than solely those that supposedly lie ahead in the future (III: 13, 1263-64; I: 3, 11). The accomplishment of which Montaigne speaks holds the promise, he believes, of replacing arrogance with humility, pride with modesty, hate with kindness, and fanatical idealism with listening. Montaigne concludes,

This great world of ours is the looking-glass in which we must gaze to come to know ourselves from the right slant. To sum up then, I want it to be the book which our pupil studies. Such a variety of humours, schools of thought, opinions, laws, and customs teach us to judge sanely of our own and teach our judgement to acknowledge its shortcomings and natural weakness. And that is no light apprenticeship (177).

For Montaigne, the apprenticeship is life long and necessary if persons are to move beyond the intolerance emblematic of his time. Too often, Montaigne suggests, his warring contemporaries judge others and themselves *insanely*. Stumbling into envy, fear, hatred—including a hatred for uncertainty and doubt—his contemporaries become morally blind. They yearn for heaven on earth, or to leave earth for heaven, rather than seeing what the earth truly is, and what it truly offers. People look everywhere but within, Montaigne observes, for help in deriving a workable human compass. They rush to fill themselves uncritically with this or that. “We seek other attributes because we do not understand the use of our own,” he writes; “and, having no knowledge of what is within, we sally forth outside ourselves.” “A fine thing,” he continues, “to get up on stilts: for even on stilts we must ever walk with our legs! And upon the highest throne in the world, we are seated, still, upon our arses” (III:13,1269).

Montaigne suffers no illusions about how difficult it is to gain a hearing for this ethical outlook. He knows that for many of his contemporaries, or so it seems, the salvation of their souls as they conceive it—or the enlargement of their estates—is more important than everyday virtues and civic harmony. Faced with such formidable facts, Montaigne intensifies rather than relaxes his commentary on the nature and education of judgment. Appalled by the wars of religion in his era, so often triggered by cruel presumptions to know God’s will, Montaigne writes that the cultivation and enactment of good judgment can help usher in a reordering of life, so that it embodies respect among the variety of human tendencies, qualities, and aspirations.¹¹ He invites all who are in a position to influence human beings, from kings to preachers to teachers, to articulate and to appreciate this kind of respect. It is not given to persons at birth, and many external and internal forces work constantly against it. For Montaigne, the education of judgment helps point the way to transcendence downwards, to the earth upon which people dwell, and to individual expression outwards in the shared life of humanity.

1. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (New York: Penguin, 1991). Following convention, the first number in parentheses refers to the set of essays (three all told) that Montaigne published in his *Essais*, the second number to the relevant essay, and the third to the page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers in this essay are from the essay, “On Educating Children.”

2. These events were part of an active political life. For example, Montaigne served several terms as a magistrate (French *conseiller*) in the Parliament of Bordeaux, and also served two posts as the city’s mayor. For discussion, see Peter Burke, *Montaigne* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3ff; Donald M. Frame, *Montaigne’s Discovery of Man: The Humanization of a Humanist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 124ff; and John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: A.J. Brill, 1992), 95ff.

3. See, for example, the assessment of Montaigne’s influence on liberal and progressive political and ethical thought in David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); David Lewis Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); and Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

4. I cannot defend this claim given space limitations. But I have in mind Rousseau’s comparable use of the education of a single human being to capture an entire philosophy of education; Dewey’s focus on, and esteem for, the student’s agency; Greene’s educational respect for and delight in human difference and variability; and Noddings’s characterization of teaching as a “caring” endeavor.

5. Montaigne's focus on the education of a boy is, in part, autobiographical. As he discusses in the essay, he was the recipient of an unusually enlightened education thanks to his loving father (II:12, 491). His focus also reflects, in part, the times in which he wrote, when formal education was mainly the provenance of men and boys. I hope to illustrate how Montaigne's outlook was considerably broader than that which obtained in French education during his era. For feminist appraisals of his educational, ethical, and political orientation, see Dora E. Polachek and Marcel Tetel, eds., "Woman's Place: Within and Without the *Essais*," special issue of *Montaigne Studies* 8 (1996).

6. W.G. Moore, "Montaigne's Notion of Experience," in *The French Mind: Studies in Honour of Gustave Rudler*, ed. W.G. Moore, R. Sutherland, and E. Starkie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 50.

7. Caroline Locher, "Primary and Secondary Themes in Montaigne's 'Des Cannibales,'" *French Forum* 1 (1976), 119-26. Montaigne's concern for details and distinctions perhaps reflects his experience as a magistrate in Bordeaux, a duty which obliged him to judge people's motives, actions, reasoning, and so forth.

8. Richard A. Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne: A Critical Exploration* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 124.

9. Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 90-91.

10. See, for example, Robert Ellrodt, "Self-Consciousness in Montaigne and Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975): 37-50; Andre Gide, "Montaigne," *The Yale Review*, 28 (1939), 572-93; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 181, *passim*; and Virginia Woolf, "Montaigne," in *The Common Reader*, First Series, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984). Montaigne is widely cited in the literature as the inaugurator of the form of the essay.

11. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 123.