

POL485HS/2027H1S

The Political Thought of Michel de Montaigne: an introduction

Winter and spring 2020

Friday 10-12, in UC B205

Instructor: Rebecca Kingston, Professor of Political Science

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Course description:

This course is designed as an introduction to the political thought of Michel de Montaigne through a study of selections from his famous work *The Essays*. Montaigne lived at a time in France when public life was increasingly characterised by ideological polarization and fanaticism. In the face of the turbulence of his times Montaigne offers his readers searching and candid observations on human nature, on the nature of the self and techniques for its care and coping, on the norms and expectations of civil life as well as on how to navigate public duties and public commitments in a volatile political environment. He has been identified as a key precursor to liberalism given his repudiation of cruelty and his advocacy for humane, generous and judicious approaches to diversity and to the follies that often characterise the human experience. We will seek to work through a variety of his essays organised thematically and to draw out those aspects most relevant to the history of political thought. At the end of the course it is hoped that students will have developed a better understanding of aspects of the historical experiences and early-modern sensibilities that contributed to the rise of later liberal commitments.

Objectives:

There are three main objectives for this course. The first is to work with students to improve their skills in close textual analysis. We will read various essays of Montaigne with close attention to continuities and contrasts in his treatment of various themes. We will explore various ways to try to come to terms with the tensions that may appear to begin to develop a coherent picture of his philosophical outlook.

A second objective is to work on understanding in greater depth Montaigne's ongoing attempts to reconcile public commitments and private allegiances. While clearly praising various aspects of ordinary life, Montaigne also acknowledges a need for public engagement, something that he did not shy away from in his own life and during a time of civil war. We will try to develop a better understanding of the basis for his praise of the mundane and everyday (in part informed by his reading of ancient Hellenistic sources) without a full repudiation of public duty, even when risky. Does his model of 'citizenship' in a time of heightened civic discord and conflict have anything worthwhile to teach us today?

A third objective of the course is to tease and assess those aspects of his thinking that have been singled out as precursors to liberal democratic sensibilities. These include a repudiation of cruelty, praise of certain forms of liberty and equality, celebration of the self, and a defense of toleration. We will seek to define in greater detail what these ideas consist of more precisely and assess their capacity to sustain a larger civil and political ethos.

Course requirements:

Short paper (3-4 pp. instructions below) due February 28 th	15%
Seminar presentation on the week of your choice (10-15 minutes for undergraduates and 20-30 minutes for graduate students)	20%
Term paper (undergraduates 15 pp., graduate students 20-25 pp.) due April 3 rd	50%
Participation	15%

Short paper instructions:

The purpose of this short paper is to broaden and deepen your understanding of Montaigne's work. You have one of two options:

- 1) Choose one essay from the collection (stick to something short!) and provide a close textual analysis of it. This should include an argument about the essay, i.e. an analysis backed up with evidence from the text, about its meaning and significance for political thought. Point out aspects of the essay that support your reading as well as those that might conflict with it and try to account for them. Try to avoid reliance on secondary literature for this analysis.
- 2) Trace Montaigne's references to one ancient source (e.g. Lucan's *Pharsalia*, one of Plutarch's *Lives*, Seneca's *Letters*, Lucretius). Provide a summary of the ancient source (secondary material may be useful here to get a deeper sense of how contemporary commentary tends to interpret the work), document the references to this source in Montaigne's work and then offer a preliminary analysis of the ways in which the source was drawn on by Montaigne and its significance in the development of his ideas.

The paper should be 3-4 pp. double-spaced and standard bibliographic and footnote notation is required. Penalties for late papers are 2% a day including weekends.

Seminar presentation:

Students will do a presentation on the week of their choice (undergraduates 10-15 minutes, graduate students 20-30 minutes) related to the reading assigned for that week. The presentation is meant to serve as an opportunity for you to try out some of the ideas that will inform your final paper.

Term paper:

Please consult with me about your topic before starting to write your term paper. Your seminar presentation also can serve as an opportunity for feedback on your choice of a topic. Here are a few options for your paper but you are welcome to follow other themes or approaches as long as you consult with me about it ahead of time. One option is to focus on Montaigne in conversation with another thinker of his time on a specific concept, e.g. law, the emotions, the nature of knowledge, etc.. Another option is to focus on a single theme, e.g. diversity, class, the self, ordinary life, what is achievable in politics, and offer an analysis of this theme as treated in the essays drawing from across the work and the relevant pieces. A third option would be to explore how Montaigne's work has been harnessed by such thinkers as Judith Shklar in the development of a particular version of liberalism in modern political thought.

Of course, standard bibliographic and footnote citations are required. To help guard against plagiarism, students are required to hand in their papers through Turnitin.com. Late papers are 2% a day, including weekends.

As required by the university, here are the terms of use for turnitin.com: "Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site."

Required readings:

You are required to purchase an English translation of the Essays. There are two affordable versions currently available. **I would prefer that students use the following version: Michel de Montaigne. *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1987).** Copies of this edition should be available for sale at the University of Toronto Bookstore.

If students wish to consult another translation for comparative purposes there is also Michel de Montaigne. *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald W. Frame (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1943), as well as the French Pléiade edition, Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. J. Balsamo et al (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

Course Outline and Weekly Readings (subject to possible minor revision over the course of the semester):

- Week 1 (January 10th) - **Introduction: the personal and the political:** Who was Michel Montaigne and what were the major challenges and issues of his day? Some background to the political and literary context of 16th century France and the wars of religion
- Week 2 (January 17th) -**Montaigne's method: how he wrote and how to read the *Essays***
-Required reading: I, 25 On Schoolmasters' learning; I, 26 On Educating Children; II,10 On Books; III,2 On Repenting (ONLY pp, 907-978)
Optional reading for further depth and discussion: III,13 On Experience.
- Week 3 (January 24th) -**the self: Montaigne as self**
- Required reading: II,17 On Presumption; III,10 On Restraining your Will
Optional Reading for further depth and discussion: II,6 On Practice; III, 12 On Physiognomy.
- Week 4 (January 31st) -**the self: human nature and the emotions**
-Read: I,27 That it is madness to judge the true and the false from our own capacities; I,31 On the Cannibals; II,1 On the Inconstancy of our actions, II,2 On drunkenness; I,4 How the soul discharges its emotions against false objects when lacking real ones; I,18 On fear; I,38 How we weep and laugh at the same thing; I,41 On not sharing one's fame; I,53 On one of Caesar's sayings; II,15 That difficulty increases desire
- Week 5 (February 7th) -**the self: Hellenism and care for the self**
-Read: I,12 On Constancy; I,14 That the taste of good and evil things depends on large part on the opinion we have of them; I,20 To philosophise is to learn how to die; I,39 On Solitude
- Week 6 (February 14th) -**Short paper due today!**
-Civil society: reason, knowledge faith and their limits
-Read: II,12 An Apology for Raymond Sebond

- Week 7 (February 21st) - **No Class. Reading week!**
- Week 8 (February 28th) -**civil society: coming to terms with human diversity, self and others**
- Read:** I,1 We reach the same end by discrepant means; I,37 On Cato; I,50 On Democritus and Heraclitus; II,30 On a monster child ; II,32 In Defence of Seneca and Plutarch; II,36 On the most excellent of men; III,3 On Three Kinds of Social Intercourse
- Week 9 (March 6th) -**civil society: family and affectionate relations**
- Read:** I,28 On Affectionate Relationships; II,8 On Affection of Fathers for children; III,5 On Some Lines of Virgil.
- Week 10 (March 13th) -**the public realm: a wariness**
- Read:** I,39 On Solitude; I,42 On the Inequality there is between us; II,23 On Bad Means to a Good End; II,36, On the Most Excellent of Men; III,1 On the Useful and the Honourable; III,7 On High Rank as a Disadvantage; III,9 On Vanity; III,12 On physiognomy
- Week 11 (March 20th) -**the public realm: a more nuanced view?**
- Read:** I,23 On Habit and on never easily changing a traditional law; III,10 On Books (redux)
- Week 12 (March 27th) -**a humane ethos**
- Read:** I,11 On Cruelty; I,30 On Moderation; I,35 Something lacking in our Civil Administration; II,5 On Conscience; II,17 On Presumption; II,18 On Giving the Lie; II,20 We can savour nothing pure; II,27 On Cowardice the mother of cruelty
- Week 13 (April 3rd) - **Paper Due!**