

POL485HS/2027H1S

The Political Thought of Michel de Montaigne: an introduction

Winter and spring 2021

Lecture and discussion: Thursdays 12-2

Instructor: Rebecca Kingston, Professor of Political Science

Virtual office hours: Please email to make an appointment. Try Fridays 12-2 first if you can. I may set up another time in the course of the semester.

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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 *The Essays*. Montaigne lived at a time in France when public life suffered from intense 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 25 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 8 th	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) Map Montaigne's references to one ancient source (e.g. Lucan's *Pharsalia*, one of Plutarch's *Lives*, Seneca's *Letters*, Lucretius) in one or two of his essays. Provide a summary of the ancient source (limited secondary sources are possible here), document the references to this source in the chosen essay or essays 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 in the history of political thought 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 Quercus and 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.

Accessibility:

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations for a disability, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca or <http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca> .

Students Learning Abroad:

International students in areas with internet content restrictions, or who are working remotely on sensitive research, may require access to the University's general purpose virtual private network (VPN). If you do require the U of T VPN to connect to university resources, please see <https://vpn.utoronto.ca> for more information and instructions.

To help students located in mainland China, the University offers the Alibaba Cloud Enterprise Network (CEN) which provides a lower latency connection from mainland China to the U of T's online learning resources. Details can be found at

<https://oneresearch.library.utoronto.ca/ic-faq-categories/alibaba-cloud-enterprise-network-cen-service> .

Please note that VPNs do not typically enhance a user's underlying internet service connectivity and will not assist with connectivity issues caused by the recent general increase in web traffic.

Copyright and Privacy:

a) Video recording to be placed on Quercus (no downloads and no reuse):

This course, including your participation, will be recorded on video and will be available to students in the course for viewing remotely and after each session.

Course videos and materials belong to your instructor, the University, and are protected by copyright. Do not download, copy, or share any course or student materials or videos without the explicit permission of the instructor.

For questions about recording and use of videos in which you appear please contact your instructor.

b) Rules concerning audio recording:

Students may create audio-recordings of the lectures for their personal use. Recordings are intended to permit lecture content review so as to enhance understanding of the topics presented. Audio-recordings are not substitutes for attending class.

Students should note that since audio recordings are to be permitted, their voice may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak to the instructor if this is a concern for you.

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005, persons who have special needs will be accommodated.

Students agree to the following terms when creating audio recordings of lectures:

Recordings are not to be distributed without the permission of the instructor via the Internet, using social media such as Facebook, peer-to-peer file sharing such as One Drive or Dropbox, or other distribution channels.

Recordings are not to be shared with other classmates unless they are to be used in collaborative assignments, or if the instructor permits for other reasons.

Non-compliance with these terms violates an instructor's intellectual property rights and the Canadian Copyright Act. Students violating this agreement will be subject to disciplinary actions under the Code of Student Conduct.

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 revision over the course of the semester):

- Week 1 (January 14th) - **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 is provided.
- Week 2 (January 21st) -**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, 907-908)
- Optional reading for further depth and discussion:** III,13 On Experience.
- Week 3 (January 28th) -**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 (February 4th) -**the self: human nature and the emotions**
- Read:** I,31 On the Cannibals; II,1 On the Inconstancy of our actions; I,18 On fear; I,38 How we weep and laugh at the same thing; I,53 On one of Caesar’s sayings
- Optional reading for further depth and discussion:** I,4 How the soul discharges its emotions against false objects when lacking real ones; I,27 That it is madness to judge the true and the false from our own capacities; I,41 On not sharing one’s fame; II,2 On

- drunkenness; II,15 That difficulty increases desire (I may narrow these selections down closer to the time)
- Week 5 (February 11th) **-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 18th) **- No Class today! Reading week.**
- Week 7 (February 25th) **-Short paper due today!**
- Civil society: reason, knowledge faith and their limits**
- Read:** II,12 An Apology for Raymond Sebond
- Week 8 (March 4th) **-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 11th) **-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 18th) **-The public realm: a wariness**
- Read:** III,9 On Vanity
- Optional reading possible for presentations as well as for further depth and discussion:** 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,12 On physiognomy
- Week 11 (March 25th) **-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 (April 1st) **-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 8th)

- Paper Due!