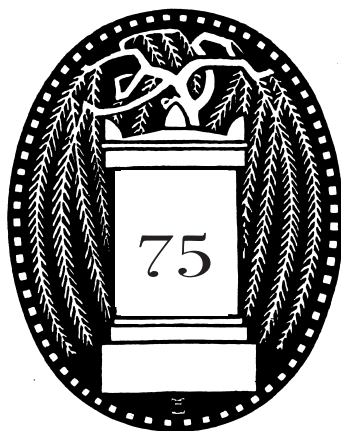


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“To Calm the Tempests of the Soul”: Examining Michel de Montaigne’s “On the Education of Children”

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Introduction

Good day educators, scholars, and admirers and students of the philosophy and history of education. I am honored to deliver The William Drake Lecture at this year’s annual meeting of the Society of the Philosophy and History of Education. As I was preparing my remarks, I was reminded of Professor William Fridley’s wonderful William Drake lecture last year (Fridley, 2024), reminding us of the thoughtful work of Israel Scheffler (1973). As with Montaigne, Scheffler also valued philosophy and judgment in education, so I am heartened that this paper continues with the same themes. I would also like to voice remembrance to William Drake, scholar, educator, loyal friend, and loving family man. As the first “Drake Lecturer,” Professor Drake also touched upon a theme Montaigne prized—individual freedom.

Michel de Montaigne’s educational philosophy presented in his essay “On the Education of Children” centers on children learning to judge rightly (Worley, 2012). To “judge rightly” means to understand, analyze, and question the given world—the everydayness of life—and to act virtuously in it. Hence, the pupil’s judgment is strengthened by scrutinizing opinions through dialectic ultimately to judge their efficacy and strength of argument (Foglia & Ferrari, 2019). Montaigne (1993) declares, “The tutor is to judge his pupil’s progress by Plato’s dialectical method” (p. 55). For Montaigne the philosophical endeavor offers learners a path to learn how to judge astutely and live virtuously. But Montaigne’s notions of philosophy, greatly influenced by Socrates, also raise questions and stimulate further discussion about philosophical activity and how such activity affects the experiences of learning. In further elucidating and analyzing this idea, I shall first discuss Montaigne’s understanding of philosophy and its connection to Plato’s spokesperson Socrates. I then explore how this understanding influences Montaigne’s philosophy of education. Lastly, I consider how Montaigne’s suggested use of philosophy enhances what I call a “serenity of learning,” augments the philosophical life, and continues the conversation about its application in teaching and learning experiences.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533–1592) wrote his essays (the French word *essais* translates as *attempts*) during a time of political and civil upheaval in his native France. Civil wars between Catholics and Protestants (Halpin, 2015; Hansen, 2002) forced Montaigne to remain loyal to the Catholics, while at the same time, at the behest of princes of both religious factions, to negotiate between the warring religious parties. Montaigne served two terms as Mayor of Bordeaux, held a judicial position in Bordeaux's Parliament, and, at the age of thirty-nine—leaving a life of action—retired to his family's château to study and write.

Philosophy, Socrates, and Dialectic

Montaigne is a thoughtful writer who observes and writes about life's occurrences—occurrences both consequential and inconsequential (Hartle, 2003). It proves only fitting that Montaigne referred to his works as “attempts.” He often meanders, questions himself, and changes his mind, sometimes even on the very next page of a particular essay (Bakewell, 2020). Sarah Bakewell, author of *How to Live, or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, argues that Montaigne “lets his material pour out, and never worries if he has said one thing on one page and the opposite overleaf, or even in the next sentence” (p. 7). It is as if he allows the reader to witness a writer in action: to experience his dynamic, perceptive, but at times, confounding thoughts about life. Montaigne expresses his solitary thoughts about the world in the form of the written word. This dual intellectual activity—the isolated thinker and public engager—reminds one of Socrates in the *Symposium* (Plato, 385–370 BCE/1997), before the wide-ranging dialogue on *eros*, when Apollodorus notices that Socrates “began to think about something, lost himself in thought, and kept lagging behind” (Plato, 385–370 BCE/1997, 174e). Socrates will eventually enter Agathon's home, enjoy the festivities, and philosophize with others, but not before he engages in private reflection. In this same vein, while Montaigne writes about the world around him (Bakewell, 2010), he also probes his own inner world, exemplifying the Socratic endeavor to strive for self-knowledge and uphold the Delphic maxim of *gnōti seauton* (know thyself) (Foglia & Ferrari, 2019). A major theme for Montaigne in his *Essays* (1580–1587/1993) is to know oneself and possess oneself.

Montaigne's essay “On the Education of Children” was written to Madame Diane de Foix, Comtesse de Gurson (1540–1587), who at the time of Montaigne's writing was due to give birth. Indeed, Montaigne says he wishes to impart some educational thoughts “to that little man who threatens shortly to make a happy departure from your womb” (Montaigne, 1580/1993, p. 52), opining that, with the aid of a conscientious tutor, the future child must be taught to learn through the free exchange of ideas, becoming able to interrogate the great thinkers and to create self-meaning out of the world. This essay caused others to advance an accepted, though at times contested, assertion that Montaigne is the “first modern” because

of his essay's focus on individual judgment and, by extension, freedom and self-authorship (Sterling, 2020). Indeed, it can be convincingly evidenced that this Montaigne essay promotes an education that prizes individualism, freedom of thought, and self-possession (Sterling, 2020). In what is roughly three segments divided into three volumes—the first and third detailing Montaigne's own education and the second his educational philosophy and programming—Montaigne reveals himself within *Essays* as a student and educational thinker, recounting to his readers the education his father gave him, his feelings of intellectual mediocrity when compared to the ancients, his difficulty learning languages, his experience with the liberal arts, his criticism of the authoritative schooling of his day, and his learning through demonstration and action.

But to understand *Essays* broadly, one must realize Montaigne's contention that the central purpose of education is to develop one's judgment; this, he argues, comes by way of reading history and philosophy (Hartle, 2003). Montaigne cites countless ancient thinkers, particularly Plutarch and Seneca. In fact, Montaigne recognizes his own weakness when he compares his thoughts to theirs, writing: "I realize how weak and poor, how heavy and lifeless I am, in comparison with them, and feel pity and contempt for myself" (Montaigne, 1580/1993, p. 50). From an instructional standpoint, Montaigne references Plato, and Plato's mouthpiece, Socrates. For Montaigne, Plato's, or more specifically Socrates' dialectical method, offers learners (in this case children) a path to a noble and virtuous life and, by extension, wisdom.

Montaigne expresses great admiration for Socrates. In his essay "On Physiognomy," Montaigne (1588/1952) reminds readers how Socrates philosophized on the nature of things by first applying relatable examples found in our everyday experiences. Montaigne writes, Socrates "moves close to the ground" and "discourses on the most useful subjects" (p. 312). This commonsense understanding of reality is paradoxically the content and context in which philosophy does its work. It is Socrates, argues Montaigne, "who brought human wisdom down again from the skies where it was wasting its labour, and restored it to man, with whom its most normal, its most toilsome, and its most useful business lies" (p. 313). Montaigne's Socrates is not one who contemplates the forms, but one who explores topics that affect life (Hartle, 2003). By understanding Socrates and his work in this way, Montaigne redeems philosophy from its arrogance and rescues it from only existing within the superior, remote mind of the philosopher (Hartle, 2003).

Dialectic or philosophy, then, becomes a palpable, efficacious instructional strategy for the tutor and pupil. The tutor encourages the pupil to "sift everything and take nothing into his head on simple authority or trust" (Montaigne, 1580/1993, p. 56). While Montaigne does not go into detail concerning Plato's dialectic, one can assume his familiarity with

the method's challenging nature. Of course, there has been a plethora of philosophical writing on Socrates' teaching method. Socrates' method was a negative learning experience in the sense that he disabused interlocutors of their assumptions by asking probing questions (Woodruff, 2005). The so-called "Socratic method" has been named by some as a "negative dialectical questioning" strategy (Fullam, 2015, p. 56). The method is negative in that it does not lead to the discovery of new information but rather destroys or eradicates one's original idea, claim, or position. This, of course, has also been identified as the *elenchus*—the dialogic exchange where an interlocutor's claim is refuted when, and only when, its negation results from the interlocutor's own opinions (Vlastos, 1991). As I indicate, Montaigne does not go into detail about the intricacies of Socrates' dialectic, but one can imagine the tutor's use of the dialectic, would, as it did with Socrates' interlocutors, lead pupils to *aporia* (Candiotti, 2018).

Aporia (perplexity) may initially be painful to the learner since it is designed to confront the learner's faulty logic or false assumptions, yet in consciously knowing one's ignorance, one is set on the path to knowledge and self-improvement (Ionescu, 2008). Moreover, as one commentator has expressed of the *elenchus*, the interlocutors "would eventually have to admit that the certainty of their knowledge was pretty flimsy and that doubt, in fact, replaced their certainty" (Tubbs, 2005, p. 104). In the experience of the dialectic, Montaigne ostensibly endorses a "common-sense" skepticism that includes a healthy and balanced dose of self-doubt that guards against dogmatism, intellectual stubbornness, and expression of mere opinion (Hartle, 2003). At this point, we can already see how this 16th-century thinker speaks to many of the learning goals and desires modern-day educators have for their students, additionally appreciating the role doubt plays in the learning process.

Montaigne understands the intellectual challenges that come with philosophizing—"sifting through everything" can be excruciatingly difficult for students. But such challenges free the mind, even during times when the learner is forced to suspend judgment. An individual learns through the mental discomfort philosophy prompts. Remaining in doubt, then, becomes a stage in the process of learning. As evidence of this, Montaigne (1580/1993) points to Dante's *Inferno*, specifically Canto XI, verse 93, where Dante (1321/2000) states "It pleases me as much to doubt as to know." (p. 56).¹ For Montaigne, Dante's (1321/2000) simple experience of sharing his queries about transgressors' eternal consequences with Virgil is as pleasurable as receiving from the ancient Roman poet the answers he craves.

The Tools of Philosophy

But what does the tutor utilize for content? Both at the beginning and toward the end of "On the Education of Children," Montaigne (1580/1993) credits ancient thinkers and books for his education. Early in his essay,

Montaigne points out the guidance he received from Seneca and Plutarch, and toward the end of his essay he tells readers of his introduction to certain great books: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the works of Terence and Plautus. But these books are not to be poured into the student's head as if to fill a void, only to have the student regurgitate quotations from these and other authors without understanding them, analyzing them, or reflecting on them. In his essay "Of Pedantry" (Montaigne, 1580/1952a), an essay written before "Of the Education of Children," he criticizes the prevailing educational system of his day, asserting:

We only labour to stuff the memory, and leave the conscience and the understanding unfurnished and void. Like birds who fly abroad to forage for grain, and bring it home in the beak, without tasting it themselves, to feed their young; so our pedants go picking knowledge here and there, out of books, and hold it at the tongue's end, only to spit it out and distribute it abroad. (p. 57)

Whether tutors or pupils, educators or learners, we do not read books, philosophize, or learn in general as a kind of ornamentation to show others. Seriously reflecting on the educational content's pragmatic use in life is a proper education. According to Montaigne, the whole world is the content; it is the "pupil's book" (Montaigne, 1850/1993, p. 64), meaning human events are subject matter *par excellence* for those who philosophize. Montaigne includes a famous story told by Pythagoras to emphasize his point:

Our life, said Pythagoras, is like the great and crowded assembly at the Olympic games. Some exercise the body in order to win glory in the contests; others bring merchandise there to sell for profit. There are some—and these are not the worst—whose only aim is to observe how and why everything is done, and to be spectators of other men's lives, in order to judge and regulate their own. (p. 64)

Interestingly, Pythagoras' allegory has traditionally been understood to view the philosopher as the spectator who engages in *theoria* (Burger, 2013; Duarte, 2010). But Montaigne uses Pythagoras' allegory to remind readers that a philosopher does not solely ponder abstract concepts but ponders, too, concrete examples. One sees such evidence when, shortly after Pythagoras' story, Montaigne offers readers the example of Anaximenes the pre-Socratic philosopher, who asked Pythagoras, "How can I meditate on the secrets of the stars when I have death or slavery always before my eyes?" (Montaigne, 1850/1993, p. 66). Montaigne understands that the tutor and pupil must philosophize about what truly matters. This is why Montaigne opines, shortly after sharing what Anaximenes tells Pythagoras, that every person should ask themselves the question: "Beset as I am by ambition, avarice, temerity, and superstition, and having so many other enemies of life within me, shall I start speculating about the motions of

the world?” (p. 66). Montaigne asks his readers, the Comtesse’s future child, future tutors and pupils, first to come to terms with their fallibilities, and then to probe deeply and carefully into themselves to reflect on what kind of learning, what kind of education, they strive for. Will that education develop one’s virtue and judgment? Here again, Montaigne’s thoughts evoke struggles and goals we as educators and learners experience in coming to know ourselves, as we as imperfect human beings help one another, and as tutors serve the world through education. Hence, the pressing issues of educational philosophy reside in one’s soul (Miner, 2017), and developing a healthier soul can only come via philosophical activity on what others do; on the world that has been given to us. As educationist Brann (1979) remarks:

Philosophy is indissolubly dependent on the conservation of a grown and given realm. If we were ever to succeed in transforming our whole world, including ourselves, into a “second nature,” the intellect and its theory would indeed have to cease. (p. 144)

For Montaigne, the tutor’s philosophical activity with the pupil is not about contemplating universals, but particular, concrete circumstances (Hartle, 2003). Ann Hartle, author of *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (2003), argues Montaigne rescued philosophical practice from its vanity and understanding of itself as only being practiced within the superior, distant mind of the philosopher. To Montaigne, philosophy must be examined in the world. Philosophy must engage with the “given realm.”

Often a courageous thinker, Montaigne’s conception of philosophy differs from many philosophers of his day, surmising,

It is a great pity that things have reached such a pass in our age, and that philosophy is now, even to men of intelligence, a vain and chimerical name, a thing of no use or value either in the popular opinion or in reality. (Montaigne, 1580/1993, p. 66)

Montaigne believed the philosophers of his time exerted their energies quibbling about the cosmos as opposed to examining human issues. Along with his criticisms of philosophy’s obtruse subject matter, Montaigne also suggests philosophy has been perceived as a severe, remote, and bleak practice. But this is far from the truth of philosophy if understood rightly, for indeed, for Montaigne philosophy is agile, cheerful, joyous, and coltish. Drawing from one philosophical exemplar, one is reminded that the Platonic dialogues are dramas that often exhibit the characters’ mental agility, repartee, emotion, and playfulness. Consequently, Montaigne reminds one of the humanness of philosophy. Engaging in Montaigne’s notion of the philosophical life brings forth wisdom and, to Montaigne, the surest manifestation of a wise person is their positive, happy outlook on life, since such an outlook “calms the tempests of the soul” (p. 67).

Impact Today

I have so far discussed Montaigne's own views of philosophy based on his understanding of Socrates and dialectic, connecting that understanding to his philosophy of education and educational programming. I now recount how Montaigne's proposed practice of philosophy vis à vis the work between tutor and pupil (educator and learner) develops a serene sense of learning, while also raising further questions concerning its activity in educational pursuits.

Before I go on, I do want to say in passing, however, that several educationists do indeed espouse the practice of teachers philosophizing with children. Educator and philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, founder and architect of the Paideia schools and author of *The Paideia Proposal* (1998) considers Socratic dialogue an important instructional strategy to children's education. Adler views all children's humanness as the great proof that they can learn through philosophizing, specifically through Socrates' dialectic (Adler, 1998). In Matthew Lipman's (2003) *Philosophy for Children* educational approach (P4C) he posits children can engage in and learn from sustained philosophical discussion (McCall, 2009). Along with his colleague, Ann Margaret Sharp, Lipman also maintains philosophical practice can improve children's entire educational experience, including in critical thinking skills and judgment (Gregory, 2011). Students of the Neo-Kantian German philosopher Leonard Nelson developed a nuanced version of the Socratic method in the early-20th century, which incorporates Socratic discussion with primary and secondary students, specifically including material on ethics and justice (Delgehausen, 2004; Saran & Neiser, 2004). Finally, noted philosopher Gareth Matthews theorizes a child's confusion or puzzlement as a stage in their development toward philosophical sophistication (Bakhurst, 2023).

According to these educationists, especially Matthews and Lipman, children naturally philosophize about ethical and moral issues (Pritchard, 2022). While proponents of philosophizing with children are many, criticism about the possibility of children philosophizing stubbornly remains. Besides claims of developmental psychologists working in the tradition of Jean Piaget that children cannot think abstractly or reflect until reaching Piaget's fourth operational stage (Bakhurst, 2023), others note the "pure versus practical distinction" of philosophy: to wit, philosophy focuses on exegetical work and theory and should be left to professional philosophers as opposed to those outside the academic philosophic world (Gregory, 2011). Other objectors claim more practical reasons—overcrowded curriculum, a lack of teacher training, etc. in their arguments against the practice of children philosophizing.

When accepting Montaigne's idea that children philosophize and continue to do so throughout their education and lives, one should then

consider how Montaigne's assertion that philosophy, "calms the tempests" of one's soul relates to teaching and learning. I previously considered Dante's, one might argue, educational doubt, as instructive and edifying to his learning. To Dante, querying, wondering, and doubting about why, in the 6th circle of hell, a group of wrongdoers are not condemned to the same area as others, is a pleasurable, arguably serene exercise—an exercise not solely based on utility or outcome, but in its very practice.

At this point, I wish to offer two other examples of philosophers who speak to the promise of philosophizing with children—Socrates and Augustine. According to Brann (1999) both experienced wonder, awe and perplexity throughout their lives—for Socrates the subject was Being and the nature of the whole. For Augustine, it was the workings of God. However, both exhibit, as one commentator has claimed—a kind of stressless inquiry. There is no anxiety about arriving at answers or immediacy in discovering the truth, while at the same time, both Socrates and Augustine do not lose hope that an answer can be discovered.

Arguably, the learner enjoys hearing or asking the question as much as finding the answer. The queries and struggles people grapple with through the dialectic bring pleasure; learning through philosophy is pleasurable. Dialectic also assuages needless anxiety for knowledge of the whole. To doubt in this sense is not to question in such a way as if to hold all of reality suspect or to suffer anxiety about one's confusion. The confusion occurs when a tutor or educator attempts to quell their pupil's confusion by degrading wonder, awe, and the questioning that wondering and awe inspires (Brann, 1999). Such harm would not be allowed in Montaigne's classroom rather, in the spirit of Montaigne's earlier thought experiment which he employs often in his *Essays*, I offer this question that I argue educators should ask themselves:

As the facilitator of the dialectic and instructor of the lesson, shall I opt to give the answer immediately to address the student's perplexity or give the student the space to wrestle with the topic even if the experience is uncomfortable?

The answer may seem obvious, and as good moderns and educators committed to learner-centered instruction, we choose the latter, but if we think of education today, with its managerial class dictating mandates and external demands from pressure groups, how cognizant is the teacher of making room for philosophizing? Do we still offer that space for inquiry and wonder considering the challenges wrought by education today?

As Montaigne posits, the tutor allows the student to doubt or suspend judgment if they cannot arrive at a definitive answer. This view of education—one that differed from the prevailing view of education in Montaigne's day—offers the opportunity for learners to ponder, wonder, and grow as individuals; for the pupil eventually to fulfil Montaigne's amazing comment in Book 1, of his *Essays*, "The greatest thing in the

world is for a man...to know that he is his own" (Montaigne, 1580/1952b, p. 109).

As noted previously, Montaigne's philosophy is not the esoteric, snobbish, grim activity philosophy is commonly characterized as. As Montaigne begins to end the section on his specific educational program and philosophy, he proclaims a poetic and naturalistic description of philosophy as the path to virtue, saying, "But anyone who knows the way can get there by shady, grassy, and sweetly flowering paths, pleasantly and up an easy and smooth incline, like that of the vault of heaven" (Montaigne, 1580/1993, p. 68). Dante's pleasure in doubting as much as knowing reflects this serenity of philosophizing and, by extension, learning. One comes to see how such an activity cares for the pupil's soul and offers a calming, renewing experience not unlike Socrates' discussions with his interlocutors in that the more they discussed virtue, justice, piety, and courage, the more they encountered themselves, encountered their own self-knowledge (Hakim, 1992). Should not educators who employ philosophy in learning experiences want this for their students? While Adler, Lipman, Sharp, and Matthews saw the promise of important outcomes from philosophizing with children, it is no less essential to keep in mind the serene and pleasurable experience philosophy affords and the way its practices care for learners' innermost selves.

However, for philosophy to calm the tempests, as Montaigne gracefully expresses, is to see philosophy as more than a practical strategy that leads one to virtue and correct judgment. For Montaigne, philosophy's worth is its practical effects. Knowing that *philosophy qua philosophy* is enjoyable in and of itself, its practical effects may then be considered secondary. Returning to philosophy's "pure versus practical" distinction, is philosophy more of a theoretical enterprise reserved for professional philosophers, or is it what Aristotle asserts in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (335–322 BCE/1941), a contemplative activity that leads to complete happiness or *blessedness*? And if this is the case, then is the philosopher's role merely to be the spectator at the Olympic Games involved in solitary reflection? By following these lines of argument, educators may consider philosophizing difficult to maintain in teaching and learning situations. These ruminations about philosophy raise questions about Montaigne's understanding of the activity, but also challenge educators to wonder about the possibilities of philosophy in education.

Conclusion

Educators may still wonder whether children can truly philosophize or if philosophy finds its true home in practical outcomes, such as attaining virtue and correct judgment as Montaigne thought it did. Nevertheless, a lasting question for me remains: does Montaigne rob philosophy of reaching the highest plains of life—the level of pure contemplation? Is Socrates lagging behind the others, lost in thought, the philosopher's true home? These are important questions to consider. But educators can at least now know that Montaigne's educational philosophy in the essay "On

the Education of Children” has the potential to calm those tempests that, for us, come from the demands of modernity—exactness, immediacy, and certainty; calms the tempests engendered by authoritative forms of education; and calms those tempests that come from our own anxiety, confusion, anger, or incorrect judgment. Educators may also take delight in how Montaigne’s educational philosophy opens doors to a classroom full of wonder and freedom, a place suitable to live out the maxim, “The greatest thing in the world is for a man...to know that he is his own.” As educators, let us commit ourselves to doing the same.

Endnote

- ¹ Looking more deeply into this oft-attributed line from Dante quoted in Montaigne’s essay reveals a misattribution I can only partially unravel. Despite Montaigne’s “quotation,” Dante never uses these exact words according to any standard translation (this phrase Montaigne attributes to *Inferno*, Canto XI, verse 93), so this “quotation” is most likely a misattribution which focuses upon the themes of *Inferno*. Grok kindly reminds us—and Grok’s take dovetails well with Bakewell’s (2011) characterization of Montaigne’s writing style and modus operandi—“Montaigne was known to quote from memory and sometimes took liberties with sources, as he himself admits in his *Essays* (e.g., enjoying “mental playfulness” and occasional misquoting)” (xAI, 2025). So, while this Dante phrase is “quoted” in Montaigne’s *Essays*, its sentiment is well aligned with Dante’s intent, and it has been *widely* attributed as a verbatim quotation, the phrase “It pleases me no less to doubt as to know” does not match with any known line in any Dante text.

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