A Question of Values

SIX WAYS WE MAKE THE PERSONAL CHOICES THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

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3. Value Systems Based on Sense Experience

In ordinary language, the word *experience* can refer to almost anything. We can and do speak of experiencing logic, emotion, intuition, and so on, as in: "I experienced [the emotion of] falling in love for the first time." But when we speak of sense experience, we are referring to something narrower and more specific: the knowledge that we get directly by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching.

Obviously, all of us obtain general knowledge, as well as the knowledge needed to form values, through this avenue of direct sense experience. Some people, however, seem to place considerably greater emphasis on the testimony of their senses than on other modes of learning, believing, knowing, and judging. They do not want to accept the teachings of the Bible or the church on faith. They do not want to sit in a dark room working through abstruse logical problems. They want to see and hear it themselves, either on the spot in their own communities or traveling in foreign lands, or vicariously through books and films. If a friend or a stranger or the author of a book tells them that something is true, they do not ask themselves: What authority or logic backs up this statement? They ask instead whether the alleged truth corresponds to their own entirely personal sense experience in this world—and, if it does not, the alleged truth is quietly but decisively put aside.

Seeing and hearing: Eudora Welty

As one might expect, votaries of a "religion" of sense experience often possess acutely developed powers of seeing and hearing. For example, novelist and short story writer Eudora Welty begins a brief memoir of her early life in Jackson, Mississippi, with an account of sounds, especially the sounds of her parents:

> I'd listen toward the hall: Daddy upstairs was shaving in the bathroom and Mother downstairs was frying the bacon. They would begin whistling back and forth to each other up and down the stairwell. My father would whistle his phrase, my mother would try to whistle, then hum hers back. It was their duet…[from]…"The Merry Widow."…Their song almost floated with laughter: how different from the [Victrola] record, which growled.

Later, when Eudora was a young woman, her powers of observation lead her to "mak[ing] pictures with a camera." Both in her photographs of Mississippi during the Depression and in her more celebrated fiction, Welty's unblinking but warmly compassionate gaze seemed to penetrate into the very "mind, heart, and skin" of her subjects.

But where does such heightened sense experience, heightened hearing and seeing, take us in our personal values? Miss Welty is reluctant to say; indeed, it might be said to be contrary to her values to comment directly. After all, she suggests, the point of hearing and seeing is to hear and see for yourself. If you want to know what a fiction writer and photographer in Mississippi has heard and seen, you should read her fiction or look at her photographs, then make up your own mind about what it means to you. The point of art is to broaden the reader/viewer/listener's sense experience, put people and things in a different, perhaps a more revealing or telling, perspective, not to serve up ready-made answers.

This might seem to be an uncompromising attitude, but it is tempered by Miss Welty's graciousness. If you arrived at her house on the tree-lined street in Jackson, like so many newspaper interviewers and Ph.D. candidates did, you were probably taken in for a warm chat. And if you were unhurried, listened intently, and enjoyed good conversation, you soon recognized that Miss Welty's values, however reluctant she may have been to express them directly, are of a particular, recognizable type, one that descends from an individual who may be thought of as the progenitor of all such values in modern Western culture, the sixteenth-century French aristocrat, Michel de Montaigne.

High sense experience: Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

As with Welty, you cannot pursue Montaigne's personal beliefs too directly. You will not find them listed conveniently in some tract, or laboriously argued in a philosophical tome. You must be patient and approach his personal beliefs obliquely by first getting to know the man. For example, when we meet Montaigne in his delightful but purposefully wandering *Essays* (Montaigne invented the term *essay*, which originally referred to an attempt to gain knowledge, especially self-knowledge and moral knowledge), he is wearing silk hose and padded doublet covered by a wrap of vulture's skin to protect himself against a piercing cold wind as he paces his library on the top floor of a tower, which is itself attached to a fortified manor house perched high on a hill overlooking the rolling, checkerboarded fields of rural Gascony. As he observes,

> I am above the gateway, and can see below me my garden, my farmyard, and most parts of my house. There I turn the pages now of one book, now of another, without order and without plan, reading by snatches. Sometimes I reflect, and sometimes I compose and dictate my reflections, walking up and down, as at present.
>
> On the first [floor of the tower] is my chapel, on the second a bedroom with ante-chambers, where I often lie.…My [top-floor] library is circular in shape, with no flat wall except that taken up by my table and chair; and, being rounded, it presents me with all my books at once, arranged about me on five tiers of shelves. From this room I have three open views, and its free space is sixteen paces across.…If I were not more afraid of the trouble than the cost—trouble which deters me from every kind of business—I could easily join to each side a gallery a hundred paces long and twelve paces wide on the same level. For…every place of retirement requires a room for walking.…
>
> Formerly, [the tower] was the most useless part of the house. Now I spend most of the days of my life there, and most of the hours of the day.…It is my throne, and I try to rule here absolutely.…Miserable, to my mind, is the man who has no place in his house where he can be alone, where he can privately

> attend to his needs, where he can conceal himself! Ambition fitly requites her servants by keeping them always on show.…They can have no privacy even in the privy.…I find it rather more bearable always to be alone than never to have the power to be so.

A servant breaks the spell of solitude by announcing that an armed horseman is at the gate. Montaigne recollects that

> I knew him by name, and had reason to trust him as a neighbor and distant connection. I admitted him as I do everyone. There he was, in a terrible fright, with his horse panting and worn out. This is the story he told me: that he had been set upon a mile or so away by an enemy of his, whom I also knew—and I had heard about their feud; that his enemy had made him clap on his spurs to some purpose; that having been caught in disarray and outnumbered, he had fled to my gates for safety; and that he was very anxious about his men, whom he supposed to be either dead or prisoners. In my innocence I tried to comfort, reassure, and hearten him.
>
> Presently there came four or five of his soldiers, with the same appearance of terror, and demanded entrance. They were followed by more, and by still more, well-equipped and well-armed, to the number of twenty-five or thirty, all pretending that the enemy was at their heels. This mystery began to rouse my suspicions. I was not unaware of the times I was living in, or that my house might be an object of great envy.…However …not being able to get rid of my visitors without a complete breach, I took…the simplest course, as I always do, and had them all admitted.
>
> These men remained mounted in my courtyard, while their chief was with me in my hall. He had declined to have his horse stabled, saying that he would have to depart as soon as he had news of his men. He saw that he was master of the situation, and nothing now remained but to carry out his plan.…[Yet]…he remounted his horse; and his men, whose eyes were constantly fixed on him, to see what signal he would give them, were amazed to see him ride away and abandon his advantage.

In the midst of religious warfare and banditry, plague periodically grips the countryside:

> Apprehension…is especially dangerous in this disease. You…spend forty days worrying…with your imagination working on you…all that time, and making even your health into a fever.…[Among the peasants], each and every one renounced all concern for life. The grapes, which are the principal wealth of the district, remained hanging on the vines; and all unconcernedly prepared themselves for a death which they expected that night or on the morrow.…Because they are dying in the same month, children and the young and old, they cease to be appalled, they cease to lament. I saw some who were afraid of being left behind, as in some dreadful solitude, and I generally found them quite unconcerned except about their burial. It distressed them to see bodies scattered about the fields, at the mercy of the wild animals, which immediately infested them. One man, while still healthy, was digging his grave; some others lay down in theirs while they were yet alive; and one of my laborers, as he was dying, shoveled the earth down over himself with his hands and feet.

Montaigne is spared from plague, but suffers excruciating kidney stones, an inherited affliction which had killed his father:

> People…see you sweating with anguish, growing pale, flushing, trembling…suffering strange contractions and convulsions, and at times dropping great tears from your eyes. You discharge thick, dark, and dreadful urine, or have it stopped by a sharp rough-edged stone that cruelly pricks and tears the neck of your penis; and all the time you are talking to those around you with an ordinary expression, joking in the intervals with your servants, taking your share in…conversation.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, and despite long absences from the tower, first to visit Rome by way of Switzerland (where Montaigne views, and rejects, the novelty of using knives and forks instead of fingers at supper) and then to serve as mayor of Bordeaux, the *Essays* are eventually completed. The first two unrevised volumes are presented to Henry III, monarch of France, equally famous for his transvestism, his court *mignons*, his exquisite manners, and his love of learning. A three-volume edition is later presented to the dashing and energetic Henry of Navarre (Henry IV), whom the nobleman has helped ascend the throne. Even the papal censor joins in the praise, although his

successors will eventually reconsider and place the work on the Index of Forbidden Books.

Essays: General approach

In setting down his *Essays*, Montaigne reveals himself as the kind of man who does not stick to the subject, and who does so brilliantly. As the French philosopher Diderot later described his method: "He cares little where he starts from, how he goes, or where he ends up." Topic is piled on topic (idleness, books, smells, even cannibals)—"I take the first subject that chance offers me, all are…equally good"; digression is piled on digression (a discussion of Christian mysticism merges with a crude scatological story, both adorned by abstruse Latin references). The only thread that runs through all these disconnected impressions is the author himself, his mind and life, the former occasionally contradictory, the latter presented without a trace of chronology.

Even in the midst of this melee, however, the reader is not confused or lost. On the contrary, we are carried along by a transparently clear prose; by an easy, relaxed, entertainingly conversational tone; by an absence of artifice or pretension ("I had rather know what [Brutus] did in his study and his chamber than what he did in the Forum and before the Senate"); and above all by a rivetingly honest stream of self-revelation. It is not just that we learn the nobleman's sleeping habits (late to bed and late to rise: "I like to lie hard and alone…without my wife"), or bowel habits (early in the morning), or weakness for physical beauty (the chief criterion by which he chooses household servants as well as lady loves), or fondness for animals ("I cannot easily refuse my dog when he…asks me to play with him at an inopportune moment"). It is rather that through this one human being, who has chosen to "spy on himself from close up" with complete objectivity, we are able to learn about ourselves.

A man who is now a doctor tells the story of being unable to consummate his first love affair during high school. In a state of near-tearful collapse, he secretly visits a psychiatrist who tries to

be reassuring: Impotence in young men is often curable, though the treatment may take years. Talking sessions ensue, but self-doubt and panic are only further magnified. Then the youth chances on a passage from the *Essays*:

> I am…of the opinion that those comical impediments which so embarrass our society that they talk of nothing else are most likely caused by apprehensions and fears. I have personal knowledge of the case of a man for whom I can answer as for myself, and who could not fall under the least suspicion of impotence. He had heard a comrade of his tell of an extraordinary loss of manhood that had fallen on him at a most inconvenient moment; and, when he was himself in a like situation, the full horror of this story had suddenly struck his imagination so vividly that he suffered a similar loss himself. Afterwards the wretched memory of his misadventure so devoured and tyrannized over him that he became subject to relapses. He found some remedy for this mental trick in another trick; by himself confessing this weakness of his and declaring it in advance, he relieved the strain on his mind and the mishap being expected, the responsibility for it diminished and weighed upon him less.…He was then completely…cured of his infirmity.

After reading this passage, the young man is instantly cured.

Attack on Christianity and logic

The author would assure us that there is no message at all buried among the charming intimacies and digressions of the *Essays*, that he has reached no "conclusions," that he is not "well enough instructed to instruct others," that his work is "frivolous" and of "little weight." But such aristocratic subterfuges must be set aside. The *Essays* are not at all what they appear. They are at once a repudiation both of faith in a higher authority and of logic, the two reigning paradigms of the time, and the most complete exposition yet offered of an alternative, an approach to forming values based primarily on personal sense experience.

Montaigne does not directly attack the idea of faith in a higher authority, much less the all-powerful spiritual authority of his

day, the Catholic church of France. To do so would bring himself and his family to ruin. As he tells a favorite lady: "I speak the truth, not to the full, but as much as I dare; and as I become older, I become a little more daring."Besides, in his view the right way to deal with imperious spiritual authorities, Catholicism included, is not to contest them; opposition just makes them wax hotter and stronger. The best approach is to ignore them, to show them a tolerant, even an affectionate, respect, and then to do as you please.

Nor does the nobleman want to interfere with anyone else's beliefs. If you think that you need God or the church, or an infallible book, that is all right. Indeed, popular religion is conceded to have two indisputable advantages, at least in the short run: Not only does it provide answers to questions that are otherwise unanswerable; it also helps you discipline yourself and control passions that might otherwise prove uncontrollable. In the long run, however, too many answers, in a world where answers are not really available, may become a sort of drug. Like other drugs, it may lead to a cycle of craven dependence alternating with boundless pride, a deadly combination that virtually guarantees misery for believer and unbeliever alike. What people really need, according to Montaigne, is just the reverse: an independent spirit tempered by humility and modesty. Such a spirit may choose to worship a God, but not a God who "fears…is angry…loves" or otherwise suffers "agitations and emotions" common to us. Better still is to make no assumptions, to remain "unresolved and undecided," to rest one's head on the "soft and pleasant and healthful…pillow [of] ignorance and lack of curiosity" about all worlds beyond our world.

If the misleading certainty of Christianity is to be resisted, so, Montaigne tells us, is the equally suspect hope of logic. The deductive method is all "preambles, definitions, classifications …etymologies [and] disputes…about words.…A stone is a body. But if you press the point: and what is a body?—a substance—and what is a substance? and so on.…One [merely] substitutes one word for another, that is…less well understood." Such verbal gymnastics are then followed by:

> scattering and chopping…small questions [until] the world teem[s]…with uncertainties and disputes.…Have you ever seen [someone] trying to divide a mass of quicksilver into a number of parts? The more he presses and squeezes it, and tries to bring it under control, the more [it] keeps breaking and diversifying itself indefinitely. So it is here…by the subdivision of these subtleties, we [accomplish little].…Philosophy's object is to calm tempests of the soul, to teach…virtue, which does not, as the [logicians] allege, stand on the top of a sheer mountain, rugged and inaccessible. Those who have approached it have found it, on the contrary, dwelling on a fair, fertile plateau, from which it can clearly see all things below it.…Anyone who knows the way can get there by shady, grassy, and sweetly flowering paths, pleasantly and up an easy and smooth incline.…Through unfamiliarity with this…virtue…which is the professed and irreconcilable enemy of bitterness, trouble, fear, and constraint; and which has nature for guide, and good-fortune and delight for companions, [logicians] have created in their feeble imaginations this absurd, gloomy, querulous, grim, threatening, and scowling image, and placed it on a rock apart, among brambles, as a bogey to terrify people.

Flight from abstraction

According to Montaigne, what both Christianity and logic share in common is a high level of abstraction, together with a wearisome habit of constantly drawing distinctions and rendering judgments. According to these two great faiths, life is analyzable, generalizable, categorizable, systematizable, simplifiable. Whatever question or problem arises, there is a commandment, a rule, a recipe, a methodology, or a theory to provide guidance. But, protests Montaigne, this is all a pathetic fallacy, a naive confidence in explanations which on close examination explain nothing. The truth is that we operate under a veil of ignorance, both in general ("When I play with my cat, who knows whether she is amusing herself with me, or I with her?") and in the world of value judgments. In addition, the world is ambiguous, full of good that is evil and evil that is good, and "our existence is impossible without this mixture." Under these circumstances, moral evidence is concrete and personal, not abstract or organizable. Put differently, the proper course of

action depends on the particular circumstances, and the best guide is always one's common sense, defined as the ability to hold in one's mind a variety of considerations all at once and then to arrive at a sound and experienced judgment.

Lessons of sense experience

The idea that there are no infallible teachers or theories, never have been and never will be, that each of us stands alone and must fashion his or her own destiny, might seem depressing to some. To Montaigne, on the contrary, it would be depressing if answers existed, for then life would consist of passively following someone else's blueprint rather than boldly and vigorously setting out on a uniquely personal and never-to-be-repeated adventure.

But how is this adventure to be conducted? Not, it must be emphasized, by falling back into gross sensationalism, or some form of anti-intellectualism. To reject Christianity, the religion of the book, or logic, the religion of deductive reasoning, is not to reject the mind or reason. What is needed is *empirical reasoning*—the patient, steady accumulation of facts drawn from personal sense experience, the constant opening of oneself to the evidence of one's eyes and ears, no matter how unexpected or uncomfortable this evidence may be, the deliberate opening of oneself to alternative ways of living and being. "Never rely on [others'] opinions," but always base your own opinion on as much information as possible, information that has been sifted with a critical, skeptical, and preferably humorous eye.

To get "the facts," ransack your own daily life—your family, friends, the immediate world around you: "The most familiar and commonplace events, could we but see them in [a fresh] light, would furnish us with the most marvelous examples [of how to live or not to live]." Then amplify this experience with books and travel (both are important). Try not to let any of this raw data "pass and slip by.…Rather than let [even] sleep…escape me, I used once to have myself woken up, in order that I might catch a glimpse of it.…[If] I am tickled by some…[moment], I do not allow it to be stolen by the senses; I bring my mind to it.…I

enjoy [life] twice as much as others, for the measure of enjoyment depends on the…attention that we give to it."

Finally, and most important, look for heroes, paradigms, models that can be used, not as authorities to be blindly followed, but as options to be explored, imitated, tested, and—always—eventually discarded. As Voltaire said of Montaigne: "He bases his ideas on the ideas of great men. He judges them, he fights them, he talks with them.…Always (and I love that!) he knows how to doubt [them]."

Sense experience, especially intense sense experience, may be a great teacher, but to the extent that people open themselves to it they are often swept away by violent currents and end up either as Don Juan, a mindless voluptuary, or as Leporello, his score-keeping, nonparticipating servant, when the bare minimum goal is to participate and observe at the same time. As usual, Montaigne does not offer any systematic advice for coping with this problem. In his oblique fashion, however, he suggests that certain attitudes, character traits, or (to use the old term) virtues are helpful, indeed may be essential, in order to experience life in all its raw power without losing one's footing. At the risk of systematizing the inveterate enemy of system, these particular cardinal virtues—pagan rather than Christian in inspiration and spirit—may be listed as follows:

Openness to pleasure

On this point, Montaigne places himself entirely at odds with Christian fundamentalism. He is a man "over whom the body exercises great sway," who "give[s] in to those appetites that are insistent," who "loathe[s] that inhuman teaching which would make us despise and dislike the…body," who places no particular value on monogamy or marital fidelity, and who states that "I have never been harmed by doing anything that was a real pleasure to me," although he admits to "a couple of [adolescent] touches…both slight and transitory" acquired by unwisely visiting prostitutes. The only real drawback to sexual pleasure as opposed to milder pleasures such as conversation,

amusements, books, companionable friends, affection, is that it "withers with age" and, for that very reason, youth should pay no attention to older persons who have been forced into an involuntary repentance. Nor should one try to dress up sex with a spiritual or intellectual fig leaf: "For in the business of love, which is principally a matter of sight and touch, one can do something without the charms of the mind, nothing without the charms of the body."

Tolerance

To be fully open to sense experience, one must give up the ingrained habit of condemning and criticizing and interfering with others: "I do not look closely into a footman's chastity [nor dismiss as] barbarous anything that is contrary to [my] own habits." What is more difficult, one must cultivate a state of mind that actually welcomes criticism from others: "My mind so frequently contradicts and condemns itself that it is all one to me if someone else does so, especially as I only give his criticism such authority as I choose."

Avoidance of pride, pretense, formality, dishonesty

Such barriers against the world are a particular bane of the middle class, especially the churchgoing middle class. The very rich and very poor often dispense with them, although for quite different reasons (in the one case, complete financial security; in the other, nothing to lose). The middle class is always fearful of revealing itself too fully, of causing offense, and of losing what it has so laboriously accumulated; even so, "it is a cowardly and servile characteristic to go about in disguise, concealed behind a mask, without the courage to show oneself as one is.…It is not [of course] necessary always to say everything, for that would be foolish; but what we say should be what we think." The very worst part of dissimulation and pretense is that it always leads to crippling inner conflict. By being one thing "inwardly" and another "on the surface," we dissipate our energy and purpose, losing our ability to "go forward all of a piece…[with an] undivided strength."

Avoidance of rigidity, eccentricity, fastidiousness

Inflexibility is a prison to which many of the most independent minds consign themselves. Montaigne himself is not free of this vice, but

> to be tied and bound of necessity to one [habitual approach] is to exist…not to live.…Our chief talent is the power of suiting ourselves to different ways of life.…A young man ought to break his rules in order to stir up his energy, and keep it from getting moldy and weak, [as] there is no way of life so foolish as one that is carried out by rule and discipline. If he takes my advice, he will often plunge even into excesses; otherwise the slightest over-indulgence will upset him, and he will become difficult and disagreeable in company. The most perverse quality in a well-bred man is fastidiousness…delicacy of humor [or too much concern about] health.…I thought I was honoring a certain nobleman…when I asked him, in good company, how many times in his life he had got drunk in Germany in the interest of the king's business. Taking this in the right spirit, he answered "three times" and told us the circumstances.

Avoidance of obsessions, ambition, hard work, too much seriousness of purpose

Obsessions are "evil" and an "enemy of life" because they blind a man to all the rich detail and texture of the surrounding world ("When I am walking by myself in a beautiful orchard…my thoughts [may] dwell for part of the time on distant events, [but] I bring them back…to the walk, the orchard, the charm of this solitude"). Ambition is particularly to be avoided, partly because it requires perjuring or obligating or even enslaving oneself to others to gain their support; partly because it is so frequently futile ("The highest places are usually seized by the least capable men.…If you do succeed…you leave the world and that is that!"); partly because even the most idealistic projects are rarely justified ("Statilius replied in just that strain when Brutus invited him to join the conspiracy against Caesar; he considered the enterprise a just one, but did not think that men were worth taking any trouble about"); above all, because it is based on a misapprehension of success:

> "He has spent his life [on nothing]," we say, and "I have done nothing…" What! have you not lived?…Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live properly.…The man who knows how to enjoy his existence as he ought has [already] attained to an absolute perfection.…We [only] seek other conditions…to reign, to lay up treasure, to build…because we do not understand the proper use of our own, and go out of ourselves because we do not know what is within us. [But] it is no good our mounting on stilts, for even on stilts we have to walk with our own legs; and upon the most exalted throne in the world it is still our own bottom that we sit on.

The case against hard work is similar, and just as vehement: "As for biting my nails over the study of Aristotle [or putting my] mind…on the rack, toiling for fourteen or fifteen hours a day, or stoutly pursuing any knowledge…that I have never done." Although pure idleness is burdensome and not to be desired, "I am a sworn foe to constraint, assiduity, and perseverance." Moreover, the most dangerous hard work is specialized hard work because "our object is not to make a grammarian, or a logician, [or any other professional], but a gentleman."

The worst feature of all these worldly obsessions is the way they persist, first in one shape, then in another, always adopting some new and clever disguise. When faced with their blandishments, the only remedy is to check one's seriousness at the door, to reorder one's priorities, to sup at table with "the amusing rather than the wise," to remember to "prefer beauty to goodness…in bed," and "for serious conversation [to seek out] ability…combined with dishonesty."

Detachment

Montaigne's first five virtues "open" a person who might otherwise be "confined and pent up" inside. But openness to life is an incomplete virtue; it must be moderated and disciplined in order to prevent a self-destructive orgy of sense experience—of too much sex or other pleasures or a total abandonment of work and ambition—leading to an eventual breakdown. The first and, in some respects, the most important moderating virtue is detachment. More than any other device,

it is the ability to watch ourselves from outside, to see ourselves with the same cool impersonal gaze we turn on others, that protects us from an excess of mood or action. Without detachment, we "flush" and "tremble" from alternating reveries of greed and fear. As proof of his own efforts to achieve detachment, Montaigne attempts to refute the idea that sexual pleasure at its orgasmic peak completely obliterates consciousness. He reports that "it may be otherwise, and that one can sometimes, by force of will, successfully direct one's mind at that very instant to other thoughts, but one must prepare and brace it deliberately."

Self-discipline

In addition to detachment, Montaigne approves of old-fashioned self-discipline. This is not unlike Christian self-discipline in some respects, especially in its underlying assumption about human nature. Whereas most Christians believe in a doctrine of "original sin," that unredeemed human nature is inherently evil and sinful, Montaigne believes that everyone, himself included, "is nothing but a fool," a difference more in tone than in substance.

On the other hand, this self-discipline is different. It does not entail dependence, submission, or conformity before a wrathful or loving God; nor deprivation of the flesh; nor the grave and majestic solemnity of ancient puritanism; nor the prim prudery of a bloodless and attenuated puritanism. It is a combination of personal training (thus resurrecting the Greek root of asceticism, which refers to "practice" and, indirectly, to games and sport), of refined good taste, and of ordinary good sense. A mature mind knows that "the appetite for [worldly goods] is…made sharper by their enjoyment than by their scarcity…that excess is the bane of pleasure, [that] temperance is not its scourge but its seasoning." The best precaution to observe is a simple one: Whenever desire becomes insistent, even commanding, pull back. Let a little time pass before indulging that particular appetite again. Montaigne even strikes a metal with the words *Que sais-je*

(What do I know?) engraved on one side and *Je m'abstiens* (I restrain myself) on the other.

Self-reliance

To strive for self-reliance is yet another way to control oneself. Why? Because self-indulgence, in the form of impatience or too much pleasure or too much ease, invariably involves an imposition on others. When Montaigne faces a variety of worldly dangers, ranging from marauding bandits to court intrigues, he considers seeking help from a more powerful lord. But he quickly realizes "that it [is] safest to rely on myself in my distress…see to my own protection, [and so to strengthen myself] that it would take a heavy blow to throw me out of [the] saddle." In this respect, a degree of personal misfortune is a positive good. It hardens us, keeps our passions and weaknesses in check, and helps us to maintain some order and sobriety in the face of limitless temptation.

Eight virtues in one

Can all eight virtues be summarized in one? One might speak of being simultaneously open and closed; of being a lover but also an athlete of sense experience; of never commanding oneself but always relying on detachment, self-knowledge, and an easy, unserious, good-natured self-discipline; of being in harness, but loose in harness; of being successful and effective without any apparent effort. Although each of these formulations reveals something, they are still entirely too stiff to capture Montaigne's designedly paradoxical doctrine. A picture would be better—a picture, for example, of the younger Scipio, "first of the Romans," who in the midst of planning his fateful military campaign against Hannibal in Africa, a campaign that would decide the future of the civilized world, takes time to "stroll…along the seashore, gaily engaged in the childish amusement of picking up and selecting shells, and playing ducks-and-drakes; or, in bad weather entertaining himself with the ribald writing of comedies, in which he reproduce[s] the most ordinary and vulgar actions of men."

Objections to Montaigne

If one were sitting with Montaigne in his tower, enjoying the kind of civilized conversation that he loved, it would be interesting to learn what he thought about the following objections to his doctrine of relying on a highly cultivated and disciplined form of personal sense experience.

It is like a library without a catalogue

According to philosopher Bertrand Russell, Montaigne is "content with confusion; discovery is delightful and system is its enemy." On the surface, this approach sounds appealing. Do we not learn more from wonder, search, ambiguity, inconsistency, disorder, paradox, irony, and nuance than from their opposites? Besides, the rest of Montaigne's arguments possess an undeniable nobility: that each of us must find our his or her way, with only personal sense experience as a guide; that there are no true authorities, that dependency is self-destructive, whether on a God or on another human being; that there are valuable models to be studied and emulated, but only up to a point, and only insofar as they fit one's individual case; that one must immerse oneself in experience, in everyday life, in books, and in travel, all the while remaining aloof and detached and forming one's own unique judgment, taste, and character.

Appealing and noble these doctrines may be, but are they practical? Is a way of life designed by a sixteenth-century gentleman living in a remote corner of France even conceivable today? Since Montaigne's time, many millions of books have been published. The entire world has been opened for travel. Where is one to begin? Should one still regard Horace and Seneca and Plutarch and other ancient Romans as the place to begin in forming and testing one's personal evaluations and beliefs? What about the ancient Greeks? Merely reading the relatively few surviving works of the ancient world, together with all the books written about them, would consume a lifetime, leaving the moderns and all the limitless vistas of travel untouched.

One is reminded of the novelist Thomas Wolfe's gargantuan appetites, of how he tried as an undergraduate at Harvard to

read every volume in Widener Library, beginning at random with one stack, and proceeding book by book from there. It is not recorded where Wolfe abandoned the attempt, which was more symbolic than real. The point is that most library users rely on a catalogue to guide them, and Montaigne not only eliminates the "catalogue"—the direct teaching method of other "religions"—he despises it as an obstacle to our development.

Even Montaigne's literary legacy, the essay form that he invented, tends to thwart the modern student of sense experience. For almost four hundred years, the prestige of the essay, with its charmingly unstructured, digressive, and conversational tone, has been immense. We see it everywhere, in newspapers, magazines, books, or, increasingly, transposed to radio and television. Reporters who have tired of recounting the news like to write short pieces on "loneliness" or "the relations of men and women" or similarly airy topics that mostly serve as a point of departure for unrelated observations or discursive autobiography, and whose contents are often immediately forgettable. The convention of the essay is so strong that even scholarly research articles in some fields are expected to follow the form, to convey new information not just simply and directly and precisely and economically, but with art and indirection. Because few researchers are artists, the result may be only squandered time, both the writer's and the reader's.

It lacks a goal or purpose

In this respect, Montaigne's brand of high sense experience completely denies the basic outlook of the authorities of his day. For example, in Catholicism, even the church, God's representative on earth, is seen as only a means to the ultimate goal of God. In logic, deduction is the means to the goal of an irrefutable argument, a Q.E.D. (*quod erat demonstrandum*) proof. In high sense experience, sense experience is both the means and the goal. In other words, truth is not something that we find at the end of a quest, it is the quest. This is a revolutionary idea in a purely theoretical sense and in a practical sense as well. Westerners have always been work- and goal-oriented. Yet here is a rather admirable man, Montaigne, who says that the work

ethic is misguided; that goals are not important; that one goal, so long as it is disciplined and not an imposition on other people, is about as good as any other; that how you live is more important than what you accomplish.

It is selfish

To the observant Christian eye, something else is odd about this ethic of high sense experience. Although it strongly disavows the standard egoistic longings—to reign as a monarch, to win military triumphs, to gain immense riches—it nevertheless glorifies and cultivates the self. *Personal* sense experience, *self*-knowledge, and *self*-control are emphasized to the exclusion of all else, even to the exclusion of unselfish and altruistic acts. Montaigne himself is so likable, so calm, so comfortable, so intimate, that it is easy to overlook this aspect of his doctrine. But it is there all the same, and freely admitted: "It pleases me not to be interested in the affairs of others, and to be free from responsibility for them." Toward his close friends, the noble seigneur is both protective and loving. Toward his wife and children and servants, he is protective if not particularly loving. Beyond this narrow circle of benevolence there appears to be only self-absorption and duty. Of course, Montaigne would argue that one must put one's own house in order before attempting to assist others and that assistance all too often creates dependency. If self-reliance and self-knowledge require all one's energies, no harm is done to others, which cannot always be said about more directly altruistic religions.

It is elitist

To say that a way of life assumes an unlimited leisure for its particular activities, that it eschews common purposes and goals, that it ignores the masses in favor of oneself and a select few is to say, in brief, that it is elitist. And this is, indeed, a central feature of what we have called high sense experience. It is a privileged way of life, symbolized not only by Montaigne's hereditary manor house with its famous tower-library, but also by the spires of Oxford and Cambridge universities, by the undergraduates' scouts (servants), by

spacious suites and gardens, by a tutorial system that assigns a private tutor to each student.

Such elitist privilege is not to be confused with either snobbery or luxury. High sense experience is "open to all the talents" and likes nothing better than to find protegés among the ranks of the "natural aristocracy," the most gifted students of modest or even impoverished background. Nor is it especially enamored of worldly goods, other than beautiful objects of art, for which it has a decided fondness. But snobbery and luxury aside, Montaigne is concerned with the elect, not with the masses, and he does not share the idea that a doctrine must be suitable for the masses in order that it be suitable for the elect. When he endorses sexual adventure or leisurely reading at a fine university or foreign travel as an essential part of education, it does not occur to him that the masses might want or expect these things, or that his methods might eventually collapse under the sheer weight of numbers. It would indeed have been remarkable if he had foreseen any of this: high sense experience steadily gained in prestige for nearly four centuries, and only reached a kind of peak in the United States in the early 1960s. Shortly thereafter, the evidence of collapse became increasingly apparent: in Ph.D.s who hoped to retire to their own tower but who could not support themselves and ended up as insurance brokers; in the students who expected to find something of the Oxford and Cambridge experience at their state university but were unable to get close enough to a professor to engage him in conversation; in the hordes of would-be travelers who had to settle for being "tourists"; in the disappointed pioneers of free love and the sexual revolution—in other words, in all those people who naively trusted that high sense experience could be a mass phenomenon but who learned that in its purest form it was for the few, and the very few.

It is a status symbol

For much of the 1960s and 1970s, high sense experience was anything but a status symbol. The effort to transform it into a mass phenomenon had failed; the Ph.D. glut was a joke; students abandoned art, history, and literature in droves for economics

and business courses; art museums and rare book libraries languished. Then, during the 1980s and 1990s, something rather unexpected happened. The newly rich, of whom there was an unprecedented supply, began to covet the domestic style and artistic furnishings long associated with people of Montaigne's ilk. The reasons for this phenomenon were complex, but at least one factor was clear. If you had just made millions in a world awash with newly made millions, money alone would not guarantee social standing or personal prestige. On the other hand, if you owned rare and irreplaceable objects, the kind of objects that Montaigne and others like him had always taken for granted in their households, some of the objects' value and uniqueness might rub off on you.

This transmogrification of high sense experience into high status was at once broadly and narrowly based. It was broadly based in that the newly affluent, often represented by young professional couples, not just the newly rich or newly super-rich, ardently competed as "collectors" or for places on museum committees. Yet it was also narrowly based in that favored objects and institutions had to be suitable for public display, not just private connoisseurship. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, truly rare books often sold for more than even the rarest paintings. By the end of the twentieth century, however, rare paintings sold for vastly greater sums, at least partly because they could be displayed on a wall, either in a private residence or in a museum.

A library without a catalogue, aimlessness, selfishness, elitism, status seeking: These are harsh charges, and at least partially warranted. It is only fair, however, to listen to a rebuttal, a rebuttal implicitly offered by Joseph Alsop, an American who closely resembled Montaigne in his distinguished lineage, his immense learning and culture, his participation in the public life of his day (as a leading newspaper columnist covering Washington during the post-World War II years of American paramountcy), in his enjoyment of all the civilized and uncivilized pleasures that life has to offer, and not least in the size and frequent use of his library.

Alsop in effect argued that what we call high sense experience in this book has become misunderstood and debased. High sense experience, he said, is simply what the English philosopher and statesman Lord Bolingbroke called "philosophy teaching by examples." The goal of life is to find and follow the example that is right for you; the goal of education is to inculcate a variety of worthy examples from which to choose. Inculcation can be both extensive and luxurious, drawing on huge libraries, comfortable university reading rooms, fine collections and museums, and a long canon of exemplary works; or it can be plain and rough, as plain and rough and nonelitist as Abraham Lincoln educating himself with five or six dog-eared volumes. As Alsop pointed out in the *Washington Post*:

> Lincoln's texts…were first of all the Bible and Shakespeare.… He not infrequently recited the [Bible] or the great soliloquies, sometimes in the course of important policy discussions, and on a five-hour boat trip to City Point, after Appomattox…passed the time for his companions with Shakespeare readings. It is interesting trying to imagine a similar journey by water with one of our last three presidents. After the Bible and Shakespeare, history was his main study. As a young man in New Salem, he read the whole of Gibbon and all of Rollin's history of the world…with…much space devoted to…Greek and Roman history.…
>
> The first point that strikes you about the foregoing [list] of books [is that what] Lincoln read and learned is neither read, nor learned, nor even taught in any normal American school or university today.…I do not suppose as many as one university student in a thousand has ever read so much as a chapter of the Bible in the… noble…King James version, and I fear the same ratio of ignorance prevails among American university professors.…Lincoln, *per contra*, went through life without the slightest acquaintance with the social sciences, in happy ignorance of the brand of English favored by the Modern Language Association.…If all of us learned to [think and] express ourselves as Lincoln did—by all but getting by heart the King James version—we might even have the cure of the gummy tide of jargon and pseudoscientific pretentiousness which is spreading…today.