MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE AND THE CONCEPT OF "L'ESPRIT LIBÉRAL"

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE Y EL CONCEPTO DE "ESPÍRITU LIBERAL"

GONTIER, Thierry: *L'Égoïsme vertueux: Montaigne et la formation de l'esprit libéral*", Paris, Les Belles Letres, 2023, 462 pp. ISBN: 978-2-251-45398-9.

JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN
University of California, Riverside
johnl@ucr.edu

The concept of liberalism in political philosophy has been and surely will continue to be much contested. One of the big questions is, when did it begin? Scholars tell us that it really came into its own in the nineteenth century as a label for a particular set of political principles which included constitutional government, individual rights, private property, rule of law, and a few other related ideas. Some push it back to Montesquieu and even to John Locke, each with their own variations on some of these themes. And some push it back to Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), ingenious author of the *Essais*. This book belongs to the genre of those who push it back, but it avoids the danger of anachronism by redirecting the focus on liberalism as a political philosophy to focus on what the author describes as "l'esprit libéral".

This "esprit libéral" is "une veritable revolution intellectuelle" in Gontier's account, amounting to the invention of "l'ethos de la modernité", which serves as the basis of the later development of economic and political liberalism (p. 41). He makes a good case for seeing Montaigne as a founding father of liberalism through the development of the liberal spirit (or liberal mind).

Part of "l'esprit liberal" is a sense of the freedom to make of the past what one wants. Montaigne is aware that in "essays" he can do what he wants, follow his instincts where they lead him, pull what he wants from the past without too much concern for grasping the past as it really was [*wie es eigentlich war*], as the Germans used to put it.

Rather, he takes what he wants from the ancient Stoics, Epicureans, skeptics, and the Church fathers as they suit his mood and purpose. In a sense, Montaigne wants to have it all, to use all items of his inherited culture for his own purposes. What could be more individualist than to allow every person to use whatever ideas seem right to them at any point in time?

Some purists will see a danger in Montaigne's practices of incoherency and inconsistency: you cannot have everything all at once. Part of Montaigne's defense would be that he is not trying to represent the truth about the Stoics, the Epicureans, skeptics, or churchmen but rather the truths of his own time and life as he sees them. His use of his cultural inheritance is mainly to bounce his ideas off of them, to compare and contrast his own experience with theirs, and to use them as building blocks for his own edifice. He does not claim to be doing the history of political philosophy or the history of ideas. He is putting together a basket of his own ideas by picking and choosing from what he sees before him.

Maybe the proof of Montaigne's strategy is in the pudding. Did he have a more or less coherent and consistent life? As much as anybody has, and maybe more than at least some sticklers for what they think of as the one and only truth. At some point, the reader will have to judge for himself or herself. Does this author – Montaigne – seem to have a consistent and coherent life? He seems to have thought so, and so have many readers since.

Ralph Waldo Emerson called Montaigne the "prince of egotists" for his focus on himself (p. 51), and part of what Gontier is doing in this book is bringing out the case that Montaigne makes in favor of egotism: as the title of the book puts it, one can be a virtuous egotist. Montaigne often justifies his focus on himself by asserting that he knows so little about anything else; Socratic skepticism becomes an excuse for self-centeredness and self-expression (p. 68). But perhaps one causes less harm when one focusses on oneself than when one tries to focus on others and then reform them. In any case, a focus on the self allows for admission of weakness, such as Montaigne's vindication of his own forgetfulness. This has its moral benefits. You cannot lie successfully if you cannot remember much; you cannot hold grudges; and you cannot plan the downfall of others (p. 83). Skepticism is a way of living within your limits, undermining dogmatic pride (p. 86). And living within these limits allows you to be friends with yourself, which rather than

being the source of all evil is the source of all the virtues, Montaigne implies (p. 92).

How does self-centeredness lead one to virtue? In the case of kings, they neglect their selves in their pursuit of ambition, and by neglecting their selves they end up neglecting their realms. If they took better care of their selves, they would take better care of their realms (p. 93). This line of thinking entered our modern culture in the form of teaching self-respect in order to teach respect for others. As Gontier puts it, "nous ne pouvons juger de ce que nous devons aux autres que relativement à ce que nous nous devons à nous-memes" (p. 95). Public ethics and politics are built on private and personal ethics, and cannot get along without it. This means, among other things, that Montaigne does not believe the moralizers, such as the republicans of his time, who claim to do everything out of what was later called altruism. This is the basis for what Gontier calls Montaigne's "scepticisme politique" (p. 103).

When it comes to human relations with animals, Gontier rejects those like Derrida who find that animals are the "alterité" to humans. On the contrary, to Montaigne those who are different from us are always partly similar; there are no radical others (p. 115). Paradoxically, skepticism appears here in the argument that since we cannot know much of anything, we also cannot know much about how different animals are from us. And egotism appears as one of the things we can learn from animals: they appear to be self-centered and watch out for themselves! (p. 139). They seem to take care of their bodies, and we should, too. At this point Gontier can speak of a "revendication d'un égoisme vertueux" (p. 148).

Montaigne's individualism or egotism affects everything. When he reads, when he quotes, nothing is passive. Everything is an exercise of his personal judgment, often twisting what he has read in his own direction. He does not quote because he seeks an authority to support his ideas, but because he seeks to bounce his ideas off of someone. It does not matter if he has misunderstood a source: the only thing that matters is that the source gave him some ideas. He recommends Cicero's skeptical practice of "in utramque partem dicere [arguing both sides of any issue]" (p. 191). Then the writer or reader can make up his or her own mind. There are no doctrinal authorities, only individuals in progress.

Montaigne opposes the ancient republican total commitment to the community,

and worries about the unintended effects of any sort of radical change. But Gontier argues that he does not worship the past nor wish to conserve it entire. Change is natural, inevitable, and acceptable when it does not cause too much harm. Montaigne also thinks that any community consists of the individuals in it, and is stronger if they are stronger. The egotism we have been talking about does not have to destroy the public good: it can reinforce it (p. 224). A reserve in the face of demands for total commitment can in fact be a good thing, slowing down the precipitant rush toward precipices. Montaigne was proud of his obstinate and instinctive opposition to all dogmatic demands and claims: "au Gibelin j'estois Guelphe, au Guelphe Gibelin" (p. 233).

Montaigne is in favor of the rule of law, but not because it is the voice of the people; rather, because it can protect people when done right (p. 239). Despite some things he said that can be construed as a sort of tolerance of religious differences, on the whole he worries about them leading to factions, the breakdown of order, and civil war (p. 244). He had more than a little justification for this opinion in his times of religious civil war. Gontier argues that he favors moderation, the avoidance of cruelty, and even sweetness or gentleness (*douceur*), but that does not mean toleration or abetting differences that may turn into violence (p. 247). He did not care about theological arguments or doctrines, but only about strife and peace. So his solution anticipated Hobbes and Locke in putting religion under the authority of a neutral state (p. 253). There is no case in Montaigne's work for unlimited religious or expressive freedom. Religion, and other ideas that may spread, should be restricted where they cause trouble.

Montaigne's skepticism is not merely an arsenal of arguments, but a way of responding to chaos in the world and in one's own life (p. 267). It allows one to downsize one's ambitions and concentrate on surviving. It does not mean quietism, or abandoning all practical action: one's decisions can make a difference. We are not totally ignorant, nor totally prey to chance and fortune. Montaigne's prudence is fallible and relatively unambitious compared to Aristotle's, but it may be more realistic and make for a better life (p. 281). And he rejects the hermeneutic principle that says that we are always subject to the idea-world of the community around us: we can be individuals up to a point, and much of his book is dedicated to showing that possibility. Few readers have concluded that Montaigne was just another child of his times.

We have already seen that Gontier observes that Montaigne values forgetting, as part of his ignorance and "weakness". But sometimes forgetting is a strength, as Nietzsche would later have it. Forgetting gives you the freedom to leave things behind and concentrate on the future (p. 285). It can be both a personal and political virtue. It can be part of self-discipline, without which there is no real freedom: we have to know when to quit, when to do something else. Montaigne also insists that reason and rationality are not the pillar of stability and strength that some philosophers have thought they were. Reason and rationality themselves are subject to passions and change, as Hume was later to say (p. 301, 399).

Friendship and conversation are two of the pillars of Montaigne's model of society. In both cases, there must be individuals, egotists (p. 315ff.). In Montaigne's practice, one cannot be **friends** with or have a real conversation with a generic "member of society" or "member of a community". What could such a person do as a friend or say in a conversation but whatever it was programmed to say by the community? And would that not be so predictable that it would not be necessary to have such a friend or conversation? Anyone would do, and anything said would be generic. The need for individuality is both part of the definition of what Montaigne likes to see and of a liberal society and how it functions. True friendship and true conversation take us outside of the bounds of the community. But that will only undermine the community if the community is a tyranny; otherwise, it will reinforce the community.

True conversation, according to Montaigne, is not always polite, courteous, or amiable (p. 364). It is not always a safe space. One can raise one's voice, make others feel uncomfortable, express one's passions. But those others will learn more from this than from the always-amiable. They will grow stronger than those who have been shielded from any ideas that are deemed threatening. They will become less vulnerable than those who have been protected from any challenges to their way of thinking because they are vulnerable. Montaigne also makes the good point that over-long discourses from one party which preclude interchange are an obstacle to critical examination (p. 370). A good conversation allows for exchange of ideas, not just expression of them. It depends on their being two or more individual selves who can relate to each other even as they disagree.

Gontier brings Montaigne's "esprit libéral" into dialogue with many later thinkers,

including Habermas, Rawls, Rand, Derrida, and Flathman. He makes many good points about where some of these authors have underestimated Montaigne, or even misunderstood him in important ways. One can go beyond Gontier by looking at other people who read and relied on Montaigne throughout the world in the last century or more. It is not so widely known that some Vietnamese thinkers were inspired by Montaigne to offer alternatives to both French colonialism (using French liberalism against the French) and Ho Chi Minh. When one disappointed follower of Ho Chi Minh protested against some of his policies and was sent to prison, he brought his copy of Montaigne's *Essais* with him to prison (see K. Pham, "To tighten or relax social bonds?: Vietnamese criticism and self-criticism, and liberal self-exploration", *European Journal of Political Theory* 22, 2023).

Gontier's book is a mature work, based on his solid track record of more than two dozen books, articles, and book chapters about Montaigne and related figures over the last quarter of a century. It is a worthy follow-up to the major works of Lucien Jaume on the development of liberal ideas, providing some of the deep background on which liberalism depends.

Liberalism has a bad name in some quarters today because it is associated with "neo-liberalism", a particular economic doctrine that has been credited with bringing us the advanced capitalist world with all of its wealth, technology, inequality, and violence. But neo-liberalism is at best only one spin-off of liberalism, and by no means the most pervasive. Most of us are liberals in the larger sense, preferring representative government, the rule of law, some individual rights, and some measure of private property, even if we hold other more progressive or more conservative values and preferences as well. In the liberal democracies of the modern world, much of politics plays out within this framework. This means that if you do not like some aspects of modern politics, and want to see some major changes, those changes may still be within the liberal framework. Abandoning the liberal framework may be a risky proposition, and it may not be too harmful to keep the framework. Understanding the concept of liberalism might help us reconcile with it, despite its flaws. Thus, it behooves us to understand the thinkers who brought us this framework. In Gontier's account, Montaigne was one of the founders, developing the crucial "esprit libéral" that makes the later political institutions and doctrines possible.