

## **Philosophy 12th Grade Summer Assignment 2018-2019**

Welcome to your SENIOR year! I know you've got A LOT of work from your AP classes (haha), but here's another log for the fire. Your assignment is simple. You are to read the 11-page philosophical primer "**What Do I Know?**" Included with the reading are a set of Guiding Questions. The questions themselves will not be collected, but... There will be a short-answer exam based on said questions on the first day of class. Do them, and you'll start off the semester right. Don't do them, and well... good luck.

If you have obnoxious questions like, "How many questions? How many points is it worth?"

Throw them away.

Start asking yourself more meaningful questions like:

1. If I choose not to read or do these questions, did I really CHOOSE to not do them? Or did circumstances outside my control (unhealthy environment, bad genes, luxurious vacations) compel me to not do them? Do we truly have free will?
2. Why should I care about this assignment? Or grades? Or school? Or my self? Is there a reason for everything that happens? Or do we live in a contingent and absurd universe?
3. Why do I even want to go to college anyway? Aren't I just going to work even harder there, get a "good" job, work for 30+ years, and then slowly wait for death?
4. Oh my God, why am I here? What am I? Do I even exist?
5. If Fuentes is going to be my philosophy teacher, will he be even more annoying than what I imagined him to be?
6. And of course, please start asking yourself what you know. Do you know yourself? If not, then what DO you know?

It's going to be a fun year! See you in August!

### **"WHAT DO I KNOW?"**

"What do I know?" was the personal motto of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), and it is the question that guided him in writing one of the great classics in the history of the humanities, *The Essays of Montaigne*. Montaigne thought that this question should also be the starting point for anyone who sets out to have an intellectual life of his own, and in order to remind himself of its importance, and also of how little he actually knew, he had a medal coined with the words *Que sais-je?* (What do I know?) which he wore on a chain. Of course, Montaigne thought that people who think critically should be concerned with other general questions, especially questions about what is real, and what is right, and what works for political progress, but he felt that the question of knowledge should be the primary guide for anyone who wants to live an intellectual life. In

what follows we'll say something about how Montaigne tries to justify this claim, and also about what he learned in pursuing knowledge of himself.

**The Historical Background.** First it should be noted that Montaigne lived in France during the Renaissance, and he died about eight years before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* (which was greatly influenced by a translation of Montaigne's *Essays*). This was a time in Western history that was still heavily influenced by Medieval superstitions, a time when demons and exorcisms were common. It was also a time when thousands of witches were burned at the stake, and when there were intense religious divisions, bigotry and slaughter (Montaigne himself witnessed the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre, when 10,000 Frenchmen were killed in a day because they were seen as being the wrong kind of Christians). It was also a time when there was a revival of interest in Classical thought, and when modern science was beginning to get underway, both encouraging skepticism about age-old religious beliefs. And it was a time when Europeans were hearing stories about strange people in the New World, stories that seemed to call for a more complex view of human life (Montaigne wrote essays on the European Conquest of America and also on cannibals who had been discovered in Brazil). Perhaps above all, it was a time when intellectuals were beginning to have doubts about the words of the priests and to instead place their faith in reason and experience, and also a time when they were shifting their attention from the Beyond to living well on this Earth.

So Montaigne lived at a time when it was becoming difficult to be certain of anything, a time when a critical thinker had to make his way in the world without any fixed points of support, a time to try to figure things out for oneself, as we see when we watch Hamlet as he skeptically moves across the stage at the beginning of the Modern World.

Given this changing historical background, it isn't hard to see why Montaigne says the starting point and guide for an intellectual life should be the question: "What do I know?" Here, however, Montaigne was especially concerned with what he could know about himself, and thus he often quoted Socrates' "Know thyself!" as the first commandment for an intellectual life. To put it simply, he thought that anyone who wants an intellectual life should first ask herself: "What do I know about me?" Of course Montaigne thinks you should also be concerned with knowledge of other people and nature, but he thinks that self-knowledge should be your primary concern.

**The Essay and Self-Knowledge.** Montaigne invented a new form of writing to help him gain self-knowledge—the personal essay. He coined the word “essay” to refer to this kind of writing, and it means a “test upon oneself,” or a “self-examination.” The connection between essay writing and self-knowledge isn’t obvious, but what Montaigne realized is that if you want to discover your deepest thoughts about something, the best way is to write out those thoughts. What you write reveals not only your thoughts, but also what kind of a person you are. Whether it is your thoughts about a work like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a human being like President Trump, a recent public event like a school shooting, or perhaps a personal event like being rejected in love, the best way to know your thoughts and what kind of a person you are is to write an essay about it. What you make the effort to write out about something will be far more revealing about who you are than merely going over your thoughts about it in your mind. Of course, for most of

today's students an essay is seen as a tool for evaluating their academic progress, but Montaigne would quickly say it is far more important than that: it is also a tool for discovering who you really are.

In searching for himself and writing out his own essays, Montaigne began with a practice that was popular with Renaissance intellectuals. They would keep a collection of famous quotes or proverbs, such as "Virtue is knowledge" or "You can't step in the same river twice" or "All the world's a stage," and then they would write out what they thought about them. Like other Renaissance intellectuals, Montaigne would sometimes put these quotes up on a wall in his study, and his early essays are basically just quotes strung together with a few of his thoughts about them. But, eventually, as he read more and began to think more deeply, his own comments begin to prevail, and in his later essays what he has to say from his own point of view becomes dominant. Thus the later essays are much longer than the early ones, and the quotes are in the background. In the later essays he also began to write about anything that he randomly encountered as he went through life, and not just about quotes that he came across in books. What eventually comes into view is a full picture of Montaigne's thoughts and feelings—a picture of his 'self.'

If you wanted to develop yourself as an intellectual, Montaigne wouldn't be a bad starting point. You've heard plenty of proverbs and clichés about topics such as racism ("People are prejudiced against anyone who is different"), romantic love ("Love is blind"), human beings ("Women are the weaker sex")—so what are your deeper, considered thoughts about them? Of course, it is easy to talk about such proverbs and clichés off the top of your head—but what would you say if you tried to type out your own thoughts about them? Slowing down, thoughtfully typing, and seeing what you think gives you a deeper and more objective picture of your thoughts than does just introspecting and running invisible thoughts through your mind. When you can actually see your thoughts in front of you, you are also able to think much more cautiously about them and, in particular, about the connections between your evidence and your conclusions, about your choice of words, and about the implications of your sentences that aren't at first apparent. Thus, if you want to come up with a more complete and realistic picture of yourself, if you want to know who you really are, you should be writing essays.

**Montaigne's Defense of His Essays.** Montaigne spent the last 20 years of his life trying to portray himself in his 850 pages of essays, but at this point you might raise questions about why you should read what he has to say. What might you learn about yourself from his self-portrait, and why might it help you in your life? As even Montaigne admits, he is just presenting another human being in his essays, with all of the usual weaknesses and faults—so why should you care? And if you really want to learn about human beings, shouldn't you turn to empirical and scientific studies, rather than just think about what a single human being says about himself based on introspection? And, finally, even if Montaigne did gain self-knowledge, what has this got to do with a reader like you, since your background and culture have little in common with his? In the following famous passage Montaigne tries to answer these questions:

"Others form man [i.e., describe humankind, in general]; I... portray a particular, very ill-made one, who, if I had to fashion him anew, should indeed be very different from

what he is. But now it is done. Now the features of my painting do not err, although they change and vary. The world is but a perennial see-saw. All things in it are incessantly on the swing, the earth, the rocks of the Caucasus, the Egyptian pyramids, all with the common movement and their own particular movement. Even fixedness is nothing but a more sluggish motion. I cannot fix [freeze] my object; it is befogged, and reels with a natural intoxication. I seize it at this point, as it is at the moment when I beguile myself with it. I do not portray the thing in itself. I portray the passage; not a passing from one age to another, or, as the common people put it, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must adapt my history to the moment. I may presently change, not only by chance, but also by intention. It is a record of diverse and changeable events, of undecided, and, when the occasion arises, contradictory ideas; whether it be that I am another self, or that I grasp a subject in different circumstances and see it from a different point of view. So it may be that I contradict myself, but, as Demades said, the truth I never contradict. If my mind could find a firm footing, I should not speak tentatively, I should decide; it is always in a state of apprenticeship, and on trial.

I am holding up to view a humble and lusterless life; that is all one. Moral philosophy, in any degree, may apply to an ordinary and secluded life as well as to one of richer stuff; every man carries within him the entire form of the human constitution. Authors communicate themselves to the world on some specific topic; I am the first to do so by my general being.... If the world finds fault with me for speaking too much of myself, I find fault with the world for not even thinking of itself. But is it reasonable that I, who am so retired in actual life, should aspire to make myself known to the public? And is it reasonable that I should show to the world, where artifice and ceremony enjoy so much credit and authority, the crude and simple results of nature, and of a nature besides very feeble. Is it not like making a wall without stone or a similar material, thus to build a book without learning or art? The ideas of music are guided by art, mine by chance. This I have at least in conformity with rules, that no man ever treated of a subject that he knew and understood better than I do this that I have taken up; and that in this I am the most learned man alive. Secondly, that no man ever penetrated more deeply into his subject matter, nor more minutely analyzed its parts and consequences, nor more fully and exactly reached the goal he had made it his business to set up. To accomplish it I need only bring fidelity to it; and that is here, as pure and sincere as may be found.... It cannot be the case here, as I often see it elsewhere, that the craftsman and his work contradict each other.... Here my book and I go hand in hand together, and keep one pace. In other cases we may commend or censure the work apart from the workman; not so here. Who touches the one touches the other."

**Our Self, or Selves?** In these paragraphs we have an example of Montaigne's personal and conversational style, but what he says is sharply focused. And notice how clear the reasoning is in the first paragraph: in my essays I write about myself; I am constantly changing; therefore, what I say about myself in my essays is also constantly changing (in Montaigne's words: "I portray the passage... from day to day, from minute to minute.") The reasoning that leads to the second premise is also clear: The world is constantly changing (it is a "perennial see-saw;"), and

then, I am part of the world; therefore, I am constantly changing. So, although the style is informal and conversational, the passage is a carefully reasoned discussion of what Montaigne is producing in his *Essays*, and in what follows we will look closely at what he says. First we'll examine what he says about himself and human beings, and then what he says about why his essays might continue to have value for people.

To begin with, Montaigne is presenting a particular way of thinking about human beings, namely, that we are constantly changing creatures. For Montaigne, there is no such thing as a human being who remains constant over time, e.g., a "shy man," "a mean man," or "a sexist man." We typically stereotype people in these ways, but our stereotypes have nothing to do with what people are like in reality. For the reality of a human being is not fixed. And Montaigne is not only saying that we change as we grow older, he is saying we change "from minute to minute." Indeed, for Montaigne, we have "selves," rather than a "self." So if you are searching for who you really are, you first need to get over your tendency to think that you are going to find some kind of thing with a fixed nature. Rather, you need to look for the selves that you are from minute to minute.

Montaigne never tires of emphasizing the changeability of a human being, and it is a major theme in his late as well as his early essays. It is classically discussed in "On the inconsistency of our actions." Here he draws on many historical accounts while showing us how common it is for the same person to be one thing today, and another tomorrow, e.g., cowardly today, while courageous tomorrow, or virginal today and lustful tomorrow, or cruel today and kind tomorrow. Thus Montaigne thinks that if we study ourselves we will see that "There is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others." Here is how he describes himself:

"All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly, and prodigal: all this I see in myself and to some extent according to how I turn... I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word..."

As the examples illustrate, Montaigne is not only emphasizing that a human being changes over time; he is also saying that what a human being is at this moment contradicts what he was a moment ago. Indeed, he is saying that the Greek idea of a being a rationally consistent human being is a myth. In his words, "Nothing is harder for me to believe in than man's consistency, and nothing easier to believe in than his inconsistency."

In developing this way of thinking about human beings, Montaigne criticized ancient biographers and historians who would choose a general characteristic that a famous person revealed on a few climactic occasions (e.g., perhaps the courage that Alexander the Great displayed in a few battles), and then fashion an entire picture of him based on this characteristic, making him seem consistent and always that way, ignoring what he may have been like on other occasions. Thus we might read that "Alexander was a brave man," as though that were his whole life story. Of course, ancient biographers and historians weren't the only people who tended to reduce human beings in this way, and if you listen to people talk today, you will see that it remains a prevailing tendency. Rarely do people talk about others without simplifying and generalizing comments,

e.g., he's "kind" or "cruel," "smart" or "dumb," etc. That is to say, rarely do we talk about a human being without distorting the reality of who she is, and if you study the path of your own life, you will see that this common-sense way of talking about a human being is deeply flawed.

This theme of a changing and contradictory human nature is also illustrated in an essay entitled *How We Weep and Laugh at the Same Thing*. Here Montaigne focuses on our rapidly changing emotions, and he begins by citing several famous generals, who are said to have wept when they first learned that enemy generals, who they had just been fighting, had been killed in battle. What Montaigne says of himself, e.g., "what pleases me now, will soon be painful," also applied to them. In connection with the title of the essay, Montaigne notes that it is common for children to cry and laugh at the same thing. He also notes that it is common for a young woman to feel happy about going off with her new husband, while also sad about leaving her home and parents. Think, too, of how easy it is for you to pass from feeling love for your mother to feeling hostility. Long before Freud (we'll get to him later in this class), Montaigne thought that any serious student of himself will see that ambivalent feelings prevail. To talk about someone who is constantly in love with someone isn't to talk about a real human being.

So, if you follow Montaigne, when you are asked, "Do you love your mother?" you will answer: "When?" Of course Montaigne knows that you prefer to simplify and generalize, and thus you'll say, "I always love my mother," but he also thinks that with self-study you'll get over such a false view of yourself. And do you think that your mother's feelings toward you are constant? Granted, you share some genes and she says that she always loves you, but is this *always* revealed by her behavior and what she actually says to you? Could anyone always find an adolescent loveable? You? And do you always feel love for yourself? Montaigne thinks the answers to these questions are obvious to anyone who has honestly studied herself. Like the changing world outside you, nothing is fixed within.

**Our Selves and Our Circumstances.** Montaigne rejects the romantic idea that an individual can find herself simply by reflecting on what she really is in isolation from her circumstances. For there is no self that exists independent of circumstances; there are only changing selves that are intimately tied to changing circumstances. As they change, so does the individual. Thus Montaigne compares human beings to chameleons who change colors as they move from one environment to another. Take you, for example—one color when you are with your mother, another when you are with your little brother, another with your peer group, another with your teacher, another with your lover, and still another when you are all alone. If you listen to yourself talk, notice the way you carry yourself, and if you reflect on your thoughts and feelings as you move from one set of circumstances to another, it will be obvious that what you are depends on your changing circumstances. It will also be obvious that Montaigne's quote from Horace fits you, too: "Like puppets, we are moved by outside strings."

Indeed, the power of our circumstances over our lives is so great that Montaigne thinks we should get over our natural tendency to trace our actions back to our character or a core self, and instead "trace our actions to the neighboring circumstances." When you see someone stand up to a powerful bully, for example, you shouldn't jump to the conclusion that he has a brave character, but rather take note of the fact that his girlfriend is watching him. Would he have

displayed such bravery if there were no watchers around? This tracing of behavior to circumstances that a person is caught up in might be harder to do when it comes to evil action—such as the behavior of a Nazi S.S. officer in a concentration camp. But Montaigne would be sympathetic with modern accounts of evil that trace an individual's evil acts to his circumstances rather than to his character or “inner person,” and he would wonder whether that same S.S. officer was kind in different circumstances, for example, when dealing with his wounded comrade or sick son. And on a less dramatic level, it's not hard to see that the ‘cool’ self of a high school student is intimately connected with a peer group that is watching her.

In discussing the weight of our circumstances, Montaigne notes that it is difficult for an individual to mentally separate herself from the social role that she is playing on the public stage. He says that when he himself was mayor of Bordeaux (he served two terms), he was able to separate what he was from his official position, but he emphasizes that this wasn't easy and that he had to concentrate to keep the two separate. As he says:

“We must play our part duly, but as the part of a borrowed character. Of the mask and appearance, we must not make a real essence, nor of what is foreign what is our very own [we shouldn't confuse a part we are playing with what we are]. We cannot distinguish the skin from the shirt. It is enough to make up our face, without making up our heart. I see some who transform and transubstantiate themselves into as many new shapes and new beings as they undertake jobs, who are prelates to their very liver and intestines, and drag their position with them even into their privy. They give themselves up so much to their fortune that they even unlearn their natures. They swell and inflate their soul and their natural speech to the height of their magisterial seat.” [In short, they take themselves seriously and act like fools]

Again, Montaigne is saying that it is difficult for a human being to mentally separate her real, internal life from the circumstances in which she finds herself, and in particular, from the particular role she is playing. Here he sounds like contemporary social role theorists who emphasize that students and teachers often assume they are thinking about themselves, when in reality their attention is centered on the role they are playing, and not whatever they are beneath the pretense. Think here of a teacher who is used to playing God with all the answers, and thus starts thinking that he really does know something. And the student who doesn't have all the answers similarly starts thinking of herself as an idiot. This is what Montaigne is referring to in the above passage in which he says “If the world finds fault with me for talking too much about myself, I find fault with the world for not even thinking of itself.” To think of yourself as a “student” or “teacher” is not to think of the reality which underlies these parts.

**Our Everyday Selves.** But to learn such things, that is to say, to get beyond our ordinary common sense view of ourselves, we need to study ourselves and not merely act. As Montaigne says in opposition to what he sees as normal in the world:

“The world always looks straight ahead; as for me, I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy. Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself; I take stock of myself, I taste myself. Others always go elsewhere...as for me, I roll about in myself.”

Note that Montaigne is not saying we should become narcissistic egomaniacs. His point is that it is only through serious study of ourselves that we come to see such things as we have been describing here, e.g., that our thoughts and feelings are constantly changing, that we have many selves rather than a single stable core self, that these selves are tied to our changing circumstances, and that we tend to confuse the roles we play with what we are. In studying our circumstantial selves, Montaigne emphasizes that we should be especially concerned with searching for what we are like as we live through the normal events in our everyday lives. This point is major, and in making it Montaigne is rejecting the common sense tendency to think that it is the big, climactic events in life—e.g., being in battle, or turning 21, or getting an “A” on a major exam, or making the winning basket at the end of the game—that show us what an individual is “really like.” Of course, something is revealed about you by how you behave in these big events in your life, but for Montaigne the more mundane and ordinary events reveal much more about you. For example, how you talk to your little brother, how you treat your dog, what you are like driving to school, and what you are like when you are all alone in your room says far more about you than how you handle “big events.” After all, most of the time you are caught up in everyday things, and not big events. Montaigne deeply distrusted ancient biographies of famous people like Julius Caesar because they ignored his everyday life, and instead talked only about his behavior in battle or in dealing with a challenge to his leadership in the Roman Empire. Perhaps it’s harder for males, who sometimes dream of being “heroes,” to get over this traditional bias that, say, President Obama revealed more of who he really is when he gave the order to take out Bin Laden than when he talks to his wife and kids at dinner. But for Montaigne, we reveal little of what we are when we get caught up in a handful of dramatic events in our lives: if we want self-knowledge, it is our thoughts, feelings and behavior in response to everyday events that need to be studied.

**Our Creatural Selves.** Montaigne also distrusted ancient biographies because they said little about an individual’s physical existence. In talking about Plato or Aristotle, for example, biographers would focus solely on their mental lives while leaving their physical lives in the dark. But for Montaigne, ignoring our physical existence leads to a distorted view of human life. For instance, it doesn’t take much self-study to realize that you are an animal who gets hungry, tired and sick. How many young women want to deny that menstruation is a major part of their life? Who wants to say that lust is irrelevant? And how many old people want to deny that having an aging body has an influence on their thoughts and feelings? For Montaigne, it’s obvious that an individual’s mind is united with his body, and thus in his self-portrayal he tells us a lot about his own physical existence, e.g., his taste in wine (white as well as red, and he mixed his wine with water), his sense of smell (he didn’t like perfume), and even his ability to hold water (he once tells us that he could go ten hours without urinating). He also tells us that he was short and had a mustache (he says that his mustache could hold the scent from a handkerchief for a whole day, and that in his younger days “the close, luscious, greedy, long-drawn kisses of youth would adhere to it, and remain for several hours afterward”!). And in his later essays he talks a lot about getting old (he says that with age his soul got “sour and musty”), and he even spends several pages of his last essay describing his terrible kidney stones (which prevented urination, were enormously painful, and could not be dissolved).

Thus readers of the *Essays* will not only learn a lot about Montaigne’s intellectual life, but they

will also learn an awful lot about his body. To use a technical word, they will learn about his *creatural* life, where “creatural” refers to the low, physical side of life, e.g., shitting, vomiting, bleeding, kidney stones, decaying with age. To be a human being is to suffer from a *creatural* existence, and, in general, if you study your selves, you will see that they are deeply influenced by an animal’s body, as well as a mind or soul.<sup>1</sup>

**Why Read Montaigne?** Here we should return to the quoted passage in which Montaigne discusses and defends his *Essays*. In the second part of it, he raises the question of why you might profit from reading what he has to say about himself—again: “But is it reasonable that I...should aspire to make myself known to the public?” After all, he lived a long time ago, and he was a product of a culture and world that were quite different from ours. Nor, as he also emphasizes, was he a great king who played a big part on the public stage, but rather only an ordinary man who lived in the country and had the usual human weaknesses and imperfections—so again, why should you read what he has to say about himself? Montaigne’s answer to this question is famous and interesting: “every man carries within him the entire form of the human constitution.” In other words, all human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or culture are fundamentally alike, and from this it follows that an in-depth study of any human being will help us to see what the rest of us are like. If we grant the premise that, despite different backgrounds and cultures, all people are alike in fundamental ways, the conclusion follows, and you should be able to see yourself mirrored in the life of Montaigne. In particular, you should see yourself as constantly changing,<sup>2</sup> intimately connected with your circumstances, and having a *creatural* life, just like Montaigne.

In addition to the claim that all human beings share a basic human condition, Montaigne says he did two other things that make his book worth reading: he was thorough in tracking himself down as well as honest. That is, in writing about himself he tried to give us a complete portrait, showing us how he responded to a wide range of books, ideas and circumstances, and in doing so, he tried not to idealize himself or fall victim to the normal mental illness of self-deception. Only truthfulness and thoroughness, i.e., honestly searching for oneself everywhere, enables a human being to track himself down in a meaningful way, and thus make his self-portrait

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<sup>1</sup> In concluding this analysis of Montaigne’s description of himself and human life in general, I think we should see it as a major advance over the earlier descriptions of Classical and Medieval writers, and it is easy to say that Montaigne gives us a strikingly modern way of thinking about human life. At the same time it should be noted that he ignores or pays little attention to several major factors that will be emphasized later in this course by later describers of human life: evolution and natural selection (Darwin and E.O. Wilson); economic conditions and historical developments (Smith, Marx); the will to power and the animal that puts its kind in cages (Nietzsche, Foucault); early childhood determinism and repressed, unconscious thought (Freud); self-consciousness, freedom, and the eye of the Other (Sartre); and language and the creative animal (Wittgenstein, Rorty). Later this year we will discuss where these writers would qualify Montaigne’s portrayal of the human condition and what they would add, but Montaigne provides one of the best starting points for thinking about who you are.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Montaigne had a deep interest in different cultures and historical periods. And it should be emphasized that his descriptions of the Others are remarkably free of ethnocentrism. This is clear not only when he describes ancient Europeans, but also when he describes the Mexica in his essay on the Conquest of Mexico, and even when he describes the cannibals who had been discovered in Brazil. In his essay *On Cannibals*, he says, “I do not believe...that there is anything barbarous or savage about them, except that we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits,” and in comparing them to the Europeans of his day, he even goes on to say that the Europeans “surpass them in every kind of barbarity.”

worthwhile for the rest of us. Since a human being exists in all of her circumstances, to know about what she's like in only a few, say, in responding to her parents or to a particular movie, says vary little about the various selves that she displays. To be sure, nobody before Montaigne gave us such a complete self-portrait (850 pages), and for many who have read him, he shows an honesty that is rare in the human world. And for many readers he also shows a wisdom that is rare in the human world.

**“What Do I Know?” —Does It Matter?** But is Montaigne’s motto, “What do I know?” a good one to live by today? Is there a better guide as you move through the world and think about what you are doing and experiencing? Of course you will need to think about how to make a buck, how to have a good love life, how to raise children, and how to defend yourself, but why think about what you can know and, in particular, what you can know about yourself? Common sense will always give you ready-made answers to these questions, so why not just accept common sense? Why get picky, and think independently, skeptically and critically about abstract topics like knowledge and what you can actually be sure of when you think about what kind of a person you are?

In dealing with the question of what you know, it can first be noted that Montaigne ranks as one of the great skeptics in the history of Western thought, and in his early as well as late essays, he often comes close to saying that nobody can really know anything about anything. He even considered whether animals know more than humans, and in a famous passage, he asked himself, “When I play with my cat, who knows whether I am amusing myself with her, or she with me?” Given such sweeping skepticism, you might think he would downplay the importance of an individual’s searching for knowledge. If there is no absolute knowledge to be gained, why bother searching for it?

Montaigne gives several reasons, and for actually living with the question: “What do I know?” Above all, the pursuit of knowledge, especially of yourself, leads to tolerance, good judgment, and self-control—virtues that are essential for living well in the world, which Montaigne thinks should be our ultimate goal. Here we can first emphasize that it is only after a human being thinks deeply about what she can and cannot know that she begins to realize how easy it is to question her common-sense “knowledge.” And this skepticism is good because it tends to make us more tolerant of others who have different beliefs and customs. Once we have doubts about “our” beliefs, it is more difficult to see the Others as the “barbarians;” this tolerance is illustrated in Montaigne’s essays about indigenous peoples in the New World. In a diverse and democratic society such as ours a degree of skepticism about “our” beliefs is probably essential for a tolerant and cooperative social life.

Here something else should be emphasized. Montaigne lived at a time when it was common sense that witches and people with a different religion were the cause of evil. This common sense was tied to a terrible human urge to blame our problems and frustrations on a scapegoat and then destroy it. Montaigne discusses this scapegoating urge in his essay, “How the soul discharges its passions on false objects when true ones are lacking,” and he understood that it helped to explain why human beings so often slaughter their own kind.

But not everyone joined in. Some, like Montaigne, could stand back from common sense and the murderous crusades against “heathens” and witches, but only because they had pursued knowledge and had thus thought independently and critically about their own inner urges, and

also about evidence, reasoning, and the meanings of words. Of course, the desire to point to evil people over there and the urge to blame our frustrations and problems on a scapegoat have not left the world since Montaigne's day. Nor have these tendencies left the human world since the Nazis were defeated.

These are extreme examples, but in our personal lives we are also constantly making judgments about other people, e.g., judgments about who to hang out with, who to marry, who to vote for, etc. And here, too, once we seriously reflect on our limits as knowers—specifically, on how often our memory misleads us, how often we overgeneralize, and how often our judgments are simply wrong—we are slower and more cautious in reaching conclusions about who the “good people” and the “bad people” are. Yet once again, to live with an awareness of our limits as knowers requires self-study (it's too bad you didn't start writing essays in elementary and middle school, so you could have an autobiographical record of your own dumb judgments), and again, people who haven't studied themselves are quicker to jump to the wrong conclusions. They are often people who are certain of their conclusions about others and about themselves, e.g., “I know who I am!” But for Montaigne: “A persuasion of certainty is a manifest testimony of foolishness.”

In addition to showing us our limits as knowers, Montaigne emphasizes that self-study can help us in dealing with uncontrolled passions such as anger, jealousy, fear and lust, which often explain why we mess up and do ugly things. If you have doubts about this, check out the media; every day you'll find stories about people whose uncontrolled passions led to messed up lives, wife-beating, murder, prison. Yet, as Montaigne says in his last essay, *On Experience*:

“If each man watched closely the effects and circumstances of the passions that dominate him, as I have done with the ones I have fallen prey to, he would see them coming and would control their impetuosity and course a bit. They do not always leap at our thoughts at a single bound; there are threats and degrees... He who calls back to mind the excess of his past anger, and how this fever carried him away, sees the ugliness of this passion better than what Aristotle says about it, and conceives a more justified hatred of it.”

In other words, a man who has closely studied himself knows that his passions often account for the dumb and ugly things he has done in the past, and thus when anger or jealousy or fear or ambition or lust again start to “leap” at him, he can control their pernicious influence. Again, self-knowledge leads to the self-control that is essential for living well on Earth, and again, for Montaigne living well should be our ultimate goal in life. As he would have said in response to an ex-Magnet student, who complains that he didn't make it to the top of the social ladder:

“Have you been able to think out and manage your own life? You have done the greatest task of all... To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces [and money], but order and tranquility in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately.”

In addition to showing us our limits as knowers and helping us to bring our passions and lives under control, Montaigne also emphasizes that self-study helps us in making better judgments about others. This is because our judgments about others inevitably pass through the filter of what we know about ourselves. To take some simple examples: you know that jealousy is influencing the negative things a friend is saying about someone because you know how jealousy

has influenced you in thinking about a rival, and you know how someone feels when he's just been rejected in love because you know what you have felt when you were rejected. Or perhaps if you're babysitting and a child wants you to leave the light on when you put him to bed after a scary movie, you know his comments spring from fear because you remember that you were scared in the dark when you were younger. Or, more serious, you know that your friend's constant negative comments about another group of people have their roots in his need for a scapegoat because you have recognized the same terrible tendency in yourself. These, of course, are simple examples, but in making judgments about others you are constantly drawing on what you know about yourself, and if your self-knowledge is shallow, your judgments about others will reflect that shallowness. Again, for Montaigne, you should never forget Socrates' famous command: "Know thyself."

But aside from these arguments for the importance of pursuing knowledge of the self, is there something sad about a grown human being who has a poor sense of himself? For example, have you ever listened to someone talk who is full of himself, talking on and on about his big projects and what all he's going to do next, but doesn't know that he is despicably vain and self-centered? Or have you ever listened to stupid macho males who don't realize that they are simply insecure animals who are playing to their peer group, or to weepy or hysterical females who don't realize that they are merely acting out traditional female roles? Is there something repulsive about a grown human being who lacks knowledge of who he or she is? Such a person might have a high S.A.T. score and might make a lot of money, but is he or she loveable? A good person? Not for Montaigne—and you?

*Que sais-je?*

Should you start wearing your medal?

### **Guiding Questions for *What Do I Know?***

1. What about his Renaissance historical background might explain why Montaigne coined his "What Do I Know?" medal?
2. What kind of knowledge was Montaigne particularly concerned with?
3. What is an "essay," and for Montaigne what kind of a "tool" is it?
4. Why might writing down your thoughts in an essay help you to discover what your deeper thoughts are and who you are? Why might it also help you to think more critically about your thoughts?
5. What does Montaigne mean when he says that he contradicts himself in his *Essays*, but he doesn't contradict the truth?
6. In discussing the subject matter of his essays, what is the main thing he wants us to realize about himself and about human beings in general?

7. Rather than searching for your “self,” (whatever that is) what does Montaigne think you should be searching for?
8. In writing about the malleability (changeability) of human beings, what is the Greek idea about human beings that Montaigne is challenging?
9. Why is Montaigne critical of ancient historians and biographers? Would he be critical of you and your friends for the same reason?
10. Do you love your mother?
11. For Montaigne, what should you “trace” a person’s actions to, and what should you not trace them to?
12. In talking about our role playing for others on the public stage, how do we get confused, and what is the reality that it is easy to lose sight of?
13. In talking about when you reveal most about yourself, what is the idea that Montaigne is rejecting? What is he replacing it with?
14. In describing himself, what part of life does Montaigne emphasize that was left out or played down in traditional biographies?
  - a. What “unity” did Montaigne believe in?
  - b. What is “the creatureal?”
15. According to Montaigne, what are three factors that explain why you can profit from his self-description, even though he grew up a long time ago and lived in a totally different culture?
16. Montaigne has four reasons for thinking an intellectual life dominated by “What do I know?” will lead to a good life on Earth:
  - a. Why does he say trying to answer this question leads to greater tolerance?
  - b. Why does he say it can also lead to the avoidance of scapegoating behavior?
  - c. Why does he say it can lead to greater control of your destructive passions?
  - d. And why does he say it can lead to better judgments about others?
17. Could you love an adult who obviously lacks self-knowledge? (God, I hope not)
18. What does Montaigne’s philosophy have to do with YOUR pathetic college applications?