Humanities 3
IV. Skepticism and Self-Knowledge
Lecture 13

What Do I Know?
Outline

• Reading *The Essays*

• Montaigne’s Skepticism
  – *On the Resemblance of Children to their Fathers*
  – *On the Lame*

• Montaigne’s Morality
  – *On Cannibals*
  – *On Cruelty*

Friday Movie Pick: *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982), starring Gerard Depardieu
Order and Disorder

• In reading the *Essays* one inevitably tries to impose order on them, to discern what Montaigne’s position *really* is.

• But this may go against the very form of the work: “This is a register of varied and changing occurrences, of ideas which are unresolved and, when needs be, contradictory… If my soul could only find a footing I would not be assaying but resolving myself. But my soul is ever in its apprenticeship and being tested.” (“On Repenting,” 233)

• What explains the form of the work and Montaigne’s always tentative conclusions?
Background: Religious Conflict

- England: Catholic => Protestant (1534) => Catholic (1553) => Protestant (1558)
- Germany: Suppression of Anabaptists (1534-5), Charles V subjugates S. Germany, enforces Roman Catholicism (1547)
- Italy: Inquisition begins in Rome (1543); Protestants burned at the stake
- Switzerland: On Calvin’s order, Michael Servetus burned at the stake for denying the Trinity (1553)
- France: St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre (1572): 50,000 Huguenots killed in and around Paris
Origins of Conflict

- Many causes unrelated to religion (desire for political power or wealth)
- No overarching secular political institutions
- No recognized right of conscience or support for religious toleration
- The force of convictions:
  Luther stresses the need for certainty, concerning points of doctrine and one’s own salvation
Responses

• Erasmus: love and charity are values that preclude conflict (weakness of this response: Erasmus represents the Catholic church and presupposes a particular understanding of Christianity; only applies to Christians)

• Montaigne’s skepticism: opinions about religion (based on faith) lack the certainty that supports suppressing the opinions of others. The only viable response to conflict is toleration of difference.
Skeptical crisis of the 16th c.

• Who is an authority on what to believe and how to live?
• Who has a justified claim to knowledge about God, the world, the nature of human beings, what is good and evil, the source of virtue and vice?
• Skeptical response: no one can support the claim to have knowledge in this sense: not philosophers, not theologians, and of course not Montaigne himself.
Montaigne’s Skepticism

- Borrows from the ancients (Pyrrhonism): equally strong (or weak) arguments on both sides => doubt, “suspension of judgment”
- For Montaigne: doubt => inquiry (to essay: a “trying” or “testing” of oneself, one’s beliefs and values)
- In the absence of knowledge, one can only rely on one’s own experience: this shows the world to contain some regular patterns, but also to be highly variable; one’s beliefs are always subject to revision
Montaigne and Religion

• For Montaigne, the Catholic Church’s authority is not based on its claim to have knowledge that resists the force of skeptical arguments.
• But Montaigne himself does not have knowledge that demonstrates the falsity of Catholic doctrine.
• Consequently, Montaigne defers to the spiritual teachings of the Church (pp. 78, 93-4).
• How serious is he in this? Are other things he says stressing religious tolerance and the search for contentment in this life consistent with this deference?
The Dangerous Wish for Certainty

• Certainty would be fine, if we could have it, but we can’t
• It is a weakness of the human mind that we are led to extravagant conclusions based on little or no evidence
• We stubbornly cling to our opinions in the face of contrary evidence and are willing to do horrible things on the basis of them. In short: opinions that are taken to be more than opinions are dangerous
What Did People Know, c. 1580?

- Much less than we do today: Montaigne says many things that reflect his pessimism about the limits of human knowledge (e.g. medicine) and he attacks the willingness of people to believe unsupported reports of witchcraft and ghosts (see “On the Resemblance of Children to their Fathers” & “On the Lame”)

- But are we really that different? Do most people regulate their beliefs by reason and science?
“On the Resemblance of Children to their Fathers”

• “The Art of Medicine is built from examples and experience. So are my opinions. Have I not just cited an experience both relevant and convincing?” (208)

• “That is how they juggle and trifle with reason--to our detriment. They cannot give me a single proposition against which I could not construct an opposite and equally valid one.” (221)

• “That example shows how our experimental knowledge is likely to increase, as do those cures which doctors claim to have been put on to by the example of certain animals.” (227)
Toleration of Difference

“I do not loathe ideas which go against my own. I am so far from shying away when others’ judgments clash with mine, so far from making myself unsympathetic to the companionship of men because they hold to other notions or parties, that, on the contrary, just as the most general style followed by Nature is variety… I find it much rarer to see our humors and purposes coincide. In the whole world there has never been two identical opinions, any more than two identical hairs or seeds. Their most universal characteristic is diversity.” (231)
“[I]f you ask people to account for ‘facts,’ they usually spend more time finding reasons for them than finding out whether they are true. They ignore the *whats* and expatiate on the *whys*…. To know causes belongs only to Him who governs things, not to us who are patients of such things and who, without penetrating their origin or essences, have complete enjoyment of them in terms of their own nature. Wine is no more delightful to the man who knows its primary qualities. Quite the reverse…” (352; see also 362)
Skepticism in “On the Lame”

• “Do not these examples serve to prove what I said at the outset: that our reasons often run ahead of the facts and enjoy such an infinitely wide jurisdiction that they are used to make judgments about the very void and nonentity…. ” (362)
Virtuous Ignorance

“… in many similar kinds of case which surpass our knowledge I consider that we should suspend our judgment, neither believing nor rejecting. Many of this world’s abuses are engendered--or to put in more rashly, all of the world’s abuses are engendered--by our being schooled to fear to admit our ignorance…. There is a kind of ignorance, strong and magnanimous, which in honor and courage is in no wise inferior to knowledge.” (356)
Dangerous Opinions

• “When it is a question of words, of scholastic disputations, let us grant that they apparently have as good a case as that of their objectors: but in the practical consequences that they draw from it the advantages are all with the [objectors]. To kill people, there must be a sharp and brilliant clarity; this life of ours is too real, too fundamental, to be used to guarantee these supernatural and imagined events.” (358)

• “After all, it is to put a very high value on your surmises to roast a man alive for them.” (360)
Montaigne’s Morality

• Deference to the Church: supported by skepticism

• Tolerance of those different than ourselves (“Of Cannibals”)

• One’s sense of morality discovered within, through self-examination
“Of Cannibals”

• We are apt to judge barbarous and savage whatever is different from ourselves (82)

• There is something admirable about the natives of the New World, because they are in a “natural” state (82-3)

• They have a natural virtue (courage, honor, love of their wives), even if their culture is war-like and cruel (84-5)
Conclusion

• On the whole, the society of the New World peoples compares favorably with European society (86-7, 91-2)

• Virtue can exist even when the conventional signs of it are different (e.g. multiple wives)
Montaigne’s Virtue: “On Cruelty”

- “Can it possibly be true that to be good in practice we must needs be so from some inborn, all-pervading property hidden within us, without law, without reason and without examples?” (176)

- “Among the vices, both by nature and judgment I have a cruel hatred of cruelty, as the ultimate vice of them all…. I have a most tender compassion for the afflictions of others and would readily weep from fellow-feeling--if, that is, I knew how to weep at anything at all.” (177-8, 179)
Are We Innately Cruel?

- “I live in a season when unbelievable examples of this vice of cruelty flourish because of the license of our civil wars; you can find nothing in ancient history more extreme than what we witness every day. But that has by no means broken me in….“ (181)

- “I fear that Nature herself has attached to Man something which goads him on towards inhumanity.” (182)
Our Relation to Animals

- Our inhumanity should not be ascribed to what we have in common with animals: “Watching animals playing together and cuddling each other is nobody’s sport...” (182)

- “Theology herself ordains that we should show some favour towards them...” (182)
• Some exaggerate the closeness of animals to the gods, ranking them above humans (183-4)
• Montaigne rejects this, but he accepts arguments that confirm his own innate sympathy: “when... I come across arguments which assay to demonstrate the close resemblance we bear to animals, and how much they share in our greatest privileges and how convincingly they can be compared to us, I am led to abase our presumption considerably and am ready to lay aside that imaginary kingship over other creatures which is attributed to us” (184)
But that “imaginary kingship” is based on scripture

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

(Genesis 1:26)
Montaigne’s Universal Morality

“There is a kind of respect and a duty in man as a genus which link us not merely to the beasts, which have life and feelings, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men: and to other creatures who are able to receive them we owe gentleness and kindness. Between them and us there is some sort of intercourse and a degree of mutual obligation. I am not afraid to admit that my nature is so childishly affectionate that I cannot easily refuse an untimely gambol to my dog whenever it begs one.” (185)