

# Preparations and actions: thought on life and death in montaigne's essays



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Michel de Montaigne's Essays are hailed as profound modern, and their style original. This type of personal essay writing is still found in many places, including today's commonplace blogs. These pieces are political, they are social, they are philosophical, but they are all deeply personal; they are all self-portraits. In his address to the reader, Montaigne says that this is a work which has been "dedicated...to the private benefit of my friends and kinsmen so that, having lost me (as they must do soon) they can find here again some traits of my character and of my humors...I myself am the subject of my book" (Ixiii). Despite this assertion that he alone is the subject of these works, Montaigne also acts on expanding his personal experiences to defining the human condition. His essays often deal on questions of existence, and the pieces "To philosophize is to learn how to die" and "On physiognomy", in particular, ask about the relationship of death to life, and the relationship of life and death to how a man lives or how he views these things. The later work "On physiognomy" actually refutes or contradicts some claims made in the earlier "To philosophize is to learn how to die"; this also, in a larger scheme, threatens Montaigne's claim that "You have here, Reader, a book whose faith can be trusted" (Ixiii). The way Montaigne reaches his new, corrected position on death in relation to living, and how he transitions even within the selected passage, are central to the reader's understanding of the entire work, and provides said readers with a way to reconcile major contradictions found in these essays.

In many places, Montaigne assumes a sort of royal "we," and this selection of "On physiognomy" is no different; he says that "We confuse life with worries about death, and death with worries about life. [C] One torments us:

the other terrifies us." These descriptions are apparently respective, that the one which torments us is when we "confuse life with worries about death," and the one which terrifies us is when we "confuse death with worries about life." Why does one torment us, the other terrify? Is this simply a rhetorical differentiation? Furthermore, what does Montaigne mean by "confusing" life with worries about death or vice versa? Confusion implies a muddling, perhaps a tainting, that life is tainted with worries about death. Less clear is how people can be worried about life when they are dead. Here, Montaigne seems to be appealing to the potential feeling of not being fulfilled when dying; he has asked himself, "Would I have died any the less happy before reading the Tusculan Disputations?" and answered, "I judge that I would not" (1176). Both possibilities proposed in this passage have the potential to terrify us and to torment us constantly.

He continues on to say that "We are not preparing ourselves to die: that is too momentary a matter. [C] A quarter of an hour of pain, without after-effects, without annoyance, has no need for precepts of its own. [B] To speak truly, we prepare ourselves against our preparations for death!" The beginning of this train of thought is rather confusing, as it does not offer context. When is this lack of "preparing ourselves to die" happening? What has happened so that we now have "to speak truly" about "prepar[ing] ourselves against our preparations for death?" This is unclear until the next couple of statements finish this paragraph, and even then, can only be fully understood when the earlier essay "To philosophize is to learn how to die" is revisited. In this essay, Montaigne seeks to remedy his melancholy, realizing that the constant presence of death is what has caused his depressive state.

He puts forth that all men should learn to face and accept death, and only then, only after internalization of this inevitability, can they truly live. Philosophy apparent aids man in doing this, and so it is sensible when he says in “ On physiognomy” that “ Philosophy first commands us to have death ever before our eyes, to anticipate it and to consider it beforehand, and then she gives us rules and caveats in order to forestall our being hurt by our reflections and our foresight.” Montaigne wonders why philosophy would comfort such a painful topic, but only after actively bringing it up? He compares this to doctors who “ tip us into illnesses in order that they may have the means of employing their drugs and their Art.” Philosophy is not simply preparing people to die or teaching them how to die, as Cicero said, but is a double negative which prepares people against their preparations for dying; it is the medicine for the self-induced sickness. This mention of doctors brings to mind an earlier line about doctors in “ To philosophize is to learn how to die”: “ Silly fool, you! Where your life is concerned, who has decided the term? You are relying on doctors’ tales; look at the facts and experience instead. As things usually go, you have been living for some time now by favour extraordinary.” The tone there and the tone here are markedly different.

However, the concept of “ means” brings into question the idea of “ ends.” Every means goes towards an end. This is what Montaigne then goes into in his next section. First, he transitions by discussing how “ If we have not known how to live, it is not right to teach us how to die, making the form of the end incongruous with the whole. If we have known how to live steadfastly and calmly we shall know how to die the same way.” In his earlier

essay, Montaigne used death to define life. He believed that knowing death or thinking of death made life more meaningful by giving it a clear and present end. This kind of thinking defined life negatively, that is, by what it is not. Here, Montaigne realizes that his former thinking was in the reverse order. Instead, knowing how to live is a prerequisite which should be acquired before learning how to die. He says that if we know how to “live steadfastly and calmly” then we will already know how to die in the same way. He takes a quick aside to criticize those of his old thinking, calling those who say that “the entire life of philosophers is a preparation for death” as people who can “bluster as much as they like.” He now has the opinion that, “death is indeed the ending of life, but not therefore its End”; although it is the physical termination of life, death is the End of life which life as a means works towards. “It puts an end to it,” he repeats, “it is its ultimate point; but it is not its objective.” What is the objective of life, then? Instead of death being involved at all, Montaigne says that “Life must be its own objective, its own purpose. Its right concern is to rule itself, govern itself, put up with itself.”

Lastly, these sections are closed off with a flourish: “Numbered among its [life’s] other duties included under the general and principal heading, How to live, there is the subsection, How to die.” Life has many concerns, and dying is only a small one of these. However, it still seems important and fools many people, Montaigne himself originally included, into believing it is a bigger matter than it really is. This is because of fear; “If our fears did not lend it weight, dying would be one of our lighter duties.”

The views espoused in “ On physiognomy”, in this passage, are substantially different from the thinking in “ To philosophize is to die.” Are there any ways to reconcile these two seemingly disparate outlooks? An easy way to do so is to reconsider Montaigne’s purpose in “ To the Reader”; that this work is a self-portrait which incorporates an element of time. He himself says, later, that it is difficult for him to pin down the subject or subjects of his writing, and his prose often stumbles around, almost drunkenly.

However, besides this general explanation, this particular passage also lends itself to a reconciliatory purpose between these two essays. Although the views put forth in both the first and second paragraphs of this “ On physiognomy” selection directly contradict the general feelings expressed in “ To philosophize is to die,” the transition from the first paragraph to the second is of particular interest. In the first section the author is discussing the idea of preparing to die; in doing so he must talk about philosophy and address it directly, just as he did so in the first essay. However, in the second he is addressing the knowledge of living, of life, of life’s purpose. One way to understand the transition is the separation between preparations and the action itself. The first section itself even seems like a set-up for the second, building up the passage with analogies such as the one about the doctor who instills illnesses into his patients in order to heal them. Once specifics like these have been touched upon, Montaigne moves into more sweeping statements which concern life as a whole.

In the end, physiognomy in itself explains much about this passage.

Physiognomy as a scientific practice seeks for connections between

disparate subjects and disconnected spheres; in doing so, its unique position  
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brings together the discrete subjects which populate Montaigne's Complete Essays. In the same way that the transition between preparations—even preparations against preparations—to the actual act, the deed, the doing of life, requires temporality but is still constant, these passages connect “ On physiognomy” to preceding essays, but does so continually. “ To philosophize is to learn how to die” came before “ On physiognomy” chronologically, or at least has been placed, by the author, in such an order for it to be read first, but their relationship deep and complex. It is beyond, simply, a while ago, Montaigne believed this, and later he changed his views. The relationship between contradictions in Montaigne's work reflect the uncertainty of his self-portrait making, the constantly shifting perspectives in his mind, and the fleeting nature of his own ability to pen these perspectives. Above this, or perhaps alongside it, there is a also an apparent disparity between the set-up of life, or living, and the execution of it. How does one transition into the other? Montaigne has his ideas. He supports changing outlook and perhaps completely reversing our order of thinking. Either way, preparations for life or even its negative definition, death, are certainly not the same as living it.

Montaigne, Michel De. *The Complete Essays*. Trans. M. A. Screech. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.