

Ontological freedom in montaigne's selections from the essays



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For many readers, Montaigne's Selections from the Essays at first seems scattered both in rhetorical structure and topic. However, as one reads through the individual works, there is one concept that the diverse text consistently refers to: man's need to strive for freedom. Yet Montaigne did not seek to write an instructional philosophical work, like many other Renaissance writers; rather, he sought to utilize a unique writing style and reflective anecdotes to indirectly convey his message. Montaigne seeks to reveal to his readers, through his own eyes, how personal experience and reflection can lead to a higher degree of ontological freedom. One of the first and most crucial steps towards achieving a greater state of freedom is to realize that humans are significantly limited in scope and are not free when they are tangled in worldly affairs. In the scheme of life, a mere human being is practically nothing. In Montaigne's words, man is "the most vulnerable and frail of all creatures" (59), one that is "neither above nor below the rest" (60). This conclusion is based on the empirical instances of man's limitations and instability, and an experienced man should recognize his own meager existence. Montaigne describes this conclusion with a simple metaphor; "To really learned men has happened what happens to ears of wheat; they rise high and lofty, heads erect and proud, as long as they are empty; but when they are full and swollen with grain in their ripeness, they begin to grow humble and lower their horns" (62), where "ripeness" refers to the experienced condition of the learned man. Montaigne also uses this metaphor to subtly imply that man, like an ear of wheat, is subject only to the laws of nature, a point covered extensively in other areas of the text.

Once a man has realized his relative insignificance in the world, he must limit his observations and conclusions to his own self, for Montaigne stresses that <https://assignbuster.com/ontological-freedom-in-montaignes-selections-from-the-essays/>

“ we tell ourselves all we most need” (115). Additionally, “ to hope to straddle more than the reach of our legs, is impossible and unnatural. Nor can man raise himself above himself and humanity; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only with his own grasp” (71). The specific diction of “ impossible” and “ unnatural” support Montaigne’s previous statements about the limitations of man, demonstrating that not only is it arrogant to reach outside one’s individual scope, but it is also an unattainable and abnormal hope to do so. Thus, one of the first steps towards achieving true freedom is realizing one’s triviality and limitations in a more global environment. Once a man has circumscribed himself, he is in state much more conducive to individual growth and experience because he is capable of becoming free within himself. Montaigne himself has realized his confines, and he speaks in a reflective, first-person voice to remind readers that all men, including himself, are subject to these same boundaries. Furthermore, to reach a higher state of true freedom, man must acknowledge his inability to understand the transcendental reality of nature without divine aid. Montaigne describes this reality as “ so divine...and so far surpassing human intelligence...truth with which it has pleased the goodness of God to enlighten us...by extraordinary and privileged favor, so that we may conceive it and lodge it in us” (54). Reason and “ purely human means” are not “ at all capable of this” (54), so it is necessary that God grants man the gift of an intrinsic understanding of Him and of nature, His creation. If an individual wants to achieve a pleasurable state of being through ontological freedom, he must first recognize from where his insight into what is pleasurable comes. If God is inherently good, then his creations are as well; as Montaigne says; “ Himself all good, he has made all things good” (133). It <https://assignbuster.com/ontological-freedom-in-montaignes-selections-from-the-essays/>

follows, then, that “ Nature always gives us happier laws than those we give ourselves” (107). Human beings can recognize the imperfections in the manmade society around them solely because they have been granted the awareness of what is perfect: God and nature. The only things that humans can say truly exist are those supernatural concepts that are perfect; as Montaigne describes: “ what really is? That which is eternal: that is to say, what never had a birth, nor will ever have an end, to which time never brings any change” (70). Once a man has realized that he has been given the intrinsic idea of what is perfect and eternal, he can utilize that gift in his journey to achieve true freedom. In fact, Montaigne praises the man who does so: “ it is...a very fine and very laudable enterprise to accommodate also to the service of our faith the natural and human tools that God has given us,” so “ we apply even our limbs and movements and external things to honor him” (54-55). Montaigne’s references to physical entities imply that there is a concrete, corporeal aspect to the faith that depends on the abstract concept of God-infused awareness of the eternal. Using the adjective “ happier” to describe the laws of nature makes the eternal seem appealing and enjoyable. Therefore, part of obtaining true freedom involves aligning one’s actions and bodily proceedings with one’s faith in God and nature, his creation. This alignment will in turn bring a man greater happiness. An awareness and response to the apparent inconsistency in man’s behavior is also necessary for true freedom to be established. Oscillation in human actions is blatantly obvious when observing real life, and in fact Montaigne dedicates an entire chapter of Essays to developing this idea. For instance, he states, “ Those who make a practice of comparing human actions are never so perplexed as when they try to see them as a

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whole...for they commonly contradict each other so strangely" (41).

Terminology such as "perplexed" and "strangely," often used to describe this obvious fluctuation, implies that such behavior is highly unnatural. Man acts predominantly according to his reason. Therefore, aside from forming a correlation between one's actions and faith, it is necessary to line up one's reason with the laws of nature. Nature itself is consistent, and Montaigne describes his own experience of its consistency: "In this universe of things I ignorantly and negligently let myself be guided by the general law of the world"; yet "It is folly to hope [for nature to modify itself], and greater folly to be troubled about it, since it is necessarily uniform, public, and common" (114). Thus, it remains that man's reason is one of the main causes for inconsistent actions, and must be adapted to the consistency of nature. This includes accepting pleasures and pains, good and evil. Montaigne informs his reader that "Our existence is impossible without this mixture, and one element is no less necessary for it than the other" (120). It is natural for man to enjoy pleasures that nature has given them, for "Pleasure is one of the principal kinds of profit" (119), and "nature has placed it in our hands adorned with such favorable conditions that we have only ourselves to blame if it weighs on us and if it escapes us unprofitably" (130). Pleasures such as sex, eating, and drinking are not only enjoyable, they are "actions [nature] has enjoined on us for our need" (126). If pleasures are natural, nature is God's creation, and God is innately good, it follows that pleasures are only perceived as bad because of constructs that are unnatural and inconsistent. Montaigne argues through metaphor that humans should be free and open to what nature brings them: "We are all wind. And even the wind, more wisely than we, loves to make a noise and move about, and is content with <https://assignbuster.com/ontological-freedom-in-montaignes-selections-from-the-essays/>

its own functions, without wishing for stability and solidity, qualities that do not belong to it" (124). So ontological freedom arises from accepting the pleasures and pains of nature, profiting from them by aligning one's reasoning with nature, and releasing one's unnatural desire for stability. Wishing for stability is pointless because stability is not something that can be accomplished through human means. Additional actions are necessary to truly escape the corruption of manmade societies – what Montaigne calls "art" – and reach true freedom. One of these processes involves rejecting the fabricated "knowledge," "truth," and other absolutes that have been created in the past, as well as the structure in society that has arisen according to them. If the world is in a constant state of flux, it is impossible to state that at any given point, a particular object or truth exists. As Montaigne states: "we no longer know what things are in truth; for nothing comes to us except falsified and altered by our senses" (67). The only truths, knowledge, and absolutes are what God has implanted into man's mind, and his senses exist only to work with those fixed ideas. For one to experience true freedom, he must release his attachment to all arbitrarily crafted human concepts: "he will rise by abandoning and renouncing his own means" (71). Structured religions and political laws are among the most critiqued forms of art in the Essays, for they represent manufactured paradigms that cannot possibly be beneficial for one trying to achieve ontological freedom. Religious beliefs are often based on customs born in history, rather than faith. This represents one of the worst forms of art, because it prevents humans from discovering the true faith that has been granted to them, and is subjective with regards to cultural diversity: "Another region, other witnesses, similar promises and threats, might imprint upon us in the same

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way a contrary belief” (58). Montaigne also criticizes religions for their attitude towards vice: “ Our religion is made to extirpate vices; it covers them, fosters them, incites them” (57). If a religion cannot accept and reason with both good and vice, then according to previously discussed definitions it is unnatural and abnormal. Political laws also infringe upon the laws of nature, for “ There is little relation between our actions, which are in perpetual mutation, and fixed and immutable laws” (107). A given set of laws, crafted by reviewing a few hundred cases, can never fairly apply to every diverse circumstance. Montaigne is especially critical of his own French political system, stating that “ Their commands are so confused and inconsistent that they are some excuse for both disobedience and faulty interpretation, administration, and observance” (113). Again, connotations of unnatural concepts are present throughout Montaigne’s discussions, subtly supporting his ideas by creating a tense and highly critical atmosphere. Rather than conforming to these strict codes, Montaigne advises: “ Relaxation and affability, it seems to me, are marvelously honorable and most becoming to a strong and generous soul” (127). By providing the reader with brief literary relief to the built-up atmosphere, Montaigne offers an alternative to the corruption previously discussed. In reference to both religious and political institutions, Montaigne reminds his readers: “ To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books” (126). Clearly, then, the two activities do not coincide in society. A second action that is important to the development of one’s state of freedom is to constantly exercise that freedom in his judgment. Judgment is the mechanism that determines how an individual will respond to a particular experience.

Although ultimately judgment is left up to God, humans should still take
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advantage of their own resources and exploit them for the purpose of cultivating their relationship with nature. Judgment often consists of evaluating a behavior in terms of the circumstances or appetites that helped set it in motion, though Montaigne reminds his reader that one should do so “ without getting into any further research and without drawing from them any other conclusions” (44). Additionally, Montaigne encourages humans to disregard misleading senses when practicing their judgment, for “ whoever judges by appearances judges by something other than the object” (68). Essentially, judgment should exist to critique deceiving appearances. Together, rejection of absolutes and structured institutions and the practice of individual judgment are ongoing processes that break one apart from the corruption of art. This break is necessary for achieving ontological freedom because it brings one further from art and closer to nature. Judgment gives man the flexibility to experience nature with his own self because it breaks through the corruption and appearances which surround existence. Montaigne indirectly encourages his readers to foster their own ontological freedom. He does not provide his reader with a list of instructions for how to live their lives, but rather seeks to exemplify the philosophies that he presents. Ontological freedom is cultivated by aligning oneself with nature in all ways. Complete alignment of man’s reason and judgment with nature, along with a recognition of human limitations and inconsistencies, will bring man as close as possible to this true freedom.