

# Montaigne college essay



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Montaigne in his Apology for Raymond Sebond begins his exploration into the human capacity for knowledge with this belief that only through God can one achieve true knowledge. God is the only infinite, all seeing, being with divine wisdom. He is not subject to the laws and rules of the human domain, and he exists in a realm outside of human comprehension. God is an unchanging, permanent being, and only from this state can the concept of truth propagate.

Montaigne believes that the one tie that binds all truth is this idea of permanence. Montaigne even states, Truth must be the same everywhere (xxvi). He insists that the only product of humanity that has withstood the test of time and has not changed since its inception was the Catholic Church. The dogma of the Catholic is categorized as, What has been held always, everywhere by all. The strength in the Catholic faith comes from its static nature, which provides a source of truth for humanity. Catholic truth is in strict conformity with the existence of God, and knowledge can only come from an almighty source.

Montaigne goes on to say that, No creature ever is: a creature is always shifting, changing, becoming. Man embodies the idea of impermanence. He is fragmented, does not have divine reasoning abilities, and has a finite amount of time allotted to him. Human reasoning, which creates the concept of knowledge, is in direct confrontation with the qualities of truth. Plato, Aristotle, and Sextus Empiricus all conceded the fact that when it comes to the human being, there is no exact standard of truth. All humans view the concept of truth differently, and thus, it can only be associated to an opinion. Like wise a mortal man cannot know everything there is to know about a

certain being, or structure or thing. He cannot possibly know the inner workings of such thing only through the use of his senses, he can only for his own opinions.

Opinions in a finite domain are susceptible to different interpretations and uncertainty, and what is true for one person does not necessarily have to hold true for another. Thus, the concept of truth derived by man is ridden with inconsistencies, all of which are in direct violation with the very definition of truth. Since the building block of human knowledge is this flawed truth, then human knowledge itself is flawed. Simply put, the concept of human knowledge is false and consequently knowledge cannot exist. Knowledge is just an opinion taken for the truth, and can be seen as only one side in an ever evolving story. Just think of what we considered the book of human knowledge today. No matter in what aspect of life one considers whether it be math, physics, biology, history, or computer science there is never really any truth. The book of knowledge is rewritten daily as new opinions enter the foray, and will never be as static or held as high as divine truth.

Although we have established the fact the knowledge cannot exist from the human standpoint, it is this concept that all of mankind believes in most deeply. From a mans perspective, it is our knowledge, which sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. The fact that we can communicate to each other the knowledge of our thoughts and ideas is the dividing line between man and beast. However, Montaigne is in strict disagreement with this rational and believes the only the inese sense of vanity displayed by all humanity separates men from the rest of the animals.

Montaigne flatly states that, That of all vain things, Man is the most vain; that a man who dares to presume that he knows anything, does not even know what knowledge is (Montaigne 13). He characterizes man as being the most vain of all his creatures because he clings to this notion of knowledge and that though this attainment of knowledge he perceives himself as enlightened. Montaigne then shows the absurdity of this claim by taking a hypothetical situation in which Man is in isolation with not outside help and stripped of the grace and knowledge of God those things that are his power and the very ground of his being (Montaigne 13). Without the true knowledge the God bestows upon man, he cannot found or erect any such rational as to why he is different than his fellow animals. Without this basis of heaven, which man proclaims only he can understand, he is the most pitiful of God's creatures. Man has no authority and no basis for this knowledge that he generally assumes he has over any other creature. Man's concept of knowledge and of his enlightened state in the world falls apart in such a scenario. Without his claim to being unique, man can no longer assert his vanity, and the book of man-made knowledge becomes a volume of blank pages.

Aside from his scenario Montaigne again solidifies his position on humanity vanity by further examining the differences between man and the rest of the animal. It is in this argument that Montaigne makes two major points, the first of which focuses on man's inability to communicate with animals. He questions, Why should it be a defect in the beasts not in us which stops all communication between us (Montaigne 17)? Man has always attributed the lack of communication between himself and the animals as a flaw in animals

because man has always assumed he is at a higher level than the animals. Montaigne goes on to inquire, When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her (Montaigne 17)? By introducing this question, Montaigne has turned the idea of the all-powerful man on its head. The fact is that we don't know which case is true, but if one begins to question man's relationship with the animals, it may be hard to discern which plays the role of master. After all, it is a man who serves his pet: he washes it, he feeds it, he plays with it, he even takes breaks in his schedule to assist his pet with going to the bathroom. How then can we consider the man as the master and not the pet? It almost seems like a relationship a King like Louis XIV had with his royal court.

Montaigne then brings about his second point, in that he sees no difference between the qualities of man and those of animals. He states, After all, what aspects of our human competence cannot be found in the activities of animals (Montaigne 19). It is Montaigne's contention that the qualities that human possesses are not unique but instead can be found in various organisms spanning the entire animal kingdom. Montaigne's first example of this is when he begs the question, Is there any form of body politic more ordered, more varied in its allocations of tasks and duties or maintained with greater consistency than that of the bees (Montaigne 19)? However Montaigne does not stop there, he continues to sight examples of how the swallows have a concept of structural engineering and of the properties of clay, water, and the process of evaporation with the building of their nests. He also points out how spiders make their web denser and one place and slacker in another and use a wide assortment of knots. Montaigne even

concedes, how superior they are to us in most of their works and how weak our artistic skills are when it comes to imitation them (Montaigne 20).

On the subject of reasoning Montaigne offers the story of Chysippus and the fox. He tells how Chysippus watched the actions of a dog when it came upon three crossroads when trying to catch up to his master. The dog tries both the first and second paths, by inspecting the furiously and when he had not found any sign, charged down the third path with out even a hint of hesitation. The dog reasoned that his master had gone as far as these roads and had picked on of the three. The first two showed no trace of what he was looking for, so his master had inevitably had gone down the third path. Chysippus noted that the dog did not even attempt to sniff the third path but instead relied on its power of reasoning (Montaigne 28). This story is just one of many that displays the innate and associative reasoning skills of animals, which though rarely observed, destroys the exceptional nature of the human mind.

In addition to his Apology for Raymond Sebond, Montaigne also analyzes the basis of man-made knowledge in his, Essays. In this book Montaigne shows how again truth is based on opinion alone, and this opinion is swayed by a familiarity ones own culture.

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