

Comparative analysis of de montaigne and donne on mind and body



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Both Michel De Montaigne and John Donne argue that the cultivation of the mind is linked to the well being of the body. Both argue that a mind void of proper enrichment and education will lead to an unhealthy body. However, Montaigne argues that the appropriate means of " education and enrichment" are studying and following the works of other great thinkers of history. Additionally, Montaigne declares imagination to be the impetus for the downfall of the body. Conversely, Donne argues that a mind groomed in imagination is the proper mode of finding bodily health. In their writings, both Montaigne and Donne are seeking a unity between the mind and the body. By comparing Montaigne's Essays and the poetry of Donne, it is evident that the means for unifying the mind and body can vary for different people.

Montaigne's general philosophy on the relationship between the mind and the physical health of the body is one that associates a healthy existence with a healthy mind. His idea of a healthy mind is that which is learned through the studies of the " great thinkers" of the past, and steered clear of being taken control of by the omnipotent imagination.

In Montaigne's essay " On the Education of Children," Montaigne stresses the importance of education, but only promotes a select few genres of education as appropriate. Montaigne links these few genres of education directly to the well being of the body. First, Montaigne declares that " The mind that harbours philosophy should, by its soundness, make the body sound also"(pg. 67). Here he argues that anyone who is soundly based in the philosophy of the " great thinkers" of history will have the wellness of body that they desire. He states that " The most manifest sign of wisdom is a constant happiness; it's state... always serene"(pg. 67).

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Montaigne's obvious foremost concern is that people be educated in the thinking of great thinkers. Secondly, Montaigne addresses the types of free thinking that are appropriate for a healthy mind and body. He argues that the free thought of a person should be based in the thought of the "great thinkers." Montaigne says if a person "... embraces the opinions of Xenophon and Plato by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs, but his"(pg. 56). He encourages people to "... imbibe their ["great thinkers"] ways of thought..."(pg. 56). Montaigne's argument is that free thinking not based in the thought of the "great thinkers" is simply uneducated freethinking, and thus is unhealthy for the mind and body.

Finally, Montaigne's essay "On the Education of Children" reveals Montaigne's argument against the learning of "profitless" knowledge, or in other words. He says that "... most of the branches of knowledge in current usage are valueless to us..."(pg. 65) and that "... we must limit the extent of our studies in those branches..."(pg. 65). Montaigne's apparent argument is that only a certain type of education, one based strongly in the thought of the "great thinkers," is the type of education that will provide for not only a healthy body, but also a healthy mind.

In Montaigne's essay "On the Power of the Imagination," Montaigne next argues against the perils of the imagination. He declares that the imagination, unlike freethinking based in acceptable knowledge, leads directly to an unhealthy body. Montaigne first attacks the sheer power of the imagination. Montaigne states regarding the imagination that "Everyone feels its impact, but some are knocked over by it"(pg. 36). He contends that

the imagination is something that slowly begins to take over the mind of a person and drive them further from the appropriate lines of learning.

He argues that the imagination leads to the harm of the body. His first claim on this is that bad thoughts, such as having bodily failures (Montaigne uses the example of impotence), are spawned from the imagination. He declares that the "... comical impediments which so embarrass our society that they talk of nothing else are most likely caused by apprehensions and fears"(pg. 39). These apprehensions and fears are brought on, Montaigne argues, by an imagination that controls the mind and body.

Montaigne even goes as far as to call imagination the culprit for many people falling ill, as he says that the reason some people become sick is that their imaginations concoct how bad they could feel, and their bodies simple follow suit. He states that "... the mind must generally be prepared in advance."(pg. 41) in order for the body to feel a certain way. Montaigne" s whole argument in the essay reflects his distaste for the cultivation of a mind through imagination and his idea that imagination leads to an unhealthy mind and consequently, an unhealthy body.

John Donne" s general viewpoint on the relationship between the mind and the health of the body differs greatly from Montaigne" s. Donne" s theory is simply that the path to a healthy body is an imagination. He claims that the imagination is the machine responsible for creating the ideas that make the body feel good. As for education, he argues that the highest forms of education are not from history books or philosophers, but from the deeper and more imaginative forms.

In Donne's poems "The Canonization" and "The Will," Donne presents the argument that there is a knowledge to be sought that is much deeper and truer than any book knowledge. In "The Canonization," Donne boldly states that earthly knowledge and materialistic cultivation of the mind is far below the education of the mind through love. He says:

"For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love...

With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,

Take you a course, get you a place,

Observe his honour, or his grace...

Contemplate, what you will approve,

So you will let me love"(pg. 28).

Here Donne states that to him the ultimate knowledge is that of love and that he would choose this before all other earthly types of knowledge. Donne argues that love can teach all necessary knowledge in life. He continues this argument in his poem "The Will," in which he discusses all of the knowledge that love has imparted on him. He states:

"Thou, Love, hast taught mee...

That I should give to none, but such, as had too much before...

Onely to give such as have an incapacitie...

Onely to give to those that count my gifts indignity..."(pg. 60).

Donne reveals hear some of the lessons that love has taught to him. Donne" s obvious argument is that the knowledge that is held in a book cannot be paralleled to that which can be learned through the higher ways of learning such as love.

In Donne" s poems " The Flea" and " The Dreame" Donne lets his imagination go and argues that the imagination can be used in order to achieve a healthy and happy mind and body. First, in " The Flea," Donne sets up a very imaginative metaphor as he uses a flea to act as the means of uniting him with his woman. He tells his woman that "... in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;"(pg. 48) and continues to say that " This flea is you and I..."(pg. 48). This very use of the flea stretches the imagination to a great extent, as it places a seemingly bothersome insect into the place of tying together two people through its blood.

It is evident then that Donne" s support for the imaginative went as far as placing it into the love poems he wrote to try to seduce his woman. Donne" s belief in imagination was wholehearted. As for relating this use of the imagination to the well being of the body, Donne addresses this as well. Donne" s imaginatively crafted metaphor is also a well-planned out scheme to seduce his woman. In other words, Donne uses the imagination to help make his body feel better by seducing and sleeping with his woman. His argument to his woman is that since the flea has drawn blood from each of them and the two have already exchanged the most special of bonds, that sleeping together would not be anything wrong. He tells her:

" Thou know" st that this cannot be said

A sinne, nor losse of maidenhead,

And pamper" d swells with one blood made of two,

And this, alas, is more than we would doe"(pg. 48).

Here we see Donne putting into practice his argument that the imagination can be used in order to get the body what it desires. In his poem " The Dreame," Donne parallels his dreaming, or imagination, to the very woman of whom he is dreaming in the poem. During the poem, Donnedreamsof a great sexual fantasie with his woman, and soon enough, she walks into the bedroom to find him dreaming. However, Donne" s dream is not interrupted, but rather it continues with her entrance. He says:

" Therefore thou wakd" st me wisely; yet

My Dreame thou brok" st not, but continued" st it,

Thou art so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice,

To make dreames truths; and fables histories;

Enter these armes, for since thou thoughtst it best,

Not to dreame all my dreame, let" s act the rest"(pg. 45).

Donne" s apparent argument is then one that declares imagination to be the precursor to reality. He argues that if a person does not first imagine how a certain circumstance will result, then they will certainly not have the pleasure of knowing what circumstances may follow. In other words, Donne

believes the imagination to be a passageway from mental health and pleasure to bodily health and pleasure.

Montaigne and Donne are two people seeking the same result: a unity between the mind and body. Both incorporate their compelling philosophies into their writing and present convincing arguments in order to explicate their theories. Each of the two agree that the body and the mind are related, and additionally that the imagination is a powerful controller of both the mind and body.

However, the two disagree in their sentiments towards what types of learning and creativity create a healthy mind and body. Each of the two present their respective theories in very coercive arguments, and yet very disparate arguments. However, the two may have more ecumenically similar qualities when brought into modern society. Perhaps the greater message imparted upon the reader by the two authors is that the unity between the mind and the body is found through different means for different people. Each person must seek out their own form of mental cultivation that will help them to achieve both a healthy mind and a healthy body.