

## **On Experience and Psychotherapy: A Dialogue with Michel de Montaigne**

**by Matthew Henson**

### **Abstract**

This paper concerns itself with the relevance of Montaigne's writings for the practice of contemporary psychotherapy. Montaigne demands a personal investment from his readers beyond the scope of analytic philosophy as it is often presented. For this reason, a brief exploration of the historical significance of Montaigne is followed by an account of my personal dialogue with his text *On Experience*. In adopting this philosophical and literary style, I have attempted to tease out some of the issues I consider relevant to my own psychotherapeutic practice and which, it is hoped, might also be relevant to others aligning their practice along existential-phenomenological principles.

### **Montaigne's Historical Significance**

Michel de Montaigne is not a name often heard within the context of psychotherapeutic thought and practice. Yet even the most cursory exploration of his *Essays* reveals that he has much to offer psychotherapy, certainly psychotherapy as it might be practised within an existential enterprise. The basis for this proposition is found in numerous commentaries highlighting the relevance of Montaigne for modern and post-modern thinking. As Marchi (1994) notes, Montaigne demonstrates a remarkable relevancy to current literary and intellectual activity:

*Writers ranging from Pascal to Emerson and Sainte-Beuve to Pater have shared a common response to the work of Montaigne: they all claim that he is speaking directly to them, that he is responding to their own concerns, serving as a guide and model in the unfolding of their own writing projects. (p.8)*

Montaigne is credited with the popularisation of scepticism (MacLean, 2005) and has been called the founder of modern scepticism or rather 'a profoundly original philosopher who in some way incorporates a skeptical tone or "moment" within his own original thought' (Hartle, 2005, p.183). His influence is also seen in the writings of such important existential thinkers as Nietzsche (Marchi, 1994).

The historical importance of Montaigne alone should suffice to validate an exploration of his relevance for psychotherapy, but there is also much in the focus of his endeavours and literary style that will resonate with many existential thinkers and practitioners. Montaigne was loath to identify himself with any school of thought (Hoffmann, 2005), rather he 'throve on doubt, on uncertainty, and on endless search for truth' (Screech, 2000, p.3). Langer (2005) notes that Montaigne understands philosopher 'as someone indifferent to pain and pleasure, inhumanly (and sometimes comically) persistent in his convictions... [Montaigne] intentionally fashions his own writings to be unlike

philosophy' and proudly says 'that he is no philosopher' (p.1). Langer also points out that Montaigne is noted for his attention to the influence of the human body, and what we like to call the "human" element. Moreover, 'Montaigne "himself" is always present... what is right for himself, he readily concedes, is not necessarily right for anyone else' (p.2). So Montaigne can be seen to readily demonstrate some of the traits that characterise existentialism, at least in so far as it is possible to characterise 'existentialism' at all.

Montaigne's main concern in the *Essays* is how to live and die as Man. He believed that by studying himself he could find out what the nature of mankind really was and how he could wisely live and wisely die (Screech, 2000). At a very crude and simplistic level, this might also form the basis of an existential approach to psychotherapy. And if it is true, as Marchi (1994) notes, that Montaigne is problematic for modern and post-modern thinking in the 'impossibility of empirical verification of such nebulous phenomena as influence, impact, and reception' (p.2) then this is surely why, as psychotherapists, we must take an interest in him.

### On Reading Montaigne

It is well documented that Montaigne did not write 'essays', he wrote a volume called *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*.

*Essays, in a modern sense, can be read in any order. They do not necessarily lead back to earlier ones or forward to later ones. Montaigne's chapters do... The chapters of Montaigne's books are not assembled by date of composition. The order corresponds to a higher preoccupation... For Montaigne, at the end of his quest, had come to terms with melancholy and ecstasy – and so with religion, life and death, and with his being as a man.* (Screech, 2000, p.13)

Langer (2005) reminds us that 'the term *essai* in sixteenth-century French does not refer to a delineated segment of text, but instead retains the senses of "attempt", "trying out", "test", "practice"' (p.3). Montaigne tries out all sorts of judgements, of observations, of reflections, and of arguments, but these are not meant to be the final word on the matter. 'Montaigne does not claim universal validity for his statements, he insists on the fact that they are the product of his own judgement, and that another might judge differently' (*Ibid*, p.3). Moreover, Montaigne, like many continental philosophers, is deliberately evasive. Rhetorical models are inadequate and misleading, and Montaigne demands a personal investment from his readers in order to be understood. The reader must find the "sign" and try to decipher the message (Meijer, 1983) and 'the anomalies of composition, the incoherences, and the gaps are significant and must be addressed without attenuation or reduction' (Thournton, 1983, p.55).

Defaux (1983) states, with conviction, that Montaigne's writing has a triple purpose: 'to understand others and the world around him, to understand himself, and – last, but not least – to be understood' (p.73). The challenge

then, is to read Montaigne how as psychotherapists we might listen to a client, or indeed ourselves: With eyes and ears not only for that which is ostensible, but also for that which is evasive; with an understanding that the words are a process of working through; and with a personal investment which runs counter to the idea of objectivity as it usually understood. With specific reference to reading Heidegger, Wolf (2002) reminds us that as existential therapists we should not try to mediate a therapeutic model, but instead allow ourselves to experience the sort of relationship with the text which might facilitate our becoming the sort of people who could be therapists. So too, we might read Montaigne not for therapeutic technique, but for clues as to how we might resolve for ourselves the question of what it means to practice psychotherapy from an existential-phenomenologically informed position. This is what is attempted in this paper. The following dialogue is nothing other than my personal engagement with Montaigne. It is a working through, with Montaigne, some of the dilemmas and issues I face as a psychotherapist, within the much wider context of my existence.

### **Why On Experience?**

The Essais are so rich that considerations regarding the length and breadth of this paper require, if an adequate exploration is to be achieved, the selection of a single essay. Just as *On Experience* does not just happen to come at the end of the Essais, it has not been chosen at random for the purposes of this dialogue. *On Experience* is one of Montaigne's most important chapters. The last pages of the chapter form the climax of a long quest (Screech, 2000) whereupon, 'through ingenious textual development, Montaigne ends up restoring the "truth of experience" to its rightful place' (MacLean, 2005, pp.156-7). It is not suggested here that the whole of Montaigne's works can be somehow understood and assimilated through an exploration of his concluding remarks alone. However, there is a value in taking the climax of Montaigne's writing as the starting point for an exploration of the lessons we might glean from him in relation to psychotherapy. As Screech (2000) notes, Montaigne did believe in progress, at least insofar as although we may be lesser men than the ancients we are standing on their shoulders.

### **On Experience and Psychotherapy**

An early assertion Montaigne (1958) makes concerns the unique qualities of natural things. 'There is no quality so universal in the appearance of things as their diversity and variety' (p.344). He elaborates, stating that 'resemblance does not make things as much alike as difference makes them dissimilar. Nature has pledged herself to make no second thing that is not unlike the first' (p.344). The significance of these words becomes apparent when we consider the names and labels we give to things. Montaigne talks about the dissimilarity in the physical qualities of eggs. His point is equally valid in the realm of lived experience. To give something a name – 'love', 'anger', 'depression', 'schizophrenia' – is to implicitly focus upon the similarities between expressions of lived experience. Whilst there is obviously some value in this, what gets overlooked when we label, are the differences between similar things. However much I feel I understand my clients'

experience – with whatever label it carries – I must remain open to the possibility that dissimilarities will emerge between experiences carrying the same label. To do otherwise would be to fail Montaigne and to fail my clients.

Montaigne poses a very interesting question for the practice of psychotherapy when he notes: ‘Our disputes are about words. I ask what is Nature, Pleasure, a Circle, and Substitution. The question is couched in words and is answered in the same coin... One substitutes one word for another that is often less well understood’ (pp.349 – 50). Psychotherapy is sometimes referred to as a *talking-treatment*. We are dependent upon clients’ words to understand the issues they bring. And yet this somehow seems unsatisfactory. The questions asked in therapy sessions, when vocalised, do of course make use of words and are often answered with words. But these words are not the same as the experience that is enquired about and will therefore fail, by themselves, to fully convey the essence of experience. As well as posing this as a problem, Montaigne points towards the resolution: ‘I know what Man is better than I know the meaning of Animal or Mortal or Rational’ (pp.349 - 50). I know what Man is better than I know the meaning of any word, because I have experience of being a man. To know something is to experience it. While words alone will produce only a limited understanding, if I let the words of my clients resonate with my own experience, of being human, of being alive, then I can get much closer to knowing the experiences of another. This is not to say that I can ever fully know the experiences of my clients, even if I have had similar experiences myself, only that *through* my own experience – however similar or dissimilar this might be to my clients – I can get closer than if I simply grapple with words alone.

Montaigne provides guidance on how to facilitate this process: ‘A speech belongs half to the speaker, half to him who hears it. The hearer should let the form of its delivery prepare him for its reception’ (p.372). So there is something here about the quality of listening – a practice which, of course, every psychotherapist knows something about. Whilst it is inevitable and indeed desirable that some questions will be couched in words, a useful alternative is to couch questions in silence. A single statement from a client can raise many questions. Rather than picking one question to vocalise, or vocalising many in one go – which does little but confuse – in remaining silent many questions can be kept open. Silence prepares the listener to receive answers to any number of questions, whether these are delivered in the form of words or some other non-verbal means.

On the subject of interpretation, Montaigne’s views are clear: ‘There is more trouble in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting the things themselves’ (p.349). This statement from Montaigne follows logically from his arguments outlined above. If we accept that words provide only inadequate interpretations of experience, then removing the interpretation one step further from experience will prove still more problematic. Clients have the right to interpret their experiences – the things themselves – should they wish to. Therapists attempting to interpret clients’ experiences will prove much more problematic. Montaigne states that he judges himself ‘only by actual sensations, not by reasoning’ (p.381) and this should be our task in therapy.

## On experience and psychotherapy: A dialogue with Michel de Montaigne

Montaigne's assertion that: 'In the experience that I have of myself I find enough to make myself wise, if I were a good scholar' (p.354) is, perhaps, true of everybody. Clients are better advised to study their own lived experiences than look towards a therapist for expert opinion. Such phenomenology furnishes both client and therapist with a greater wisdom than any textbook or theory. Montaigne is forceful in his criticism of practitioners who do otherwise, of those who offer diagnosis and cure:

*the doubts and ignorance of those who take it upon themselves to interpret nature's workings and her internal progressions, and to explain away the many false prognostics of their art, should make us realize that its ways are utterly unknown* (p.381).

In this statement Montaigne is criticising physicians, but his words are equally applicable to psychotherapists.

Montaigne has yet more to say concerning the nature of illness and cure:

*The constitution of maladies follows the same pattern as that of living beings; their destiny and their length of days are limited for them from their birth. Anyone who attempts wilfully and forcibly to cut them short in the middle of their course, only lengthens and multiplies them, and incenses them instead of appeasing them* (pp.372 - 3).

This raises questions about the validity of psychotherapy if clients can expect no expedition of appeasement from therapeutic interventions. Montaigne points towards a different basis under which psychotherapy might be practised: 'You do not die because you are sick, you die because you are alive' (pp.376 - 7). Those inclined towards existential thought might immediately appreciate the importance of this statement. Life and death are intertwined. One is not possible without the other. Whatever horrors afflict me and whatever tragedies befall me in life, these events can only occur because I am alive. Indeed, they are proof that I am alive. This is the sense Montaigne puts forward throughout the text. He talks a lot about his physical ailments, providing graphic detail about the location and intensity of the physical pains he endures. And yet Montaigne talks about these matters in a tone that indicates almost a fondness for them. The point he makes clear is that he would rather have a life full of pain than no life at all. For example, Montaigne notes how much more beautiful health appears after sickness, 'when the two are so close together that I can view each in the other's presence in full armour; when they stand as deadly rivals defying and battling with one another!' (p.378). Sickness, or any other form of adversity, should act as a salutary reminder to fully appreciate the things of value. But Montaigne is not stating that we should simply appreciate and value the good things in life:

*Our life, like the harmony of the world, is composed of contrarieties, also of varying tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked one sort only, what effect would he make? He must be able to employ them together and*

*blend them. And we too must accept the good and evil that are consubstantial with our life. Our existence is impossible without this mixture, and one side is no less necessary to us than the other.* (p.374)

The message from Montaigne is that we should value everything that life brings us, the good and the evil, because they are both brought by life and we shall soon enough be dead. It should be noted that Montaigne is not advocating that we should seek out pain or try to prolong it as we do pleasure. Indeed, he advocates the opposite, in that as far as we can we should 'try as hard to cut short the one [pain] as to prolong the other [pleasure]' (p.400). Notwithstanding this however, a 'sane view of good is a sane view of evil. And pain has some quality in its gentle beginnings that should not be avoided, as pleasure has something to be shunned in its final excess' (p.400).

Translating this into practice, psychotherapy should not take as its starting point the appeasement of maladies. It is highly unlikely that I will ever be able to 'cure' the effects of bereavement, terminal illness, abuse, or whatever else clients might bring to therapy. For Montaigne, to try to do so would only make matters worse. Instead, psychotherapy should first and foremost be about learning how to live with whatever maladies or difficulties we encounter in life: to blend them with the things we value in order that we might live fully.

In order to achieve this, Montaigne advocates that 'One must learn to endure what one cannot avoid' (p.374). There is a logical self-evidence in this statement, but in practice this can be very difficult to achieve. There is here also another message for psychotherapists – we must learn to endure with our clients what our clients cannot avoid. I am aware that I am better able to withstand some experiences clients bring to therapy than others and there are many ways in which therapists can avoid hearing client experiences that they would find difficult. Perhaps the most obvious of these is to vocalise questions which divert clients away from their lived experience – a practice that, as already noted, Montaigne has warned against. There are also many subtler ways in which discomfort might be betrayed: tone of voice, facial expression and body posture, to name but a few. Montaigne states: 'I bid my soul look upon pain and pleasure with the same level gaze – "since it is as wrong for the soul to expand in joy as to contract in sorrow" – and with the same firmness' (p.400). This might also be an aspiration of psychotherapy. For if therapy is to be of any value then clients must express whatever they need to express and I must bid myself hold a level gaze upon whatever clients reveal. Here again silence might hold the key. While there are many non-verbal ways in which feelings might be betrayed, silence contains a levity which is often more likely to be containing than any verbal intervention.

Montaigne is also insightful, if a little controversial, on the subject of law: 'Now the laws maintain their credit, not because they are just, but because they are laws. This is the mystical basis of their authority; they have no other. And this serves them well' (p.353). With an equal measure of controversy, this insight can be translated to the 'laws' of psychotherapy - the procedures and protocols, often referred to as boundaries, which get handed down to students

and which are accepted with perhaps little or no question. Montaigne does not question the need for laws and here the need for therapeutic boundaries is not being questioned. What Montaigne does bring into question however, are ethical considerations in relation to the basis upon which psychotherapeutic boundaries are set. It is not sufficient for practitioners of psychotherapy to adopt boundaries wholesale, because they are told to do so by a teacher or supervisor. This will only perpetuate the mystical basis of their authority. Instead, each practitioner must wrestle with these issues themselves and know, for themselves, why they maintain the boundaries they set. Moreover, this should not be a one-off endeavour, but an ongoing struggle and openness to review. Only then can the boundaries – necessarily imposed – and, indeed, the individual practitioner, make any claim to ethical credibility.

Perhaps the most powerful message Montaigne offers psychotherapy, concerns the possibilities for an approach that does not limit itself to the pursuit of curing maladies: ‘No generous spirit stays within itself; it constantly aspires and rises above its own strength. It leaps beyond its attainments. If it does not advance, and push forward, if it does not strengthen itself, and struggle with itself, it is only half alive’ (p.348). Here Montaigne captures something of the essence of what it means to live fully. He also captures, I believe, something of the essence of what psychotherapy might be – learning how to live fully, through struggle, strengthening and allowing the spirit to advance. To be clear, this is not about therapists setting goals for clients, or educating, or alleviating symptoms. That would be to limit the process. The process of psychotherapy should be limitless, at least within the confines of certain contractual and ethical considerations. Or, to use Montaigne’s words: ‘Its pursuits have no bounds or rules; its food is wonder, search and ambiguity’ (p.348). If further persuasion is needed that psychotherapy might be about learning how to live, Montaigne provides this. ‘We are great fools. “He has spent his life in idleness”, we say, and “I have done nothing today”. What! have you not lived? That is not only the fundamental, but the most noble of your occupations’ (p.396). If living is the most noble occupation, then psychotherapy increases its own nobility if it concerns itself with this task.

For Montaigne, psychotherapy would be about learning how to live fully and living fully involves being open to experiencing what it means to be human. Montaigne further supports this point: ‘People try to get out of themselves and to escape from the man. This is folly; instead of transforming themselves into angels, they turn themselves into beasts; instead of lifting they degrade themselves’ (p.405). Montaigne has more to say about the experience of being human:

*I who boast of embracing the pleasures of life so eagerly and so deliberately, find in them, when I consider them so minutely, little more than wind. But what of that? We are all wind. And the wind itself, wiser than we, takes pleasure in blustering and veering round, and is content with its own functions. It does not desire stability or solidity, qualities that do not belong to it (p.395).*

Put simply, the point that can be inferred from Montaigne is that psychotherapy is a human enterprise. In my practice, whilst like all generous spirits I must constantly aspire to leap beyond myself, I must also accept the limitations of being human, including my limitations as a psychotherapist. In doing so I might indirectly encourage my clients to look differently upon their own human limitations and maladies.

### **Some further reflections**

Montaigne is clear that experience is all I need to make me wise, providing I can learn to be a good scholar. We can infer from Montaigne that the goal of psychotherapy, such as there is one, should therefore be to explore with clients their experience as it is lived. As such, Montaigne advocates phenomenology, judging only by actual sensations. Diagnosis, prognosis and cure are of little importance, at least as goals in themselves. Words, whilst a principle tool in this process, are not the same as experience and will fail to fully reveal it. To understand the experience of another I must therefore draw upon experience itself, to remain at times silent in order to allow my clients' words to resonate with me.

In adopting this as the basis for my practice, I might encourage clients to look afresh at whatever malaise they bring to therapy, which might facilitate a different blending of experiences. It must be stressed that this is not a prescriptive task following the dictates of rules or techniques handed down by teachers to unquestioning students. Instead, within the context of certain contractual and ethical considerations, the spirit of psychotherapy should be a generous striving, free to take any direction. Good and evil, or however the experiences of my clients are phrased, should be looked upon with the same level gaze and I should resist any temptations in the direction of nomenclature, lest the labels used conceal more about experience than they reveal.

First and foremost, the challenge presented to me by Montaigne is to live myself by these principles. To look upon my own pain and pleasure with the same level gaze, to constantly strive, to leap beyond myself while accepting the limitations of being human and to embody these qualities as a psychotherapist.

*On experience* is about human experience. Psychotherapy, at least how I attempt to practice it, is nothing if not a human endeavour. As Montaigne observes: 'Both kings and philosophers defecate, and so do the ladies' (p.368), and so too, do psychotherapists.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have given an account of a personal dialogue with Michel de Montaigne, with his essay *On experience*. In doing so I have attempted to tease out some of the relevance Montaigne holds for the practice of contemporary psychotherapy. When it comes to understanding what it means to be a psychotherapist, Montaigne demands that we find our own way and it

has not been my intention here to develop a Montaignian model of psychotherapy. Notwithstanding this, if we are prepared to engage in dialogue with Montaigne, there is much we can learn.

Hartle, 2005, notes that in Montaigne's texts

*The world is restored through true faith to its astonishing strangeness. A world created out of nothing, a world in which the Word was made flesh, is revealed as such in the philosophical activity that ends in wonder at the most familiar.* (p.204)

If, as psychotherapists, we are ever looking for shoulders to stand on, we could do much worse than choose those of Montaigne.

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