

The Evolution of Thinking: A Comparison of the Renaissance Philosophy of

Michel de Montaigne and Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola

In this essay, I will be examining the manner in which the philosophical ideas of Michel de Montaigne developed and deviated from his predecessor Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola. In order to show the antithesis of Montaigne's ideas, I will firstly consider the evolution of his ideas in philosophy through an evaluation of his thoughts on scepticism and stoicism. I will also consider his debate of experience versus reason in his essay *On Experience*. Secondly, I will compare the way in such ideas were applied in understanding the relationship between the body and the soul by comparing it with Pico with regards to the concept of the Microcosm and Macrocosm, reason and judgment, and finally the body and the soul. To illustrate this effectively, I will provide examples from writings *On Experience*, *An Apology to Raymond Sebond* and *On oration of the dignity of man*. Lastly, I will conclude this essay.

Renaissance Humanism was primarily concerned with the revival of classical Latin and Greek texts, in order to reintroduce and incorporate the values, culture, and the ideas from Antiquity into the age of the renaissance¹. At the centre of Renaissance Humanism is a cultural phenomenon that is rooted in the pursuit of knowledge. In the course of the exploration of Ancient texts, Humanists sought to justify their endeavours by explaining that such desires for intellectual knowledge stemmed from the desire to extract from the ancient texts the formula for cultivating the ideal human being.² It is here that the basis for the philosophical pursuits Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola and Michel de Montaigne was established.

¹ Nicholas Mann, 'The Origins of Humanism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1-19 (p. 1).

² Paul Oskar Kristeller, Introduction to Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, Selections in translation, by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 215-222 (p. 221).

The development of Montaigne's philosophy can be considered in terms of the phrase an 'evolution of thinking'. Human beings are considered to be a Microcosm, a miniature representation of the universe. In the hierarchical order of the universe during the Renaissance what separated a human being from other animals within that system is the ability to think.

Montaigne's evolution of thought is rooted in this understanding. Unlike the other philosophical proponents of his era who relied upon the methods of their predecessors and in the ancient philosophy of Greek and Latin texts, Montaigne interrupted the pattern by following his own way of thinking—experience— rather than what was common. This does not mean that Montaigne rejected the writings of classical texts, but rather that he sought to reject the systematic approaching towards understanding those texts. Montaigne was of the belief that following those ideas would not present an accurate representation of the manner in which the mind itself thinks and perceives for itself as it fails to consider the limitation of human knowledge.³ Margaret King explains that Montaigne's 'message is his method, and his method is wandering, associative, and fluid, as are, in his view, the qualities of the human mind, and the nature of the human heart'.⁴

Montaigne's reliance on experience positions him as a sceptic and in some instances a stoic, though that is contended against by scholars. Scepticism can be defined as 'a theory that certain knowledge is impossible'.⁵ With the revival of Classical texts, came the introduction of the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato, as well as that of Sextus Empiricus. The introduction of this philosophy by Sextus was used to debate two schools of thought: Academic and Pyrrhonism. The ideas were specifically concerned with the manner in which one would find truth. For Academics, this was seen as an impossible feat. The focus sought to filter truth through four claims: that 'the information we gain by means of our

³ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. and trans., with an Introduction, by Margaret L. King (Indianapolis, Ind.; Cambridge: Hackett, 2014), p. 124.

⁴ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 124.

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, "scepticism | skepticism (n.) (2023)
<https://www.oed.com/dictionary/scepticism_n?tab=meaning_and_use> [accessed 11 February 2024].

senses may be unreliable, that we cannot be certain that our reasoning is reliable, that we possess no guaranteed criterion or standard for determining which of our judgements is true or false'.⁶

On the other hand, Pyrrhonist sceptics kept 'searching for the truth', though they 'refused to give assent to any assertion be it affirmative or negative'.⁷ The resulting conclusion of this was guided towards the complete suspension of judgement in order to find that which is true. Montaigne incorporates the idea of Empiricus into his own philosophy though he goes about it through 'fighting [the] pretence of reason and annihilating human judgement'.⁸

The use of Montaigne's common language and his free discourse that is filled with philosophical ideas of scholars, as well as his own ideas, helps him to fluctuate between the positions of a stoic, a sceptic, Christian or Pyrrhonian as he presents his opinions to the readers. The conflict between scepticism and stoicism was based upon the manner in which one came to truth. For stoics, the foundation of their judgement was based upon virtue and reason, which for the sceptic proved to be fallible. For this cause, it is often debated that Montaigne was not interested in being a stoic, but only in the appearance of one. Montaigne primarily gravitates to sceptical thoughts, since he believes that human knowledge has severe limitations, which if relied upon, would not lead to truth, but rather to error in judgment and understanding.

In the discourse of his thesis *On Experience*, for example he uses experience to present this idea. For example, he states that 'No desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge. We try every means in our power to achieve it. When reason fails us, we employ experience'.⁹ He continues by stating that, 'Men do not understand the inborn weakness of their mind', and 'rashes about, as

⁶ Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (New York: Haper & Row Publishers, 1968), p. xiii

⁷ Jan, Miernowski, 'Montaigne on Truth and Skepticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. by Philippe Desan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 554-561 (p. 557-558).

⁸ Marc, Foglia and Emiliano Ferrari, *Michel de Montaigne* (2019) < <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=montaigne> > [accessed 11 February 2024].

⁹ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 129.

silkworms do in a bucket, and so strangles itself... From a distance, it perceives some kind of illusory vision of light and truth; but in the pursuit, so many difficulties impede the way, so many traps and detours that distract and confuse it'.¹⁰

In considering how Montaigne's thinking translated into his perceptions of the nature of the relationship between the body and the soul, it is important to firstly consider the relationship to the human being and the world, Microcosm to Macrocosm, against the philosophy of Pico. As established before, what differentiates the human being from other creatures is the simple fact that mankind has the ability to think. Pico Della Mirandola, in his nine-hundred thesis, explicitly follows this theory and expounds upon the fact that the 'human being unlike the other creatures does not have a rigidly determined nature, a limited sphere of willing and acting'.¹¹ By reason of this, the human being was given the ability to choose what position they will occupy within the hierarchical system of creature, since they are not bound by the constraints of having a 'fixed place... or particular function'.¹² For this cause, Pico argues that it is the responsibility of man to make the best possible choice; man should strive then to become a celestial being declares Pico by allowing his rational thoughts to guide him in order to fully grasp the position as a microcosm.¹³

On the contrary, Montaigne in *An Apology to Raymond Sebond*, argues against presumptuous knowledge. For the philosopher, what man can boast to know will only be used as a case to justify what he does not know. In addition to this, since knowledge that is guided by reason can lead to errors in judgement, then man is at risk of deceiving himself if he conceives that he is more than what he actually is.¹⁴ Montaigne justifies his position by expanding upon the fact that the celestial beings, unlike the human, is incorruptible; their beauty, greatness and dominion exceeds that of

¹⁰ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 132.

¹¹ Don Parry, Norford, 'Microcosm and Macrocosm in Seventeenth-Century Literature' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38.3 (1977) 409–428 (p. 409)

¹² *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 120.

¹³ Kristeller, Introduction to Pico, p. 218.

¹⁴ Michel, Montaigne, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond,' in *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters* ed. and trans. by Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 399–400.

mankind. As a result, it is impossible that our reason can make us equal to heaven as our limitations could not equate us to their level of existence. His thoughts are in clear opposition to those of Pico Della Mirandola. This is because Montaigne applied scepticism to inform his understanding, and to show that reasoning is filled with presumptions and cannot bring man to truth, only vanity.¹⁵ In addition to this, Montaigne continues to argue within his writings that mankind is not better than the animals if he uses his imagination, through vanity, to aspire to be equivalent to God or celestial beings.

Michel de Montaigne is not against the idea of the human being as a Microcosm as it is a representation of 'the individual mind [as] a symbol or image of nature and therefore is both related to nature and distinct from it'.¹⁶ The relationship indicates that there is both freedom to know, freedom to act and freedom to become. For both of the philosophers, it is important to choose which freedom they sought to relate to and counted as important. And the choice which is selected is based upon how that philosopher decided between reason and judgement.

Pico Della Mirandola seeks to justify all three forms of freedom. He believed that man possessed the ability to know his position within creation, and by default God's wisdom. He also believed that the human being had the freedom to act by deciding to switch his rank within the order of creation, and to become a celestial being. In Pico's understanding, as he's a part of the macrocosm, being represented in it by his own soul, then there is no concept of otherness between him and it, as both are one. Due to this, Pico informs his understanding by it and concludes that, 'Freedom is only present where there is no other for me, which is not myself'.¹⁷ As a result of this, for Pico 'if freedom is the essential quality of human nature, then we should exercise it for the best, choosing to exercise our rational and intellectual capacities, not those also possessed by vegetables and beasts'.¹⁸ He

¹⁵ Montaigne, Michel, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond,' p. 401.

¹⁶ Don Parry, Norford, 'Microcosm and Macrocosm, 409.

¹⁷ Don Parry, Norford, 'Microcosm and Macrocosm, 411.

¹⁸ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 117.

arrives at his conclusion by his rational thoughts, and his aspirations are rooted in the ultimate desire to arrive at the heights of human knowledge.

On the other hand, Montaigne only seeks the freedom to know, but what he knows must first be justified and filtered through sound reasoning that is guided by his experience. He approaches this philosophy with caution as Montaigne believes that it is not possible to attain all knowledge because one can never really know whether or not they know all things. His disposition is that God alone possesses the power to 'know Himself and interpret His works'.¹⁹ In addition to this, Montaigne believes that man's attainment of knowledge cannot make him good or happy. He sums his belief against rational thoughts by relying on the sceptical thought. In essence, he agrees with the writings of other sceptics and states that, 'these men judge those who think they have found it are infinitely mistaken... and that this matter of establishing the measure of our power, of knowing and judging the difficulty of things, is a great and a supreme knowledge, of which they doubt that man is capable'.²⁰ For Montaigne being guided by reason will only result in an outcome that deviates from the truth of reality. Since the human being cannot know what is true, then it would be remiss to pursue a path of reasoning that is not grounded in the knowledge of God because such an understanding will cause the human being to understand that it is impossible to be equated with God or the celestial beings.

Moreover, the ideas of the body and the soul can be depicted in terms of the relationship of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. Just as the microcosm—or human being, is apart of the Macrocosm, the universe, in like manner is the soul connected to the body. Montaigne argues that is unwise to consider that the separation of such entities can be possible, since such an ideology can be likened to attempted to splitting our existence.²¹ Montaigne continues his thinking by stating that the

¹⁹ Montaigne, Michel, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond,' p. 449.

²⁰ Montaigne, Michel, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond,' p. 451.

²¹ Alfredo, Bonadeo, 'Montaigne, Body and Soul', *Romance Notes*, 24.3 (1983), 179–186 (p. 180)

soul— or the imagination— can impact the body when it shifts towards thinking that is incohesive or when he is exposed to the uncontrollable reactions of the intangible and tangible aspects of the natural world. This vulnerability is what Montaigne conceives that makes man to be a weak creature and unable to justify his own thinking. This is not considered by Pico Della Mirandola, who views man as a creature that is able to master not only himself but also his own environment.

Throughout *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne insists on the education on both the body and the soul. He underpins his ideas with an emphasis to health, which is quite possibly due to his own condition. In so doing, Montaigne hoped to incorporate the lessons that can only be grasped to experience in order to inform how mankind should live during the difficulties which are inevitable and must be endured.²² His ideas are grounded in humility and in reliance on God's knowledge to find pure wisdom, which is contrary to that of Pico Della Mirandola, which has its roots set in the exaltation of the soul. For example, Pico's relates the soul to the body as follows, 'if you see a pure contemplator who knows nothing of his body but has withdrawn to the innermost places of his mind, he is neither a terrestrial being nor celestial: he is a most sacred spirit clothed in human'.²³

In conclusion, I provided an examined the way in which the philosophy of Michel de Montaigne developed and deviated from that of Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola. I have done this by examining the evolution of this thoughts and how his thinking is primarily based upon scepticism and stoicism. In addition to this, I have also provided an analysis of the relationship between the body and the soul by examining the concept of the Microcosm to Macrocosm, reason versus judgement and the views on the body and the soul.

²² Alfredo, Bonadeo, 'Montaigne, Body and Soul', p. 183.

²³ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, p. 122.

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