

Some Wikipedia material on French Renaissance figure, MONTAIGNE:

The **Essays** (French: *Essais*, pronounced [ese]) of [Michel de Montaigne](#) are contained in three books and 107 chapters of varying length. Montaigne's stated design in writing, publishing and revising the *Essays* over the period from approximately 1570 to 1592 was to record "some traits of my character and of my humours." The *Essays* were first published in 1580 and cover a wide range of topics.^[1]

Montaigne wrote in a rather crafted rhetoric designed to intrigue and involve the reader, sometimes appearing to move in a stream-of-thought from topic to topic and at other times employing a structured style that gives more emphasis to the didactic nature of his work. His arguments are often supported with quotations from [Ancient Greek](#), [Latin](#) and [Italian](#) texts such as *De rerum natura* by [Lucretius](#)^[2] and the works of [Plutarch](#). Furthermore, his *Essais* were seen as an important contribution to both writing form and [skepticism](#). The name itself comes from the French word meaning "attempts," which shows how this new form of writing did not aim to educate or prove. Rather, his essays were exploratory journeys in which he works through logical steps to bring skepticism to what is being discussed.^[3]

Montaigne's stated goal in his book is to describe himself with utter frankness and honesty ("bonne foi"). The insight into human nature provided by his essays, for which they are so widely read, is merely a by-product of his introspection. Though the implications of his essays were profound and far-reaching, he did not intend, nor suspect his work to garner much attention outside of his inner circle^[4], prefacing his essays with, "I am myself the matter of this book; you would be unreasonable to suspend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject ^[5]."

Montaigne's essay topics spanned the entire spectrum of the profound to the trivial, with titles ranging from "Of Sadness and Sorrow" and "Of Conscience" to "Of Smells" and "Of Posting" (referring to posting letters). Montaigne wrote at a time preceded by Catholic and Protestant ideological tension. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, protestant authors consistently attempted to subvert Church doctrine with their own reason and scholarship. Consequently, Catholic scholars embraced skepticism as a means to discredit all reason and scholarship and accept Church doctrine through faith alone^[6]. Montaigne never found certainty in any of his inquiries into the nature of man and things, despite his best efforts and many attempts^[6]. He mistrusted the certainty of both human reason and experience. He reasoned that while man is finite, truth is infinite; thus, human capacity is naturally inhibited in grasping reality in its fullness or with certainty^[6]. Though he did believe in the existence of absolute truth, an attribute which distinguishes him from a pure skeptic, he believed that such truth could only be arrived at by man through divine revelation, leaving us in the dark on most matters^[6]. He finds the great variety and volatility of human nature to be its most basic features, which resonates to the Renaissance thought about the fragility of humans. According to the scholar [Paul Oskar Kristeller](#), "the writers of the period were keenly aware of the miseries and ills of our earthly existence". A representative quote is "I have never seen a greater monster or miracle than myself."

He opposed [European colonization of the Americas](#), deploring the suffering it brought upon the natives.

Citing the case of [Martin Guerre](#) as an example, he believes that humans cannot attain certainty. His skepticism is best expressed in the long essay "An Apology for [Raymond Sebond](#)" (Book 2, Chapter 12) which has frequently been published separately. We cannot trust our reasoning because thoughts just occur to us: we don't truly control them. We do not have good reasons to consider ourselves superior to the animals. He is highly skeptical of confessions obtained under torture, pointing out that such confessions can be made up by the suspect just to escape the torture he is subjected to. In the middle of the section normally entitled "Man's Knowledge Cannot Make Him Good," he wrote that his motto was "What do I know?". The essay on Sebond defended [Christianity](#).

Montaigne also eloquently employed many references and quotes from classical Greek and Roman, i.e. non-Christian authors, especially the [atomist Lucretius](#).

Montaigne considered [marriage](#) necessary for the raising of children, but disliked the strong feelings of [romantic love](#) as being detrimental to freedom. One of his quotations is "Marriage is like a cage; one sees the birds outside desperate to get in, and those inside desperate to get out."

In education, he favored concrete examples and experience over the teaching of abstract knowledge that is expected to be accepted uncritically. Montaigne's essay "On the Education of Children" is dedicated to [Diana of Foix](#).

English journalist and politician [J. M. Robertson](#) argued that Montaigne's essays had a profound influence on the plays of William Shakespeare, citing their similarities in language, themes and structures^[7].

The remarkable modernity of thought apparent in Montaigne's essays, coupled with their sustained popularity, made them arguably the most prominent work in French philosophy until the [Enlightenment](#). Their influence over French education and culture is still strong. The official portrait of former French president [François Mitterrand](#) pictured him facing the camera, holding an open copy of the Essays in his hands.^[8]