

Education or Indoctrination? Montaigne and Emerson on Preserving Freedom in the Teacher-Student Relationship

Rebecca Sullivan

Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

In his *Essays*, Michel de Montaigne paints a self-portrait that champions individual judgment. In contemporary educational parlance, he is an advocate of critical thinking: a student's ability to reflectively evaluate information, test assumptions, ask clarifying questions, and form judgments for herself.¹ Individual judgment is a hallmark of a learner's freedom because it indicates that she is not merely repeating inherited wisdom, but personally holds a conviction. Enabling such freedom in students requires careful consideration of the relationship between teacher and student in learning. In this article, I consider how teacher-student positionality impacts individual judgment using the example of Michel de Montaigne and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Montaigne's *Essays* raise the still-relevant question of the relationship between inherited wisdom and personal experience in forming individual judgments. However, Montaigne fails to offer a conclusive answer. While Montaigne draws heavily on past thinkers, he gives precedence to his own experience over inherited wisdom in forming judgments. This can be seen, for example, in his essay "Of Friendship," in which he references past thinkers, but rejects their formulations of friendship when they fail to accord with his own experience. However, while Montaigne articulates the prominence of personal experience over inherited wisdom in forming individual judgments, the form of his writing—the essay—suggests the opposite. The colloquial, conversational style Montaigne employs in essays such as "Of Friendship" invites the reader to trust in Montaigne's wisdom without having recourse to her own experience. Montaigne offers his *Essays* as a portrait in which the reader can see herself reflected as in a mirror.² Thus, while Montaigne favors his own experience in

making individual judgments, he seems to ask his readers to trust more in his experience than in their own, and removes the reader's direct reference to reality. Instead of looking outward to form a judgment, Montaigne's reader looks to Montaigne.

Considering Emerson's relationship with Montaigne as a teacher-student relationship helps clarify the positionality between teacher and learner that promotes individual judgment in students. Emerson, like Montaigne, writes in the conversational form of the essay. Unlike Montaigne, he displays firm trust in the inherited wisdom of his teacher. This trust in Montaigne does not compromise Emerson's incorporation of his own experience into his reflections, however. In his essay on friendship, Emerson clarifies that fostering individual judgment does not require removing trust in inherited wisdom, as long as the positionality between teacher and student invites the learner to put inherited wisdom in conversation with her own experience. In his essay on friendship, Emerson adjusts his positionality from facing Montaigne to standing beside his teacher. This side-by-side posture allows Emerson to put his teacher's wisdom and his own experience in conversation as he looks outward to better understand the reality of friendship.

Emerson's relationship with Montaigne indicates the importance of positionality in teacher-student relationships. As new 'genres' of learning emerge that use digital technology to immerse students in ultra-first-personal experiences, educators would do well to consider the positionality of teacher and student and to preserve space for critical thinking by pointing both teacher and student toward a deeper grasp of reality.

MONTAIGNE'S COMMITMENT TO INDIVIDUAL JUDGMENT

A classical reading of the *Essays* sees Montaigne as the embodiment of Pyrrhonian skepticism,³ which has as its goal tranquility achieved by suspending judgment, opposing to each statement an equal statement, and putting an end to dogmatizing.⁴ This interpretation is understandable, as Montaigne emphasizes ideas that strongly resonate with Pyrrhonism. Montaigne describes

his life as a search for tranquility, the achievement of which seems to involve constant variability and casting off of all authority. “We are all patchwork” he states, reflecting on the inconstancy of himself and others.⁵ Montaigne does indeed display almost continual variability: he lives moderation by occasionally getting drunk,⁶ he denounces suicide but not in all cases,⁷ and he highlights the variability in custom across times and places.⁸ Montaigne also seems to disregard inherited wisdom, declaring that he seeks a tranquility “not according to Metrodorus or Arcesilaus or Aristippis, but according to me.”⁹ However, without denying the impact of Sextus Empiricus’ Pyrrhonism on Montaigne, I follow a reading of the *Essays* that holds that to describe Montaigne as a skeptic does not reflect the true basis of his thought.¹⁰ Montaigne does not shy away from making judgments, but on the contrary, he constantly asserts his convictions. Furthermore, the abundance of references to Classical thinkers throughout the *Essays* bears witness to their influence on Montaigne. While Montaigne may change his mind often, he certainly judges; and while he may often disagree with inherited wisdom, it forms a basis for his thought. Thus, it appears that it is not withholding judgment in itself that Montaigne values, but rather individual judgment. In contrast with rote memorization or blind adoption of inherited ideas, individual judgment is achieved when the learner autonomously grasps something to be true, not simply because it is what she has been told, but because it is in accord with her experience. A judgment “according to me” is a conviction I take to be true, not because it belongs to the wisdom of the past, but because I myself have experienced it as true.

Individual judgment, as championed by Montaigne, can be conveyed in educational parlance as critical thinking. The word “critical” derives from the Greek *kritikos*, which means “to discern,” or *krinein* and can be translated as “to judge” or “to decide.”¹¹ Critical thinking, as the term appears in educational discourses, can be broadly defined as “the use of appropriate methods to reason well and make good judgments.”¹² Critical thinking engenders learning that is internalized and opposed to unreflective repetition. The student becomes the irreplaceable protagonist of critical thinking because well-reasoned judgment cannot be imposed from the outside, but is an essentially individual and au-

onomous activity.

Montaigne's main lesson, then, the core of his pedagogy, consists in a commitment to individual judgment. A student's freedom is enacted in the internalized grasp of knowledge. This judgment depends in an integral way on the student's experience, which philosopher Jacques Maritain calls "the germ of insight" that "is from the outset a tending toward an object to be grasped."¹³ Maritain, like Montaigne, affirms that the student is the "principal agent" of education whose chief aspiration is to autonomous freedom.¹⁴ Both thinkers draw on inherited wisdom or tradition in learning, but ultimately call on students to make learning their own through individual judgment about reality.¹⁵ Turning to Montaigne's essay on friendship reveals how Montaigne conceives of the relationship between inherited wisdom and personal experience in forming individual judgments.

THE PRIMACY OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN MONTAIGNE'S INDIVIDUAL JUDGMENT

While Montaigne's commitment to individual judgment does necessarily involve a total rejection of past thinkers, it does give precedence to personal experience. This preference can be seen in his essay "Of Friendship." Montaigne does not write his musings on friendship as if in a vacuum, but rather inserts them into the longstanding philosophical discourse on the subject. However, while Montaigne shows his appreciation for inherited wisdom, he does not express trust in past thinkers, but only acknowledges whether or not their thoughts accord with his own experience. The sole source of inspiration for Montaigne's essay on friendship is his experience with Etienne La Boétie. Examining the content of this essay reveals that Montaigne does not despise inherited wisdom, but that he ultimately trusts only his own experience when forming judgments.

Montaigne describes "Of Friendship" as "a picture labored over with all his skill." It is the masterpiece within his *Essays* that he places in the center of the wall, surrounded by grotesques.¹⁶ Throughout the essay, Montaigne

references insights on friendship from past thinkers such as Cicero, Aristotle, Horace, and Virgil, and voices his agreement with certain aspects of their thought. He credits Aristotle for acknowledging the rarity of perfect friendship in his exclamation: “O my friends, there is no friend.”¹⁷ Likewise, he seconds Horace’s sentiment about the incomparable good of a true friend: “Nothing shall I, while sane, compare with a dear friend.”¹⁸ However, Montaigne does not rely on these insights in formulating his idea of friendship, but rather uses these references to anecdotally affirm aspects of his own experience of friendship.

Furthermore, other elements of Montaigne’s definition of friendship—namely total unity exclusivity—are drawn entirely from his experience with La Boétie, which Montaigne describes as entirely singular: “If you pressed me to tell you why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.”¹⁹ However, despite the uniqueness of Montaigne’s friendship, he does not articulate a definition of friendship that only holds for him; on the contrary, he decisively states what he considers to be the reality of perfect friendship. Friendship, to cast the discussion in Maritain’s terms, is the object that Montaigne freely grasps. Montaigne defines friendship in stable, almost dogmatic language, calling it “a general and universal warmth, moderate and even, besides, a constant and settled smoothness, with nothing bitter and stinging about it.”²⁰ The highest form of friendship, which Montaigne names “sovereign and masterful friendship” is characterized by complete unity between two individuals. Its only goal is “the complete fusion of our wills,” the accomplishment of “one soul in two bodies.”²¹ In this friendship, the distinction between selves disappears, and one very self emerges. This complete unity makes it possible to have only one friend, because each friend’s self-giving to the other is so total that “he has nothing left to distribute elsewhere.”²² Montaigne displays no doubt in his definition of friendship, nor does he withhold judgment. Montaigne’s account about friendship is not relative; it reflects a “free adhesion of the mind to the objective reality to be seen.”²³ Montaigne has reached this conviction, not through inheriting the thoughts of others, but through his own experience. Thus, while past thinkers are not absent from his account of friendship, Montaigne does not place his trust in inherited wisdom. On the contrary,

his individual judgment springs entirely from his own experience.

THE PRIMACY OF INHERITED WISDOM IN THE ESSAY

While the content of Montaigne's *Essays* advocates for trust in personal experience over inherited wisdom, the form of his *Essays* seems to contradict this assertion. The essay—a genre of writing that Montaigne is credited with inventing—collapses the distance between author and reader and foments a relationship of trust by abandoning rational discourse for a conversational style. The first-personal nature of the essay invites the reader to trust the author as a friend, and can discourage critical thinking. Through the form of his work, Montaigne seems to ask the reader to trust him and not primarily in her own experience.

In considering the author-reader relationship in the essay, scholars highlight the features that distinguish its rhetorical effect from that of other genres. Cathleen Baushatz, for example, cites Emile Benevise's theory of the linguistic subject to argue that the essay creates "an imagined lack of distinction between author and book."²⁴ The conversational tone of the essay invites the reader to drop her defenses and collapses the divide between author's voice and narrative voice. Unlike a novel in which characters' voices maintain distance from the author's personal voice, the essay invites us to equate the text with Montaigne's opinion. The essay leads us to assert "Montaigne says _____" in reference to a point of view expressed in one of his essays.

In addition to uniting author and narrative voice, the essay genre serves to silence the questioning voice of the reader. Unlike a philosophical treatise in which the author's argument can be considered, questioned, or rejected, Montaigne's essays avoid rationally-justified assertions. Instead of soliciting the reader's rational response to a proposition, the essay-writer asks his reader to resonate with the idea he depicts. This resonance is itself an affirmation. It appeals not to logic, but to a sense of shared feeling: "Yes" the reader says to herself in response to Montaigne's essays, "I have felt what you describe." This type of affirmation unites writer and reader in a powerful and almost

visceral way. The essay invites the reader to share a part of life with the author. Martha Nussbaum refers to the reader's experience in response to such writing as "learning to fall."²⁵ Through trust, the author and reader can move beyond rational discourse to establish deeper connection. The reader's affirmation of the author's assertion need not directly incorporate her own experience, but rather consists in recognizing her face in the writer's portrait. Thus, the reader is not required to genuinely grasp an object or form a judgment, but is invited to unreflectively second the author's judgment.

THE POSITIONALITY OF THE READER IN "OF FRIENDSHIP"

The positionality of author and reader in Montaigne's essays can be described as face-to-face. Montaigne himself presents his *Essays* as an intimate self-portrait to be enjoyed by his family and friends.²⁶ He returns to this image in "Of Friendship," describing the essay as the prized painting in the center of his collection.²⁷ This essay highlights the contrast between how Montaigne forms an individual judgment about friendship and how he invites his reader to respond to his judgment. Montaigne expresses distrust in inherited accounts of friendship, and instead relies on personal experience to make a judgment. With regard to the reader, however, Montaigne invites a different approach. He appeals to the reader with his own voice in a frank, conversational way, and asks her to trust in his portrayal of friendship even though she has not experienced it herself.

Montaigne asserts that the perfect friendship he enjoyed with La Boétie was unique and rare. In fact, he tells his reader that their friendship was "so entire and so perfect that certainly you will hardly read of the like, and among men of today you see no trace of it in practice."²⁸ The reader, it seems, has little hope of verifying Montaigne's account of friendship in her own experience. How, then, is she to respond? Montaigne does not make an argument that explicitly invites a rational response; instead, he targets the reader's trust by expressing his emotion over the death of his friend. "Since the day I lost him," Montaigne confides, "I only drag on a weary life." In fact, Montaigne holds that since the

death of his friend he has been just half a self.²⁹ Without recourse to rational argument, Montaigne expresses friendship as a good that, once experienced, is almost impossible to live without. He acknowledges that the reader has not experience such friendship, but asks her to trust him. He treats his reader as an intimate friend, sharing even his heartfelt emotions. Through his appeal, Montaigne encourages unreflective trust.

EMERSON AS STUDENT OF MONTAIGNE: RECOVERING FREEDOM BY ADJUSTING POSITION

Montaigne's essay on friendship leaves us perplexed. While he insists on the importance of personal experience for forming individual judgments, he does not encourage his reader to take her personal experience into account. While he displays distrust in the inherited wisdom of past thinkers, he asks his reader to trust completely in the wisdom he offers. Considering Emerson as a student of Montaigne offers us insight into how to overcome the seeming contradiction in Montaigne's pedagogy. In his own essay on friendship, Emerson both trusts in Montaigne and makes his own individual judgments. He is able to accomplish this by adjusting his positionality with regard to Montaigne. Instead of looking at Montaigne as a portrait, he stands beside Montaigne. This change in position opens up space for Emerson to put Montaigne's wisdom in dialogue with his own experience. It also invites him to look outward and grasp the reality of friendship for himself.

In his essay on friendship, Emerson expresses a deep trust in and reverence for Montaigne. He describes Montaigne as "learned in this warm lore of the heart"³⁰ and imitates his predecessor's informal, conversational style that invites connection with the reader. He also appears initially to be of one mind with his teacher. In the poem with which he opens the essay, Emerson seconds Montaigne's emphasis on the constancy of friendship amid the variability of the world: "The world uncertain comes and goes, / The lover rooted stays."³¹ He continues to draw on Montaigne throughout his articulation of friendship. He emphasizes the great value he places on one-to-one relationships, char-

acterizing them as “peremptory for conversation, which is the practice and consummation of friendship.”³² Furthermore, Emerson agrees with Montaigne that a great affinity must exist between the two who are conversing. However, while he acknowledges his indebtedness to his teacher, Emerson distances his account of friendship from Montaigne’s by incorporating his own experience into his reflections.

Emerson’s lived experience of friendship leads him to disagree with Montaigne about its exclusivity. While Montaigne holds that a person can have only one friend, Emerson admits “I am not so strict in my terms.” In his own life, he explains, he keeps “a circle of godlike men and women” as friends.³³ Furthermore, while Emerson values affinity between friends, this affinity is markedly distinct from the full unity his predecessor requires. A fruitful conversation, for Emerson, exists between two similar yet distinct persons. Friendship, for Emerson, is not a total union, but rather “requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness.”³⁴

By incorporating his experience into his reflections, it might seem that Emerson is taking up the same method of forming judgments that Montaigne employs. However, while Montaigne rejects inherited wisdom when it contradicts his experience, Emerson does not. Instead, he withholds definitive judgment, acknowledging that further experience might prove inherited wisdom correct. It is not skepticism that leads him to act this way, but rather his appreciation of the limitations of his experience. Emerson stresses that he cannot affirm certain elements of Montaigne’s account because he has not experienced them himself. Even though they may be true, he does yet grasp their reality. His knowledge of these elements of friendship remain on the propositional level, not yet internalized. Emerson explains, for example, that his admission of multiple friends may be because he has not known “so high a fellowship as others.”³⁵ He has, moreover, seen how, with patience, friends may “meet as water with water”³⁶ and experience “an absolute running of two souls into one.”³⁷ Therefore, while he cannot endorse Montaigne’s judgment on the exclusivity of friendship now, Emerson remains open to forming such a judgment in the future, should he experience such friendship. Emerson’s account of friendship is not nearly as

conclusive as Montaigne's. But Emerson's lack of conviction does not indicate a devaluing of individual judgment; on the contrary, it emphasizes how inherited wisdom and personal experience work together as key ingredients in enabling such judgment. Montaigne's account of friendship gives Emerson a direction to explore. Montaigne accompanies Emerson as he moves toward a personalized understanding of friendship.³⁸

Emerson's side-by-side relationship with Montaigne has three key components: inherited wisdom, personal experience, and a tending toward an object to be grasped. Emerson's goal is an understanding of friendship itself. Neither Montaigne nor Emerson is the ultimate arbitrator of the reality of friendship. Emerson draws on Montaigne's wisdom and his own experience, but ultimately looks outward in an effort to understand something that is external to them both. This outward-facing perspective manifests in Emerson's preoccupation with real versus fantasized friendship. Montaigne's ideal of perfect unity seems to be the pinnacle of friendship, yet Emerson lacks the resources to ensure that such friendships really exist. "We walk alone in the world," he remarks, and "friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables."³⁹ Montaigne's description of friendship attracts Emerson but seems to lack real substance. Emerson has never known such friendship, and Montaigne wrote his essay about a dead man. Can Emerson embrace Montaigne's account as real, or is the friendship his teacher describes imaginary, warped by memory, nostalgia, and grief?

Emerson seeks to articulate real friendship and not fantasy. This does not undermine his trust in Montaigne, but turns him outward to consider friendship beyond his teacher's account. In doing so, he acknowledges that Montaigne is likewise not the origin of truth about friendship. Putting Montaigne's lesson in dialogue with his experience, Emerson seeks "the free adhesion of the mind to the objective reality to be seen" that Maritain describes as the attainment of autonomy. While Emerson acknowledges that he does not understand the reality of friendship in all its complexity, his tending toward reality indicates that he has, according to Maritain, been educated for freedom. Emerson is tied neither to his own limited perspective nor to the limited perspective of his teacher; rather, he reflectively incorporates both points of view as he turns and tends

toward the reality of things.

Emerson's essay on friendship clarifies that free, individual judgment does not, as Montaigne's account suggests, require distrust in inherited wisdom, so long as the learner is encouraged to put inherited wisdom in conversation with personal experience as she reaches outward to grasp reality. This indicates that the trust-inspiring form of the essay can be compatible with critical thinking, if author and reader are positioned in such a way that they face outward. Emerson achieves this in his essay through his withholding of judgment and tone of intellectual humility. Emerson does not present himself as an authority on friendship, but rather as a learner *en route* toward deeper understanding. This positionality does not lead his reader to unreflectively affirm Emerson's position, but rather encourages her to join him on his journey toward fuller appreciation of friendship.

TEACHER-STUDENT POSITIONALITY IN NEW "GENRES" OF LEARNING

The lesson Emerson and Montaigne's relationship holds for teachers is a word of caution. Montaigne championed individual judgment, yet the new genre of writing he invented risked undermining the freedom he sought to articulate. In contemporary discourses of education in the United States, promoting individual judgment through critical thinking is seen as an almost inarguable good.⁴⁰ Yet new "genres" of learning do not always consider how the positionality of teacher and learner affects students' ability to make learning their own. Emerging educational technologies such as virtual reality (VR) enable students to inhabit a radically first-personal perspective in learning experiences. In narrative VR experiences, the student becomes the protagonist in an immersive, intimate, and visceral way. The ultra-first-personal posture of VR has lent it the name the "ultimate empathy machine."⁴¹ This perspective-taking holds exciting possibilities, but should also give educators pause. By virtue of its intense immersiveness, it is possible for the user to employ critical thinking in a VR experience? In virtual reality, students do more than see themselves

reflected in a portrait; they become the portrait that the creator of the experience crafted. In such an environment, is it possible for students to stand side-by-side next to the content and put it in conversation with their own experience? Is it possible for them to make a free, individual judgment about external reality when immersed in a crafted reality? Virtual reality learning experiences have not yet become mainstream in classrooms; thus, educators have the opportunity to reflectively consider whether and how such tools might promote learning.

Emerson and Montaigne teach us that enabling students to form individual judgments and make learning their own requires educators to intentionally position themselves and their students, not face-to-face, but side-by-side, walking together toward greater understanding of “an object to be grasped.” Inviting students, through the form as well as the content of the lesson, to engage inherited wisdom with their own experience enables them to make a judgment about reality that is not an unreflective acceptance of their teacher’s views, but a genuine expression of their autonomous freedom.

1 John Ennis, “Critical Thinking Assessment,” *Theory Into Practice* 32, no. 3 (1993), 180.

2 I am grateful to Dr. Mark Lilla for the provocative comparison between reading Montaigne’s *Essays* and looking in a mirror.

3 This interpretation is articulated by Richard Popkin in his *History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), in which he credits Montaigne with developing a Catholic Pyrrhonism.

4 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Benson Mates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), I.4-I.6.

5 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald Frame (New York, NY: Everyman’s Library, 2003), 296.

6 *Ibid.*, 299.

7 *Ibid.*, 318.

8 *Ibid.*, 261-265.

9 *Ibid.*, 572.

10 In *Montaigne and Education of the Judgment*, Gabriel Compayré emphasizes, as I will, individual judgment as the pinnacle of Montaigne’s pedagogy and the accomplishment of freedom (trans. J.E. Mansion [New York: Crowell & Co., 1908]). In more contemporary discourses, David Hansen acknowledges Montaigne’s sincere attempt to get to grips with meaning regarding “the phenomena of living” in “Well-Formed,

Not Well-Filled: Montaigne and the Paths of Personhood,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 2 (2005): 128-9.

11 Christopher P. Horvath and James M. Forte, eds. *Critical Thinking: Education in a Competitive and Globalizing World* (New York: Nova, 2011), 2.

12 Ibid., 3.

13 Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 44.

14 Ibid., 11, 39.

15 Ibid., 2.

16 Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, 164.

17 Quoted in *ibid.*, 171.

18 Quoted in *ibid.*, 174.

19 Ibid., 169.

20 Ibid., 167.

21 Ibid., 171.

22 Ibid., 172.

23 Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 44.

24 Cathleen Bauschatz, “Montaigne’s Conception of Reading in the Context of the Renaissance Poetics and Modern Criticism,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Inge K. Crossman and Susan Suleiman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 277.

25 Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 274-284.

26 Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, “To the Reader.”

27 Ibid., 164.

28 Ibid., 165.

29 Ibid., 174.

30 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Essays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1920 [originally published 1841]), 128.

31 Ibid., 120.

32 Ibid., 128.

33 Ibid., 128.

34 Ibid., 129.

35 Ibid., 128.

36 Ibid., 131.

37 Ibid., 129.

38 Maritain offers a full account of how personal accompaniment is essential for enabling students’ achievement of autonomous freedom in his chapter titled “The Dynamics of Education” (*Education at the Crossroads*, 29-57).

39 Emerson, *Essays*, 132.

40 In “An Educator’s Guide to the Four Cs: Preparing 21st Century Students for a Global Society,” the National Education Association lists critical thinking as a foundation of the 21st century education movement (Washington D.C., 2010).

41 Chris Milk, “How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine,” 2015, TED video, 10:26, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reali-

[ty_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine/details?language=en](#).