



An Analysis of Montaigne's Final Essay, *Of Experience*

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Abstract. In the final essay of Montaigne, named *Of Experience*, the author gave extensive criticism over the general misuse of judgement, while defining judgement quite peculiarly, which is that it is a faculty of the mind. How then, was this faculty that appears to be the rational part of the human mind but individuated from reasons defined by Montaigne? In what way do humans fail to properly utilize this faculty? What is the role of experience in the proper use of judgment? These questions shall be answered through a thorough analysis of this final work of the French thinker, through which we may find the form of the ideal that he looks to portray.

Keywords: Montaigne, philosophy, literature

1. An introduction of the arguments

This paper will be discussing Montaigne's final essay named *Of Experience*. To be specific, this paper will address first Montaigne's rather complicated account of judgment, which he considers vain yet essential. The paper will then address the negative attitude he expressed toward judgment is mainly focusing on the general misuse of it, rather than the judgment itself, and then his proposal of utilizing experience to avoid the misuse of judgment. Finally, the paper will discuss the reason why he thinks that judgment should be the authority over actions by discussing the way judgment moderates and control actions as well as the necessity of such control.

To start with, Montaigne's attitude toward judgment is more despising yet he also considers it to be essential. According to the early part of the essay, he mainly focused on criticizing how judgement is overlooked in societies and reasons misused by pointing out the inconsistency and injustice of human laws. The logic of his criticism is simple: since there is nothing in the world that can be taken as identical, human laws, French laws to be specific, which is an accumulation of interpretations of past experience cannot be taken as precisely parallel to current events that await judgment, hence utilizing such laws to judge human actions is vain. He also pointed out that laws should be simple and natural, even to the point of non-existence [1]. In my opinion, Montaigne's criticism of laws represents his despal over humans distrusting and misusing their own judgements, because utilizing and following laws are actions that rely almost entirely on external guidance, which was developed by other people's judgement. This argument of his can also be taken as a debunking argument, by pointing out that since human laws are not developed and exercised in a way that appeals to the objective truth, the judgements made through laws cannot be justified. Since the sense of truth is not defined but rather suggested through Montaigne's devaluating thinking that is not done through judgment, the definition of truth can then be taken as either an ultimate truth that appeals to the essence of the world or simply the correct use of judgment and rationality. In a way, Montaigne holds that judgment is a part of the human soul that lies beyond passions and emotions, that judges things not according to evaluative beliefs, but appeals to objective truths. However, this particular part of the soul is not being used effectively and accurately by humans that are members of societies because their judgements are usually misguided by the diversity of opinions on which they rely too much. And the objective truths are shrouded by the excessive and yet presumptuous and off-track interpretations of them which only leads people away instead of closer. He expressed such an attitude in his fond description of a city that allows personal judgement to replace set and immutable laws [1], and in his metaphor that opinions are scaling the ladder higher, which is only full of interpretations of other interpretations whereas the truth on the ground is only getting further away [1].

2. Further Analysis

With what is established above, one might figure that Montaigne holds judgment as something that contradicts experience because the tendency of relying too much on experience, which is formed in the past and according to past events instead of judgment, which appeals to the present, is what he considers a vain use of reason. However, Montaigne proposed a mindset that can avoid such cases, which is based on what he considers as the purpose that the judgment holds, and perhaps the ideal purpose or an ideal way to live for humans. According to Montaigne, what judgment does is it adjusts the soul and the body without being contaminated by them [1]. The particular word he used was "reform", which I believe indicates an

underlying ideal form he holds for how humans should ultimately be or within this a particular character form that each person can fulfill, or at least move toward that direction. The ideal form, as indicated by his reasoning, could be the full and pure reliance on judgment. To achieve such a form, he asserted that we must learn from experience, not merely in the sense that we should learn precisely what happened, but to take experiences as reminders or evidence that we have not yet become ideal. An interpretation of this can be that experiences contain errors that we have once made in the past, perhaps actions that were only driven by passions instead of judgment or the reliance on external guidance which misled the judgment, and these errors are pieces of evidence that indicate insufficient and incorrect use of the judgment. So, Montaigne thinks that experience should be taken as both reminder and guidance for self-improving because the errors one made in the past that entails misuse of judgment are stored in experiences and can be discerned by the judgment so that one can avoid them in the future and exercise the more informed judgement.

At this point, some questions regarding the importance of judgment may be raised. What precisely is the reason that Montaigne claims that judgment “holds in me a magisterial seat” [1]? To phrase this question differently: What role does judgment play in our lives? The simple and direct answer is that judgment moderates us, that is to say, Montaigne thinks that, without judgment, human minds that are completely driven by passions cannot handle desires properly, the result of which is harmful. He approaches this claim through two examples, pleasure and pain, with pleasure being the major objective the passions seek, and pain being the inevitable events in life that must be endured. There is a clear hierarchy of these two examples and the former shall be discussed later with focus.

Firstly, pain is not the desired outcome that passions seek, rather, they are unexpected “accident”. So naturally, minds without judgment cannot properly process pain and would likely intensify the extent of the harm. The fear of pain, as discussed in an early essay of Montaigne named That to philosophize is to learn to die, is falsely connected to and caused by the fear of death [2]. The connection between pain and death can be easily established: pain usually marks the end of pleasure, and defeats and overturn it; pain indicates disease which causes death; death appears to be painful. Marking these three exemplary arguments as A, B and C, A will be discussed later along with the moderation judgement has to pleasure; For B, though the statement is true, many diseases with great pain such as gout are not lethal; For C, there is simply no way of confirming. Since there are no evident connections between pain and death, the general opinion of them being related is a false opinion and should not be accepted since the fear generated through such thinking would worsen the effect pain has on people. So, what judgment does, as portrayed in the essay That the taste of good and evil depends in large part on the opinion we have of them [3], is that it molds the soul to better cope with pain, and is a way of seeking contentment.

Finally, passions naturally drive people toward pleasure, and such drives are irresistible without clear judgments, and excessive pleasure will inevitably lead to harm and pain, at which point the purpose of the initial seek of pleasure is defeated, and the essence of the action is lost. This point is derived from real-life experiences that one may simply relate to. For instance, the initial purpose of alcohol use is generally pleasure or avoidance of pain, but excessive alcohol use brings harm to the body and the action itself becomes pain, which defeats the initial purpose. So, one of the roles that judgment plays is a speed enforcement officer that makes sure human actions do not go above a certain limit because beyond which the actions would lose their essence, which can be described as a form of moderation from the soul to the body. In specifics, the judgment is able to detect the limit of pleasure by examining experiences such as an unwanted outcome or simply displeasure, which allows the judge to then restrict passions with the purpose of enjoying our being better. And the reason why this role of judgement is so essential, according to the later passage of the essay, Montaigne considers judgment as the guidance towards the essence of human life, whereas he does not attempt to seek such essence beyond the natural inclination of humans which is the desire for pleasure: instead, he embraces this idea of contentment and considers judgment as the assistance for it. Judgment is necessary because, without it, the desire for pleasure cannot be satisfied given that humans’ physical condition can only tolerate pleasures up to a certain limit, and judgment is the only force of the soul that can restrain actions and passions. To put this with a metaphor, humans are cars that only drive on one bumpy road in one direction, the structure of the cars is fragile and cannot tolerate high speed. Without a break, the car will go as fast as possible and damage itself, hence the break, which is judgment, is necessary for controlling the speed of the car to avoid damage. A slow and peaceful trip toward the desired destination, in my opinion, is what Montaigne believes to be the way to “enjoy our being rightfully” [1]. Montaigne does not see the necessity of anything in human lives apart from contentment, rather, he despises ideas that seek something beyond ordinary human lives and claim such living to be mundane and lack sophistication.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper analyzed the notion of judgment that Montaigne discussed in his final essay, *Of Experience*. Judgment is a faculty of mind that lies beyond emotions and passions. According to Montaigne, an ideal way of living

should be one that fully utilizes this part of the mind. However, this is generally neglected because people are easily misled by other opinions and have their judgments blocked by external guidance as opposed to grounding judgment in experience and especially of oneself. One way of realizing this neglect of proper judgment is through the study of one's personal experiences, by learning from the errors we once made in our past, and judging our judgments as they were, we can then come to realize the misuse of judgment and look to improve. The reason why Montaigne thinks judgment should be fully utilized is that it is capable of restricting and moderating passions. Such moderation is necessary because passions cannot lead humans to properly enjoy pleasures because they only drive people towards sensual pleasure, and humans' physical condition can only tolerate pleasures up to a limit. Therefore, in order to live life ideally as Montaigne portrayed, judgment must play the role of assisting and guiding us in the search for contentment.

References

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