

# Handout 1: Montaigne's Skepticism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
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Spring 2016

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a French lawyer, politician, writer, and philosopher. His main written work was a collection of pieces collectively called the *Essais*. Many people credit Montaigne with essentially creating the literary genre we call the “essay”: a short, personal exploration of particular topic. Montaigne’s *Essais* cover a huge range of topics: war, marriage, vanity, America and its inhabitants, death, sex, love, education, and on and on. They are, by and large, quite entertaining to read, and many are literary masterpieces. Throughout, Montaigne leans heavily on the works of ancient Greek and Roman authors, which were very popular and widely read in the sixteenth century, having been “rediscovered” during the Italian Renaissance.

The “Apology for Raymond Sebond” is the longest of Montaigne’s essays. Sebond was a fifteenth-century Spanish thinker whose book *Theologia Naturalis* argued that faith is not opposed to reason, but that faith is a necessary precondition for the use of reason. Catholic counter-reformers in the sixteenth century used Sebond’s book in arguing against protestant reformers: since reason alone is incapable of arriving at conclusions about doctrine, we should have faith in the church and tradition. Montaigne’s father had read Sebond’s book, and suggested that Montaigne translate it from Latin into French. He did so, and then wrote this “Apology,” which is ostensibly a defense of Sebond. However, very little of the “Apology” is actually about Sebond’s book.

In the passage we read, Montaigne argues that the senses cannot give us true knowledge of things. In other parts of the “Apology” he argues that reason cannot give us true knowledge either. Both ideas are expressions of Montaigne’s *skepticism*. Montaigne was heavily influenced in his thinking by the writings of the ancient Greek skeptic Sextus Empiricus, whose work made a big splash in European intellectual circles when a Latin translation of it was published in the 1560s.

Two different skeptical traditions come out of ancient Greek philosophy. *Academic* skeptics argue that we don’t know anything. This tradition is named after Plato’s Academy, whose leader Arcesilaus is credited with first defending the academic skeptical viewpoint. *Pyrrhonian* skeptics held that we should withhold judgment about everything — including whether we can know anything! This tradition is named after Pyrrho of Elis, a rough contemporary of Arcesilaus’s. Pyrrho left no writings behind, but Sextus Empiricus developed a thorough account of his skeptical views several centuries later. For ancient skeptics, especially the Pyrrhonians, skepticism was a whole philosophy of life. The skeptic, in withholding judgment, can achieve a kind of equanimity and detachment that enables him or her to enjoy a peaceful existence. Montaigne had Pyrrhonian sayings inscribed on the rafters of his home. He also had a personal medallion struck containing the Greek motto, *epoché*, which means, “I withhold judgment.”

## PASSAGES

The “Apology” is not well organized. Montaigne is fascinated by stories, observations, anecdotes, and he strews them throughout in ways that does not always make sense. He offers a wide range of skeptical arguments in the passage that you read. I want to focus on three of them.

The first is that whatever knowledge the senses give us is *incomplete*:

1. I have my doubts whether man is provided with all the senses of nature. [...] Wherefore we should take no assurance from the fact that our soul is content and satisfied with those senses we have, seeing that it has no means of feeling its malady and imperfection therein, if any there be. [...] When we see men blind from birth desire to see, it is not because they understand what they ask: they have learned from us that they lack something, that they have something to desire [...] Let an intelligent man imagine human nature as produced originally without sight, and think how much ignorance and confusion such a lack would bring him, how much shadow and blindness in our soul: it will be seen from this how important to our knowledge of the truth is the privation of another such sense, or two, or three [...] We have formed a truth by the consultation and concurrence of our five senses; but perhaps we needed the agreement of eight or ten senses, and their contribution, to perceive it certainly and in its essence (Montaigne, *Apology*, 289-292).

Montaigne is considering the possibility that we lack senses that other animals have (on page 291-292 he considers a number of possibilities). If so, then we should have little confidence that our senses give us the complete truth about the world around us.

The second is that the senses are *unreliable*:

2. As for the error and uncertainty of the operation of the senses, each man can furnish himself with as many examples as he pleases, so ordinary are the mistakes and deceptions that they offer us. [...] [T]hat the senses are many a time masters of reason, and constrain it to receive impressions that it knows and judges to be false, is seen at every turn. [...] This same deception that the senses convey to our understanding they receive in their turn. Our soul at times takes a like revenge; they compete in lying and deceiving each other (294-298).

On pages 295-297, Montaigne gives many examples of how our senses can mislead us. On page 298, he discusses ways in which our understanding or intellect can deceive our senses (E.g., “What we see and hear when stirred with anger, we do not hear as it is [...] To a man vexed and afflicted the brightness of the day seems darkened and gloomy.”)

The third is that we can have *no criterion* for determining if our senses are accurate:

3. As we say in disputes about religion that we need a judge not attached to either party, free from preference and passion, which is impossible among Christians, so it is in this. [...] To judge the appearances that we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle. [...] And as for saying that the impressions of the senses convey to our soul the quality of the foreign objects by resemblance, how can the soul and understanding make sure of this resemblance, having of itself no communication with foreign objects? Just as a man who does not know Socrates, seeing his portrait, cannot say that it resembles him (303-304).

To verify that the senses are accurate, we would need some way of comparing the truth about objects to the information we get through the senses. But how could we ever come to know the truth about objects except through the senses?