

Montaigne

by Bart Nooteboom

140. Montaigne on the move

published 7-4-2014

A central theme in this blog is movement, change: in development, evolution, discovery, and meaning. In preceding items I have been looking at change as an alternation, interaction, a merging and separation, between a principle of stability (Yin) and a principle of impetus (Yang).

Movement plays an important role in the philosophy of Montaigne, in contrast with most other Western philosophers. Might there be a connection with Yin and Yang? Here I make use of a treatise on movement in Montaigne by Jean Starobinsky¹.

Montaigne also holds a cyclical, organic view of change, but he does not reject acting in the world, as Taoism did (in *wuwei*).

However, having acted in public functions, among others as a member of the parliament of Bordeaux, in 1571, at the age of 38, Montaigne withdrew to the tower of his castle to reflect. He retired from what he saw as the posturing, hypocrisy, bragging, superficiality and mindlessness of public life and discourse.

To his dismay he next discovered that in solitude his thoughts flew off, chaotically, incoherently, in all directions. He realized that he needed some outside anchor to arrest his thoughts in some stability and coherence. He turned to the attempt to capture thoughts in writing them down. This led to his *Essais*.

Montaigne had a humanist orientation towards justice and empathy towards others, a strong sense of social responsibility, and an orientation towards others as an essential part of life. He granted that any criticism towards others might also be directed against himself.

However, a strong condition for external involvement was the preservation of his peace of mind and moral integrity. Montaigne remained inward looking, oriented towards the self as the sole arbiter. In my reading he failed to recognize that one needs not merely contributions to society, and receptive readers, but active opposition, in dialogue, as a test of one's ideas, to escape from one's own prejudice and blindness, as I have argued in this blog.

Next, Montaigne turned to a contrast between body and mind. The body represents heaviness, inertia, and the mind lightness, impetus. The body is needed to stabilize the mind, and the mind is needed to mobilize the body. Life is a flow of interaction between the two.

I find this interesting because it reminds me of the claim, which I adopted from Damasio (in item 8 of this blog), that it is the coming together of neural and other physiological processes, in embodied cognition, with the body as a focus, a locus of coordinated activity and mental maps, which creates some coherence and stability of identity.

Montaigne saw movement, in interaction of mind and body, not as continuous movement, somehow in between stability and change, heaviness and lightness, but as an alternation and interaction between the two. And indeed, if one watches an athlete in slow motion, one sees a flow of movement with a rhythmic succession of restraint and release. One sees it also in

ballet. I quote Starobinski: ‘.. the paradoxical marriage of passive surrender and active grasp, of relaxation and effort’ (p. 445, my translation).

Montaigne generalizes this to the good life, as an alternation, a feeding into each other, of mental and bodily pause and action, weight and lightness, rational restraint and spontaneous abandon, artifice and nature. As a dance through life.

To me, this is attractive, and it sounds like a description, or perhaps a manifestation, of Yin and Yang.

I would add: it is even better to have dancing partners. It takes two to tango.

155. Scepticism, relativism, and conservatism in Montaigne published 21-7-2014

If truths and values are relative, in a variety of views, each with an individual claim to validity, without a basis for claiming one view to be better than another, is there still anything to commit oneself to, to fight for? Or does one shrug and comply with the powers that be?

Montaigne was a sceptic and a relativist, to some extent.ⁱ He was committed to humanist sympathy with others and abhorred the excesses of violence in his time (the religious wars in 16th century France). Yet he feared what he saw as the even worse excesses of sedition and revolt. He preferred continuity and peace to mutations, revolutionary change. He feared that revolution would yield unforeseen disasters, the next tragedy of good intentions gone sour.

He was a moderate conservative, arguing that there are good reasons for the existing political and cultural order. It had not arisen for nothing. He did not believe in any absolute underlying value or validity, and his compliance with the established political order was ironic, dispassionate and purely formal. He went along not out of conviction but to preserve the peace.

I sympathise, in part, with the conservative argument. Given the complexity of social systems, which emerge rather than being rationally designed, there is a fundamental uncertainty of outcomes, and any intervention will indeed have unforeseeable, unintended and unwanted effects. Intelligent design is largely an illusion.

Also, from an evolutionary perspective, the existing order has survived the struggle of survival with alternatives, and can therefore claim some *fitness*.

However, the evolutionary argument is valid only if the existing order indeed has been and still is subject to the selective forces of competition with alternative ideologies. There lies the value of democracy. Authoritarianism is less adaptive. There must be freedom of rival views for the evolutionary argument to stick.

While Montaigne was occupied, obsessed, one could perhaps say, with his self, he was not indifferent or passive regarding society. He took on social responsibilities, e.g. as mayor of

ⁱ Here, as before, I use Jean Starobinsky, 1993, *Montaigne en mouvement*, Editions Gallimard

Bordeaux, but dispassionately, not sacrificing the integrity of his self, and trying to preserve his peace of mind.

How relativist is my plea for accepting, indeed rejoicing in *imperfection on the move*? Earlier in this blog I argued that while I admit that the moral and epistemic validity, and the meaning, of ideas depend on context and are subject to change, this does not entail relativism in the form of a claim that any judgement is as good as any other. Rival views may be *incommensurable*, yielding no points of contact for reasonable debate, but that should not be assumed too quickly. There are a number of common conditions for life and survival, and people are likely to have some common ideas as a foothold for some form of debate.

Hence in this blog I argued for a modest notion of truth as *warranted assertibility* (in item 104), and of morality as *debatable ethics* (in item 118).

This stance is nihilist in rejecting immutable absolutes of the true and the good, but it goes beyond nihilism, as I argued in items 19 and 148 of this blog, in the commitment to achieve improvement, even when acknowledging that that also will be imperfect. And, with a bow to Nietzsche, that is not so much a duty as a fount of flourishing life.

There is something odd in Montaigne's view that the existing order is imperfect but yet to be accepted, and rejecting change because it would fall into similar imperfections. Recognizing that all effort yields imperfection, one could still be on the move, trying to make improvements.

156. Montaigne and the mask of convention

published 26-7-2014

At first, Montaigne denounced the mask of social convention as make-belief, a lie, hypocrisy, an assault on truth. That motivated him to retire to his castle. Later, however, he adopted the mask as a necessary device, an interface and demarcation, between the make-believe of social functioning, as one part of human virtue, and authenticity and integrity of the self, as another, perhaps higher part of virtue. This is how Montaigne reconciled his being an independent thinker with his functioning as mayor of Bordeaux.

There is a connection here with the earlier series in this blog on Eastern and Western philosophy. Montaigne's predicament may reflect the tension between on the one hand a Taoist commitment to the purity and autonomy of nature, and on the other hand a Confucian commitment to social responsibility, with its artificiality and make-belief.

How satisfactory would it be, Montaigne's ironic, dispassionate social commitment, as a duty, without fight or self-sacrifice, without conviction other than taking one's responsibility and wanting to preserve the peace? The Taoist would rather abstain from social artificialities, in *wuwei*, than betray truth, nature and what is genuine. The Taoist rejects the mask as the early Montaigne did.

My view on the matter is this. One should act on one's beliefs, seriously, passionately even, not ironically, but with the pragmatist stance that the opposition one meets can feed, refresh and transform ideas and beliefs. That also can be a Nietzschean joy. Counter to Montaigne: it can yield the excitement of discovery. But it is not a Nietzschean will to power. It entails the

tolerance of give and take in dialogue, in debate. However, that is not without limit. If conviction cannot be shifted by reasonable debate, one should stick to it.

Surely, Montaigne is right in refusing to sacrifice or violate the self for the sake of social calling or duty. As I proposed in item 63 of this blog, Levinas seems to go too far in the opposite direction, surrendering the self 'as a hostage' to the other. But apparently Montaigne sees social action only as a sink, something one contributes to, not also as a source, something to learn from.

As I noted before (in item 140), Montaigne makes the error of seeing only one direction in the traffic between outward manifestation and inside flourishing. Others are not only receptacles for one's ideas, compassion and sacrifice, but also fountains of influence and opposition that help one to escape from one's prejudice and myopia, and thereby to flourish. Nietzsche also failed to recognize this (see item 60). Certainly, others may do more harm than good to the self, but that is no reason not to give it a chance, in seeking the good.

Did Taoism also make this mistake, of not seeing that action in the world, with other people, feeds the development of the individual?

¹ Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, Editions Gallimard, 1993 [1982].