**CORE 106 Fall 2015**

**October 14, 2015**

**Notes**

**Sarah Bakewell: *How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer***

Introduction: A great discussion about Montaigne’s philosophy of the mind and the radical transformation from the 1500’s to the 1600’s, when Montaigne went out of fashion.

But the largest point is this: what are we to make of critique to which 17th century thinkers subjected to Montaigne? Are those criticisms valid?

Chapter 4: "Read a lot, forget most of what you read, and be slow witted."

Great Montaignism: "At times we are a different from ourselves as we are from others."

Chapter begins with a reminder that Montaigne believes in authenticity, and the recognition that the observer is more volatile than the observed. You also get a taste of his understanding of time: writing bridges it. (64)

And the lightness: “I do not gnaw my nails over them; I leave them there. I do nothing without gaiety.” (68)

“Pierre taught him that everything should be approached in ‘gentleness and freedom, without rigor or constraint.’ Of this, Montaigne made a whole principle of living.” (69)

**[The story of Lyncestes] proved only that, under stress, an overburdened memory is likely to take fright at its load like a panicky horse, and dump the lot. (70)**

If Montaigne was too forgetful to keep stories straight in his head, he had to tell the truth. (71)

* **Truth is liberating, in that it does empty your mind.**

Consider the ideal of **involuntary memory**. (71) Nothing made an incident stick in the memory more than a conscious effort to forget it. (72) A reference to the slow food movement.

“Forget much of what you learn” …freed him to think wisely rather than glibly. (73)

Other:

His anchoring in the idea of fallibility. Influenced, among other things his philosophy of law. (78). Another new idea.

His discussion of Calvinism becomes important when we read Marilynne Robinson.

* Fatalist, contra our ordinary understanding of Calvinism.
* Our only real power is subservience to God.
* Catholicism’s response to Protestantism, at first, was reform and self questioning.

The sectarian strife wasn’t really theological, in Bakewell’s account.

Catholics came to believe that “the only path to political unity was religious unity.”

“Slowness and forgetfulness were good responses to the question of how to live, so far as they went. They made for good camouflage and they allowed room for thoughtful judgements to emerge. But some experiences in life brought forth a greater passion, and called for a different sort of answer.” (89)

**Chapter 7: Question everything**

Pyrrhonian Skepticism.

* **Key point on 124: All I know is that I know nothing (sound familiar)? The corollary: and I’m not even sure about that.**

Epekho**: I suspend judgment.**

**“Is the number of grains of sands in the Sahara even or odd.” How should I know? Epekho.**

**Page 125: To every account I have scrutinized which purports to establish something in dogmatic fashion, there appears to be another account….**

A real Pyrrhonian will suspend judgement even on questions that appear to be obvious. “Who is to say that pain is worse than pleasure?” (126)

Path to **ataraxia.**

“If they win their arguments, they show they are right. If they lose, that just prove they were right to doubt their own knowledge.” (126)

* **All Pyrrho renounced, according to Montaigne, was the pretension most people fall prey to: that of “regimenting, arranging, and fixing truth.” (127)**
* **To Montaigne, this approach meant we “weigh things rather than merely accepting them.” Critical thinking! (127) Is he overreaching?**

The problem is the incredible unreliability of human perception. Bakewell reemphasizes the ability to see outside of himself. (129)

* The pivot point of the story: Montaigne’s adherence to the Catholic faith.

“Human reason was only rarely considered something that could stand alone, unsupported by God.” (130) Skepticism was an ally of the church because faith trumped notions of “rational theology.”

“Religion must come to us by extraordinary infusion.” (131)

Fideism: The doctrine that knowledge depends on faith or religion.

“Fideism produced odd bedfellows: extremists and secular moderates were brought together by a shared desire to marvel at their own ignorance.” A great Bakewell senetence. (133)

QUESTION: Doesn’t this belief create the risk that we are merely organisms, machines?

* **“As the 16c receded into history and the 17th rolled on, people because disturbed by this picture of themselves as less refined or capable than an octopus.” (135) Concerns about morality and moral culpability.**

**“Do you reckon it as nothing to know God?” (136)**

**Each being, including animals, has its own way of perceiving the world.**

* **Can you see the problems? Resistance. Self-defense. Goals. Doesn’t skepticism breed passivity?**

**Descartes and Pascal:**

**Descartes emphasizes the soul (136). Animals lack souls, and without a soul, you are a machine.**

**Descartes argues for the need of ONE POINT of certainty.**

“Everything I perceive clearly and distinctly cannot fail to be true”. Surely one of the most astonishing statements in the whole of philosophy and one as far removed from Montaigne’s way of doing things as can be imagined. (139)

**“God must exist because man has a clear and distinct idea of his existence.”**

So what is the closest thing to truth:

1. Perception. “This shirt is green” is faithful to my reckoning of a green shirt.
2. Mathematics.
3. Science.

Descartes ushered in the desire for certainty and the penchant for extremism.

**Key passage on p. 141: A practical way out of the mess was found at last…modern science allows for an element of doubt, in theory, while in practice everyone gets on with the business of learning about the world….**

**Pascal feared skepticism because, unlike the readers of the 16c, he felt sure it did threaten religious belief. (143)**

**Pascal: Precusor to deLillo's *Libra*: “They want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts.” (145)**

For Pascal, fallibility is unbearable in itself. (145)

KEY POINT: Pascal wrote: "Human sensitivity to little things and insensitivity to the greatest things: sign of a strange disorder.” Montaigne would have put it exactly the other way around.

“Comfortable acceptance of life as it is, and of one’s own self as it is, drove Pascal to…fury.”