

## Authors' Response: Liberal Education and the Restless Soul

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We are grateful to the contributors for exemplifying the kind of conversation we hoped *Why We Are Restless* would inspire. Each embraces the spirit of the book, taking seriously our effort to clarify the Tocquevillian paradox: that citizens of modern liberal democracies are freer and more prosperous than almost anyone in human history, yet are restlessly discontent in ways that unsettle both our individual lives and our capacity for free and orderly politics. We seek to understand the origin and nature of this discontent through the work of Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, and Tocqueville—who are likewise concerned with *inquietude*.

Zuckert, Halikias, Yarbrough, and Callanan assess our scholarly work by the high standard of their own penetrating readings of those authors. Their lucid summaries of and objections to our arguments helped clarify our own thoughts. In particular, they prompted further thought about two important questions: first, what it means to write in public about the questions our authors raise; and second, what contribution liberal education can make to ameliorating the problems we describe.

Zuckert seeks to offer a more Montaignean reading of Montaigne than our own. We welcome this approach and appreciate her attention to the detail of Montaigne's text, consideration of his intentions, and defense of his distinctiveness as a thinker. Her central criticism concerns our contention that the search for "unmediated approbation" is a central theme of Montaigne's thought. We use this term to describe the core of Montaigne's distinctive understanding of friendship, patterned on his experience with Étienne de La Boétie. We believe that thinking about friendship so understood can be useful for assessing some distinctive social aspirations of modern people. Although Zuckert acknowledges that friendship was important to Montaigne, she writes that after La Boétie's death "there is no evidence in the *Essays* or his biography that he actively sought another such friend" (379). Instead, she claims that Montaigne retired to the solitude of his estate and that it is "such a solitary life that he recommends to his readers" (379). She is further concerned that our characterization of the aim of Montaignean

friendship as unmediated approbation makes him sound more subject to the approval of others than he would have accepted.

Zuckert rightly notes Montaigne's extensive praise of solitude and independence of judgment. But there is abundant textual and biographical evidence that he was no hermit. As Phillipe Desan writes, Montaigne's retirement from the Parlement of Bordeaux was not in fact a retreat from political life, but the first step in an advance.<sup>1</sup> Montaigne's life after retirement was far more socially and politically ambitious than readers have often supposed on the basis of the *Essays*—and extensive evidence of his energetic politicking forces us to reconsider the vision of Montaigne as an exemplar of contemplative solitude.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Montaigne sought to invite new friends into his life with the *Essays*, describing them as a series of open letters to potential friends. He writes down the details of his character in the hope that, "if my humors happen to please and suit some worthy man before I die, he will try to meet me." "I would go very far to find him," he continues, plaintively exclaiming "oh, a friend!"<sup>3</sup> His *fille d'alliance* and literary executrix, Marie de Gournay, sought to meet Montaigne in person based on her encounter with the *Essays*, following the pattern Montaigne hopes for here. To be sure, she was no La Boétie, but he nonetheless welcomed her into his life.<sup>4</sup>

Zuckert's critique of our discussion of friendship as unmediated approbation focuses on the noun in that formula, and she correctly notes his repeated warnings against mindlessly seeking others' approval. But she does not deal with the adjective in the formula, which is the heart of Montaigne's distinctive view of social life. True friends love one another, Montaigne tells us, not for pleasure, virtue, utility, or even because of shared ideas or a shared quest for truth; such Aristotelian forms of friendship fall short of the real thing.

<sup>1</sup>Phillipe Desan, *Montaigne: A Biography*, trans. Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 223. As Desan notes there, Montaigne enjoyed a "meteoric" ascent as an informal political operator, involving a great deal of social maneuvering, which Montaigne seems to have thrown himself into with gusto.

<sup>2</sup>Montaigne's political career after his retirement from the Bordeaux parlement included both extensive shuttle diplomacy and two terms as mayor of Bordeaux. The work of writing the *Essays* helped him realize his social and political ambitions, and he wrote with those ambitions in mind. As Douglas I. Thompson points out, when Montaigne first published the *Essays* in 1580, he rode off to Paris to present copies to the king and his court by hand. Douglas I. Thompson, *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>3</sup>Montaigne, *Essays*, 3.9.981 [911]. References to Montaigne's *Essays* give book, chapter, and page numbers for Pierre Villey's French edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1924), followed by page numbers in brackets for the translation of Donald M. Frame in his *Complete Works of Michel de Montaigne* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2003).

<sup>4</sup>Montaigne, *Essays*, 2.17.661–62 [610].

True friends love one another for “some quintessence of all this mixture,” which one can only describe through something like Montaigne’s famous formula, “because it was he, because it was I.”<sup>5</sup> Real friendship must be unmediated: no third term, such as pleasure, can explain what friends love in one another—they must love the person, not a quality. Thus, while Montaigne counsels against seeking approbation by the standards of others, it is the standards, not the approbation, that he sees as intrinsically dehumanizing—because standards focus on qualities rather than persons.

Understanding Montaigne’s attitude toward friendship in this way can help us grasp his intentions as a writer, which were at once to gain readers’ allegiance and to shape their tastes. Montaigne tells us that he sought to put his whole self on paper in the *Essays*, a book he describes as “consubstantial with its author.”<sup>6</sup> He published that book several times, aggressively seeking an audience. He does so, moreover, in French, which makes his book much more accessible than it would have been in Latin, the standard choice for authors of his era, and—because of his unusual education—his own first language. Few books have been so successful in winning their audience over. For centuries, reader after reader has reported discovering a new best friend in Montaigne’s pages. Montaigne, we think, intended to produce that effect: as most writers do, he sought readers’ approbation. And he sought it “not as a grammarian, a poet or a jurist,”<sup>7</sup> but as Michel de Montaigne: for his whole, unmediated self, in the manner of Montaignean friendship. He won readers’ approbation of himself, and the self, as a subject worthy of their attention.

Zuckert also argues that we have made Montaigne too similar to Rousseau. She rightly points out several significant differences between the two, such as Montaigne’s acceptance of the naturalness “of the desire to look good in the eyes of others” (380) as she puts it, which Rousseau describes as a historically contingent *amour-propre*. But these differences seem to us to exist in the context of some larger continuities between Rousseau and Montaigne, whom Rousseau read attentively. Those continuities may be seen in Rousseau’s focus on the self as an object worthy of study, his celebration of sincerity, his argument that nature should be understood as a standard of simplicity rather than teleological perfection, and his contention that natural life may be enough for human happiness without the help of grace.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 2.28.188 [169].

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 2.18.665 [612].

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 3.2.805 [741]. We hope that readers would benefit from reflecting on the most original and serious expression of the ambition to lay oneself bare before the world that motivates the secular-confessional culture all around us, replete with tell-all autobiographies and a cult of oversharing. For it is only by reflecting on the highest motives of such thought that we can take its proper measure, and perhaps gain some resistance to the inflated expectations and frequent disappointments to which it seems to give rise.

These threads constitute a tradition that links Montaigne, Rousseau, and others in a distinct school of modern naturalism.

Halikias's contribution is an incisive essay on Pascal in its own right. Halikias accurately grasps not only our interpretation of Pascal but the role Pascal plays in our overall argument, and he points to the deepest questions we attempt to raise about what human beings are, and about what kind of education can lead us to see the truth about ourselves. Just as Zuckert argues that our Montaigne is insufficiently Montaignean, so Halikias argues that our Pascal is insufficiently Pascalian. His critique focuses on two related points: first, that our ultimate recommendation of the liberal arts departs from the Pascalian core of our argument, which would indicate asceticism rather than study as a treatment of our inquietude, and second, that by not emphasizing original sin, we obscure one of Pascal's central Christian convictions.

We welcome this concern for the most faithful possible reading of the author in question. But we seek to attend not only to what these authors explicitly say but what their words effectively do. In the case of Pascal, this means attending to the apologetic strategy of his work, which is a profound meditation on what it takes to effectively announce the Gospel to an audience with no initial interest in it. Attending to Pascal's art of writing with apologetic intent leads us to think that Pascal would be more sympathetic to our recommendation of liberal education than Halikias allows. Halikias suggests that the liberal education we recommend is essentially Montaigneanism—the "high-class hedonism" (385) of the effete dabbler in delightful books. While we agree that liberal education often falls prey to this vice, we think Pascal would support a different form of liberal education that attends to both the concern for the souls of others at the heart of Christian charity, and the desire to understand God at the heart of Christian faith.

Pascalian liberal education seeks to liberate from sin, making us aware of our fallenness and need for reconciliation with the divine. We agree with Halikias that ascetic practices can be a mark of genuine (and perhaps more direct) self-knowledge. Pascal himself engaged in ascetic self-denial—much more of it than he let on in his writings. But when Halikias suggests that Pascal would "have demanded ascetic self-denial *rather than* a core curriculum" (385, emphasis added), he fails to consider what it takes to effectively demand such practices. Even where Pascal points to the need for ascetic self-denial in the *Pensées*, he does not begin with that argument. This is probably because he considered the magnitude of the rhetorical feat he was attempting: to convince sophisticated, well-to-do, self-satisfied Montaignean hedonists that they are fallen, miserable, and in need of redemption. He crafts a rhetorical approach suited to that challenge.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, S680/L418. References to the *Pensées* give fragment numbers according to Sellier's and Lafuma's numberings, following the practice of Roger Ariew's English translation (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004). For the French texts,

Pascal approaches his readers by giving a comic account of our ordinary behavior, intended to help us see our foolishness and self-contradiction. Wondering at our own strangeness, we then see that our strange behavior hides our misery from ourselves. By pointing out everything from the inanity of our love of diversion to the tragic perversities of human justice, Pascal hopes to dislodge us from our complacency, encourage us to face our unhappiness, and prompt us to become what he calls “seekers in anguish.”<sup>9</sup> Pascal’s liberal education gives him both the penetrating familiarity with human things and the rhetorical skill necessary to be a singularly powerful Christian apologist, capable of charming the great ladies of Parisian salons as well as the stern theologians of Port-Royal. He gets under the skins of readers as skeptical as Voltaire<sup>10</sup> and Nietzsche<sup>11</sup> because he makes a serious effort to know such souls better than they know themselves. He does so by acquainting himself with their heroes: particularly pagan philosophers such as Epictetus and above all Montaigne. He deals seriously with what is most serious in the intellectual tastes of his contemporaries. This charitable approach has always made him interesting, even irresistible, to some readers who believe they have nothing to learn from Christianity.

But Pascal’s encounter with Epictetus and Montaigne did not only allow him to understand his neighbors better. It also undergirds the depth and originality of his anthropology and theology, allowing him to understand both himself and the God-man of the Gospels better. For Pascal, the two great philosophic types—Epictetus, with his dutiful and proud stoicism, and Montaigne, with his hedonistic and despairing skepticism—exemplify human greatness and human misery. Their arguments and ways of life typify all of philosophy, and thinking through their confrontation and mutual destruction helps us understand what we are looking for that philosophy cannot give us. The hedonism of Montaigne and the stoicism of Epictetus “ruin and annihilate one another so as to make way for the truth

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we use that of the *Ceuvres complètes* of Henri Gouhier and Louis Lafuma (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963). The sophistication of Pascal’s rhetorical considerations is well attested. As his sister, Gilberte Périer, puts it in her brief life of Pascal, he was deeply interested in “eloquence,” which he understood as an art consisting in knowledge of “certain relations which must be found between the heart and the mind of those to whom one speaks, and the thoughts and expressions which one uses.” Périer, *Vie de Monsieur Pascal*, in *Ceuvres complètes*, 23. Pascal’s nephew Étienne Périer describes the rhetorical intention of the *Pensées* as to speak to religiously “indifferent” readers. Étienne Périer, “Préface [à l’édition de Port Royal],” in *Pensées*, ed. Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 44.

<sup>9</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, S192/L160.

<sup>10</sup>Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, no. 25, “Lettre sur les *Pensées* de M. Pascal,” in *Mélanges*, ed. Jacques Van Den Heuvel (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

<sup>11</sup>Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, trans. Paul V. Cohn (New York: Macmillan, 1913), “Assorted Maxims,” § 408.

of the Gospel."<sup>12</sup> In Pascal's telling, Jesus surpasses the philosophers in two directions at once, greater than Epictetus and more miserable than Montaigne. He combines these distant extremes in the startling figure of a God who lives as an impoverished practitioner of a cranky, provincial religion, is tortured and dies as a criminal, and nonetheless was there at the world's beginning, will be there at its end, and commands winds, demons, death, and sin in the meantime. Thinking about Montaigne and Epictetus helps Pascal understand, and show us, how this paradoxical God-man might be the strange answer to the strange question of the human heart.

Christian vocations are various, and sainthood, the Christian "one thing needful," has often come to those with little education of any kind. But there is a place and a need for liberally educated Christians, who seek to know the minds of their times better than they know themselves, and who have unique resources for helping us understand the depths of the Gospels afresh, rescuing the great surprise of Bethlehem from the staleness of repetition. As long as there are human beings who love thinking, Christianity will need to approach them through the avenues of the mind. Liberal education is indispensable for doing so. Such intellectual Christians should not, however, overestimate their rhetorical powers. Halikias rightly notes that we take an oblique approach to original sin. We did so because we believe, with Pascal, that it is "the most incomprehensible of all mysteries."<sup>13</sup> We limit ourselves to attempting, in Pascal's manner, to lead Montaigneans to wonder at their own strangeness, hoping that they might assume the life of seeking in anguish that alone can allow us, with the help of grace, to enter such mysteries.

Yarbrough nicely sums up the book's overall intention: to indicate to the young that "the modern turn away from the transcendent in all its forms (philosophic, religious, and heroic). . . explains the restlessness of their souls" (386). She joins our effort to treat Rousseau as a fascinating intellectual failure and provides an able précis of the Rousseauian system that finds the unity behind its many contradictions. She focuses her critical energies on our assessment of Rousseau's account of the romantic couple in *Emile*. Rousseau depicts the formation of a marriage, grounded in the complementarity of the sexes, as one way forth from the dividedness he describes as the fundamental problem of modern man. Yarbrough notes that it is not just any marriage, but "only the romantic family based on the supposedly natural division of sexual roles that can possibly overcome our dividedness" (388). We agree that sexual complementarity is essential to Rousseau's argument. We do not emphasize that point because it is not necessary to our own argument and would likely distract from it. That argument is that Rousseau thinks through the principles of modern political anthropology with remarkable

<sup>12</sup>Pascal, *Entretien avec M. de Saci*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 296; see also *Why We Are Restless*, 78 and 208n52.

<sup>13</sup>Pascal, *Pensées*, S164/L131.

power and shows, perhaps against his own intention, that a coherent pursuit of happiness is not possible on the basis of that anthropology.

We think, with Aristotle, that human beings are rightly understood as social, familial, political, and rational animals, and with Pascal that we must also be understood as God-seeking, self-transcending animals. Modern thought, from Montaigne and Hobbes through Locke and Rousseau, denies our social, rational, political, God-seeking, self-transcending nature, so as to defend the independence of the individual from society, and the independence of the human from the divine. Our declarations of independence, however, often leave us feeling isolated and deprived of the standards, natural and revealed, we need to orient our lives. Human beings who understand themselves to be free, independent, and accountable to themselves alone often feel like meaningless accidents who might as well not exist. Many turn to strange and sometimes extreme measures to relieve the resulting disquiet: distraction, ambition, the worship of sex, revolutionary and totalitarian politics, intoxicants, self-harm, and even suicide. One such measure, in some ways superior to the others, is the one Yarbrough emphasizes: to ask sexual differences and the family to bear the full weight of the human search for meaning. But sex is not everything, and not even the most loving family can bear the weight of the human desire to matter. *Emile* is a singularly powerful distillation of this desire to find in marriage a remedy for what ails us. Its sequel illustrates why that remedy will not work. In our own view, marriage may be better and less tragically understood if we see it as one sacrament among others, not as the apex of human existence.

Here and elsewhere, the great lesson of the failure of Rousseau's "sad and great system"<sup>14</sup> is that one cannot understand human life or live it well based on his principles. Rousseau borrows some of those principles from modern liberal thinkers more commonly associated with the American way of life, and thinks them through to paradoxical and disquieting conclusions. Our description of the illustrative experimental catastrophe of Rousseau's thought and life is intended to encourage Americans to rethink some of their most basic presuppositions about themselves—not to become a different people, but to recover the richer moral and intellectual heritage of our past that we need to understand ourselves and make good use of our political inheritance.

Callanan brings out the political dimension of our argument, grasping our intention to draw a line from the quest for immanent contentment to both Donald Trump and cancel culture. He raises important questions about historical causality, and aptly encapsulates our sense of the strange place of Montaigne in American life: the philosophy of Montaigne, "is not studied but is followed among the Americans" (390). He rightly wonders whether

<sup>14</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 105.

our unselfconscious Montaigneanism is merely a matter of material conditions, as Tocqueville sometimes seems to imply about American Cartesianism. Is it part of the Protestant theological inheritance? What accounts for the intellectual influence of writers over people who do not read very much?

We sought to avoid the oversimplification of historical causality that comes naturally to people who love old books and see their enduring power. We think historical causality is complex, as human beings are: political, religious, material, ethical, and intellectual all at once. In our view, Montaigne's thought makes its mark on the United States for several reasons. First, he articulates his understanding of the human quest for happiness against the backdrop of religious war, and Americans know that their own history began in the flight from such conflicts. We do not wish to go back, and so we often prefer not to ask the existential questions that seem to fuel such conflicts. For those who do not ask such questions, attempting to dabble one's way to happiness makes implicit sense.

Second, material conditions make this Montaignean view of happiness plausible: to human beings mired in poverty, Montaigne's variegated hedonism would be a cruel taunt, not an inspiration. With reliably decent standards of living, our ruling class reflects the combination of soft mores and expansive desires Montaigne made to seem attractive. Third, Montaigne was read by almost everyone in the European intellectual world for several centuries. Thinkers such as Bacon, Locke, and Montesquieu, whose thought powerfully influenced the American founding, carefully studied and thoroughly absorbed him. Although copies of the *Essays* were rarer in the American colonies, they made their way into the libraries of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Montaigne's winsome worldliness has powerful charms for people who want to be sophisticated and decent simultaneously. As Americans ascend the social scale and discover the delights and discontents of its upper reaches, they naturally drift in a Montaignean direction, wherever they may have started out. For these and other such reasons, Montaignean thoughts wend their way into the minds of Americans who have never heard of him.

Callanan also argues that we underplay the role of the love of equality in understanding American restlessness, and extend Tocqueville's concern with forms beyond the political realm to which he confined it. We agree about the significance of the love of equality. While we do not use that phrase, the thought behind it drives much of our analysis, including our discussion of the instinctive offense Americans take at inequality, our understanding of the remarkable democratic ability to perceive equality in the

<sup>15</sup>See *Why We Are Restless*, 15–16 and 198n9, and Daniel R. Brunstetter, "Benjamin Franklin's Three Montaignes: The *Essays*, the *Éloges*, the Man," *Montaigne Studies*, no. 31 (2019): 1–16.



face of apparent inequality, and our concern with the universal envy that is the dark side of universal compassion. In all these ways, the democratic love of equality sharpens the modern restlessness characteristic of societies oriented around the pursuit of immanent contentment.

In addressing our treatment of the democratic distaste for forms, Callanan wonders if we unduly broaden Tocqueville's concern beyond the need for the political forms he emphasizes (such as due process) and into the social realm (where the respect for forms appears as politeness, formality, and other signs of social respect). Tocqueville stresses the import of political forms above all, and we follow the implications of his thought further into social life and psychology than he explicitly does. But we believe that we thereby faithfully extend the consequences of his thought rather than departing from it. One may see that Tocqueville's concern about the potential excesses of antiformalism was not limited to the political in his meditation on the potential excesses of democratic family life, where a commitment to informality could erase the necessary distinction between children and parents. He also showed that formlessness in the life of the mind—the democratic hostility to ever following a single master or mode of thought—could leave us rudderless and easily manipulated by the tyranny of public opinion.<sup>16</sup>

Callanan reasonably asks why “Tocqueville's greatest political fear—soft despotism—does not feature more prominently” (393) in our account. We do not mean to discount its dangers. But soft despotism has been widely discussed and is one of the few dangers Tocqueville considers to our republican political order that has entered into our political vernacular, where it has its own nickname, “the nanny state.” We intended to concentrate on the less well-studied question of the psychic preconditions that make soft despotism attractive. Like Halikias, Callanan doubts the recommendation of liberal education as a countermeasure to Tocquevillean restlessness in our conclusion. We agree that religion and the “practical exercise of political liberty” (393) which Tocqueville recommends are essential to the civic well-being of modern democracies and the sanity of modern citizens. We remain convinced, however, that liberal education rightly understood is the proper remedy to some of our ailments. The prayer and politics recommended by Halikias and Callanan are good things. But man was born not only to pray and to politic but also to think.

The restless unease that unsettles our political and personal lives derives in part from a failure to understand ourselves, and to think well about the objects in which a human being might reasonably invest the hopes of a life. Across the spectrum, intellectuals, politicians, and others of influence willfully contradict themselves from one sentence to the next, substitute ad hominem attacks for substantive arguments, see words as totems of power rather than symbols of truth, and ignore the deepest reasons others have

<sup>16</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schliefer (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2010), 2.3.8, 2.1.1–2.

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for seeing the world differently than they do. Increasingly, Americans follow their lead and ignore the most basic canons of coherent thought. These are intellectual problems that must be met with intellectual remedies, which it is the work of educators to provide.

Liberal education—through which human beings train their minds to help them make good use of their freedom—thus has an indispensable role in any effort to find a measure of equilibrium. While cynicism may tempt us when thinking about the potential revival of an education that would deserve the name liberal, there is no choice but to hope and work towards such a revival. The only way forth from problems that begin with thinking badly is to train the younger generation to think better. We hope that helping the young become aware of, and think well about, the deepest human questions can contribute to their individual flourishing and the continuation of our tradition of self-government. Insofar as our problems have an intellectual dimension, there is simply no alternative to attempting to think our way out of them.