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What Does It Mean to be Human, and Not Animal? Examining Montaigne's Literary Persuasiveness in "Man is No Better Than the Animals"

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Abstract: *Michel de Montaigne famously argued in "Man is No Better Than the Animals" that humans and non-human animals cannot be dichotomized based on language or reasoning abilities, among other characteristics. This article examines a selection of writing features at play in the text and discusses how successfully they convey Montaigne's claims. Throughout, I argue that Montaigne presents a superficially convincing case for doubting a categorical distinction between humans and animals on linguistic and rational grounds through the use of rhetorical questions, listing, appeals to authority, point of view, imagery, and narrative anecdotes. However, Montaigne's rejection of a human/animal distinction appears self-refuting since the form and content of his text both suggest that humans typically possess some degree of unique language and reasoning capacities.*

The question of what it means to be human, when viewed through an essentialist lens, can be addressed by defining what important characteristics or abilities distinguish humans from non-human animals (hereafter animals). Michel de Montaigne argues that such dichotomizing is unjustified in "Man is No Better Than

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the Animals," an excerpt from his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1580–92). In the text, he examines an abundance of possible defining features of humanity, but for clarity, this article focuses on just two: language abilities and rational thought.[1] Herein, I critically examine the form and content of Montaigne's text and judge its literary persuasiveness for readers accordingly. My discussion focuses largely on contemporary readers, but, where relevant, I also consider how historical readers may have responded to Montaigne's writing. Specifically, I analyze the use of rhetorical questions, listing, appeals to authority, point of view, imagery, and narrative anecdotes. I conclude that although the text is convincing in parts, much of its force derives from Montaigne's calculated use of literary techniques as opposed to his logical arguments. Indeed, Montaigne's skillful use of language and reasoning suggests, ironically, that humans may well possess unique abilities in both these respects.

Since its first publication, Montaigne's text has posed a challenge to the deeply entrenched view that humans are superior to animals across various dimensions (Foglia 2014). Contemporary interpretations have generally found the arguments it contains insightful and Montaigne's writing eloquent. George Boas (1933) asserts "the general impression which one derives from this essay is…that we are not better—if not worse—than the beasts" (9). Equally charitable readings persist among more recent critics, who often view Montaigne's text as an erudite contribution to debates in human-animal studies.[2] Laurie Shannon (2013) illustrates this in claiming that Montaigne "may be the most sweeping expositor of the scientific experiment/imaginative act that zoographic critique entails" (134) and that his text "scatters the traditional hierarchy" (193) of humans being thought above other animals. Furthermore, James Ramsey Wallen (2015) remarks that Montaigne's text "offer[s] fertile ground today for thinking and rethinking the human/animal distinction" (476). Recent critical readings, however, usually consider "Man is No Better Than the Animals" within the context of Montaigne's larger body of work (e.g. Melehy 2006; Randall 2014; Shannon 2013). Few, if any, sustained discussions concentrate solely on this particular section of the *Apology.* This article contributes

[1] Many points I discuss also apply to other aspects Montaigne considers, however.

[2] Montaigne's text features in Niall Shanks' (2002) *Animals and Science: A Guide to the Debates*, as well as Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald's (2007) *The Animals Reader*, an anthology of "essential classic and contemporary writings" according to its subtitle.

to the existing literature by giving "Man is No Better Than the Animals" the focused and thorough critical analysis it deserves.

Additionally, there has been somewhat limited attention in past interpretations toward examining how, through destabilizing the species boundary, "Man is No Better Than the Animals" addresses the question of what it means to be human. Wallen (2015) briefly considers this aspect of the text, noting that some passages "might be read as early examples of posthumanist theory/rhetoric" (450). Ayesha Ramachandran (2015) also acknowledges the text's contribution to this question but does so only fleetingly within a broader discussion about Renaissance humanism (8–9). Consequently, this article works toward ameliorating the gap in the current literature by analyzing how Montaigne's text scrutinizes what it means to be human.

In biological terms, to be human is to possess DNA which sufficiently resembles a typical *Homo sapiens* genome. Where precisely to draw such a line of sufficiency is controversial, but wherever one chooses to place the cut-off point, this criterion provides a plausible scientific demarcation. However, it fails to address what it means to be human; at best, DNA defines what it *is* to be human. If "meaning" is taken to denote the "significance, purpose, underlying truth, etc., of something" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online* 2018) then DNA will clearly not suffice. If somebody discovered that due to a strange genetic deformity, their DNA had mutated such that it was no longer "human," this would not detract from the value or meaningfulness of their existence. Thus, defining what it means to be human via such an essentialist interpretation requires isolating one or more characteristics or attributes that are central to the significance of human life.

There is an important distinction, however, between "human" and "person." In the philosophical literature, the term "human" is synonymous with "member of *Homo sapiens"* while "person" refers to any entity—be they human, chimpanzee, robot, or alien—who possesses, to some degree, capacities such as "rationality, command of language, self-consciousness, control or agency, and moral worth" (*Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* 2016). Consequently, defining what it means to be human must be distinguished from clarifying what it means to be a person. Such definitions have proven crucial in recent legal cases contesting what rights should be afforded to non-humans such as chimpanzees (Holtum 2017). The question at hand might, therefore,

be suitably rephrased as follows: what significant characteristics, if any, do humans possess but animals do not, which give meaning to human life?

It is this formulation which Montaigne addresses in "Man is No Better Than the Animals." To do so, he considers various potential criteria for distinguishing humans from the rest of the animal kingdom including language, rationality, altruism, emotional capacity, and soul possession, among others. Montaigne begins by criticizing the arrogance of humans who presume their superiority over animals without good reason—"Presumption is our natural and original malady" (401)—and argues it is by this "vanity" that man "attributes to himself divine characteristics" (401). This introduction effectively primes readers to duly consider the claims presented in the body of the text. Characterizing those who hold unwarranted assumptions about humans' abilities as being presumptuous and vain is likely to result in readers wanting to distance themselves from this position. Further, in this opening section, Montaigne questions the anthropocentrism common during the early modern period through an epigrammatic rhetorical question: "When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?" (401). Through this, readers are encouraged to cast aside their pre-existing speciesism and approach the subsequent arguments from a less biased perspective than they otherwise might.

As the text continues, Montaigne "tests" the many proposed human/animal distinctions by swiftly transitioning between historical material, personal experiences, and empirical evidence to show that animals demonstrate exceptional abilities often attributed solely to humans. Though some sections mainly focus on a central topic—Montaigne dedicates two pages in the early part of the text to discussing language (402–03) and concentrates on rationality through four consecutive pages later (412–15)—he frequently switches attention between key concepts. Language reappears as an important point in several places, as does rationality.[3] Such rapid shifts in ideas, combined with Montaigne's prolific use of anecdotes, quotations, and rhetorical questions, bombard readers such that they often may not scrutinise his arguments before being quickly led to another point. This abundance of information, in conjunction with the mockery of those who hold anthropocentric ideas in the first few

[3] For language, see pages 407–08, 412, 416; for rationality, see pages 404, 406, 408–09, 411, 416, 418–19, 421–22, 434.

paragraphs, may pressure readers to accept Montaigne's claims without carefully contemplating the quality of arguments or evidence provided.

Comparing the human and animal faculties for language and communication is a prominent theme throughout the text. Montaigne integrates a variety of writing techniques to argue that humans and animals are unable to be easily distinguished on their language capabilities including rhetorical questions, listing, and appeals to authority. Notably, he combines these features to maximize their effects. Montaigne generally does not use rhetorical questions to present standalone claims but rather strategically places them toward the end of more developed arguments to solidify his point before moving on. For instance, after paraphrasing Plato's conception of the Golden Age where humans and animals communicated with one another, Montaigne asks, "Do we need a better proof to judge man's impudence with regard to the beasts?" (402). The question could well be answered affirmatively—Plato was wrong on many topics, and perhaps his interpretation of Greek mythology is one of them—but Montaigne's placement of the rhetorical device subtly induces readers to side with his position without attempting to answer the question. Classical writings held sway over much of Western thought in the early modern era, and hence Plato's argument provides a widely accepted, albeit fallible, "proof" for Montaigne's position. Immediately afterward, Montaigne even describes Plato as "That great author" (402), further establishing the role of the question as being merely to fortify readers' pre-existing affiliation with respected classical works.

Later on, Montaigne employs listing to build his case against the human/animal language distinction further. After explaining some examples of inter-species communication among animals—"In a certain bark of the dog the horse knows there is anger" (402)— Montaigne claims that "Even in the beasts that have no voice, from the mutual services we see between them we easily infer some other means of communication; their motions converse and discuss" (402). Montaigne anticipates the objection that this non-verbal communication is insufficiently complex to be equated with the sophisticated language skills humans possess, so as a counterargument he provides an extensive list of non-verbal communication among humans:

> What of the hands? We beg, we promise, call, dismiss, threaten, pray, entreat, deny, refuse, question, admire, count, confess, repent, fear, blush, doubt,

> instruct, command, incite, encourage, swear, testify, accuse, condemn, absolve, insult, despise, defy, vex, flatter, applaud, bless, humiliate, mock, reconcile, commend, exalt, entertain, rejoice, complain, grieve, mope, despair, wonder, exclaim, are silent, and what not, with a variation and multiplication of the tongue. (403)

This *ad nauseam* list may overwhelm readers with information, thereby lulling them into complacency and reducing their likelihood of attempting to falsify Montaigne's claims. There are several examples provided which are less than convincing. For instance, it is rarely the case that people can promise or flatter with their hands alone; rather, hand gestures serve to accentuate verbal expressions. In fairness to Montaigne, however, the majority of his examples are reasonably sound and hence suggest that an anthropocentric focus on verbal language above other forms is unjustified. Thus, Montaigne's use of listing persuades readers that body language is more complex than might be first thought. Animals, then, may communicate in more sophisticated ways than humans often give them credit for, and human language skills could reasonably be deemed less exceptional as a result.

There are many cases where Montaigne uses quotations from authority figures to provide additional support for the claim that humans cannot be distinguished from animals on linguistic grounds. Scholars have noted Montaigne often borrows heavily from ancient works throughout much of his writing (Melehy 2005, 274; Randall 2014, 16). Among those whom he quotes directly in the text (he paraphrases several others) are Lucretius (402, 407, 408), Tasso (403), Dante (407), and Martial (416). All are well-known classical figures: precisely what was required to appeal to educated readers during the early modern period. Incorporating such material demonstrates that Montaigne himself was well-read and that his ideas were consistent with classical writers, thus helping to persuade historical readers.

Interestingly, though, the quotations add little to the substance of Montaigne's argument. Some merely repeat what Montaigne has already said, such as when he writes, "we discover very evidently that there is full and complete communication between [animals] and that they understand each other" and follows this with a quotation from Lucretius: "Even dumb cattle and the savage beasts / Varied and different noises do employ / When they feel fear or pain, or thrill with joy" (402).

This only rehashes what Montaigne has previously stated; it does not further develop his line of reasoning. Other quotations such as "Likewise in children, the tongue's speechlessness / Leads them to gesture what they would express" (402), also from Lucretius, are poetically phrased— hence giving a certain mellifluousness to the text through their rhyme— but add little to Montaigne's substantive points. His purpose for using such quotations is often not to assist in constructing cogent arguments, but rather to impress and flatter the reader while at the same time increasing the text's flow and eloquence.[4]

Montaigne's rejection of a language-based distinction between humans and animals is, on the whole, unconvincing. He does make a strong case that animals have some level of communication skills (402–03, 407) and correctly notes that young children and inhabitants of "a far country" (416) may have limited language abilities. However, this fails to disprove that humans and animals do, typically, show a significant discrepancy in their capacity to use language effectively. Montaigne's own writing is a case in point: he uses rhetorical questions both to dispel assumptions and subtly influence readers, listing to inundate and provide evidence, and quotations to flatter and enhance the text's fluency. Written language itself is uniquely human, at least by most understandings of what constitutes writing. Animals may possess some language skills, but most humans, like Montaigne, have language abilities far exceeding these. The linguistic discrepancy between humans and animals, then, may not be categorical but is of a significant enough degree that a distinction may reasonably be drawn.

A possible explanation for why humans alone use language so fluently and purposefully is because only humans possess rationality. This view was prevalent during Montaigne's time, stemming in part from Thomas Aquinas' claim that the ability to reason separates humans from other species (Frampton 2011, 101). Montaigne disagreed with this and argued that humans and animals cannot be dichotomised on the basis of rationality any more than they can on language abilities. In the text, he attempts to show that animals exhibit sophisticated reasoning capacities too. He elucidates this point through various techniques including point of

[4] Critics have acknowledged Montaigne's skillful use of this writing style. Sarah Bakewell (2010) goes as far as saying that "Montaigne neither argues nor persuades; he does not need to, for he *seduces*" (148).

view, figurative language, and narrative anecdotes, which together project a seemingly plausible position at first glance.

Point of view is among Montaigne's most essential methods of encouraging readers to question whether rationality is a uniquely human attribute. Montaigne constructs a personal, embodied, intimate point of view throughout the text—characteristic of his writing—through the use of tone and the balancing of singular and plural first-person pronouns. In one part, Montaigne writes with a sensitive and empathetic tone to depict animals and the natural world sentimentally: he describes birds as caring for the "tender limbs of their little ones" (404) and characterises Nature itself as having a "maternal tenderness" (404). In other sections, he uses a more humorous tone, one instance being when, after providing a series of examples of animal reasoning, he writes that animals' "brutish stupidity surpasses in all conveniences all that our divine intelligence can do" (404). This mocking tone mimics the vocabulary Montaigne attributes to his opponents earlier on, and so by ridiculing the anthropocentric position he encourages readers to echo his rejection of the orthodox view.

In conjunction with his sagacious use of tone, Montaigne's variation of pronouns induces readers to assent to his arguments while at the same time establishing an amiable and casual author-persona. Inclusive pronouns, notably the first-person plural "we," draw readers in when Montaigne describes observations of animal intelligence they are unlikely to have seen directly: "we see the goats of Candia, if they have received an arrow wound, go and pick out dittany out of a million herbs for their cure" (411); "In the way the tunnies live we observe a singular knowledge of three parts of mathematics" (428). By contrast, Montaigne uses singular first-person pronouns in various parts to emphasise his active presence as a communicator: "So, I say, to return to my subject" (408); "I observe with more amazement the behaviour…of the dogs that blind men use" (412); "I do not want to omit citing another example of a dog" (414). This careful balance between plural and singular forms, coupled with the many instances of Montaigne's empathetic and emotionally responsive tone, presents the text through a deeply personal, embodied point of view. Readers are prompted to side with the persona Montaigne constructs and hence accept the arguments he provides.

Further strengthening his case against the human/animal divide are several instances where Montaigne uses figurative language to present human rationality as less spectacular than often thought. In one section, Montaigne discusses the complaint some have voiced toward nature for making humans "the only animal abandoned naked on the naked earth" (405), that is, having skin rather than a protective exoskeleton or heat-retaining fur. He sarcastically describes these "vulgar complaints" through a metaphor: "the license of their opinions now raises them above the clouds, and then sinks them to the antipodes" (405). This comparison holds theological connotations and parallels the uncharitable description of the anthropocentric position given earlier in the text:

> He feels and sees himself lodged here…farthest from the vault of heaven…and in his imagination he goes planting himself above the circle of the moon, and bringing the sky down beneath his feet…. He equals himself to God, attributes to himself divine characteristics, picks himself out and separates himself from the horde of other creatures. (401)

The metaphor, then, can be interpreted in light of the previous passage. Claiming a person's arrogant opinions "raises them above the clouds" invokes images of Heaven, perhaps intended to attack the commonly held belief that humans are superior since God created animals with the intention that humans should have dominion over them (see Genesis 1:26–28). Montaigne uses "antipode" in accordance with the term's geographical definition, meaning the point on Earth which is diametrically opposite a given location.[5] Thus, by describing people's opinions as "sink[ing] them to the antipodes," Montaigne means that holding these arrogant and rationally unjustified views will not grant access to the place "above the clouds," Heaven, but to its geographical opposite, Hell. People's dissatisfaction with what Nature has endowed them will, in the long run, only cause them unhappiness. Montaigne's metaphor for the irrationality of people complaining about their natural faculties creates a palpable image of Heaven and Hell. Doing so showcases how vain such a belief is, due to the comparison to Heaven, and how possessing these thoughts may entail negative ramifications by "sink[ing] them to the antipodes." This metaphor, therefore, illustrates what Montaigne considers a clear example of human irrationality.

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[5] The term "antipodes" could not refer to Australasia since the region had not yet been colonized at the time of Montaigne's writing.

Montaigne's attack on such "vulgar complaints" is not limited to figurative language, however. Immediately afterward, he gives several plausible counterexamples to the idea that having skin somehow disadvantages humans. For instance, he notes that there are "many nations who have not yet tried the use of any clothes" (405) and others who have been frugal in their use: "Our ancient Gauls wore hardly any clothes; nor do the Irish, our neighbors, under so cold a sky" (405). Through these reasoned, empirical observations, readers are led to understand that the prevailing dependence on clothing is not necessary for survival but is instead a social custom. However, this whole section of the text comes across as one extended straw-man argument. Presumably, it is only a minority of the population who truly voice complaints against having skin rather than fur. So, although Montaigne's use of both figurative language and empirical evidence suggests that humans can act less rationally than often thought, this point does not generalize sufficiently to show that humans are, on the whole, more irrational than commonly believed. Montaigne's seemingly eloquent prose is undercut by the lack of substance in his overall claim here.

There are numerous examples given throughout to show Montaigne's other major point: that animals exhibit greater rationality than people usually credit them with. These often take the form of anecdotal and historical stories which, as Boria Sax (2013) notes, is a technique many writers have used over the centuries to show the complexity of animals' emotions and intelligence (74). In one example, Montaigne describes a story of a fox who is said to "bring his ear very near the ice, to hear whether the water running beneath sounds near or far" (409). Montaigne suggests we would "not have reason to suppose that there passes through his head the same reasoning that would pass through ours, and that it is a ratiocination and conclusion drawn from natural common sense" (409). There are many other stories of animal intelligence throughout the text, including a magpie memorizing and repeating a complex tune (414), a dog placing stones in a partially filled bucket of oil so it could lick the oil after it rose to the top (414), and Thales' mule who, when loaded with sacks of salt, lowered himself into a river to decrease the weight (421).

These cases seem to be impressive examples of animal reasoning and intelligence, but only if interpreted without knowledge or consideration of other plausible accounts of animal behavior. In the fox story, for instance, the animal's actions may not

demonstrate the sort of intelligent cognitive processes Montaigne suggests. René Descartes opposed Montaigne on this point, arguing that such animal behavior could be explained as the result of "passions" rather than reasoning (Melehy 2006, 264). Modern-day readers may explain the fox's behavior as a consequence of straightforward operant conditioning. When, after hearing the water sounding a particular way, the ice breaks and the fox is unpleasantly submerged, this may deter the fox from crossing the river after hearing similar sounds in the future, assuming it survives the ordeal—positive punishment, in psychological terms. Likewise, when the water flow creates a different noise, and after hearing this the fox is not submerged, this may reinforce the same behavior in the future. This process does not require the sophisticated intellectual abilities Montaigne proposes. Similarly, the other stories can be explained without animals possessing meaningful rationality. Their persuasiveness relies on readers being willing to go along with Montaigne's implied explanations. Niall Shanks (2002) describes Montaigne as "an astute observer of animal behavior" (45). But this judgment seems somewhat too charitable since if readers consider the many credible alternative explanations to Montaigne's, his claim that animals exhibit intelligent reasoning fails to hold any water.

To briefly recap, there are two approaches Montaigne takes throughout the text to discredit the rationality distinction between humans and animals. The first is revealing humans to be less rational than typically thought, which he strives to do through figurative language and appeals to empirical evidence. However, his straw-man tactics let him down in the case described above, and at best he shows that some people hold a particular irrational belief while failing to show that humans are, generally speaking, no better than the animals. The second approach Montaigne takes is to show that animals are more rational than they are given credit for, mainly through anecdotal stories. But to be convincing, these stories must be read without contemplating other reasonable explanations to those provided, which perhaps much of Montaigne's original audience, but fewer contemporary readers, are likely to do.

Ironically, Montaigne's own writing can be used once more to show that humans and animals may be distinguishable on rational as well as linguistic grounds. His carefully constructed author-persona through variations in tone and pronouns, his creative use of figurative language to argue his case, and his many appeals to empirical observations of animal behavior all demonstrate a level of rationality and intellect

above that which animals seem to express. As with language, the difference between humans and animals may not be categorical since animals do exhibit some forms of reasoning. Humans, however, appear to possess a degree of rationality beyond that which has been observed in animals, and Montaigne himself exemplifies this.

Looking back now over the text as a whole, Montaigne addresses the issue of what it means to be human by asserting an unconventional position for his time: that many of the proposed criteria are unsatisfactory since humans are no better than the animals in these respects. Among these, he critiques linguistic and rational distinctions as potential qualities for being human rather than animal. Montaigne employs a wide array of literary techniques to try to persuade readers on this point, but these are convincing only to a limited extent. Though he manages to show that the human/animal divide is not strictly categorical, Montaigne fails to demonstrate that humans are no better than the animals in either of these aspects.

Ultimately, it is the reliance on superficial arguments without rigorous analysis that lets Montaigne down; his eloquent prose, itself indicative of supra-animal language and reasoning skills, cannot substitute for logical argumentation. The literary practices Montaigne employs may well have been among the most effective means of convincing readers when the text was first published. However, for those willing to look beyond the text's rhetorical façade, many of Montaigne's claims appear less than persuasive. This is not to say that humans and animals are necessarily distinguishable on linguistic and rational grounds—the contemporary literature offers many plausible reasons to question whether they can be—but simply that Montaigne fails to show that such human/animal dichotomies are unjustified in "Man is No Better Than the Animals." On the basis of this text, at least, what it means to be human as opposed to animal may very well include language abilities and the possession of rationality.[6]

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