

# The Art of Conversation and the Revival of the Humanities

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**N**O ONE IS HAPPY WITH THE STATE OF THE HUMANITIES; the dominant characterization of the problem by humanists themselves is crisis. Indeed, as Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon point out in *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*, humanists have been describing their disciplines as in crisis for the better part of two centuries. The word “crisis,” they note, appeals to humanists because it cast them as defenders of “the human” against the degrading forces of modernity, from natural science to capitalism. If the humanities are in crisis, it is because they fight the good fight against overwhelming odds.

But a crisis that endures for two centuries is not really a crisis. The right word for the state of the humanities is less crisis than decadence. As Ross Douhat defines it, decadence is characterized by repetition, intellectual exhaustion, and despair—sentiments familiar to all those who know the academic humanities from the inside. While many humanistic scholars still run great seminars and write valuable books, the larger story is one of shrinking enrollments, discontinued PHD programs, and demoralized teachers. The reason for this lack of interest is not that the humanities go against the grain and court cancellation, but that they go with the grain and drift into irrelevance. The egalitarianism, liberationism, and opposition to hierarchy characteristic of much humanistic writing and teaching are not actually an exciting challenge the prejudices of democratic societies. For the goodness of egalitarianism, liberationism, and the anti-hierarchical spirit are exactly what democratic societies take for granted, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out long ago.

In their erudite expression of a dominant worldview, the academic humanities today resemble the medieval universities as the Renaissance humanists saw them: an entrenched and insular guild, more obstacle than venue for the flourishing of the intellectual life. But that does not mean the humanities as such have nothing to contribute to our world. As Reitter and Wellmon point out, the term “humanities” has several meanings. The word refers not only to a set of university disciplines, but also to the study and practice of a set of intellectual arts—principally poetry, history, and moral philosophy—which have no necessary connection to academic institutions. The Renaissance flourishing of those arts, from Petrarch and Boccaccio in the fourteenth century to Cervantes and Shakespeare in the sixteenth, took place outside the university’s walls, and was conceived by many of its practitioners as an alternative to the decadent form of intellectual life that possessed these institutions.

When one separates the substance of the humanities from the academic disciplines that bear their name, their present state and prospects look brighter. Book sales of classic titles in literature, philosophy, and history are strong. Reading groups abound. The classical schools movement, which now counts some million students, asks the young to read and take seriously works that have nothing to do with the contemporary spirit in ethics and politics—from the history of Egypt to the geometric proofs of Euclid to the lives of the saints. Many of them fuse the spirit of religion and humanism in a way that is original and fecund.

The humanists of the Renaissance may offer a lesson to us insofar as they showed how intellectual life can be revived from outside dominant institutions. Importantly, they distinguished themselves from the theologians, jurists, and doctors of the universities not only in the substance of their thought but also in their characteristic forms of speech and writing. As Marc Fumaroli points out, they rejected what they regarded as the dead and rigid forms of university speech—*lectio*, *quaestio*, and *disputatio*—in favor of the free and lively forms of letters, essays, and conversation. They brought these arts to high degrees of perfection in their writing and their lives, leaving a literary legacy that subsequent generations would treasure.

In the art of conversation, in particular, present-day lovers of the humanities may find something to imitate and to offer that may be of service to the wider world. Despite our digital connectedness, ours is an age of isolation, alienation, and division. More people are living alone than ever before; many are disconnected from and distrustful of the major institutions of social and civil life, from town government to Hollywood cinema; social media echo chambers relentlessly vilify those with whom we disagree. While many exclusive universities have turned themselves into pricey, judgy monocultures that exacerbate these problems, the humanities’ historic cultivation of the art of conversation might contribute to ameliorating them.

The art of conversation the humanities cultivates leads us to engage with those with whom we disagree, for intelligent disagreement is indispensable to intellectual progress. It draws its vitality from the intrinsic interest of the subject at the center of humanistic inquiry: the question of how to live. In a time of existential dislocation and social atomization, those who model thinking well about our lives in the company of those with whom we disagree have something unmistakably useful to offer.

We may see what the art of conversation can be by considering how it was practiced by two of its principal adepts. Both were moral philosophers, or, as the French term has it, *moralistes*, interested above all in the question of how human beings live. Each of them—Michel de Montaigne, the archetype of French humanism, and his most important successor in the tradition of the *moralistes*, the extraordinary polymath Blaise Pascal—expounds a different vision of the good life. And each assigns conversation an essential but distinct role in that life.

In them, we may see a case for the enduring relevance of the humanities as arts that both help us think our own lives through and bring us into conversation with one another. Such a reminder is perhaps more important for our universities than any other institution in our society. For while universities still pay lip service to “great conversations” and “meaningful dialogue,” many have become places where alarming numbers of students and faculty are afraid to speak their minds. If the humanities—understood not as a proprietary domain of the university, but as an inheritance freely given to anyone with a library card—can offer us this reminder, they may make a modest but concrete contribution to developing the conversational disposition of which our academic, personal, and public lives seem so sorely in need.

### **Michel de Montaigne: Conversation and Presumption**

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is the emblematic figure of humanism in France. His three semi-autobiographical volumes, the *Essays*, brought the essay into being as a literary art form, and were some of the most widely read books in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They have retained their charm ever since, as was recently illustrated when Sarah Bakewell’s brilliant biography of Montaigne, *How to Live*, became a surprise bestseller in 2010.

Like most Renaissance humanists, Montaigne never taught at a university. His attitude toward academic life is that of a satirical outsider, and he gins up brilliant copy by lampooning learned pretension and pedantry. His own humanism, by contrast, comes across as rich, free, and winsome. Though his learning is vast, he

wears it with a light touch. Every sentence he writes hums with wit, pathos, or irony. He makes clear that he is neither poet nor historian nor philosopher (except “accidentally”), yet he engages with all of them as a free and intelligent equal. And he turns his impressive intellectual resources to the purpose of humbling yet liberating self-instruction, according conversation a central place as an art that both shows us our limits and exercises our judgment.

Montaigne lived his adult life during France’s wars of religion: a nasty and confusing three-way conflict that raged from the massacre of Huguenots at Vassy in 1662, when Montaigne was thirty, until the Edict of Nantes secured religious peace in 1598, six years after his death. Those wars are never far from Montaigne’s mind as he writes the *Essays*. His humanism proved an attractive alternative to the theological intransigence and bloody-mindedness that beset his country.

The *Essays* seek to intervene in that conflict at the most fundamental level: the level of self-understanding. Montaigne argues that the “original and natural malady” of the human race is what he calls “presumption.” He sees this presumption as the psychological root cause of the conflicts that swirled all around him, noting that “it is putting a very high price on one’s conjectures to have one’s neighbor roasted alive because of them.” In the *Essays*, he creates a series of “secular spiritual exercises,” as Pierre Manent has put it, intended to remedy that original and natural malady.

The method of the *Essays*, as Fumaroli suggests, is conversational. Every chapter puts human possibilities in dialogue with one another, drawing from the manifold examples available to Montaigne in the books with which he surrounded himself and the conversations and experiences of which he made the *Essays* a detailed record. This comparative method encourages a complex mixture of appreciation of the many ways human beings live their lives, modesty about one’s dispositions and accomplishments, and the free but unpretentious exercise of individual judgment about the whole.

One sees this method at work in Montaigne’s assessments of the characters with whom he populates the pages of the *Essays*. He honors the Roman citizen-martyr Cato the Younger in his place, but pulls back from the brutal extremes to which he took his civic dedication. Of some of the religious orders of his time, he writes, “I do not fail, just because I am not continent, to acknowledge sincerely the continence of the Feuillants and the Capuchins, and to admire the manner of their life:” he respects religious self-restraint without seeing any need to imitate it. The greatest of philosophers, for Montaigne, is Socrates, with whom he constantly engages in the *Essays*. And the distinctive model of moral and intellectual life he presents to the world is self-consciously divested of the highest moral and intellectual aspirations Socrates holds forth.

Constantly comparing himself to these and many other examples of how people have dealt with what he calls “the human condition,” Montaigne makes his own modest life the unassuming hero of his book. He describes that life as “humble” and “inglorious,” and fills it with satisfying, varied, but unambitious activity. He enjoys his travels, but has none of the ambitions of an explorer or hopes of the pilgrim. He has love affairs and eventually a marriage, but prides himself on never expecting too much from either. He reads, but specifies that he prefers light books, Plutarch and Ovid, to the heavy-duty philosophizing of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

Montaigne places the art of conversation at the center of this way of life. He calls it “the most fruitful and natural exercise of our minds,” and uses it to both assert his own freedom and keep the temptation of presumption in check. In an essay entitled “On the Art of Conversation,” he tells us that he seeks out disagreement, and delights in the freedom of spirited intellectual contestation, for “unison is an altogether boring quality in conversation.” He admires and engages in frank disagreement, disdains the pulling of punches, and likens good conversation to jousting. And yet he counts it his victory when, “in the very heat of the battle,” he makes himself “bow beneath the force of my adversary’s reason.” Good conversation demands that one be at once free and modest, bold and reasonable.

Conversation partners capable of embodying this complex disposition are rare, and not always available in the flesh. Montaigne often finds the best conversation available to him in encounters with minds of the past available to him in the pages of books. And so he closes his chapter on conversation with an extended meditation on Tacitus. He both admires and differs from the Roman historian, defending his pagan religious views before his own Christian readership, yet criticizing his bashfulness in writing about the personal lives of himself and others. In so doing, Montaigne demonstrates the freedom and boldness of judgment, together with appreciation of others and modesty toward oneself, that conversation cultivates.

The taste for such conversation is not an accidental element of Montaigne’s humanism. “Our souls reach out beyond us,” he writes in the title of a brief but important chapter. We are naturally discontent and outward-looking—a disposition pregnant with trouble. Conversation brings us into contact with others, and the comparison it embodies and encourages allows us to weigh and consider their examples. But it ultimately brings us home to ourselves, in a motion Ann Hartle calls “circular dialectic,” with a perspective at once broadened, freed, and self-possessed. Such is the fruit of his humanistic conversation, which issues in a model of thought, sociability and life that a long train of readers would find preferable to the fanaticism so common in the France of Montaigne’s time.

## Blaise Pascal: The Conversational Path to the Greatness and Misery of Man

Montaigne would have a long train of admirers in the tradition of the *moralistes*. The greatest of them was the remarkable, even “frightening” genius, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Pascal called Montaigne the “incomparable author of ‘The Art of Conversation.’” Though Pascal would develop a Christian humanism which dramatically reverses Montaigne’s vision of the human condition, he always held the *Essays* close, treating it as a breviary of human psychology, and developing his own thoughts through an intense and intimate dialogue with Montaigne. His *Pensées* illustrate the depth human thought may gain from intense conversation with alternatives we reject.

Pascal was perhaps the most extraordinary mind to emerge from the rich intellectual world Montaigne helped foster in France. His father, Étienne Pascal, was himself a serious mathematician, connected to the best mathematicians of his time. He homeschooled his son in the gentle, humanistic spirit Montaigne recommended, and cared so much for his son’s humanistic studies of Latin and Greek that he withheld instruction in his own favorite subject, mathematics, lest it distract young Blaise from his languages. Neither father nor son were ever connected with a university.

Confronted with the extraordinary development of his son’s mathematical talents even without lessons, Étienne Pascal eventually relented and had the boy instructed. Blaise would prove to be a true prodigy, making world-historical contributions to arithmetic (with Pascal’s triangle), geometry (with his solution to the problem of the cycloid), and physics (with his discovery of atmospheric pressure). He was also a significant inventor, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, creating and marketing the world’s first mechanical calculator and implementing Paris’s first public transportation system.

As he matured, Pascal’s attention gravitated toward the question of how to live that was central to humanistic inquiry. And when he looked around at the pleasures and pursuits preferred by adepts of the Montaignean way of living popular with prominent people in his own time, he concluded that their outwardly splendid and diverting existences were so many ways of avoiding the most important human questions.

These were not the sour grapes of a disappointed outsider. Pascal successfully engaged in everything the variegated and charming world of learned Paris in his time had to offer. He participated in scientific endeavors and literary controversies at their most daring and exciting. He discovered mathematical truths both ingenious and enduring. He experienced the thrill of clandestine political activity and the glow of a writer’s fame. He knew good friends and the love of family. He had money and he made more of it. But his soul was too uncompromising and honest to accept any of the little fibs we deploy to

convince ourselves that the finite and fleeting things we can enjoy—wealth, fame, friendship, excitement—will really satisfy the longings of souls that can think about, and therefore desire, the infinite.

## **Montaigne's attitude toward academic life is that of a satirical outsider, and he gins up brilliant copy by lampooning learned pretension and pedantry.**

For Pascal, the Montaignean world of highbrow dabbling could be summed up in the word *diversion*. Travel, reading, flirting, hunting, gambling: all are a shield we hold up before our faces to blind ourselves to the fact that we are running toward a cliff. That cliff is death, and mortality is the most evident mark of the insuperable gap between what the human soul longs for and what human life can deliver. We want knowledge but dwell in ignorance; we want happiness but endure misery; we long to live and are fated for dust and ashes. Though something in us always knows this, we avoid looking at it by whatever means we can. And so we are attracted to anything that gets our minds off of ourselves: the insipid trivialities of salon gossip in Pascal's time or of Tik-Tok in ours; the intrigues of romance and sport; even the pursuits human beings take most seriously, from money to scholarship to politics. The chief attraction of all of it is that it relieves us of the burden of self-awareness.

Pascal judged the whole effort of Montaigne's *Essays*—to learn to be at home with oneself—paradoxically self-alienating. He sums up his own humanism in an aphorism that negates almost everything Montaigne stands for: *l'homme passe l'homme*, “man transcends man.” To be human is indeed to reach out beyond oneself, to have desires that outstrip our possibilities, intimations that point beyond what we can know, hopes that defy our mortal limitations. A truly human life goes with this motion rather than seeking to check it. To know the human heart is to know that no human thing can fill it, and to begin down the one path Pascal believes genuinely corresponds to that truth: the anguished but clear-eyed search for God.

As Pascal embarked on that search, he kept his Montaigne close, though he regarded some of the essayist's most important thoughts as “entirely pagan.” He had a special relish for Montaigne's “incomparable” chapter on conversation, and commends Montaigne's counsels of tactical tenacity when sounding the depths of others' convictions (i.e., receive other people's one liners with diffidence, to see if they will stick with their statements without approval). Such roughness is unavoidable for those who truly seek to discover “what there is that is good and sound at the bottom of the pot,” in Montaigne's

inimitable language—what lives in the secret recesses of human hearts, behind all the social subterfuge and self-deception. Such was Pascal's intention, and he found engagement with this powerful interlocutor an indispensable aid in developing his own understanding of the human condition and considering what might constitute a true answer to the question the human heart incessantly asks.

Pascal was familiar with Montaigne's brilliant observation intended to check our tendency to believe that the whole cosmos is interested in our fate:

Whoever considers as in a painting the great picture of our mother Nature in her full majesty; whoever reads such universal and constant variety in her face; whoever finds himself there, and not merely himself but a whole kingdom, as a dot made with a very fine brush; that man alone estimates things according to their true proportions.

Applying his own geometric mind to Montaigne's humanistic insight, Pascal at once deepens its pathos and reverses its import. There is no magnitude so great that we cannot double it; there is no unit of measure so small that we cannot divide it in half. Space spreads out quite literally to infinity; and there is no minimum limit, either—no indivisible atom upon which the whole might somehow rest. We are not merely a small point in nature's vastness. We are suspended between two infinities. To see as much is not merely to humble ourselves, but to enter into the unsettling wonder appropriate to our complete inability to comprehend our place in the whole.

The same dialectic between the great and the small is at work in Pascal's most sustained discussion of Montaigne. That discussion takes place in a gripping philosophic dialogue, recorded by Nicolas Fontaine, who witnessed Pascal's extraordinary first meeting with one of the priests who led the Jansenist sect who would play a decisive role in Pascal's intellectual and spiritual life.

In that meeting, Pascal and Father de Saci discuss the two philosophers most on Pascal's mind, Epictetus and Montaigne. Saci had a conversational art of getting people talking about the subjects they most cared about, and leading them from wherever they began in the direction of the Gospels. But Pascal's interior dialogue with the philosophers he most studied had its own religious motion, and took flight with very little help from Saci.

Pascal seeks to understand philosophy by putting two of its exemplars, Epictetus and Montaigne, into conversation with one another. In the stoic Epictetus, Pascal sees the heights of human greatness—of unflinching dedication to duty and courageous resignation to fate—that man can achieve by his own powers.



But he also sees that such heights are inseparable from dogmatism, presumption, and pride. In the hedonist Montaigne, Pascal sees the power of skepticism to shake us loose from such presumption, and make us aware of human frailty. But he argues that Montaignean skepticism and commendation of pleasure-seeking inevitably leads to despair.

Pascal depicts the confrontation of these two alternatives—stoic dogmatism and hedonistic skepticism—as a “battle of giants,” in the words of Graeme Hunter, which implicates all of philosophy. It shows the extremes of human possibility, which “ruin and annihilate one another.” Their mutual destruction makes way for the God-man of the New Testament, who combines the greatness of commanding creation with the lowness of a suffering servant, thereby stretching beyond anything human beings could hope to achieve and matching the worst we could fear to suffer. The old story of Bethlehem, Lake Gennesaret, and Golgotha is the paradoxical, non-invented answer to the human heart’s most profound terrors and longings.

Perhaps Pascal would have reached this and the other characteristic insights of his distinctly modern Christian apologetics without his intense conversation with Montaigne. But we will never know, for he found in Montaigne the key to understanding much about the hidden workings of the human heart and the fleeting fascinations of his contemporaries. Arguing with Montaigne made Pascal who he was.

Perhaps Montaigne could have been Montaigne without his love of conversation, and his constant comparative engagement with the thinkers and figures he so constantly interrogated. But that conversation is precisely what populates the vast world of the *Essays* and accounts for their enduring power to engage us. Despite their radically different answers to the question of the human soul, both these thinkers sought the human truth by grappling resolutely with those with whom they disagreed.

In a moment when so much of academic speech seems moribund, we should take a conversational lesson from these two kinds of humanists, who thought and lived outside the university. The fundamental reason for doing so is that their example may help us in the basic human task of living in the light of the clearest possible understanding of our situation. The deepest source of the enduring vitality of the humanities is precisely their capacity for helping us find, in one another, the resources we need to know ourselves. Whether in old institutional forms or new ones, a humanism that speaks to such abiding human longings will always be relevant. A