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MONTAIGNEAN STUDIES IN BRAZIL: FRANCO-BRAZILIAN DIALOGUES

Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia, a journal edited by Professor Plínio Smith (UNIFESP), has been dedicated since 2007 to promoting authors, themes, and issues related to skepticism, contributing – both nationally and internationally – to the debate and circulation of primary sources and scholarly commentary on ancient and modern forms of skepticism. In issue no. 29 (2024)¹, in addition to the excellent translation of Sextus Empiricus’s “The Five Modes of Agrippa (PH 1.164-177)”, *Sképsis* presents a twofold uniqueness: 1) for the first time, it has devoted an entire issue to studies on Montaigne, and 2) it has opened the floor for a debate that has been raised in recent years by Thierry Gontier regarding an interpretive reading that attributes to the *Essays* the seeds of modern liberalism.

Regarding the first unique feature – an issue dedicated to Montaigne – we highlight the diversity of themes and interests surrounding the *Essays*, demonstrating the plurality of perspectives in Montaignean studies in Brazil (ethics, politics, religion, language, anthropology, etc.), as well as the involvement of researchers from different generations and academic institutions.

The paper “Montaigne and Environmental Ethics” (in French) by Maria Célia Veiga França retraces two paths in the history of the relationship between humans and animals [França 2024]. First, it revisits the traditions of Judeo-Christian and Greek thought that place humans at the top of a hierarchical scale, with animals considered inferior. Next, it traces the history of a philosophy of “animal defense” featuring figures such as Pythagoras, Seneca, Plutarch, and, in a certain sense, even St. Thomas Aquinas. This second line of thought presents, as its reasons, the fact that the mistreatment of animals brutalizes human beings, that animal suffering matters, and, finally, that human moral goodness cannot be achieved without renouncing violence against animals. Thus, Veiga França argues that a close reading of the *Essays* reveals a Montaigne who clearly falls within the second group, despite not being a vegetarian. In the *Apology*, he not only dismantles the hierarchy among beings proposed by Christian authors, but he also asserts that humans and animals share a universal instinct. Furthermore, Montaigne extends a general duty of humanity toward animals, trees, and plants.

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¹ All materials from this issue are publicly available on the corresponding page of the journal's website: <https://www.skepsis.com.br/c%C3%B3pia-sk%C3%A9psis-28>

Pedro Carné's paper poses the question: "Is There a Philosophy of Language in Montaigne's *Essays*?" (in Portuguese) [Carné 2024]. The author's answer is clear, as he argues for the existence of a philosophy of language in the thought of Montaigne. Carné argues, on the one hand, that Montaigne was influenced by Sextus Empiricus's reflections when developing his own thoughts on the communicative purpose of human language; on the other hand, the essayist pioneered a line of thought all his own by maintaining that gestures can communicate what words cannot.

In her paper "Philosophical Exercise in the Essays and the Hadotian Approach" (in Portuguese), Maria Cristina Theobaldo begins by acknowledging Montaigne's strong connection to the Greco-Latin tradition. Based on this, she investigates how the philosophical practice in the *Essays* converges with or diverges from Pierre Hadot's concepts of "spiritual exercises" and "philosophy as a way of life" in ancient philosophy [Theobaldo 2024].

In his paper "Montaigne's Pyrrhonism in Descartes: The 'Apology of Raymond Sebond' as the Source of Provisional Morality" (in French), Marcelo Fonseca de Oliveira argues that Descartes's idea of "provisional morality" was already, in some way, formulated by Montaigne. Consequently, Oliveira positions the essayist, alongside Sextus Empiricus, as one of the principal sources for modern moral philosophy and skepticism [Oliveira 2024].

In the paper "Observations on Montaigne's Critique of Repentance" (in Portuguese), Sérgio Araújo argues that the chapter "On Repentance" constitutes one of the clearest expressions of Montaigne's growing boldness in defending his own positions, after his reputation had already been firmly established with the 1588 edition of the *Essays* [Araújo 2024]. There, Araújo examines the ways in which the essayist develops a polemic against the Tridentine requirement of mandatory private confession, while at the same time affirming, in contrast, the inner primacy of his own judgment and conscience.

André Scoralick, in his paper "Contingency, Inconstancy, and the Problem of Conduct in Montaigne's *Essays*" (in Portuguese), sets out to investigate the notion of inconstancy in the *Essays* [Scoralick 2024]. Once knowledge of the Good has been cast into doubt and reason dethroned from its position as the faculty capable of guiding us safely through practical life, all that remains for us is to learn to deal with our own contingency, passions, and inconstancy. It is from within this unstable and precarious scenario, then, that we must learn to extract the parameters and strategies to, if not act virtuously, at least act less viciously. This, Montaigne shows us, is the path of customs and the management of the passions.

Finally, our paper "Anthropological and Political Considerations in Montaigne's 'On Cannibals'" (In Portuguese) [Morador 2024] examines how Montaigne reverses the discourse of "absence" found in 16th-century navigation accounts. We show that he employs the terms "savage" and "barbarism" to relativize the customs of Indigenous peoples in the "New World" while simultaneously leveling a harsh critique of European society.

The second part of *Sképsis* 29 is dedicated to the debate surrounding the liberal interpretation of the *Essays*, which deserves special attention, as it constitutes a "bold reading", to use Sylvia Giocanti's terms [Giocanti 2024: 114].

Gontier defends this reading in his book *Virtuous Selfishness: Montaigne and the Formation of the Liberal Mind* (in French) [Gontier 2023]. A general outline of this work appears in his paper "Montaigne's Virtuous Selfishness, or The Making of the Liberal Mind" (in French too), published in *Sképsis* 29 [Gontier 2024a]. Broadly speaking, Gontier's thesis argues that in the *Essays* there is a shift in republican values, whereby Montaigne aban-

dons the civic virtues of the republican tradition in favor of qualities diametrically opposed to them, entirely linked to self-care. In other words, Montaigne would view zeal for the public as a form of “voluntary servitude”, which would leave no room whatsoever for individual freedom. Thus, devoting oneself entirely to the affairs of public life – as his father had done while serving as mayor of Bordeaux and as advocated by the republicans who were heirs to Ciceronian precepts – would mean subjecting oneself to the tyranny of the public. Conversely, rejecting this submission to public affairs would be the first step toward constructing an authentic space of freedom. For this reason, according to Gontier, Montaigne would present himself as endowed with qualities such as *nonchalance*, *versalité*, *lâcheté*, *mollesse*, etc., which would be completely incompatible with the virtues of the *vivre civile* of the republican tradition.

Thus, Montaigne, still according to Gontier’s interpretation, would bring about a reversal of values, abandoning the qualities related to the exercise of civic life – which characterized the virtues of the republican tradition – in favor of individual freedom. It is there that Gontier identifies, in the *Essays*, “*virtuous selfishness*”, which consists, in general terms, in the defense of the authentic expression of the *self*, as opposed to the “tyranny of the public” [Gontier 2022: 20]. Thus, not only would Montaigne’s connection to the genesis of the “liberal spirit” be established, but also a parallel between his conception of freedom and the concept of “negative freedom”, coined by Isaiah Berlin [Gontier 2024a: 117].

Gontier himself was aware of the risks of a reading that regards Montaigne as a precursor of the liberal spirit: “To see in Montaigne a precursor of the intellectual movement that we today call ‘liberal’ is undoubtedly to accept both an anachronism and an ambivalence” [ibid.: 106]. For this reason, his interpretation, though controversial, has a direct impact on the field of Montaigne studies, sparking a broad debate that was partially reproduced in *Sképsis* 29. There, one finds the general observations of Sylvia Giocanti and Emiliano Ferrari, who, from the outset, agree that Gontier’s interpretation is situated within a framework of problems, concepts, and vocabulary foreign to the context of the *Essays*, insofar as it draws on the analytical categories of contemporary liberal thought, openly assuming the risk of anachronism [Ferrari 2024: 143].

Furthermore, other points in this debate deserve attention. In her incisive analyses, summarized in her “Compte-rendu” on Gontier’s work, Sylvia Giocanti underscores the originality of this interpretation, while also raising important criticisms. One of these concerns the “thesis of the substantial character of the self”, defended by Gontier as the primary hallmark of the liberal spirit and interpreted by Giocanti [2024: 115-116] as something completely incompatible with a “skeptical anthropology”, according to which the being is devoid of nature and of a pre-social existence. According to Giocanti [ibid.: 116], the authenticity (identity) of the being is not given in its substance, nor is it constituted in a “pre-social or asocial state” that disregards social experience, but rather in social dynamics themselves – with others, in relationships, and in multiple experiences (in friendship, in public office).

Emiliano Ferrari also offers a direct critique of this idea of a pre-social subject, which is presented as the primary component of Montaigne’s liberal spirit. For Ferrari, Gontier’s thesis seems to overlook the “radical social determinism that Montaigne addresses” [Ferrari 2024: 146] in his essay on customs (I, 23). Like Giocanti, Ferrari agrees that this Montaignean subject is constituted first through multiple relationships (with books, with women, with the men around him) and not, as Gontier would have us believe, through a search for interiority and a rejection of public life. This pre-social individual, according to Ferrari,

would be nothing more than an abstract, fictional construct that does not correspond to the formulations in the *Essays*, which present a *self* embedded in a web of customs and collective dynamics from childhood onward.

Thus, Giocanti counters the image of a Montaigne who rejects external life to preserve individual freedom, safeguarding his inner life and subjectivity. Instead, Giocanti highlights the various facets of sociability found in the *Essays*: friendship, relationships with women, and conversations. In this sense, it is not a matter of a logic of opposition (public or private, external or internal), but rather an articulation of opposites. The *self* is not constituted outside of society, but at its very heart [Giocanti 2024: 120].

Another important point in Giocanti's critique concerns Gontier's argument that Montaigne reversed republican virtues. As mentioned earlier, Montaigne replaced Machiavellian *virtù* with *mollesse* and other qualities considered unmanly. He presented himself as incapable of public affairs and inclined to retreat into his *arrière-boutique*, in the manner of the Stoics. Giocanti interprets these qualities as an expression of Montaigne's skepticism, whereby he understands social institutions and political orders as no longer grounded in a metaphysical foundation but rather as derived from human experience, shaped by customs that are varied and relative to each time and place.² In other words, it is this "awareness of the relativity of customs" that leads Montaigne to adopt a less intransigent, less rigid, and less fanatical stance, one that advocates qualities associated with flexibility. Thus, contrary to Gontier's interpretation, Giocanti argues [ibid.: 118] that the *nonchalance*, the *souplesse*, and the culture of *mollesse* advocated by Montaigne are not vices, nor are they a rejection of public affairs; rather, they are public and private virtues that stand in contrast to the rigid conceptions of the wise.

In this regard, Ferrari criticizes the emphasis placed by Gontier's interpretation on Montaigne's supposed distrust of political engagement and participation in public affairs. For Ferrari, in the *Essays*, this distrust seems rather directed at a politics driven by factions – that is, small groups that hijack the political arena in defense of private passions and interests. Contrary to Gontier's reading, Ferrari sees in this critique of the public sphere an attempt to reconstruct politics on the basis of values (equality and equity) that are relatively distinct from those of liberalism and virtuous selfishness [Ferrari 2024: 151].

Joan Lluís Llinàs Begon takes a side in this debate; his analysis of Gontier's book can also be found in issue 29 of *Sképsis*. Llinàs agrees almost entirely with Gontier's interpretation. Thus, from the outset, he acknowledges that modern liberalism is rooted in the idea of individualism. He then accepts the interpretation that the *Essays* contain a defense of individualism. Thus, it is in this primacy of the individual over the social that the seed of modern liberalism is found: "one of the reasons for defending Montaigne's liberalism is that in it we find a defense of individualism" [Llinàs Begon 2024: 135].

For Llinàs, it would not be an anachronism to speak of individualism in the *Essays*, since the idea of the individual could be found even before Montaigne (in the figure of Socrates and also in Christianity's theory of individual salvation). The problem surrounding individualism – which Montaigne is said to have inherited even from the Christian tradition – would therefore consist in considering the tension between the individual and the communal [ibid.: 137]. Humanists, especially those of civic humanism, attempt to resolve

² Sérgio Cardoso takes this same line of thought and goes so far as to categorically state that, upon examining the main elements of Montaigne's political thought, we do not find a liberal conviction in the broad sense of the term [Cardoso 2024: 191].

this tension by identifying human fulfillment – the authenticity of being – in the sphere of public life. Montaigne, from this liberal reading, would have opted for the opposite pole: the human being is authentic and fulfilled through individual autonomy.

Llinàs seems to agree with this broader view. Indeed, although he has reservations about Gontier's strong emphasis on the separation between the inner and the outer, he still finds a "liberal education" proposal in the *Essays*. This is because Montaigne's educational project rejects authority and defends autonomy and freedom of judgment [ibid.: 138-139]. Thus, according to Llinàs, Gontier's interpretation would have presented "solid arguments in defense of a liberal position in Montaigne" [ibid.: 141].

However, as can be seen, this thesis regarding the seeds of liberalism in the *Essays* is controversial, and we tend to agree with the critiques of Sylvia Giocanti, Emiliano Ferrari, and Sérgio Cardoso, as we believe that this separation between public and private in Montaigne does not necessarily imply a rejection of public affairs or a defense of virtuous selfishness. In his own pedagogical project, in "On the Education of Children" (I, 26), Montaigne states: "If his tutor follows my opinion, he will shape his will to be a very loyal servant to his prince – one who is very devoted and very courageous – but he will dampen his desire to attach himself to the prince in any way other than through civic duty" [Montaigne 1595]³. Further on, he adds: "we who seek here, on the contrary, to form not a grammarian or a logician but a nobleman" [ibid.: 169]⁴. In this sense, there is an educational program aimed precisely at the *gentilhomme*, so that he may be educated for public life without running the risk of falling into "voluntary servitude".

Thus, it does not seem to us that Montaigne advocates rejecting public affairs. On the contrary, he wishes to form the *gentilhomme* who commits to his civic duties not out of private passions and interests, but for the common good. Montaigne's critique is directed at the politics of passions that have led the French kingdom into disputes between groups, factionalism, and, consequently, internal wars. It is not, therefore, a rejection of civic life or an apology for individualism, but rather the defense of a way of acting in the face of the demands of public life – a way that must be governed by simple civic duty and by an *ethos* befitting a soul formed for freedom.

In the same *Sképsis* 29, Gontier responds to the criticisms directed at his interpretation. Broadly speaking, he reaffirms the autonomy of the Montaignean "self" in relation to the social sphere, noting that Montaigne claimed independence from predefined social roles [Gontier 2024b: 157]. In this sense, adherence to customs would not occur because they play a formative role in shaping an *ethos*, but rather out of simple and even calculating adherence: while recognizing customs as irrational and as beliefs, they serve as the foundations of society because they enable a provisional stability. Thus, their value would lie precisely in the "cost-benefit" of a certain stability in the state of affairs, as opposed to the instability of constant novelty.

As for the criticisms directed at the idea of "virtuous selfishness", which involves the rejection of "servitude" to society, Gontier argues that a distinction must be made between "being for" and "living for" others. "Being for" others would not, in this sense, be incompatible with "being for oneself" [ibid.: 154-155] – that is, with the quest for authenticity of

³ Original text: "Si son gouverneur tient de mon humeur, il luy formera la volonté à estre tres loyal serviteur de son prince et tres-affectionné et tres-courageux; mais il luy refroidira l'envie de s'y attacher autrement que par un devoir publique" (our translation).

⁴ Original text: "Or, nous qui cherchons icy, au rebours, de former non un grammairien ou logician, mais un gentilhomme" (our translation).

being as articulated in the *Essays*. In other words, the various instances of relating to others would contribute to the construction of identity (they stimulate and foster personal development), but they cannot define identity, nor can they occupy our entire human dimension; it is up to the individual to seek an authenticity that does not involve complete devotion to the other.

In any case, Gontier's interpretive approach picks up the thread of important discussions in Montaignean scholarship over the last century – Gèralde Nakam, Anna Maria Battista, Arlette Jouanna, Philippe Desan – and revives the debate surrounding the political aspects of the *Essays*.

This 29th issue of the journal *Sképsis* thus marks the consolidation of a dialogue that has been developing for decades between Brazilian and French researchers regarding Montaigne's *Essays*. This dialogue has been fostered by educational institutions across diverse regions of Brazil (USP, UNIFESP, UFRJ, UFMG, UFMT, UFPB) and has as its focal points the Université Jean Moulin (Lyon 3) and the University of Chicago. This partnership has led to several important works that contributed to the dissemination of Montaignean studies. First, Telma Birchal edited issue 126 of the journal *Kriterion* [see Birchal 2012]. Next, Alexandrino Filho edited the book *Montaigne and His Time* [see Alexandrino Filho 2012]. Finally, volume 2 (no. 79/2024) of the *Bulletin de la Société internationale des amis de Montaigne*, dedicated to *Montaigne et le monde luso-brésilien*, provides an overview of Brazilian research and places it within international scholarship [see Azar Filho, Birchal 2024].

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Монтеневські дослідження в Бразилії: франко-бразильські діалоги

Рецензія на *Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia*, тематичний випуск 29 (2024) «Монтень і Тьєрі Гонтьє».

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