

of cannibals michel de montaigne

of cannibals michel de montaigne is a seminal essay that explores cultural relativism and human nature through the lens of indigenous peoples labeled as "cannibals" by European colonizers. Written by the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne, this essay challenges the ethnocentric views of his time and invites readers to reconsider notions of civilization, barbarism, and morality. Montaigne's work is notable for its skeptical approach and its emphasis on understanding rather than judgment, making it a foundational text in anthropology and philosophy. This article delves into the historical context, key themes, and lasting impact of "Of Cannibals," while also examining Montaigne's innovative use of skepticism and cultural critique. The discussion will cover Montaigne's background, the content and arguments within the essay, and its influence on both contemporary and modern thought.

- Historical Context and Background of Michel de Montaigne
- Summary and Analysis of "Of Cannibals"
- Key Themes in "Of Cannibals"
- Montaigne's Use of Skepticism and Cultural Relativism
- Impact and Legacy of "Of Cannibals"

Historical Context and Background of Michel de Montaigne

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) was a French philosopher and statesman known for pioneering the essay as a literary form. Living during the Renaissance, a period marked by exploration, religious conflict, and intellectual inquiry, Montaigne was deeply influenced by the humanist ideals of his time. His writings often reflected a critical examination of society, knowledge, and human behavior. "Of Cannibals," part of his larger work "Essays," was written in 1580 against the backdrop of European encounters with indigenous peoples in the Americas and elsewhere.

Montaigne's Intellectual Environment

The 16th century was a time of vast expansion for European powers, with

explorers bringing back stories and reports about foreign lands and cultures. These accounts frequently portrayed indigenous peoples as savage or barbaric, often emphasizing practices such as cannibalism to justify colonial domination. Montaigne's essay emerges as a counter-narrative to these prevailing views, reflecting Renaissance skepticism and a growing interest in the diversity of human customs.

Biographical Influences

Montaigne's education and political career exposed him to classical texts, philosophical skepticism, and the complexities of human nature. His personal approach to writing was introspective and reflective, aiming to understand rather than condemn. This background informed his method in "Of Cannibals," where he critiques European arrogance and advocates for a more tolerant and inquisitive stance toward different cultures.

Summary and Analysis of "Of Cannibals"

"Of Cannibals" is an essay that recounts the customs of a Brazilian tribe, focusing on their practice of cannibalism as described by European explorers. Montaigne uses this ethnographic description as a springboard to challenge European notions of civilization and barbarism. He argues that the so-called "savage" peoples possess virtues and qualities that European societies lack or have lost.

Content Overview

The essay begins with Montaigne recounting reports about the Tupinambá people of Brazil, emphasizing their bravery, simplicity, and strong communal bonds. He contrasts their behavior and moral codes with those of Europeans, particularly criticizing European cruelty and hypocrisy. Montaigne suggests that Europeans are quick to label other cultures as barbaric while ignoring their own moral failings.

Critical Analysis

Montaigne employs irony and juxtaposition to highlight the relativity of cultural norms. He questions the basis of cultural superiority claims by illustrating that "civilized" Europeans engage in acts far worse than cannibalism, such as religious wars and political oppression. The essay thus serves as a critique of ethnocentrism and an early exploration of moral relativism.

Key Themes in "Of Cannibals"

Several important themes emerge from Montaigne's essay, each contributing to its enduring significance in philosophical and anthropological discourse.

Cultural Relativism

Montaigne insists that customs should be understood within their cultural context rather than judged by external standards. He argues that what is considered barbaric in one society may be acceptable or even honorable in another, underscoring the importance of tolerance and empathy.

Nature versus Civilization

The essay contrasts the natural simplicity of the indigenous people with the artificial complexity of European society. Montaigne suggests that the "savages" live more authentically and in harmony with nature, while Europeans are corrupted by greed, ambition, and social pretenses.

Critique of European Ethnocentrism

Montaigne challenges the European tendency to view their culture as the pinnacle of human achievement. He exposes the contradictions and moral failings of European society, questioning the legitimacy of their judgment of other cultures.

Human Universality and Diversity

While recognizing cultural differences, Montaigne also emphasizes shared human traits and emotions, advocating for an appreciation of diversity without denying common humanity.

Montaigne's Use of Skepticism and Cultural Relativism

Montaigne is often credited with introducing a skeptical approach that questions accepted knowledge and beliefs. In "Of Cannibals," this skepticism

manifests in his refusal to accept European superiority as a given, instead encouraging critical reflection on cultural assumptions.

Skeptical Methodology

Montaigne's essay exemplifies his broader philosophical skepticism by withholding definitive judgments and inviting readers to consider alternative perspectives. He highlights the uncertainty and variability of moral standards across cultures, undermining absolutist claims.

Relativism as a Philosophical Stance

By emphasizing cultural relativism, Montaigne advocates for understanding and tolerance. His approach prefigures modern anthropological methods that prioritize cultural context and resist ethnocentric bias.

Impact on Enlightenment Thought

Montaigne's skeptical and relativistic ideas influenced Enlightenment thinkers who further developed concepts of cultural pluralism and human rights. His essay helped pave the way for more nuanced and respectful engagements with different cultures.

Impact and Legacy of "Of Cannibals"

"Of Cannibals" remains a landmark essay in the history of philosophy, literature, and cultural studies. Its insights continue to resonate in discussions about cultural difference, ethics, and the meaning of civilization.

Influence on Anthropology and Ethnography

Montaigne's empathetic portrayal of indigenous peoples contributed to the emergence of anthropology as a discipline. His insistence on cultural relativism anticipated modern ethnographic methods that seek to understand societies on their own terms.

Contribution to Literary and Philosophical Traditions

The essay is celebrated for its pioneering literary style and philosophical depth. Montaigne's use of the essay form allowed for a personal, reflective mode of inquiry that has influenced countless writers and thinkers.

Modern Relevance

In contemporary debates about multiculturalism, colonialism, and human rights, "Of Cannibals" offers valuable perspectives on tolerance, cultural understanding, and ethical reflection. Montaigne's work encourages ongoing critical examination of how societies define and relate to "the other."

Summary of Key Contributions

- Challenged ethnocentric and colonialist narratives
- Promoted cultural relativism and moral skepticism
- Influenced the development of anthropology and humanism
- Advanced the essay as a form for philosophical exploration
- Provided a framework for ethical engagement with cultural diversity

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'Of Cannibals' by Michel de Montaigne about?

'Of Cannibals' is an essay by Michel de Montaigne in which he explores the customs of indigenous peoples in the New World, particularly focusing on their practice of cannibalism. Montaigne uses this topic to challenge European ethnocentrism and to question the idea of cultural superiority.

When was 'Of Cannibals' written by Michel de Montaigne?

'Of Cannibals' was written in 1580 as part of Michel de Montaigne's collection of essays titled 'Essais.'

Why is 'Of Cannibals' considered a significant work in philosophy and literature?

'Of Cannibals' is significant because it is one of the earliest works to promote cultural relativism and skepticism about European notions of civilization. Montaigne argues that the so-called 'barbaric' customs of indigenous peoples may be more natural and morally sound than European practices.

How does Montaigne describe the indigenous people in 'Of Cannibals'?

Montaigne describes the indigenous people as noble savages who live in harmony with nature. He admires their bravery, simplicity, and social customs while criticizing European hypocrisy and cruelty.

What is the main theme of 'Of Cannibals'?

The main theme of 'Of Cannibals' is cultural relativism. Montaigne challenges the idea that European culture is superior and suggests that what is considered barbaric in one culture may be acceptable or even admirable in another.

How does Montaigne use the concept of cannibalism in his essay?

Montaigne uses cannibalism metaphorically to question moral judgments and cultural biases. He argues that cannibalism, while shocking to Europeans, is no worse than the violence and cruelty Europeans inflict on one another.

What impact did 'Of Cannibals' have on later thinkers?

'Of Cannibals' influenced Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, who developed the idea of the 'noble savage.' It contributed to debates about human nature, morality, and cultural diversity.

Is 'Of Cannibals' considered an example of early anthropology?

Yes, 'Of Cannibals' is often regarded as an early work of anthropology because Montaigne studies and reflects on the customs and beliefs of a culture different from his own, emphasizing understanding and relativism.

What literary style does Montaigne use in 'Of

Cannibals'?

Montaigne employs a reflective and personal essay style, using first-person narrative, anecdote, and philosophical inquiry to explore his ideas.

Where can one find the text of 'Of Cannibals' by Michel de Montaigne?

'Of Cannibals' is available in Montaigne's 'Essays,' which can be found in many public domain collections online, libraries, and various published editions.

Additional Resources

1. *Of Cannibals and Other Essays* by Michel de Montaigne

This collection features Montaigne's famous essay "Of Cannibals," where he explores cultural relativism and challenges the ethnocentric views of his time. The essay contrasts European society with the indigenous peoples of Brazil, questioning notions of civilization and barbarism. It's a foundational text in the development of the essay as a literary form and philosophical inquiry.

2. *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*

A comprehensive compilation of Montaigne's essays, this book includes "Of Cannibals" among many other reflections on human nature, society, and philosophy. Montaigne's introspective and skeptical style invites readers to question accepted wisdom and explore the complexity of human experience. This edition often provides helpful annotations and historical context.

3. *Michel de Montaigne: A Life* by Philippe Desan

This biography delves into the life and times of Montaigne, offering insights into the experiences that shaped his writings, including "Of Cannibals." Desan explores Montaigne's intellectual milieu and the Renaissance humanist movement, revealing how his personal philosophy was both revolutionary and deeply personal. The book helps readers understand the historical background behind Montaigne's essays.

4. *Cannibals and Kings: Origins of Cultures* by Marvin Harris

While not directly about Montaigne, this anthropological work engages with themes similar to those in "Of Cannibals." Harris examines the development of human societies and cultural practices, including the concept of cannibalism, from an evolutionary and materialist perspective. It offers a modern scientific context to the cultural critiques Montaigne initiated.

5. *The Savage Mind* by Claude Lévi-Strauss

This classic work of anthropology discusses the thought processes of so-called "primitive" societies, resonating with Montaigne's challenge to European ethnocentrism in "Of Cannibals." Lévi-Strauss argues for the complexity and logic of indigenous cultures, dismantling the idea of the

“savage” as irrational. It pairs well with Montaigne’s essay for readers interested in cross-cultural philosophy.

6. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* by Stephen Greenblatt

Greenblatt’s influential study covers the cultural and literary context of the Renaissance, including figures like Montaigne. The book explores how writers like Montaigne constructed identities and challenged social norms, which is central to understanding essays like “Of Cannibals.” It situates Montaigne within the broader currents of Renaissance humanism and self-exploration.

7. *Ethnology and Colonialism: Essays in Cultural Criticism* by Michel-Rolph Trouillot

This collection of essays critiques colonial narratives and ethnological studies, echoing Montaigne’s early skepticism about European superiority in “Of Cannibals.” Trouillot’s work provides a modern postcolonial perspective that enriches the understanding of cultural relativism and the politics of representation. It is valuable for readers interested in the legacy of Montaigne’s ideas.

8. *Michel de Montaigne and the Problem of Skepticism* by Frederick A. Pottle

Focusing on Montaigne’s philosophical skepticism, this book examines how essays like “Of Cannibals” embody a questioning attitude toward knowledge and certainty. Pottle analyzes Montaigne’s methods of inquiry and doubt, which challenge dogmatic thinking and encourage open-mindedness. This work is essential for readers seeking a deeper philosophical understanding of Montaigne’s approach.

9. *Travel and Violence in Renaissance English Literature* by Sara S. Poor

This study explores representations of cultural encounters, including ideas related to cannibalism and the “other,” during the Renaissance period. It discusses how Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals” influenced English literature and perceptions of violence and cultural difference. The book situates Montaigne’s essay in the broader literary and historical context of exploration and colonialism.

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