



## SKEPTICISM AND CERTAINTY AS KEY PLAYERS IN THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE: MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE'S APPLICATION OF SKEPTICISM TO EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The pursuit of mental peace has long captivated philosophers across different epochs, driven by the contradictions inherent in various beliefs. This intellectual journey often leads to skepticism, where doubt becomes a prevailing attitude. While skeptics are commonly perceived as perpetual doubters, a crucial question arises: Can a skeptic truly attain certain knowledge, reaching a point where doubt is no longer necessary? This research delves into the interplay between skepticism and certainty, exploring their connection in the context of Michel de Montaigne's works. A method of analysis, was employed to scrutinized skepticism and certainty. This was specifically to examine Montaigne's application of skepticism as a pathway to certainty in education. Contrary to the misconception that skepticism is solely about doubt, this article reveals that skepticism encompasses a method for acquiring knowledge. It advocates subjecting every hypothesis to continual testing, insisting that knowledge is best obtained through doubt until an indubitable or nearly indubitable truth is uncovered. When evidence is inconclusive, the skeptic advises suspending judgment, recognizing that knowledge often rests on unproved postulates or assumptions. This skeptical position aligns with the Pyrrhonian school of thought. In Montaigne's educational philosophy, skepticism becomes a tool for nurturing critical thinking in children, encouraging them to form opinions independently of their teachers. Our findings suggest that skepticism, when employed not only as a tool for doubt but also as a means of knowing, enhances effective communication. Therefore, it is recommended that in the search for knowledge, skepticism should be employed as a tool to know and not only as a tool for doubt, as one without knowledge cannot communicate effectively. To be certain about what one knows, judgment should be suspended.

**Key Words:** *Skepticism, Certainty and Education.*

### Introduction

Since the dawn of humanity, individuals have clung tenaciously to personal beliefs, often at odds with conflicting perspectives. In everyday life, practically, everybody is skeptical about some knowledge claims; the contradiction in things confused people and they were plagued by doubt as to which alternative they should believe. This gave rise to what we have come to know as **Skepticism**. One Philosopher comes to say one thing, another contradicts what he has said and the cycle continues. Nowadays, we refer to the Skeptics as those who doubt. Epistemological skepticism deals with the question of whether anything can be known. This claim or postulation has led many people to conclude that with skepticism, we can really know nothing. However, the word Skeptics was derived from the Greek word '*Skeptikoi*' which means 'Seekers' or 'Inquirers'. According to Sextus Empiricus, Skepticism emanated as a result of people hoping to attain mental peace and calmness. The skeptics thought that investigation could be used to separate truth from falsehood in order to attain mental tranquility. The point at which one attains mental tranquility is known as the point of being 'Certain' about a subject matter.<sup>1</sup>

Like knowledge, Certainty is an epistemic property of beliefs. People were always convinced that they are certain about the things they know. Although some philosophers have thought that there is



no difference between knowledge and certainty, it has become increasingly common to distinguish them. On this conception, then, certainty is either the highest form of knowledge or is the only epistemic property superior to knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

This research seeks to ascertain that skepticism does not make one to be void of knowledge, rather, skepticism as a method of inquiry may lead one to certain knowledge of the truth. This research seeks to underscore that theories have been falsified and new theories have emerged due to advancement in knowledge promulgated by those who suspend judgment in order to arrive at certainty through inquire. I would have still believed that the earth is flat or round if not that an inquirer suspended knowledge; doubted the existing phenomena, what seemed to be true and what was believed to be true in order to come up with a new knowledge.

This work will be relevant to everyone who is an Inquirer; people who seek to be free from prejudices, pre-conceptions and bias in their search for certain knowledge. It will be relevant to Philosophers and researchers of all periods. This research work is aimed at helping scholars to appreciate skepticism as a philosophic tool to employ in order to achieve knowledge. Furthermore, because the issue of decision making is a day to day affair, the society at large is not left out. Political leaders, Church leaders and people who are in positions of decision making will find this research work relevant as it will help them to suspend judgment in the face of two contradictory positions in order to make the right decision which will bring about development in the church, academic institutions and in the society at large.

### **Evolving Conceptions of Skepticism: Transitioning from Doubt in Classical Traditions to Certainty in the Modern Era**

Skepticism is a widely discussed theme in Epistemology. People seem to disagree about pretty much anything; disagreements arise on a wide range of topics. The world looks differently to different observers, at different times, in different circumstances. A theory convinces some, but not others; customs differ. No sense-perception, no proof or premise, and no practice, or so the skeptic's argument can be invoked to demonstrate what the world is really like, which theory is true, or which way to live is good. Because of these and similar considerations, change, difference, and dissimilarities are the basic currency of skeptical investigation. Skepticism was made popular in the 'enlightenment' period through the work of Sextus Empiricus which was published in France in 1560. However, Skepticism had its roots not only in a combination of Cynical attitudes towards the authorities of institutions and traditions but also in the relativism and skepticism of some of the Sophist. This means that skepticism dates back in the time of Sextus Empiricus. There are traces of skeptical ideas in Early and Classical Greek Philosophies. The early Greek philosophers developed distinctions between reality and appearance, knowledge and belief, and the non-evident and the evident. These distinctions form the framework in which skepticism can be conceived.<sup>1</sup> The idea that truth is seen and knowledge gained from some perspective outside of the ordinary ways of mortal life, and that mortals rely on something lesser, be it the hear-say of fame, or signs, or appearances, runs through much of early Greek thought. However, few early Greek thinkers seem to have had skeptical or proto-skeptical inclinations. Xenophanes and Democritus are perhaps the most prominent apparent exceptions. There were other early and classical Greek philosophers who were skeptical in their postulations about the nature of things. However, we heard of skepticism through Sextus Empiricus in his first volume: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*; thus, Pyrrho was honoured as the father of the skeptical tradition.

While skepticism threaded through the history of philosophy, it took a distinctive turn in the early modern period. It transformed into a tool that not only fostered doubt but also led to certitude. Notable philosophers like Descartes, Russell, and Hume contributed significantly to this shift.



Descartes is a French early modern philosopher, mathematician and scientist who existed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was credited to be the father of modern skepticism. He was dissatisfied with the scholastic philosophy which dominated the philosophy of his time. The scholastic philosophers sought to answer highly philosophical abstract questions mainly on the basis of Aristotle's teachings. To Descartes, they were pointless and futile in their opinions. He then posited that philosophy needs a completely fresh start; a new beginning. However, the question is: How can one build a new philosophical system? He responded to this question by saying that we could rebuild a new philosophy on a strong foundation. But then, what can serve as the strong foundation upon which we could rebuild a new philosophy? To Descartes, nothing can do this job better than our most certain beliefs; that is, the things we can be most sure of are true. He posits:

Of philosophy, I will say nothing except that when I saw that it had been cultivated for many ages by the most distinguished men, and yet there is not a single matter within the sphere which not still in dispute, and nothing therefore with is above doubt. I did not presume to anticipate that my success would be greater in it than that of others; and furthermore, when I consider the number of conflicting opinions touching a single matter that may be upheld by learned men, while there can be but one true, I reckoned as well-nigh false all that was only probable.<sup>2</sup>

Descartes carried out this most attempts in his "Meditations of First Philosophy, 1641." He wants to find absolutely and most certain or unshakable belief that he can build his new philosophy upon. The method he suggests is known as Descartes' Methodic Doubt. The main idea of this method is to subject all our beliefs to radical doubt in order to see which of them can withstand such doubt and hence be accepted as absolutely certain. There is a difference between the things we may in fact take ourselves to be certain about and the things I may justifiably do so (that is, things we are justified in being certain about). For example, I am certain that I am working on this research right now or I am certain that I woke up this morning or I am certain that  $2 + 2 = 4$  or you are certain that you are reading through my research right now. Yet are we really justified in being so certain? To Descartes, after having employed the radical doubt method, I will have to admit that I am not certain about many things I claim to be certain about. Indeed, there are only but few who believed that pass Descartes' test of radical doubt. Can I really be certain that I am working on this research right now or that I woke up this morning or that  $2 + 2 = 4$  and can you really be certain that you are reading this research right now? No, you are not. After all, you could as well be dreaming or being deceived.

Mathematical beliefs did not escape Descartes' radical doubt; how can I be sure that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? He says: "I was especially delighted with mathematics, on account of the certitude and evidence of their reasonings; but I had yet a precise knowledge of their true use..."<sup>3</sup> What ensures that I do not err every time; perhaps there is an 'evil demon' or a wicked neuro-scientist who constantly manipulates our thoughts by systematically distracting us when I try to verify our mathematical beliefs. To Descartes, 'I don't know what to believe anymore, but there is hope...'<sup>4</sup> he argues that there is at least one thing that I cannot doubt and which I can be absolutely certain about. This is the fact that when I doubt I cannot doubt the fact that I doubt or think for doubting is just a form of thinking. When I can be sure that I think I can equally be sure that I exist while I am thinking for if indeed I can be sure that I am thinking there has to be something that does the thinking and I am the something; and if I am deceived, I must exist to be deceived; if I am dreaming, I must exist to dream.<sup>5</sup> Descartes went ahead to say "... given the hypothesis of the evil genius and all its consequences which flow from it I cannot doubt my own existence without affirming it."<sup>6</sup> It was at this point that I finally arrive at the *Cogito* Argument... I think, therefore, I am. What am I?



Descartes answered ‘A thing which thinks.’ When ask what a thing which thinks is, Descartes answered “it is a thing which doubts, affirms, denies, wills refuses, and which imagines and feels.”<sup>7</sup> This argument assures us that there is at least one thing that is impossible to doubt and is thus absolutely certain. This is the fact that I exist while I think and this is precisely the unquestionable fact that can figure as the unquestionable and firm foundation which Descartes has been looking for in order to build his new philosophical system upon. The prospect of building a whole world view upon the certainty that I exist while I think is not very promising given that I can only be certain that I exist while I think. How can I ever know as I seem to that I live in a planet that I share with other human beings and other animals and which orbit is sun? and how can I know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? It is indeed a long road for Descartes to restore a certainty in our common sense beliefs and many of these beliefs have to be abandoned along the way amongst those are our commonly accepted belief that material things are really coloured or have other sensory properties like taste, smell, touch and sound. It takes Descartes the whole rest of his Six Meditations to walk down this road and restore our confidence in our belief of mathematical truths and the existence of the outer world.

The method that Descartes employs for extending our certain beliefs consists in squeezing out the certainties he has already arrived at. The *cogito* argument is a method for squeezing out certain beliefs or idea from another, after all, the *cogito* argument is an argument that is a conviction or an inference from one belief to another. The unshakable belief that this argument starts from is the belief that you are thinking when I doubt and I arrive at a certainty just by observing that whatever I might doubt, I cannot doubt that I doubt when I doubt. The *cogito* argument takes this certainty and squeezes out new certainty that I cannot only be sure that I think when I doubt but also that I exist when I think. It is exactly this new regained certainty of our existence that the *cogito* argument provides us that Descartes squeezes next. In a second passage of his second meditation, he writes “I am... I exist... that is certain... but for how long...? for as long as I am thinking, I am then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind or intelligence or intellect or reason, But for all that, I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. Descartes further squeezes out information about his nature from the certain belief that he exists while he thinks, as a result Descartes cannot only know with certainty that he exists but also that he is a thinking thing; a thing capable of thinking. At this stage Descartes can only be sure of the fact that he is a thinking thing and it is still an open question on whether also he has a body as he usually supposed. Descartes responded to this by saying that it can be proved that I have a body and that our senses by and large assure us of the existence of other corporeal things even though they still systematically deceive us about their nature. This can be proved by further squeezing out a clear and distinct idea of ourselves as a thinking thing.

David Hume, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Philosopher and Historian based his skepticism on the knowledge of the unobserved; to get clear about what this amounts to. For instance, we ordinarily take ourselves to know a lot about things that we haven’t directly observed. For example, we take it that blue whales and other animals are the largest animals on earth, we take it that we know that there was a man called Napoleon who conquered most of the world, we also take it that we know when the next Presidential election will be conducted in Nigeria, that is, knowledge about what will happen in the future. None of these are things that are directly observed, we have never seen blue whales and we haven’t seen every other animal to compare them to the blue whales. We have never met Napoleon and we are not sure if he actually conquered most of the world and finally, it is likely possible that the presidential election in Nigeria might not hold when we thought it would hold. The question now is: how do we know these things that we haven’t yet observed? In some cases, it seems pretty easy to know about things we haven’t directly observed. For instance, we know that all triangles, even triangles we haven’t yet observed have three sides, we know that two apples and another two apples will give us four apples any time. The question is: what is special about these cases that make them so easily to know? Hume says they express relations of ideas.<sup>8</sup> A Relation of ideas is something whose denial cannot be conceived and any attempt to denial it would be self-



contradictory. Try to imagine a two-sided triangle, that's impossible. Relation of ideas have to be true no matter how the world turns up, they are necessary truths. I can ask again: what does it take to know relations of idea? For Hume, he said that propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought without dependence on whether it is anywhere existent in the universe. In some claims, I don't need to gather evidence to know whether it is true or false; evidence might tell us the world is this way or that way but no matter what the world is like, all triangles must have three sides. If anything at all is required to know if the relation of idea is true, it is just 'Understanding.' This is what Hume referred to as the mere operation of thought; that it is enough to say that it has to be true and to know that it is true. Contrast Relation of Ideas with another class of claim that Hume calls Matters of Fact. For example, as I am writing this, it is raining outside. This claim is true but the denial is not inconceivable or contradictory. The mere 'Operations of Thought' is not enough to get knowledge of their truth. I can easily imagine that it is sunny outside; because this claim has a denial that is contradictory, because I conceived that they are false, is not enough just to conceive what they mean, I have to go out and make some observation, hence, matters of fact contrast with relations of ideas and what it takes to know them. This distinction is closely related to what was later called *A posteriori* and *Apriori* by Immanuel Kant.<sup>9</sup>

Another question that Hume was faced with was: how can I know about these matters of fact if not by observation or by operation of thought? Hume often use this general strategy: he projects observed regularities, things that has been true in cases he has observed and in unobserved cases. For instance, all the fires I have observed are hot when I feel it. I can state it with some premise;

p1: All Observed 'F's have been 'G'

p2: If 'F' is Fire and 'G' is Hot

Conclusion: All unobserved 'F's are 'G'

This pattern of inference is called Induction.<sup>10</sup>Our judgments based on past experience all contain elements of doubt; we are then impelled to make a judgment about that doubt, and since this judgment is also based on past experience it will in turn produce a new doubt. Once again, though, we are impelled to make a judgment about this second doubt, and the cycle continues. He concludes that "no finite object can subsist under a decrease repeated *in infinitum*." A second contradiction involves a conflict between two theories of external perception, each of which our natural reasoning process leads us to. One is our natural inclination to believe that we are directly seeing objects as they really are, and the other is the more philosophical view that we only ever see mental images or copies of external objects. The third contradiction involves a conflict between causal reasoning and belief in the continued existence of matter. After listing these contradictions, Hume despairs over the failure of his metaphysical reasoning:

The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another.<sup>11</sup>

He then pacifies his despair by recognizing that nature forces him to set aside his philosophical speculations and return to the normal activities of common life. He sees, though, that in time he will be drawn back into philosophical speculation in order to attack superstition and educate the world.

Hume's emphasis on these conceptual contradictions is a unique aspect of his skepticism, and if any part of his philosophy can be designated "Humean skepticism" it is this. However, during the course of his writing 'The *Treatise*', his view of the nature of these contradictions changed. At first, he felt that these contradictions were restricted to theories about the external world, but theories about the mind itself would be free from them, as he explains here:



The essence and composition of external bodies are so obscure, that I must necessarily, in our reasonings, or rather conjectures concerning them, involve ourselves in contradictions and absurdities. But as the perceptions of the mind are perfectly known, and I have used all imaginable caution in forming conclusions concerning them, I have always hoped to keep clear of those contradictions, which have attended every other system.<sup>12</sup>

When composing the Appendix to the *Treatise* a year later, he changed his mind and felt that theories about the mind would also have contradictions:

I had entertained some hopes that however deficient our theory of the intellectual world might be, it would be free from those contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explication, that human reason can give of the material world. But upon a more strict review of the section concerning I find myself involved in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent. If this be not a good *general* reason for skepticism, this at least a sufficient one (if I were not already abundantly supplied) forme to entertain a diffidence and modesty in all my decisions.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in the *Treatise*, the skeptical bottom line is that even our best theories about both physical and mental phenomena will be plagued with contradictions. In the concluding section of his *Enquiry*, Hume again addresses the topic of skepticism, but treats the matter somewhat differently: he rejects extreme skepticism but accepts skepticism in a more moderate form. Hume propounded what is known as mitigated skepticism. He associates extreme Pyrrhonian skepticism with blanket attacks on all reasoning about the external world, abstract reasoning about space and time, or causal reasoning about matters of fact. He argues, though, that I must reject such skepticism since “no durable good can ever result from it.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, he recommends a more moderate or *Academic* skepticism that tones down Pyrrhonism by, first, exercising caution and modesty in our judgments, and, second, by restricting our speculations to abstract reasoning and matters of fact.

### **The role of skepticism in Education according to Michel de Montaigne**

By the 16th century, the Renaissance was in full swing, the Protestant Reformation had already been around for over a generation and people had serious doubts about the intellectual and spiritual grip the Church had on the society. Since the Church also controlled education, people began to question these methods.<sup>15</sup> This wave of humanism swept through Europe to other continents where we have more of developed countries.

It was during this time of doubt and skepticism that Michel de Montaigne arrived on the scene. Montaigne was not so much an educator as he was a person who had a strong opinion of how education should be. He also knew how to write witty insightful essays on the subject of education along with other subjects of his interest. Let us take a brief glance at his contentions on philosophy of education may enable one to analysis how skepticism and certainty informed his position on education.

In the light of the preceding statements, it is being asserted that Montaigne’s views on education were almost a reaction against church views on education. Montaigne exhibits an unstinting skepticism toward nearly every subject he considered. He doubted the philosophy of education which was held by the church in his time. Montaigne believed in a holistic education of the man and not the type of education that divides man into pieces. As a child, he had a very unique education



being the son of a wealthy man; his early education was done by private teachers who taught him Latin and Music. He then attended an excellent boarding school where he received the highest quality humanistic education. For this reason, he criticized the study of Latin and Greek because to him, the development of the mother tongue first should be a priority. The discussion regarding the use of the mother tongue is a recurring motif in the realm of early language education. Education, he argued, is similar to philosophy. It should not consist in teaching the Latin language and inculcating knowledge of Latin classics, but rather in careful reflection, the development of judgment, hands-on activities, personal freedom, learning from everyday situations, and playfulness. Therefore, he voiced his critique of the study of classical subjects, asserting that it inadequately equipped students for real-world applications, instead fostering arrogance. He continued by advocating for tutors to encourage their pupils to critically analyze and meticulously evaluate all their readings, refraining from accepting information unquestioningly or relying solely on authority. There should be diversity of opinions and let the diversity of opinions be propounded to, and laid before him, the student will himself choose, if he be able; if not, he will remain in doubt. This is because, if he does not embrace the opinions of his teacher, by the exercise of his reason they will no more be theirs, but become his own. Hence he says: “Who follows another, follows nothing, finds nothing, nay, seeks nothing. *Non sumus sub rege; sibi quisque se vindicet* (we are not under a king; let everyone dispose of himself. Let him, at least, know that he does know).<sup>15</sup> This for him, means we should imbibe their knowledge, but not adopt their dogmas; and no matter if he forgets where he had his learning, provided he knows how to apply it to his own use; truth and reason are common to everyone, and are no more his who spoke them first than his who spoke them after. It is no more “according to Plato than according to me,” since both he and I equally see and understand in the same manner. The several fragments the pupil borrows from others he will transform and blend together to compile a work that shall be absolutely his own; that is to say, his judgment, which his instruction, labour, and study should alone tend to form. He is not obliged to discover whence he had his materials, but only to produce what he has done with them. Montaigne proceeded to express that conscience and virtue must be prominently evident in one's speech, guided solely by reason. The student should be made to understand that when he acknowledges errors that he discovers in his own argument, though only found out by himself, it is an effect of judgment and sincerity, which are the principal things he is to seek after. Let him examine every man's talent; a peasant, a bricklayer, or any casual passenger, a man may learn something from every one of these in their several capacities, and something will be picked out of their discourse, whereof some use may be made at one time or another; nay, even the folly and weakness of others will contribute to his instruction. By observing the graces and manners of all he sees, he will create to himself an emulation of the good, and a concept of the bad. After having taught our pupil what will make him more wise and good, you may then show him the elements of logic, physic, geometry, and rhetoric; and the science which he shall then himself most incline to, his judgment being, beforehand, formed and fit to choose, he will quickly make his own. The way of instructing him ought to be, sometimes by discourse, and sometimes by reading; sometimes his instructor shall put the author, which he shall think most proper for him, into his hands, and sometimes only the marrow and substance of it; and if the instructor himself be not conversant enough in books to turn to all the fine discourses the book contains, there may some man of letters be joined to him, that, upon every occasion shall supply him with what he desires and stands in need of, to recommend to his pupil. And who can doubt but that this way of teaching is much more easy and natural than the fruit, therefore, is not only, without comparison, much finer, but will also be much more early ripe. . . . Such a tutor will make a pupil to digest this new lesson, that the height and value of true virtue consists in the facility, utility, and pleasure of its exercise; so far from difficulty that boys as well as men, and the innocent as well as the subtle, may make it their own; and ‘it is by order and good conduct, not by force, that it is to be acquired. Another target of criticism was the teaching methods of the day, which were often lecture-style. Montaigne views this pouring knowledge into the mind and not useful for the student. He supported a more ‘interactional’ approach to teaching in



which the students and teacher take turns talking and listening. Through action came understanding in his opinion. Montaigne was among the philosophers who criticized corporal punishment. To him, the use of corporal punishment implies that one is training an animal and not a human being.<sup>16</sup>

We are able to see from these points that education, to Montaigne should start off from philosophy. He encouraged that the students should be skeptical about the things they are being taught. The use of reason to ascertain certainty was also encouraged by Montaigne and when a student does not yet agree with what the teacher says, the student should remain in doubt.

### Evaluation/Conclusion

This research have established that skepticism refers to the search for knowledge; a skeptic is one who inquires and one who seeks for mental peace in a world filled with chaos despite the myriad of beliefs and opinions which people hold. Skepticism is an academic tool for enquiry which should be employed in every research and learning process to attain certainty. Individuals dedicated themselves to the pursuit of definite knowledge, and akin to Socrates, Montaigne was equally preoccupied with this quest for knowledge. Similarly, for both Montaigne and Socrates, the pursuit of knowledge remains imperative, even in the face of its potential unattainability. His search for knowledge gave skepticism its relevance in the renaissance period. The aim of Montaigne's skepticism is not to ruin arguments by opposing the arguments, as it is the case for the Pyrrhonian antilogy but rather to counter-balance a single opinion by taking into account other opinion.

Prior to embarking on his literary endeavor, Montaigne perceived the 16th century, his contemporary era, as characterized by deceit, corruption, aggression, and insincerity. Given this perspective, it comes as no surprise that the Essays find their starting point in a pessimistic outlook: the pessimism of Montaigne's recognition of the rule of appearances and of the loss of connection with the truth of being. Montaigne's much-discussed skepticism results from that initial negativity, as he questions the possibility of all knowing and sees the human being as a creature of weakness and failure, of inconstancy and uncertainty, of incapacity and fragmentation, or, as he wrote in the first of the essays, as "a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating thing who is not capable of forming many certain and uniform judgment." His skepticism is reflected in the French title of his work, *Essays*, or "Attempts," which implies not a transmission of proven knowledge or of confident opinion but a project of trial and error, of tentative exploration. Neither a reference to an established genre (for Montaigne's book inaugurated the term 'essay' for the short prose composition treating a given subject in a rather informal and personal manner) nor an indication of a necessary internal unity and structure within the work, the title indicates an intellectual attitude of questioning and of continuous assessment.

Montaigne's skepticism does not, however, preclude a belief in the existence of truth but rather constitutes a defense against the danger of locating truth in false, unexamined, and externally imposed notions. His skepticism, combined with his desire for truth, drives him to the rejection of commonly accepted ideas and to a profound distrust of generalizations and abstractions; it also shows him the way to an exploration of the only realm that promises certainty: that of concrete phenomena and primarily the basic phenomenon of his own body-and-mind self.<sup>17</sup> This self, with all its imperfections, constitutes the only possible site where the search for truth can start, and it is the reason Montaigne, from the beginning to the end of the *Essays*, does not cease to affirm that "I am myself the matter of my book."<sup>18</sup> He finds that his identity, his "master form" as he calls it, cannot be defined in simple terms of a constant and stable self, since it is instead a changeable and fragmented thing, and that the valorization and acceptance of these traits is the only guarantee of authenticity and integrity, the only way of remaining faithful to the truth of one's being and one's nature rather than to alien semblances.





Yet, despite his insistence that the self guard its freedom toward outside influences and the tyranny of imposed customs and opinions, Montaigne believes in the value of reaching outside the self. Indeed, throughout his writings, as he did in his private and public life, he manifests the need to entertain ties with the world of other people and of events. For this necessary coming and going between the interiority of the self and the exteriority of the world, Montaigne uses the image of the back room: human beings have their front room, facing the street, where they meet and interact with others, but they need always to be able to retreat into the back room of the most private self, where they may reaffirm the freedom and strength of intimate identity and reflect upon the vagaries of experience. Given that always-available retreat, Montaigne encourages contact with others, from which one may learn much that is useful. In order to do so, he advocates travel, reading, especially of history books, and conversations with friends. He refers to the books written by others as ‘Other Minds’ that one should interact with. Thus, Montaigne extends his curiosity about others to the inhabitants of the New World. To him, involvement in public service is also a part of interaction with the world, and it should be seen as a duty to be honourably and loyally discharged but never allowed to become a consuming and autonomy-destroying occupation.

To further emphasize on the existence of certainty, we saw in this research, the work of Rene Descartes where through his skepticism; he was able to arrive at certainty. He kept on doubting till there was something about him that he couldn’t doubt; the fact that he exists and he is thinking or doubting cannot be doubted, “I think, therefore, I exist.” He was also of the notion that mathematical truth cannot be doubted. I see a great reflection of the skepticism of Michel de Montaigne in the work of Rene Descartes who was regarded as “The father of modern philosophy.” He was interested in “certain” knowledge and the relationship between the body and the mind.

Montaigne applies and illustrates his ideas concerning the independence and freedom of the self and the importance of social and intellectual intercourse in all his writings and in particular in his essay on the education of children. There, as elsewhere, he advocates the value of concrete experience over abstract learning and of independent judgment over an accumulation of undigested notions uncritically accepted from others.

By way of conclusion, this research work has been preoccupied with the philosophical evaluation of skepticism and certainty and it can be noted through some of the essays of Michel de Montaigne that skepticism and certainty are key players in the search for knowledge therefore, that a skeptic should not be seen as one who is without knowledge. The question is how relevant is this research to our time?

The relevance of this research cannot be overemphasized as it cuts across all spheres of human endeavour. In our education system today, especially at the tertiary institutions, a negative attitude is given to skepticism and this has resulted in lecturers playing an authoritative roles during lectures. Students are not given the opportunity to think outside what the lecturer is teaching and have a conversation with the lecturer. Disappointingly, this style of teaching is considered as one of the approved methods of teaching, a method called Lecture Method. In this method, the lecturer comes to pour what he knows (or even read out what he has downloaded from the internet) on the students and in giving them exam questions, he expects them to give back the answers the way it was explained in class. Any students who answers using a different opinion fails while the one who gave it back same way it was taught graduates as the best student. For instance, A lecturer comes to class to teach the students that ‘Obi is a boy’ and in giving his exam question, he ends us asking ‘Obi is a \_\_\_\_\_. or \_\_\_\_\_ is a boy.’ This type of question does not give the students rooms to express themselves or prove otherwise that there could be another Obi who is not a boy. This style of teaching has created a big problem in our society. Minds are being marred instead of being made in schools. Little wonder the saying ‘School is scam’ is very common among university graduates. Our universities have produced graduates who cannot take the right decision through critical thinking, graduates who cannot look at things beyond the way others see it, graduates who follow



trends and the crowd to do things without asking questions, graduates who are easily deceived by political and religious leaders. Africa is considered uncivilized because we lack the application of skepticism in lecture halls. I have said this because a civilized society is the product of a good educational system. When the people are properly educated, they help to bring about development in the society. On education, Michel de Montaigne maintained that the educational system should be one that encourages the students to explore; it should encourage skepticism and not a system where students are made to learn like machines or robots. Ideas of their tutors should be placed alongside other ideas and the student should have freedom to critically examine these ideas, constructively criticize them and come up with their own conclusions. Learning should allow the students express their intellectual freedom, hence, lecture method should be discouraged at all levels. It is not about how much we have covered, it is about how well the students have been taught. Exams should be structured in a way that is not allowing the students give back to teachers exactly the things they were taught in class. They should express that through studies, they have been able to come up with their own ideas concerning issues discussed. Hence, objective exams should be highly discouraged. Also tutors should be open-minded to accommodate or accept other ideas which are contradicting their own ideas. They should allow the students express their intellectual faculties to come up with their own theories. Tutors are supposed to act as guide to students as they learn.

Montaigne encourages us to go out of ourselves to reach out to the external world we exist in, he also encourages us to participate in public service. This is very relevant in our time especially now that there is serious political awareness especially among the youths in our society. Political decisions should not be taken because of tribal or religious attachments or sentiments. People should ask questions, do their own investigations and disregard opinions that are not consistent with reality. Debates for all political aspirants should be compulsory at all levels. Those who wish to lead the people in different political positions should be transparent and open-minded. In the just concluded presidential election in Nigeria, one of the presidential candidates said “Go and Verify”, - that is, giving room for skepticism and certainty. People verified, formed their opinion about him and this earned him many supporters as many who did not know him the time he was a governor became interested in him. Most youths gave their all to support him through a movement they formed. He didn't give them money and for the first time in the history of our country, the youths from different religions and tribes came to support one candidate who all he gave them was an opportunity to critically examine him through personal research and debates. Man naturally wishes to be made to feel involved; man wishes to be given a position where he feels important because his opinion is considered. Imagine if education is given such opportunities in our tertiary institutions, people will give their all to get educated.

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