

Michel de Montaigne's Library Contrasted with ChatGPT AI's

We live in a time in which people dedicate much of their days to being on the web. We read online news and search online for information. We email and text. We exchange opinions, experiences, images and video clips on social media. We communicate with family, friends, and people who share common backgrounds and interests. Content producers include professional journalists, scholars, “influencers” or opinion makers. Some publish blogs; others post less serious content on Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, etc.

The web also allows instant access to commercial movies, theatrical plays, concerts, dance performances, etc., even from extremely prestigious orchestras and performance groups. The catalogue of available online films is now enormous, from restored classics to recent releases. Reading ebooks or listening to audiobooks is also a wonder of our time; one can carry a whole library on an iPad or any other portable electronic device, making notes and highlighting passages for later reference.

The internet represents an immense set of knowledge that we experience and parse in different ways. It is illuminating to contrast today's body of knowledge and ways of knowing with sixteenth century intellectual Michel de Montaigne's (1533–1592). Montaigne's library of books and experiences were distilled in his lengthy work *Essays (Essais)*, which I use as a point of contrast later in this essay.

The negative aspect of new technologies is well documented. The web is polluted with outright lies, misinformation, racism, political propaganda, and a plethora of dangerous “rabbit holes” designed by authoritarian governments, criminals, and other predators. Societies are more divided as a result; racism is more open and spreading, including the reemergence of neo-nazi movements that weaken worldwide democratic values.

A controversial new technology in the digital world is the wide-open AI (artificial intelligence) platforms such as ChatGPT. The first of these platforms was made public just a few months ago. Big tech companies like Microsoft and Google are already announcing plans to expand their research and implement new public AI applications. Some people are excited about these platforms' new options, particularly some businesses that use AI and automation to improve services and reduce human resources.

Some voices express concerns about AI's implication for certain human activities. Two years ago, the prestigious *MIT Technology Review* published a lengthy article entitled “The True Dangers of AI Are Closer Than We Think: Forget superintelligent AI: algorithms are already creating real harm. The good news: the fight back has begun.” by Karen Hao.¹ The article tries to present a balanced story, especially since MIT is a host of relevant research on the topic, but the magazine is not shy to warn its readers, “AI is now screening job candidates, diagnosing disease, and identifying criminal suspects. But instead of making these decisions more efficient or fair, it's often perpetuating the biases of the humans on whose decisions it was trained.”²

1. ¹*MIT Technological Review*, “The True Dangers of AI Are Closer Than We Think: Forget superintelligent AI: algorithms are already creating real harm. The good news: the fight back has begun.” by Karen Hao, October 21, 2020. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/21/1009492/william-isaac-deepmind-dangers-of-ai/>

2 *Ibid.*

I am surprised that in all the talk about AI, few recall Norbert Wiener (1894–1964), the father of “cybernetics,” a general theory of control and communication systems together with feedback mechanisms. Wiener coined the term “cybernetics” from the Greek word *kubernētēs* (κυβερνάω), or “steersman” the same Greek word from which we eventually derive the word “governor.”³

After the Second World War ended, Wiener was worried about the impact of technology in the wrong hands. He concentrated on publishing prophetic works about “the displacement of human beings by automatic machinery.” Among his most famous works are *The Human Use of Human Beings* and *God & Golem, Inc.*, with relevant ideas about machine learning and machines’ places in society, particularly with regard to the exchange of information between people and machines. In the books, machines accumulate knowledge provided by humans over time, and build immense databases unmatched by any library. Even before machines became superior in processing and transmitting information, Wiener describes the likely interaction between humans and machines and how “messages between man and machines, between machines and man, and between machine and machine” work. He adds “When I give an order to a machine, the situation is not essentially different from that which arises when I give an order to a person.”⁴

With increasingly powerful technologies and machines, including the new Chatbots, we may be approaching what Wiener anticipated as severe problems with machines that learn. We are currently experiencing a dramatic change, as explained by Geoffrey Hinton, who recently quit Google to speak freely and warn about the dangers of AI getting more intelligent than people. In a BBC interview, the British-Canadian cognitive psychologist and computer scientist said that “the chatbot could soon overtake the level of information that a brain holds.” He added “I’ve come to the conclusion that the kind of intelligence we’re developing is very different from the intelligence we have; Biological systems are different from digital systems,” adding that “the big difference is that with digital systems, you have many copies of the same set of weights, the same model of the world.”⁵

Using Hinton’s ideas, it is possible to extrapolate and compare the enormous difference between today’s computers’ ways of knowing and those of Montaigne, as understood through the nineteen volumes of his *Essays*. Montaigne’s work has enjoyed widespread distribution since it was published four hundred years ago. During that time, the work has seen thousands of new editions, dozens of translations, and hundreds of branching-off books by other scholars analyzing his ideas. We can understand the difference by studying the impressive accumulated knowledge inside Montaigne’s *Essays* in contrast with what content machines get in a day or a week and at an incredible speed, from multiple channels. According to Hinton, “if you had 10,000 people and whenever one person learnt something, everybody else automatically knew it. And that’s how these chatbots can know so much more than any one person.” Hinton and others’ concerns should be taken seriously, since one issue is that we can agree or disagree with what Montaigne wrote; he is a well-known persona easy to identify, but with new

³ Wiener, Norbert. *The Human Use of Human Beings* (Houghton Mifflin, 1950; Anchor Books, paperback, 1954). <https://books.apple.com/us/book/the-human-use-of-human-beings/id1210036706>

⁴ Wiener, Norbert. *God & Golem, Inc.* (M.I.T. Press, 1964).

⁵ *AI 'godfather' Geoffrey Hinton warns of dangers as he quits Google*. BBC News, May 2, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65452940>

technologies, anonymously and without any form of accountability for the sources, “the internet will be flooded with false photos, videos, and text,” and the average person will “not be able to know what is true anymore.”⁶

Since the Chatbots rely on the billions of texts posted by people of different cultures and education levels, they can produce results that equally weigh and mix peer-reviewed academic work with teenagers’ pranks. Dictators and ideologues can create and influence Chatbots with outright lies that spread at thundering speed to millions of information consumers. As a source of propaganda, politics has enormous consequences; think of Brexit, where Cambridge Analytica used information from Facebook users to create false realities, convincing enough UK voters about the supposed benefits of exiting the EU to make that a reality, stripping millions of their European rights in a flawed, borderline undemocratic referendum.

Chatbots pose serious questions about what is and is not artwork. A photograph entitled *The Electrician*, won the World Photography Organization’s Sony World Photography Award; artist Boris Eldagsen rejected the award after revealing that the image was AI-generated.⁷ Another concern is the violation of copyrights, particularly texts, pictures, film, and any other protected content; AI generally doesn’t distinguish between intellectual property and the public domain, and harvests hard work and talent indiscriminately.

Joseph Weizenbaum (1923–2008) was an MIT computer science professor who had serious reservations about artificial intelligence. Like Wiener before him, he warned of the dangers of machines playing a significant role in society. He created ELIZA, a program that was a Chatbot natural language precursor. ELIZA made users feel like they were corresponding with a psychologist. After he learned that many participants were taking programmed answers to people’s real psychological issues seriously, he stopped developing the program and warned users of the software’s flaws. In his book *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (1976), he warned against “giving machines the responsibility for making genuinely human choices.”⁸

Many distinguished scientists experimenting with computer-human interactions in the past wrote about the dangers AI can pose to humans. Today, as AI becomes widespread and Chatbots are freely available to anyone with a computer or mobile device, the issue is a hot topic; many analysts write about AI, and respected experts are now openly talking about the dangers AI poses if it is not developed and used correctly and responsibly. Microsoft founder Bill Gates has stated that “AI has already changed the way people work, learn, travel, get health care, and communicate with each other.”⁹ Tesla/Twitter CEO Elon Musk and more than one thousand other relevant business leaders expressed their fears in a document

⁶ ‘The Godfather of A.I.’ Leaves Google and Warns of Danger Ahead by Cade Metz. *New York Times*, May 2, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/technology/ai-google-chatbot-engineer-quits-hinton.html>

⁷ *An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren’t Happy.* By Kevin Roose. *New York Times*, May, 3, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-artists.html>

⁸ Weizenbaum, Joseph. *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation*. (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976.)

⁹ Gates, Bill. *The Age of AI has begun: Artificial intelligence is as revolutionary as mobile phones and the Internet.* (GatesNotes, March 21, 2023.) <https://www.gatesnotes.com/The-Age-of-AI-Has-Begun>

entitled “Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter: We call on all AI labs to immediately pause for at least 6 months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4.”¹⁰ In this document, they warn of the existential risk of AI, calling for stricter regulations. The European Union Parliament is rushing to do precisely that. A farfetched ideal would be to have ChatGPT and other AI platforms used only with transparency, accountability, and human oversight.

Chatbots use databases that are fed by new queries from their users and other sources, which increases their size every minute. This technology uses natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning to respond and interact with humans. Chatbots are “trained,” a technical word for managing and processing large amounts of chat logs or transcripts of conversations. The “training” can happen with or without feedback from users or developers.

Michel de Montaigne, the famous sixteenth century French philosopher, compiled his ideas, philosophy, and work into his *Essays*,¹¹ which serve as an extensive reflection of his experiences. Contrasting his ways of gathering knowledge with today’s technology is enlightening. Montaigne had a personal library that was eclectic and large. He used various sources and authors to support his arguments and ideas. He frequently wrote quotes from the books in his library and cites specific thinkers and works throughout his writing. To understand Montaigne’s unique character, together with the relevance of his library, it is worth reading the Latin inscription painted on the wall of his library’s side chamber:

In the year of Christ 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, on the last day of February, anniversary of his birth, Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned Virgins [the Muses], where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life now more than half run out. If the fates permit, he will complete this abode, this sweet ancestral retreat; and he has consecrated it to his freedom, tranquillity, and leisure.¹²

Montaigne was concerned with the survival of an endangered species: the great intellectuals and artists who enriched the world. The cybernetics and computer science experts who are watching AI’s influence grow have similar concerns.

Montaigne’s *Essays* continue to be of great relevance despite their centuries-old age. He is one of the most outstanding and influential French philosophers and, for many, is seen as a precursor of psychology because his work is based on introspection. He had a broad life experience; his father sent him to live with a humble family in a village soon after he was born, to imprint upon him an understanding of ordinary people. In *How to Live*, Sarah Bakewell describes how Montaigne “had the impression at once

¹⁰ <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/>

¹¹ Montaigne, Michel de. *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, <https://books.apple.com/us/book/the-essays-of-michel-de-montaigne-complete/id764683642>

¹² Bakewell, Sarah. *How to Live*. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/how-to-live/id445369964>

of being a peasant among peasants, and being special and different.... He felt ordinary, but knew that the very fact of realizing his ordinariness made him extraordinary.¹³

His father insisted on educating young Michel exclusively in Latin to make him a native latinist, hiring a German tutor who did not speak French. Montaigne recalled this time: “For me, I was over six before I understood any more French or Périgordian than Arabic.”¹⁴

Montaigne was known for developing a unique strategy for writing essays. He wrote on various topics, from love and friendship to death and morality, and his essays are characterized by their conversational tone, broad scope, and profound vision of human nature. No matter how eccentric the topic he addresses, it becomes part of his work. Bakewell makes a short, exemplary list of the exploratory, free-floating pieces to which he gave simple titles: “Of Friendship, Of Cannibals, Of the Custom, Of Wearing Clothes, How we cry and laugh for the same thing, Of Names, Of Smells, Of Cruelty, Of Thumbs, How our mind hinders itself, Of Diversion, Of Coaches, Of Experience.”¹⁵

The *Essays* are full of quotes from classic historians, philosophers and storytellers, blended with Montaigne’s comments and interpretations. He mentions conversations and letters from friends and family with stories of daily life. Impressions from his experience complement his reading; they are gathered in his regular walks and horse rides, and his trips, mainly to Italy. He draws from his experience as a translator of theological works and an editor of political manuscripts, especially those left by his close friend Étienne de La Boétie. He had experience in law and politics, serving as a magistrate and as Mayor of Bordeaux. He had a diverse family: His mother came from a wealthy Sephardic Spanish Jewish family who converted to Protestantism. His father’s family also came from Spain, and possibly converted to Catholicism. Montaigne lived during the French Wars of Religion (1562–98) between Catholics and Protestants (called “Huguenots”). These battles were constant and cruel, brutalizing many innocent civilians.

Montaigne based his outlook upon doubt and self-knowledge, studying classical Greek and Roman thinkers. He represented a universalist spirit in a simple quote: “I look upon all men as my compatriots, and embrace a Polander as a Frenchman, preferring the universal and common tie to all national ties whatever.”¹⁶

Michel de Montaigne was a unique intellectual and writer. Other writers are similarly special and have extensive understandings: Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Ernest Hemingway, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Scott Fitzgerald, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and many Nobel Literature Prize recipients and others who deserved such a prize. Most of these intellectuals used extensive sources such as books and colleagues’ support and advice. Thomas Mann was careful to document in his diaries and letters the books and other materials he gathered on his desk while he wrote his novels. Mann’s *The*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Montaigne. *Ibid.*

15 Bakewell. *Ibid.*

16 Montaigne. *Ibid.*

*Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus*¹⁷ describes the step-by-step process of writing the novel, including interviews with musicians and a close relationship with famous musical composer Arnold Schoenberg; both found refuge in the German exile community in Los Angeles during the Nazi era.

The plethora of topics and quotes in *Essays* can be likened to a database without a natural order. Montaigne organized the content using numbers for volumes and chapters, with names and concepts that only sometimes guide the reader helpfully. Today, with an electronic version, a reader can search for a word, often finding references for a query. For this essay, I used an Apple Book copy of *Essays* and other books I've quoted, which made my research faster and easier. I also used the internet to search for news articles and commentary on the ethics of AI.

After I finished writing the above part of this essay, I turned to ChatGPT to see how AI intelligence would compare to what I wrote. I asked three questions regarding three issues related to Montaigne and his *Essays*. I did not borrow any ideas from the Chatbot.

Question: What would Montaigne think about AI?

Answer: Michael Montaigne was a 16th-century French philosopher and writer, known for his *Essays*, which were a collection of his thoughts and reflections on various topics, such as education, ethics, and human nature.

As an AI language model, I cannot say for certain what Montaigne's thoughts would be on AI, as he lived centuries before the development of such technology. However, based on his philosophical ideas, it is possible to speculate on his perspective.

Montaigne was known for his skepticism and his belief in the limitations of human knowledge. He believed that we cannot know everything, and that our understanding of the world is limited by our own perceptions and biases. He also emphasized the importance of individualism and personal freedom, and was critical of dogmatic thinking and blind adherence to tradition.

Given these ideas, it is possible that Montaigne would be both fascinated and cautious about AI. On the one hand, he might appreciate the potential of AI to expand our knowledge and understanding of the world, and to help us tackle complex problems in ways that were previously impossible. On the other hand, he might be concerned about the limitations of AI, and about the potential for AI to be used in ways that restrict individual freedom and perpetuate existing biases and inequalities.

Overall, it is difficult to say for certain what Montaigne's perspective on AI would be, as he lived in a very different time and context. However, his ideas about skepticism, individualism, and the limitations of human knowledge are still relevant today, and can provide a useful framework for thinking about the opportunities and challenges posed by AI.

¹⁷ Mann, Thomas. *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus*. Alfred A. Knopf (1961).

Question: Michel Montaigne and psychoanalysis?

Answer: Michel de Montaigne was a French philosopher who lived during the 16th century. While he did not develop or practice psychoanalysis, his writings on the nature of human thought and behavior have been influential in the development of psychoanalytic theory.

One of the central concepts in psychoanalysis is the unconscious mind, which refers to the part of the mind that is inaccessible to conscious awareness. Montaigne's writings suggest an understanding of the unconscious mind, as he emphasizes the importance of introspection and self-reflection in understanding one's own thoughts and motivations.

Montaigne's essays also explore the complexity and contradictions of human behavior, which is a central concern in psychoanalysis. He wrote about the ways in which people can act in ways that are seemingly irrational or contradictory, suggesting that our behavior is often driven by unconscious impulses that we are not fully aware of.

While Montaigne did not directly contribute to the development of psychoanalysis, his writings have been influential in shaping the way that we think about the human mind and behavior, and his emphasis on self-reflection and introspection are central to many forms of psychotherapeutic practice.

Final question: Montaigne and aging?

Answer: Michel de Montaigne, the French Renaissance philosopher and essayist, wrote extensively about the process of aging and its effects on the human body and mind. In his famous essay "On Old Age," Montaigne reflects on his own experiences of aging and the changes that come with it. He acknowledges the physical decline that accompanies old age, but he also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a positive outlook and a lively mind.

Montaigne argues that one of the greatest benefits of aging is the wisdom and perspective that come with experience. He notes that older people have a better understanding of human nature and are better equipped to navigate life's challenges. He also suggests that aging can bring a sense of liberation, as one becomes less concerned with superficial pleasures and more focused on the truly important things in life.

Overall, Montaigne's reflections on aging are insightful and thought-provoking. He encourages his readers to embrace the process of aging, to cultivate a sense of gratitude and contentment, and to continue to grow and learn throughout their lives.

The three answers provided by the Chatbot are fairly good, with better grammar than mine, since English is not my mother tongue. The Chatbot plays it safe and does not take intellectual risks. The similarity of the Chatbot's ideas to my essay's might be attributable to the fact that these are relatively

well-known facts and many publications present similar arguments. Both I and the machine may have used the same books and sources.

Chatbots with AI can be powerful tools to write and inspire ideas about specific topics, much like Montaigne used his extensive library to develop his ideas and style, sometimes using comprehensive quotes from the classics, such as Seneca, Aristoteles, Pliny, Heraclitus, Herodotus, Plutarch, and others.

Contemporary experts consider it dangerous that these new technologies may lead to a new generation of humans, writers, artists and creators who will differ from great intellectuals who enriched the world for centuries.

My focus on Montaigne serves to compare what it meant to be a poet, an artist, or a writer with a new time when machines are becoming more “intelligent” and prevalent. There are issues or situations that machines, as we know them today, cannot emulate. Machines lack emotions, moods, and the specific background of an artist or creator, like Montaigne’s unique and dangerous upbringing and education. I genuinely do not think that a machine could replicate the impact of emotional scars, like Beethoven composing his last work after losing his hearing, the excommunication of Spinoza from his family and community, Schopenhauer’s father’s presumed suicide, Thomas Mann’s forced exile from Germany, or Jorge Luis Borges’s blindness, just to cite a few examples. The machine can never recreate that kind of human experience. Experts think that with the correct input and the use of NLP, it might be possible to mimic those moods, which are subjective and changing. Base on the information and training, even MiniBots can create machine-generated paragraphs with distinct writing styles like Virginia Woolf’s and J.K. Rowling’s. But the machine will lack the human touch.

New art and even new art forms have been facilitated by search technology, digital libraries and powerful software that facilitates dictation, musical composition, video and photo editing. Professional journalists and bloggers benefit from the speed of getting information through Bots.

I have greatly benefited from technology, since the Apple II personal computer in the early 1980s, followed by the Mac, which adopted an interface Xerox had developed but never planned to share with the general public. Thanks to Steve Jobs’s vision, we can have computers on our pockets and strapped to our wrists. But the powerful new technologies might now also rob me of the pleasure of writing using digital encyclopedias, dictionaries, and, naturally, searching databases and ebooks. I carry a library of almost a thousand books on my iPad, and I make notes and get quotes for essays and book reviews. In principle, I plan to limit the use of Bots. It will likely be more of a search platform, even if it seldom provides the sources.

The proliferation of Bots will change writing and other creative activities as we know them today. With time and use, a new generation of creators may be responsible for inverting the process, making humans the processors instead of the creators of knowledge or intelligence, giving machines the upper hand, eventually becoming the primary source of creativity, as Norbert Wiener and other early computer scientists predicted.

—Jorge Pinto-Mazal, May 2023
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