

FOUNDING EDITION • VOLUME I • JUDGMENT

ESSAY NO. 001

Michel de Montaigne

Before Artificial Intelligence, There Was Humility

*The first responsibility of an executive
is not to know more.*

*It is to remain worthy of the
responsibility to decide.*



THE EXECUTIVE LIBRARY

*Technology provides the context.
Human judgment remains the subject.*

OPENING OBSERVATION

Before Certainty, There Is Judgment

Every generation believes it knows more than the one before it.
Never has that belief appeared more convincing than it does today.

Markets are monitored continuously.

Algorithms detect patterns beyond human perception.

Artificial Intelligence summarizes reports, generates forecasts and recommends courses of action within seconds.

Entire organizations now operate with analytical capabilities that previous generations could scarcely imagine.

Yet the essential challenge of executive decision-making has remained remarkably unchanged.

The most consequential decisions are rarely constrained by a lack of information.
They are constrained by uncertainty.

A board must decide whether to acquire a company whose future cannot be known.

A government must regulate technologies whose long-term consequences remain uncertain.

A chief executive must commit capital, reputation and people to strategies that will be judged only years later.

*Information may reduce uncertainty.
Judgment begins where uncertainty remains.*

The modern executive therefore confronts a paradox.

As knowledge becomes increasingly abundant, certainty becomes increasingly tempting.
It is precisely at that moment that judgment becomes most vulnerable.

The greatest failures of leadership have seldom resulted from an absence of intelligence.
Far more often, they have resulted from an excess of confidence.

Long before Artificial Intelligence expanded humanity's capacity to generate answers,
one Renaissance thinker devoted his life to a far more enduring question.

How much can we truly know?

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Michel de Montaigne

and the Discipline of Intellectual Humility

History rarely remembers thinkers because they anticipated the future. It remembers them because they understood something permanent about the human condition.

Michel de Montaigne belongs to that rare tradition.

Montaigne lived in an age marked by religious conflict, political instability and competing claims to absolute truth. Learned men defended opposing convictions with equal confidence, each convinced that reason stood firmly on his side. Each regarded doubt as weakness.

Montaigne reached a different conclusion.

He became increasingly suspicious of the confidence with which human beings claimed to possess knowledge.

His enduring question — *Que sais-je?* (“What do I know?”) — was not an expression of ignorance, nor an invitation to skepticism.

It was an act of intellectual discipline.

The question did not diminish the value of knowledge.

It established the conditions under which knowledge could remain trustworthy.

To ask “What do I know?” was to recognize that experience is always incomplete, that perspective is always partial, and that confidence often exceeds evidence.

Centuries have transformed the instruments through which leaders acquire information.

Books gave way to databases. Letters became instant communication.

Statistical tables evolved into predictive algorithms.

Artificial Intelligence now produces analyses at a scale previously unimaginable.

Yet none of these transformations altered the question Montaigne placed quietly before every thoughtful decision-maker:

“

Not: “What can I know?”

But: “How certain should I be that I know it?”

”

*That distinction remains
one of the foundations of executive judgment.*

INTELLECTUAL ANALYSIS

Intelligence and Judgment

Two Distinct Human Capacities

Montaigne's ultimate contribution was not the defense of doubt.
It was the distinction between two capacities that are often confused
but must never be mistaken for each other.

INTELLIGENCE ACQUIRES KNOWLEDGE.
JUDGMENT GIVES IT DIRECTION.

INTELLIGENCE	VS.	JUDGMENT
 PROCESS Analyzes information. Identifies patterns. Generates options.	PROCESS	 PROCESS Evaluates meaning. Assesses consequences. Chooses a course of action.
 DOMAIN Deals with what is. Works with data, facts and measurable signals.	DOMAIN	 DOMAIN Deals with what ought to be. Works with values, context and human consequences.
 FOCUS Reduces complexity. Breaks problems into smaller parts.	FOCUS	 FOCUS Embraces complexity. Holds multiple factors in balance.
 OUTPUT Answers the question "What is the probability?"	OUTPUT	 OUTPUT Answers the question "What is the right decision?"
 STRENGTH Speed, scale and accuracy. Essential for navigating the world.	STRENGTH	 STRENGTH Wisdom, prudence and responsibility. Essential for leading within the world.
 LIMITATION Can process everything. Cannot determine what matters most.	LIMITATION	 LIMITATION Can err. Can be influenced. Can be biased.

“

Intelligence informs.
Judgment decides.
Intelligence is a capacity of the mind.
Judgment is a capacity of the human being.

”

Leaders need both. Only judgment can *commit*.

EXECUTIVE APPLICATION

The Discipline of Humility

in a High-Intelligence Environment

Montaigne did not offer humility as a virtue in the abstract.

He offered it as a discipline for thinking clearly in conditions of uncertainty.

That discipline is not only relevant today.

It is indispensable.

For executives, intellectual humility is not timidity.

It is an operational advantage.

It protects judgment precisely when intelligence is most abundant.

It enables better decisions in environments where no decision can be made with certainty.

WHAT HUMILITY DOES FOR EXECUTIVES



EXPANDS PERCEPTION

It makes leaders more attentive to weak signals, contradictions and alternative explanations.



REDUCES BLIND SPOTS

It prevents overconfidence, confirmation bias and premature closure.



IMPROVES DECISION QUALITY

It encourages calibration of conviction with evidence.



STRENGTHENS ORGANIZATIONS

It creates a culture where dissent is safe, evidence matters and learning compounds.



SUSTAINS LONG-TERM VALUE

It aligns short-term action with long-term consequences that cannot yet be seen.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

1

SEEK DISCONFIRMING EVIDENCE

Actively test assumptions.

What would change your mind?

2

CALIBRATE CONFIDENCE

Differentiate between what is known, what is probable and what is unknown.

3

SEPARATE ANALYSIS FROM DECISION

AI can analyze.

Humans must decide.

4

REHEARSE REGRET

Before acting, consider what you may regret not having considered.

5

ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

Models do not bear consequences.

Executives do.

“

Humility is not doubt for its own sake.
It is the disciplined recognition of the limits of our knowledge
in service of better judgment.

*In a world of accelerating intelligence,
humility is what allows judgment to remain human.*

”

REFLECTION

The Unchanging Core of Executive Judgment

Technologies will continue to evolve.
Artificial Intelligence will become more capable.
Organizations will gain access to insights that previous generations could not imagine.
None of these transformations alters the essential nature of executive judgment.

The responsibility to decide will always belong to a human being.
The consequences will always be borne by human beings.
The uncertainties will always exceed our ability to control them.
And the need for humility will always remain.

Montaigne did not offer executives a formula.
He offered something far more enduring.
He offered a way of thinking.
A way that recognizes the limits of knowledge without denying its value.
A way that accepts uncertainty without surrendering to it.
A way that preserves intellectual rigor without sacrificing intellectual humility.

In an age of accelerating intelligence, that discipline is not merely relevant.
It is indispensable.
For judgment to be worthy of the future,
it must be grounded in a recognition of the limits of the present.

*That is why humility is not the opposite of leadership.
It is one of its preconditions.*

“

The goal is not to eliminate uncertainty.
The goal is to remain clear-eyed in its presence
and worthy of the responsibility to act.

”

CLOSING THOUGHT

The Virtue That Makes Judgment Possible

Technologies will continue to expand what we can know.
Artificial Intelligence will continue to expand what machines can do.
Organizations will continue to expand what systems can automate.

None of these advancements will alter the essential truth
that every consequential decision
will be made by a human being
living with uncertainty
and accountable for the outcome.

The executives who lead with humility
do not possess less conviction.
They possess better conviction.
It is conviction calibrated by reality.
It is conviction open to revision.
It is conviction disciplined by responsibility.
It is conviction worthy of the people and institutions they serve.

INTELLIGENCE MAY BECOME INCREASINGLY ARTIFICIAL.
JUDGMENT REMAINS IRREDUCIBLY HUMAN.



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is not to know more.

*It is to remain worthy
of the responsibility to decide.*



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HUMAN JUDGMENT REMAINS THE SUBJECT.

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