

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 1

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On the Inconsistency of Our Actions

Such as make it their business to oversee human actions, do not find themselves in anything so much perplexed as to reconcile them and bring them into the world's eye with the same lustre and reputation; for they commonly so strangely contradict one another that it seems impossible they should proceed from one and the same person. We find the younger Marius one while a son of Mars and another a son of Venus. Pope Boniface VIII entered, it is said, into his Papacy like a fox, behaved himself in it like a lion, and died like a dog; and who could believe it to be the same Nero, the perfect image of all cruelty, who, having the sentence of a condemned man brought to him to sign, as was the custom, cried out, "O that I had never been taught to write!" so much it went to his heart to condemn a man to death. All story is full of such examples, and every man is able to produce so many to himself, or out of his own practice or observation, that I sometimes wonder to see men of understanding give themselves the trouble of sorting these pieces, considering that irresolution appears to me to be the most common and manifest vice of our nature witness the famous verse of the player Publius,

Malum consilium est, quod mutari non potest.

There seems some reason in forming a judgment of a man from the most usual methods of his life; but, considering the natural instability of our manners and opinions, I have often thought even the best authors a little out in so obstinately endeavoring to make of us any constant and solid contexture; they choose a general air of a man, and according to that interpret all his actions, of which, if they cannot bend some to a uniformity with the rest, they are presently imputed to dissimulation. Augustus has escaped them, for there was in him so apparent, sudden, and continual variety of actions all the whole course of his life, that he has slipped away clear and undecided from the most daring critics. I can more hardly believe a man's constancy than any other virtue, and believe nothing sooner than the contrary. He that would judge of a man in detail and distinctly, bit by bit, would oftener be able to speak the truth.

"Tis evil counsel that will admit no change. • GELL., 17.14

It is a hard matter, from all antiquity, to pick out a dozen men who have formed their lives to one certain and constant course, which is the principal design of wisdom; for to comprise it all in one word, says one of the ancients, and to contract all the rules of human life into one, "it is to will, and not to will, always one and the same thing: I will not vouchsafe," says he, "to add, provided the will be just, for if it be not just, it is impossible it should be always one." I have indeed formerly learned that vice is nothing but irregularity, and want of measure, and therefore 'tis impossible to fix constancy to it. 'Tis a saying of Demosthenes, "that the beginning oh all virtue is consultation and deliberation; the end and perfection, constancy." If we would resolve on any certain course by reason, we should pitch upon the best, but nobody has thought on it,

*Quod petit, spernit; repetit, quod nuper omisit;
Æstuat, et vitæ disconvenit ordine toto.*

Our ordinary practice is to follow the inclinations of our appetite, be it to the left or right, upward or downward, according as we are wafted by the breath of occasion. We never meditate what we would have till the instant we have a mind to have it; and change like that little creature which receives its color from what it is laid upon. What we but just now proposed to ourselves we immediately alter, and presently return again to it; 'tis nothing but shifting and inconsistency,

Ducimur ut nervis alienis mobile lignum.

We do not go, we are driven; like things that float, now leisurely, then with violence, according to the gentleness or rapidity of the current:

*nonne videmus,
Quid sibi quisque velit, nescire, et quærere semper,
Commutare locum, quasi onus deponere possit?*

Every day a new whimsy, and our humors keep motion with the time.

*Tales sunt hominum mentes, quali pater ipse
Juppiter auctiferas lustravit lumine terras.*

We fluctuate betwixt various inclinations; we will nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly.

In any one who had prescribed and established determinate laws and rules in his head for his own conduct, we should perceive an equality of manners, an order and an infallible relation of one thing or action to another, shine through his whole life.

Empedocles observed this discrepancy in the Agrigentines, that they gave themselves up to delights, as if every day was their last, and built as if they had been to live for ever.

The judgment would not be hard to make, as is very evident in the younger Cato; he who therein has found one step, it will lead him to all the rest; 'tis

That which he sought he despises;
what he lately lost, he seeks again.
He fluctuates, and is inconsistent in
the whole order of life. • HOR.,
EPIST., 1.1.98

We are turned about like the top
with the string of others. • HOR.,
SAT., 2.7.82

Do we not see them, uncertain what
they want, and always asking for
something new, as if they could get
rid of the burthen. • LUCR., 3.1057

Such are the minds of men, that
they change as the light with which
father Jupiter himself has illumined
the increasing earth. • AUG., DE CIV.
D., 5.8¹

a harmony of very according sounds, that cannot jar. But with us 'tis quite contrary; every particular action requires a particular judgment. The surest way to steer, in my opinion, would be to take our measures from the nearest allied circumstances, without engaging in a longer inquisition, or without concluding any other consequence.

I was told, during the civil disorders of our poor kingdom, that a maid, hard by the place where I then was, had thrown herself out of a window to avoid being forced by a common soldier who was quartered in the house; she was not killed by the fall, and therefore, repeating her attempt would have cut her own throat, had she not been prevented; but having, nevertheless, wounded herself to some show of danger, she voluntarily confessed that the soldier had not as yet importuned her otherwise; than by courtship, earnest solicitation, and presents; but that she was afraid that in the end he would have proceeded to violence, all which she delivered with such a countenance and accent, and withal imbrued in her own blood, the highest testimony of her virtue, that she appeared another Lucretia; and yet I have since been very well assured that both before and after she was not so difficult a piece. And, according to my host's tale in Ariosto, be as handsome a man and as worthy a gentleman as you will, do not conclude too much upon your mistress's inviolable chastity for having been repulsed; you do not know but she may have a better stomach to your muleteer.

Antigonus, having taken one of his soldiers into a great degree of favor and esteem for his valor, gave his physicians strict charge to cure him of a long and inward disease under which he had a great while languished, and observing that, after his cure, he went much more coldly to work than before, he asked him what had so altered and cowed him: "Yourself, sir," replied the other, "by having eased me of the pains that made me weary of my life." Lucullus's soldier having been rifled by the enemy, performed upon them in revenge a brave exploit, by which having made himself a gainer, Lucullus, who had conceived a good opinion of him from that action, went about to engage him in some enterprise of very great danger, with all the plausible persuasions and promises he could think of;

Verbis, quae timido quoque possent addere mentem.

"Pray employ," answered he, "some miserable plundered soldier in that affair,"

*quantumvis rusticus, ibit,
Ibit eo, quo vis, qui zonam perdidit, inquit,*

and flatly refused to go. When we read that Mahomet having furiously rated Chasan, Bassa of the Janissaries, because he had seen the Hungarians break into his squadrons, and himself behave very ill in the business, and that Chasan, instead of any other answer, rushed furiously alone, scimitar in hand, into the first body of the enemy, where he was presently cut to pieces, we are not to look upon that action, peradventure, so much as vindication as a turn of mind, not so much natural valor as a sudden despite.

Words which might add courage to any timid man. • HOR., EPIST., 2.1.2

Some poor fellow, who has lost his purse, will go whither you wish, said he. • HOR., EPIST., 2.2.39

The man you saw yesterday so adventurous and brave, you must not think it strange to see him as great a poltroon the next: anger, necessity, company, wine, or the sound of the trumpet had roused his spirits; this is no valor formed and established by reason, but accidentally created by such circumstances, and therefore it is no wonder if by contrary circumstances it appear quite another thing.

These supple variations and contradictions so manifest in us, have given occasion to some to believe that man has two souls; other two distinct powers that always accompany and incline us, the one toward good and the other toward ill, according to their own nature and propension; so abrupt a variety not being imaginable to flow from one and the same source.

For my part, the puff of every accident not only carries me along with it according to its own proclivity, but moreover I discompose and trouble myself by the instability of my own posture; and whoever will look narrowly into his own bosom, will hardly find himself twice in the same condition. I give to my soul sometimes one face and sometimes another, according to the side I turn her to. If I speak variously of myself, it is because I consider myself variously; all the contrarieties are there to be found in one corner or another; after one fashion or another: bashful, insolent; chaste, lustful; prating, silent; laborious, delicate; ingenious, heavy; melancholic, pleasant; lying, true; knowing, ignorant; liberal, covetous, and prodigal: I find all this in myself, more or less, according as I turn myself about; and whoever will sift himself to the bottom, will find in himself, and even in his own judgment, this volubility and discordance. I have nothing to say of myself entirely, simply, and solidly without mixture and confusion. 'Distinguo' is the most universal member of my logic. Though I always intend to speak well of good things, and rather to interpret such things as fall out in the best sense than otherwise, yet such is the strangeness of our condition, that we are often pushed on to do well even by vice itself, if well-doing were not judged by the intention only. One gallant action, therefore, ought not to conclude a man valiant; if a man were brave indeed, he would be always so, and upon all occasions. If it were a habit of valor and not a sally, it would render a man equally resolute in all accidents; the same alone as in company; the same in lists as in a battle: for, let them say what they will, there is not one valor for the pavement and another for the field; he would bear a sickness in his bed as bravely as a wound in the field, and no more fear death in his own house than at an assault. We should not then see the same man charge into a breach with a brave assurance, and afterwards torment himself like a woman for the loss of a trial at law or the death of a child.

When, being an infamous coward, he is firm in the necessities of poverty; when he shrinks at the sight of a barber's razor, and rushes fearless upon the swords of the enemy, the action is commendable, not the man.

Many of the Greeks, says Cicero, cannot endure the sight of an enemy, and yet are courageous in sickness; the Cimbrians and Celtiberians quite contrary: *nihil enim potest esse aequabile, quod non a certa ratione proficiscatur.*

Nothing can be regular that does not proceed from a fixed ground of reason. • CIC., TUSC., 2.65

No valor can be more extreme in its kind than that of Alexander: but it is of but one kind, nor full enough throughout, nor universal. Incomparable as it is, it has yet some blemishes; of which his being so often at his wits' end upon every light suspicion of his captains conspiring against his life, and the carrying himself in that inquisition with so much vehemence and indiscreet injustice, and with a fear that subverted his natural reason, is one pregnant instance. The superstition, also, with which he was so much tainted, carries along with it some image of pusillanimity; and the excess of his penitence for the murder of Clytus is also a testimony of the unevenness of his courage.

All we perform is no other than a *cento*, as a man may say, of several pieces, and we would acquire honor by a false title. Virtue cannot be followed but for herself, and if one sometimes borrows her mask to some other purpose, she presently pulls it away again. 'Tis a vivid and strong tincture which, when the soul has once thoroughly imbibed it, will not out but with the piece. And, therefore, to make a right judgment of a man, we are long and very observingly to follow his trace: if constancy does not there stand firm upon her own proper base, *cui vivendi via considerata atque provisus est*, if the variety of occurrences makes him alter his pace (his path, I mean, for the pace may be faster or slower) let him go; such an one runs before the wind, *avau le vent*, as the motto of our Talebot has it.

If the way of his life is thoroughly considered and traced out. • CIC.,
PARAD., 5.1

'Tis no wonder, says one of the ancients, that chance has so great a dominion over us, since it is by chance we live. It is not possible for any one who has not designed his life for some certain end, it is impossible for any one to arrange the pieces, who has not the whole form already contrived in his imagination. Of what use are colors to him that knows not what he is to paint? No one lays down a certain design for his life, and we only deliberate thereof by pieces. The archer ought first to know at what he is to aim, and then accommodate his arm, bow, string, shaft, and motion to it; our counsels deviate and wander, because not levelled to any determinate end. No wind serves him who addresses his voyage to no certain port. I cannot acquiesce in the judgment given by one in the behalf of Sophocles, who concluded him capable of the management of domestic affairs, against the accusation of his son, from having read one of his tragedies.

Neither do I allow of the conjecture of the Parians, sent to regulate the Milesians sufficient for such a consequence as they from thence derived coming to visit the island, they took notice of such grounds as were best husbanded, and such country-houses as were best governed; and having taken the names of the owners, when they had assembled the citizens, they appointed these farmers for new governors and magistrates; concluding that they, who had been so provident in their own private concerns, would be so of the public too.

We are all lumps, and of so various and inform a contexture, that every piece plays, every moment, its own game, and there is as much difference betwixt us and ourselves as betwixt us and others: *Magnam rem puta, unum hominem agere*. Since ambition can teach man valor, temperance, and liberality, and even justice too; seeing that avarice can inspire the courage of a shop-boy, bred and nursed up in obscurity and ease, with the

Esteem it a great thing always to act as one and the same man. • SEN.,
EP., 150

assurance to expose himself so far from the fireside to the mercy of the waves and angry Neptune in a frail boat; that she further teaches discretion and prudence; and that even Venus can inflate boys under the discipline of the rod with boldness and resolution, and infuse masculine courage into the heart of tender virgins in their mothers' arms,

*Hac duce, custodes furtim transgressa jacentes,
Ad juvenem tenebris sola puella venit:*

'tis not all the understanding has to do, simply to judge us by our outward actions; it must penetrate the very soul, and there discover by what springs the motion is guided. But that being a high and hazardous undertaking, I could wish that fewer would attempt it.

She leading, the maiden, furtively
passing by the recumbent guards,
goes alone in the darkness to the
youth. • TIB., 2.2.75

NOTES

- 1 Augustine citing Cicero's Latin translation of verses from chapter 18 of Homer's *Odyssey*.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Aug., De civ. D.	Augustine, <i>City of God</i>
Cic., Parad.	Cicero, <i>Stoic Paradoxes</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Gell.	Aulus Gellius, <i>Attic Nights</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Tib.	Tibullus, <i>Elegiae</i>