

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 42

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On the Inequality among Us

Plutarch says somewhere that he does not find so great a difference betwixt beast and beast as he does betwixt man and man; which he says in reference to the internal qualities and perfections of the soul. And, in truth, I find so vast a distance betwixt Epaminondas, according to my judgment of him, and some that I know, who are yet men of good sense, that I could willingly enhance upon Plutarch, and say that there is more difference betwixt such and such a man than there is betwixt such a man and such a beast:

hem vir viro quid præstat;

and that there are as many and innumerable degrees of mind as there are cubits betwixt this and heaven.

But as touching the estimate of men, 'tis strange that, ourselves excepted, no other creature is esteemed beyond its proper qualities; we commend a horse for his strength and sureness of foot,

*volucrem
Sic laudamus equum, facili cui plurima palma
Fervet, et exsultat rauco victoria circo,*

and not for his rich caparison; a greyhound for his speed of heels, not for his fine collar; a hawk for her wing, not for her jesses and bells. Why, in like manner, do we not value a man for what is properly his own? He has a great train, a beautiful palace, so much credit, so many thousand pounds a year: all these are about him, but not in him. You will not buy a pig in a poke: if you cheapen a horse, you will see him stripped of his housing-cloths, you will see him naked and open to your eye; or if he be clothed, as they anciently were wont to present them to princes to sell, 'tis only on the less important parts, that you may not so much consider the beauty of his color or the breadth of his crupper, as principally to examine his legs, eyes, and feet, which are the members of greatest use.

Ah! how much may one man surpass another! • TER., EUN., 2.2

So we praise the swift horse, for whose easy mastery many a hand glows in applause, and victory exults in the hoarse circus. • JUV., 8.57

*Regibus hic mos est: ubi equos mercantur, opertos
Inspiciunt; ne, si facies, ut saepe, decora
Molli fulta pede est, emptorem inducat hiantem
Quod pulchrae clunes, breve quod caput, ardua cervix.*

Why, in giving your estimate of a man, do you prize him wrapped and muffled up in clothes? He then discovers nothing to you but such parts as are not in the least his own, and conceals those by which alone one may rightly judge of his value. 'Tis the price of the blade that you inquire into, not of the scabbard: you would not peradventure bid a farthing for him, if you saw him stripped. You are to judge him by himself and not by what he wears; and, as one of the ancients very pleasantly said: "Do you know why you repute him tall? You reckon withal the height of his pattens." The pedestal is no part of the statue. Measure him without his stilts; let him lay aside his revenues and his titles; let him present himself in his shirt. Then examine if his body be sound and sprightly, active and disposed to perform its functions. What soul has he? Is she beautiful, capable, and happily provided of all her faculties? Is she rich of what is her own, or of what she has borrowed? Has fortune no hand in the affair? Can she, without winking, stand the lightning of swords? is she indifferent whether her life expire by the mouth or through the throat? Is she settled, even and content? This is what is to be examined, and by that you are to judge of the vast differences betwixt man and man. Is he

*sapiens, sibi que imperiosus,
Querm neque pauperies, neque mors, neque vincula terrent;
Responsare cupidinibus, contemnere honores
Fortis; et in seipso totus teres atque rotundus,
Externi ne quid valeat per leve morari,
In quem manca ruit semper fortuna?*

such a man is five hundred cubits above kingdoms and duchies; he is an absolute monarch in and to himself.

Sapiens pol ipse fingit fortunam sibi.

What remains for him to covet or desire?

*Nonne videmus,
Nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi ut, quoi
Corpore sejunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur,
Jucundo sensu, cura semotu metuque?*

Compare with such a one the common rabble of mankind, stupid and mean-spirited, servile, instable, and continually floating with the tempest of various passions, that tosses and tumbles them to and fro, and all depending upon others, and you will find a greater distance than betwixt heaven and earth; and yet the blindness of common usage is such that we make little or no account of it; whereas if we consider a peasant and a king, a nobleman and a vassal, a magistrate and a private man, a rich man and a poor, there appears a vast disparity, though they differ no more, as a man may say, than in their breeches.

This is the custom of kings, when they buy horses, to inspect them covered so that if a fair head, as often chances, is supported by a weak foot, its fine rump, pretty head, and firm neck should not tempt the gaping purchaser. • HOR., SAT., 1.2.86

A wise man, self-governed, whom neither poverty, nor death, nor chains affright: who has the strength to resist his appetites and to condemn honors: who is wholly self-contained: whom no external objects affect: whom fortune assails in vain. • HOR., SAT., 2.7

The wise man is the master of his own fortune • PLAUT., TRIN., 2.2.84

Do we not see that human nature asks no more for itself than that, free from bodily pain, it may exercise its mind agreeably, exempt from care and fear. • LUCR., 2.16

In Thrace the king was distinguished from his people after a very pleasant and especial manner; he had a religion by himself, a god all his own, and which his subjects were not to presume to adore, which was Mercury, whilst, on the other hand, he disdained to have anything to do with theirs, Mars, Bacchus, and Diana.

And yet they are no other than pictures that make no essential dissimilitude.

for as you see actors in a play representing the person of a duke or an emperor upon the stage, and immediately after return to their true and original condition of valets and porters, so the emperor, whose pomp and lustre so dazzle you in public,

*Scilicet grandes viridi cum luce smaragdi
Auto includuntur, teriturque thalassina vestis
Assidue, et Veneris sudorem exercita potat,*

do but peep behind the curtain, and you will see no thing more than an ordinary man, and peradventure more contemptible than the meanest of his subjects: *Ille beatus introrsum est, istius bracteata felicitas est.*

Cowardice, irresolution, ambition, spite, and envy agitate him as much as another:

*Non enim gazae, neque consularis
Submovet lictor miseros tumultus
Mentis, et curas laqueata circum
Tecta volantes;*

Care and fear attack him even in the center of his battalions,

*Re veràque metus hominum curaeque sequaces
Nec metuunt sonitus armorum, nec fera tela;
Audactèrque inter reges, rerumque potentes
Versantur, neque fulgorem reverentur ab auro.*

Do fevers, gout, and apoplexies spare him any more than one of us? When old age hangs heavy upon his shoulders, can the yeomen of his guard ease him of the burden? When he is astounded with the apprehension of death, can the gentlemen of his bedchamber comfort and assure him? When jealousy or any other caprice swims in his brain, can our compliments and ceremonies restore him to his good-humor? The canopy embroidered with pearl and gold he lies under has no virtue against a violent fit of the colic:

*Nec calidæ citius decedunt corpore febres,
Textilibus si in picturis, ostróque rubenti
Jacteris, quam si plebeia in veste cubandum est.*

The flatterers of Alexander the Great possessed him that he was the son of Jupiter; but being one day wounded, and observing the blood stream from his wound: "What say you now, my masters," said he, "is not this blood of a

Because he wears great emeralds richly set in gold, darting green lustre; and the sea-blue silken robe, worn with pressure, and moist with illicit love (and absorbs the sweat of Venus). • LUCR., 4.1129

The one is happy in himself; the happiness of the other is counterfeit. • SEN., EP., 115

For not treasures, nor the consular lictor, can remove the miserable tumults of the mind, nor cares that fly about panelled ceilings. • HOR., CARM., 2.16.9

And in truth the fears and haunting cares of men fear not the clash of arms nor points of darts, and mingle boldly with great kings and men in authority, nor respect the glitter of gold. • LUCR., 2.48

Nor do burning fevers quit you sooner if you are stretched on a couch of rich tapestry and in a vest of purple dye, than if you be in a coarse blanket. • LUCR., 2.34

crimson color and purely human? This is not of the complexion of that which Homer makes to issue from the wounded gods.” The poet Hermodorus had written a poem in honor of Antigonus, wherein he called him the son of the sun: “He who has the emptying of my close-stool,” said Antigonus, “knows to the contrary.” He is but a man at best, and if he be deformed or ill-qualified from his birth, the empire of the universe cannot set him to rights:

*puellæ
Hunc rapiant; quidquid calcaverit hic, rosa fiat,*

what of all that, if he be a fool? even pleasure and good fortune are not relished without vigor and understanding:

*haec perinde sunt, ut ilius animus; qui ea possidet
Qui uti scit, ei bona; illi, qui non uritur rectè, mala.*

Whatever the benefits of fortune are, they yet require a palate to relish them. ’Tis fruition, and not possession, that renders us happy:

*Non domus et fundus, non æris acervus et auri
Ægroto domini deduxit corpore febres,
Non animo curas: valeat possessor oportet,
Qui comportatis rebus benè cogita uti.
Qui cubit aut metti, juvat illum sic domus aut res,
Ut lippum pictæ tabulæ, fomenta podagram.*

He is a sot, his taste is palled and flat; he no more enjoys what he has than one that has a cold relishes the flavor of canary, or than a horse is sensible of his rich caparison. Plato is in the right when he tells us that health, beauty, vigor, and riches, and all the other things called goods, are equally evil to the unjust as good to the just, and the evil on the contrary the same.

And therefore where the body and the mind are in disorder, to what use serve these external conveniences: considering that the least prick with a pin, or the least passion of the soul, is sufficient to deprive one of the pleasure of being sole monarch of the world. At the first twitch of the gout it signifies much to be called Sir and Your Majesty!

Totus et argento conflatus, totus et auro.

does he not forget his palaces and girandeurs? If he be angry, can his being a prince keep him from looking red and looking pale, and grinding his teeth like a madman? Now, if he be a man of parts and of right nature, royalty adds very little to his happiness:

*Si ventri bene, si lateri est, pedibûsque tuis, nil
Divitix poterunt regales addere majus;*

he discerns ’tis nothing but counterfeit and gullery. Nay, perhaps he would be of King Seleucus’ opinion, that he who knew the weight of a sceptre would not stoop to pick it up, if he saw it lying before him, so great and

Let girls carry him off; wherever he steps let there spring up a rose! • PERS., 2.38

Things are, as is the mind of their possessor; who knows how to use them, to him they are good; to him who abuses them, ill. • TER., HAUT., 1.3.21

’Tis not lands, or a heap of brass and gold, that has removed fevers from the ailing body of the owner, or cares from his mind. The possessor must be healthy, if he thinks to make good use of his realized wealth. To him who is covetous or timorous his house and estate are as a picture to a blind man, or a fomentation to a gouty. • HOR., EPIST., 1.2.47

Wholly made up of silver and gold • TIB., 1.2.70

If it is well with thy belly, thy side and thy feet, regal wealth will be able to add nothing. • HOR., EPIST., 1.12.5

painful are the duties incumbent upon a good king. Assuredly it can be no easy task to rule others, when we find it so hard a matter to govern ourselves; and as to dominion, that seems so charming, the frailty of human judgment and the difficulty of choice in things that are new and doubtful considered, I am very much of opinion that it is far more easy and pleasant to follow than to lead; and that it is a great settlement and satisfaction of mind to have only one path to walk in, and to have none to answer for but a man's self:

*Ut satiùs multo jam sit parere quietum,
Quam regere imperio res velle.*

'Tis much better quietly to obey than wish to rule. • LUCR., 5.1129

To which we may add that saying of Cyrus, that no man was fit to rule but he who in his own worth was of greater value than those he was to govern.

But King Hiero in Xenophon says further, that in the fruition even of pleasure itself they are in a worse condition than private men; forasmuch as the opportunities and facility they have of commanding those things at will takes off from the delight that ordinary folks enjoy.

*Pinguis amor, nimiumque patens, in taedia nobis
Vertitur, et stomacho dulcis ut esca nocet.*

Love in excess and too palpable turns to weariness, and, like sweetmeats to the stomach, is injurious. • OV., AM., 2.19.25

Can we think that the singing boys of the choir take any great delight in music? the satiety rather renders it troublesome and tedious to them. Feasts, balls, masquerades and tiltings delight such as but rarely see, and desire to see, them; but having been frequently at such entertainments, the relish of them grows flat and insipid. Nor do women so much delight those who make a common practice of the sport. He who will not give himself leisure to be thirsty can never find the true pleasure of drinking. Farces and tumbling tricks are pleasant to the spectators, but a wearisome toil to those by whom they are performed. And that this is so, we see that princes divert themselves sometimes in disguising their quality, awhile to depose themselves, and to stoop to the poor and ordinary way of living of the meanest of their people.

*Plerumque gratae divitibus vices,
Mundaeque parvo sub lare pauperum
Cenæ, sine aulæis et ostro,
Solicitam explicuere frontem.*

The rich are often pleased with variety; and the plain supper in a poor cottage, without tapestry and purple, has relaxed the anxious brow. • HOR., CARM., 3.29.13

Nothing is so distasteful and clogging as abundance. What appetite would not be baffled to see three hundred women at its mercy, as the grand signor has in his seraglio? And, of his ancestors what fruition or taste of sport did he reserve to himself, who never went hawking without seven thousand falconers?

And besides all this, I fancy that this lustre of grandeur brings with it no little disturbance and uneasiness upon the enjoyment of the most tempting pleasures; the great are too conspicuous and lie too open to every one's view.

Neither do I know to what end a man should more require of them to conceal their errors, since what is only reputed indiscretion in us, the people in them brand with the names of tyranny and contempt of the laws, and, besides their proclivity to vice, are apt to hold that it is a heightening of pleasure to them, to insult over and to trample upon public observances. Plato, indeed, in his *Gorgias*, defines a tyrant to be one who in a city has licence to do whatever his own will leads him to do; and by reason of this impunity, the display and publication of their vices do oftentimes more mischief than the vice itself. Every one fears to be pried into and overlooked; but princes are so, even to their very gestures, looks and thoughts, the people conceiving they have right and title to be judges of them besides that the blemishes of the great naturally appear greater by reason of the eminence and lustre of the place where they are seated, and that a mole or a wart appears greater in them than a wide gash in others.

And this is the reason why the poets feign the amours of Jupiter to be performed in the disguises of so many borrowed shapes, and that among the many amorous practices they lay to his charge, there is only one, as I remember, where he appears in his own majesty and grandeur.

But let us return to Hiero, who further complains of the inconveniences he found in his royalty, in that he could not look abroad and travel the world at liberty, being as it were a prisoner in the bounds and limits of his own dominion, and that in all his actions he was evermore surrounded with an importunate crowd. And in truth, to see our kings sit all alone at table, environed with so many people prating about them, and so many strangers staring upon them, as they always are, I have often been moved rather to pity than to envy their condition.

King Alfonso was wont to say, that in this asses were in a better condition than kings, their masters permitting them to feed at their own ease and pleasure, a favor that kings cannot obtain of their servants.

And it has never come into my fancy that it could be of any great benefit to the life of a man of sense to have twenty people prating about him when he is at stool; or that the services of a man of ten thousand livres a year, or that has taken Casale or defended Siena, should be either more commodious or more acceptable to him, than those of a good groom of the chamber who understands his place.

The advantages of sovereignty are in a manner but imaginary: every degree of fortune has in it some image of principality. Caesar calls all the lords of France, having free franchise within their own demesnes, *roitelets* or petty kings; and in truth, the name of sire excepted, they go pretty far toward kingship; for do but look into the provinces remote from court, as Brittany for example; take notice of the train, the vassals, the officers, the employments, service, ceremony, and state of a lord who lives retired from court in his own house, among his own tenants and servants; and observe withal the flight of his imagination; there is nothing more royal; he hears talk of his master once a year, as of a king of Persia, without taking any further recognition of him, than by some remote kindred his secretary keeps in some register. And, to speak the truth, our laws are easy enough,

so easy that a gentleman of France scarce feels the weight of sovereignty pinch his shoulders above twice in his life. Real and effectual subjection only concerns such among us as voluntarily thrust their necks under the yoke, and who design to get wealth and honors by such services: for a man that loves his own fireside, and can govern his house without falling by the ears with his neighbors or engaging in suits of law, is as free as a Duke of Venice. *Paucos servitus, plures servitutem tenent.*

But that which Hiero is most concerned at is, that he finds himself stripped of all friendship, deprived of all mutual society, wherein the true and most perfect fruition of human life consists. For what testimony of affection and goodwill can I extract from him that owes me, whether he will or no, all that he is able to do? Can I form any assurance of his real respect to me, from his humble way of speaking and submissive behavior, when these are ceremonies it is not in his choice to deny? The honor we receive from those that fear us is not honor; those respects are due to royalty and not to me:

*maximum hoc regni bonum est,
Quod facta domini cogitur populus sui
Quam ferre, tam laudare.*

Do I not see that the wicked and the good king, he that is hated and he that is beloved, have the one as much reverence paid him as the other? My predecessor was, and my successor shall be, served with the same ceremony and state. If my subjects do me no harm, 'tis no evidence of any good affection; why should I look upon it as such, seeing it is not in their power to do it if they would? No one follows me or obeys my commands upon the account of any friendship, betwixt him and me; there can be no contracting of friendship where there is so little relation and correspondence: my own height has put me out of the familiarity of and intelligence with men; there is too great disparity and disproportion betwixt us. They follow me either upon the account of decency and custom; or rather my fortune, than me, to increase their own. All they say to me or do for me is but outward paint, appearance, their liberty being on all parts restrained by the great power and authority I have over them. I see nothing about me but what is dissembled and disguised.

The Emperor Julian being one day applauded by his courtiers for his exact justice: "I should be proud of these praises," said he, "did they come from persons that dared condemn or disapprove the contrary, in case I should do it."

All the real advantages of princes are common to them with men of meaner condition ('tis for the gods to mount winged horses and feed upon ambrosia): they have no other sleep, nor other appetite than we; the steel they arm themselves withal is of no better temper than that we also use; their crowns neither defend them from the rain nor the sun. Diocletian, who wore a crown so fortunate and revered, resigned it to retire to the felicity of a private life; and some time after the necessity of public affairs requiring that he should reassume his charge, he made answer to those who came to court him to it: "You would not offer," said he, "to persuade

Servitude enchains few, but many
enchain themselves to servitude. •

SEN., EP., 22

"Tis the greatest benefit of a kingdom
that the people is forced to
commend, as well as to bear the acts
of the ruler. • SEN., THY., 2.1.30

me to this, had you seen the fine order of the trees I have planted in my orchard, and the fair melons I have sown in my garden.”

In Anacharsis’ opinion, the happiest state of government would be where, all other things being equal, precedence should be measured out by the virtues, and repulses by the vices of men.

When King Pyrrhus prepared for his expedition into Italy, his wise counsellor Cyneas, to make him sensible of the vanity of his ambition: “Well, sir,” said he, “to what end do you make all this mighty preparation?” — “To make myself master of Italy,” replied the king. “And what after that is done?” said Cyneas. “I will pass over into Gaul and Spain,” said the other. “And what then?” — “I will then go to subdue Africa; and lastly, when I have brought the whole world to my subjection, I will sit down and rest content at my own ease.” — “For God sake, sir,” replied Cyneas, “tell me what hinders that you may not, if you please, be now in the condition you speak of? Why do you not now at this instant settle yourself in the state you seem to aim at, and spare all the labor and hazard you interpose?”

*Nimirum, quia non cognovit, quæ esset habendi
Finis, et omnino quoad crescat vera voluptas.*

I will conclude with an old versicle, that I think very apt to the purpose:
Mores cuique sui fingunt fortunam.

Forsooth because he does not know what should be the limit of acquisition, and altogether how far real pleasure should increase. •
LUCR., 5.1432

Every man frames his own fortune. •
NEP., ATT., 11

MONTAIGNE’S SOURCES

Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Nep., Att.	Nepos, <i>Atticus</i>
Ov., Am.	Ovid, <i>Amores</i>
Pers.	Persius, <i>Satires</i>
Plaut., Trin.	Plautus, <i>Trinummus</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Sen., Thy.	Seneca, <i>Thyestes</i>

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Ter., Eun.	Terence, <i>Eunuchus</i>
Ter., Haut.	Terence, <i>Heautontimorumenos</i>
Tib.	Tibullus, <i>Elegiae</i>