

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 3 · Chapter 3

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On Three Kinds of Relations

We must not rivet ourselves so fast to our humors and complexions: our chiefest sufficiency is to know how to apply ourselves to divers employments. 'Tis to be, but not to live, to keep a man's self tied and bound by necessity to one only course; those are the bravest souls that have in them the most variety and pliancy.

Of this here is an honorable testimony of the elder Cato: *Huic versatile ingenium sic pariter ad omnia fuit, ut natum ad id unum diceret, quodcumque ageret.*

Had I liberty to set myself forth after my own mode, there is no so graceful fashion to which I would be so fixed as not to be able to disengage myself from it; life is an unequal, irregular and multiform motion. 'Tis not to be a friend to one's self, much less a master 'tis to be a slave, incessantly to be led by the nose by one's self, and to be so fixed in one's previous inclinations, that one cannot turn aside nor writhe one's neck out of the collar. I say this now in this part of my life, wherein I find I cannot easily disengage myself from the importunity of my soul, which cannot ordinarily amuse itself but in things of limited range, nor employ itself otherwise than entirely and with all its force; upon the lightest subject offered it expands and stretches it to that degree as therein to employ its utmost power; wherefore it is that idleness is to me a very painful labor, and very prejudicial to my health. Most men's minds require foreign matter to exercise and enliven them; mine has rather need of it to sit still and repose itself, *vitia otii negotio discutienda sunt*, for its chiefest and hardest study is to study itself. Books are to it a sort of employment that debauch it from its study. Upon the first thoughts that possess it, it begins to bustle and make trial of its vigor in all directions, exercises its power of handling, now making trial of force, now fortifying, moderating, and ranging itself by the way of grace and order. It has of its own wherewith to rouse its faculties: nature has given to it, as to all others, matter enough of its own to make advantage of, and subjects proper enough where it may either invent or judge.

His parts were so pliable to all uses, that one would say he had been born only to that which he was doing. •

LIVY, 39.49

the vices of sloth are to be shaken off by business, • SEN., EP., 56

Meditation is a powerful and full study to such as can effectually taste and employ themselves; I had rather fashion my soul than furnish it. There is no employment, either more weak or more strong, than that of entertaining a man's own thoughts, according as the soul is; the greatest men make it their whole business, *quibus vivere est cogitare*. Nature has therefore favored it with this privilege, that there is nothing we can do so long, nor any action to which we more frequently and with greater facility addict ourselves. 'Tis the business of the gods, says Aristotle, and from which both their beatitude and ours proceed. The principal use of reading to me is, that by various objects it rouses my reason, and employs my judgment, not my memory.

For whom to live is to think. • CIC.,
TUSC., 5.28

Few conversations detain me without force and effort; it is true that beauty and elegance of speech take as much or more with me than the weight and depth of the subject; and forasmuch as I am apt to be sleepy in all other communication, and give but the rind of my attention, it often falls out that in such poor and pitiful discourses, mere chatter, I either make drowsy, unmeaning answers, unbecoming a child, and ridiculous, or more foolishly and rudely still, maintain an obstinate silence. I have a pensive way that withdraws me into myself, and, with that, a heavy and childish ignorance of many very ordinary things, by which two qualities I have earned this, that men may truly relate five or six as ridiculous tales of me as of any other man whatever.

But, to proceed in my subject, this difficult complexion of mine renders me very nice in my conversation with men, whom I must cull and pick out for my purpose; and unfits me for common society. We live and negotiate with the people; if their conversation be troublesome to us, if we disdain to apply ourselves to mean and vulgar souls (and the mean and vulgar are often as regular as those of the finest thread, and all wisdom is folly that does not accommodate itself to the common ignorance), we must no more intermeddle either with other men's affairs or our own; for business, both public and private, has to do with these people. The least forced and most natural motions of the soul are the most beautiful; the best employments, those that are least strained. My God! how good an office does wisdom to those whose desires it limits to their power! that is the most useful knowledge: "according to what a man can," was the favorite sentence and motto of Socrates. A motto of great solidity. We must moderate and adapt our desires to the nearest and easiest to be acquired things. Is it not a foolish humor of mine to separate myself from a thousand to whom my fortune has conjoined me, and without whom I cannot live, and cleave to one or two who are out of my intercourse; or rather a fantastic desire of a thing I cannot obtain? My gentle and easy manners, enemies of all sourness and harshness, may easily enough have secured me from envy and animosities; to be beloved, I do not say, but never any man gave less occasion of being hated; but the coldness of my conversation has, reasonably enough, deprived me of the goodwill of many, who are to be excused if they interpret it in another and worse sense.

I am very capable of contracting and maintaining rare and exquisite friendships; for by reason that I so greedily seize upon such acquaintance as fit my liking, I throw myself with such violence upon them that I hardly

fail to stick, and to make an impression where I hit; as I have often made happy proof. In ordinary friendships I am somewhat cold and shy, for my motion is not natural, if not with full sail: besides which, my fortune having in my youth given me a relish for one sole and perfect friendship, has, in truth, created in me a kind of distaste to others, and too much imprinted in my fancy that it is a beast of company, as the ancient said, but not of the herd. And also I have a natural difficulty of communicating myself by halves, with the modifications and the servile and jealous prudence required in the conversation of numerous and imperfect friendships: and we are principally enjoined to these in this age of ours, when we cannot talk of the world but either with danger or falsehood.

Yet do I very well discern that he who has the conveniences (I mean the essential conveniences) of life for his end, as I have, ought to fly these difficulties and delicacy of humor, as much as the plague. I should commend a soul of several stages, that knows both how to stretch and to slacken itself; that finds itself at ease in all conditions whither fortune leads it; that can discourse with a neighbor, of his building, his hunting, his quarrels; that can chat with a carpenter or a gardener with pleasure. I envy those who can render themselves familiar with the meanest of their followers, and talk with them in their own way.

I dislike the advice of Plato, that men should always speak in a magisterial tone to their servants, whether men or women, without being sometimes facetious and familiar; for besides the reasons I have given, 'tis inhuman and unjust to set so great a value upon this pitiful prerogative of fortune, and the politics wherein less disparity is permitted betwixt masters and servants seem to me the most equitable.

Others study how to raise and elevate their minds; I, how to humble mine and to bring it low; 'tis only vicious in extension.

*Narras et genus Æaci,
Et pugnata sacro bella sub Ilio
Quo Chium pretio cadum
Mercemur, quis aquam temperet ignibus,
Quo præbente domum, et quota,
Pelignis caream frigoribus, taces.*

Thus, as the Lacedaemonian valor stood in need of moderation, and of the sweet and harmonious sound of flutes to soften it in battle, lest they should precipitate themselves into temerity and fury, whereas all other nations commonly make use of harsh and shrill sounds, and of loud and imperious cries, to incite and heat the soldier's courage to the last degree; so, methinks, contrary to the usual method, in the practice of our minds, we have for the most part more need of lead than of wings; of temperance and composedness than of ardor and agitation. But, above all things, 'tis in my opinion egregiously to play the fool, to put on the grave airs of a man of lofty mind among those who are nothing of the sort: ever to speak in print (by the book), *favellare in punta di forchetta*. You must let yourself down to those with whom you converse; and sometimes affect ignorance: lay aside

You tell us long stories about the race of Aeacus, and the battles fought under sacred Ilium; but what to give for a cask of Chian wine, who shall prepare the warm bath, and in whose house, and when I may escape from the Pelignian cold, you do not tell us.

• HOR., CARM., 3.19.3

To talk with the point of a fork.¹

power and subtlety in common conversation; to preserve decorum and order 'tis enough-nay, crawl on the earth, if they so desire it.

The learned often stumble at this stone; they will always be parading their pedantic science, and strew their books everywhere; they have, in these days, so filled the cabinets and ears of the ladies with them, that if they have lost the substance, they at least retain the words; so as in all discourse upon all sorts of subjects, how mean and common soever, they speak and write after a new and learned way,

*Hoc sermone pavent, hoc iram, gaudia, curas,
Hoc cuncta effundunt animi secreta; quid ultra?
Concumbunt docte;*

and quote Plato and Aquinas in things the first man they meet could determine as well; the learning that cannot penetrate their souls hangs still upon the tongue.

If people of quality will be persuaded by me, they shall content themselves with setting out their proper and natural treasures; they conceal and cover their beauties under others that are none of theirs: 'tis a great folly to put out their own light and shine by a borrowed lustre: they are interred and buried under. *De capsula totæ*. It is because they do not sufficiently know themselves or do themselves justice: the world has nothing fairer than they; 'tis for them to honor the arts, and to paint painting. What need have they of anything but to live beloved and honored? They have and know but too much for this: they need do no more but rouse and heat a little the faculties they have of their own. When I see them tampering with rhetoric, law, logic, and other drugs, so improper and unnecessary for their business, I begin to suspect that the men who inspire them with such fancies, do it that they may govern them upon that account; for what other excuse can I contrive? It is enough that they can, without our instruction, compose the graces of their eyes to gaiety, severity, sweetness, and season a denial with asperity, suspense, or favor: they need not another to interpret what we speak for their service; with this knowledge, they command with a switch, and rule both the tutors and the schools. But if, nevertheless, it angers them to give place to us in anything whatever, and will, out of curiosity, have their share in books, poetry is a diversion proper for them; 'tis a wanton, subtle, dissembling, and prating art, all pleasure and all show, like themselves. They may also abstract several commodities from history. In philosophy, out of the moral part of it, they may select such instructions as will teach them to judge of our humors and conditions, to defend themselves from our treacheries, to regulate the ardor of their own desires, to manage their liberty, to lengthen the pleasures of life, and gently to bear the inconstancy of a lover, the rudeness of a husband; and the importunity of years, wrinkles, and the like. This is the utmost of what I would allow them in the sciences.

There are some particular natures that are private and retired: my natural way is proper for communication, and apt to lay me open; I am all without and in sight, born for society and friendship. The solitude that I love myself and recommend to others, is chiefly no other than to withdraw my

In this language do they express their fears, their anger, their joys, their cares; in this pour out all their secrets; what more? they lie with their lovers learnedly. • JUV., 6.189

Completely made up.² • SEN., EP., 115

thoughts and affections into myself; to restrain and check, not my steps, but my own cares and desires, resigning all foreign solicitude, and mortally avoiding servitude and obligation, and not so much the crowd of men as the crowd of business. Local solitude, to say the truth, rather gives me more room and sets me more at large; I more readily throw myself upon affairs of state and the world when I am alone. At the Louvre and in the bustle of the court, I fold myself within my own skin; the crowd thrusts me upon myself; and I never entertain myself so wantonly, with so much licence, or so especially, as in places of respect and ceremonious prudence: our follies do not make me laugh, it is our wisdom which does. I am naturally no enemy to a court, life; I have therein passed a part of my own, and am of a humor cheerfully to frequent great company, provided it be by intervals and at my own time: but this softness of judgment whereof I speak ties me perforce to solitude. Even at home, amidst a numerous family, and in a house sufficiently frequented, I see people enough, but rarely such with whom I delight to converse; and I there reserve both for myself and others an unusual liberty: there is in my house no such thing as ceremony, ushering, or waiting upon people down to the coach, and such other troublesome ceremonies as our courtesy enjoins (O the servile and importunate custom!). Every one there governs himself according to his own method; let who will speak his thoughts, I sit mute, meditating and shut up in my closet, without any offense to my guests.

The men whose society and familiarity I covet are those they call sincere and able men; and the image of these makes me disrelish the rest. It is, if rightly taken, the rarest of our forms, and a form that we chiefly owe to nature. The end of this commerce is simply privacy, frequentation and conference, the exercise of souls, without other fruit. In our discourse, all subjects are alike to me; let there be neither weight, nor depth, 'tis all one: there is yet grace and pertinency; all there is tinted with a mature and constant judgment, and mixed with goodness, freedom, gaiety, and friendship. 'Tis not only in talking of the affairs of kings and state that our wits discover their force and beauty, but every whit as much in private conferences. I understand my men even by their silence and smiles; and better discover them, perhaps, at table than in the council. Hippomachus said, very well, "that he could know the good wrestlers by only seeing them walk in the street." If learning please to step into our talk, it shall not be rejected, not magisterial, imperious, and importunate, as-it commonly is, but suffragan and docile itself; we there only seek to pass away our time; when we have a mind to be instructed and preached to, we will go seek this in its throne; please let it humble itself to us for the nonce; for, useful and profitable as it is, I imagine that, at need, we may manage well enough without it, and do our business without its assistance. A well-descended soul, and practised in the conversation of men, will of herself render herself sufficiently agreeable; art is nothing but the counterpart and register of what such souls produce.

The conversation also of beautiful and honorable women is for me a sweet commerce: *Nam nos quoque oculos eruditos habemus*. If the soul has not therein so much to enjoy, as in the first the bodily senses, which participate more of this, bring it to a proportion next to, though, in my opinion, not equal to the other. But 'tis a commerce wherein a man must stand a little upon his

For we also have eyes that are versed
in the matter. • CIC., PARAD., 5.2

guard, especially those, where the body can do much, as in me. I there scalded myself in my youth, and suffered all the torments that poets say befall those who precipitate themselves into love without order and judgment. It is true that that whipping has made me wiser since,

*Quicumque Argolica de classe Capharea fugit,
Semper ab Euhoicis vela retorquet aquis.*

'Tis folly to fix all a man's thoughts upon it, and to engage in it with a furious and indiscreet affection; but, on the other hand, to engage there without love and without inclination, like comedians, to play a common part, without putting anything to it of his own but words, is indeed to provide for his safety, but, withal, after as cowardly a manner as he who should abandon his honor, profit, or pleasure for fear of danger. For it is certain that from such a practice, they who set it on foot can expect no fruit that can please or satisfy a noble soul. A man must have, in good earnest, desired that which he, in good earnest, expects to have a pleasure in enjoying; I say, though fortune should unjustly favor their dissimulation; which often falls out, because there is none of the sex, let her be as ugly as the devil, who does not think herself well worthy to be beloved, and who does not prefer herself before other women, either for her youth, the color of her hair, or her graceful motion (for there are no more women universally ugly, than there are women universally beautiful, and such of the Brahmin virgins as have nothing else to recommend them, the people being assembled by the common crier to that effect, come out into the market-place to expose their matrimonial parts to public view, to try if these at least are not of temptation sufficient to get them a husband).

Consequently, there is not one who does not easily suffer herself to be overcome by the first vow that they make to serve her. Now from this common and ordinary treachery of the men of the present day, that must fall out which we already experimentally see, either that they rally together, and separate themselves by themselves to evade us, or else form their discipline by the example we give them, play their parts of the farce as we do ours, and give themselves up to the sport, without passion, care, or love. *Neque affectui suo aut alieno obnoxia*; believing, according to the persuasion of Lysias in Plato, that they may with more utility and convenience surrender themselves up to us the less we love them.

Where it will fall out, as in comedies, that the people will have as much pleasure or more than the comedians.

For my part, I no more acknowledge a Venus without a Cupid than, a mother without issue: they are things that mutually lend and owe their essence to one another. Thus this cheat recoils upon him who is guilty of it; it does not cost him much, indeed, but he also gets little or nothing by it. They who have made Venus a goddess have taken notice that her principal beauty was incorporeal and spiritual; but the Venus whom these people hunt after is not so much as human, nor indeed brutal; the very beasts will not accept it so gross and so earthly; we see that imagination and desire often heat and incite them before the body does; we see in both the one sex and the other, they have in the herd choice and particular election in their

Whoever of the Grecian fleet has escaped the Capharean rocks, ever takes care to steer from the Euboean sea. • Ov., TRI., 1.1.83

Neither amenable to their own affections, nor those of others; • TAC., ANN., 13.45

affections, and that they have among themselves a long commerce of good will. Even those to whom old age denies the practice of their desire, still tremble, neigh, and twitter for love; we see them, before the act, full of hope and ardor, and when the body has played its game, yet please themselves with the sweet remembrance of the past delight; some that swell with pride after they have performed, and others who, tired and sated, still by vociferation express a triumphing joy. He who has nothing to do but only to discharge his body of a natural necessity, need not trouble others with so curious preparations: it is not meat for a gross, coarse appetite.

As one who does not desire that men should think me better than I am, I will here say this as to the errors of my youth. Not only from the danger of impairing my health (and yet I could not be so careful but that I had two light mischances), but moreover upon the account of contempt, I have seldom given myself up to common and mercenary embraces: I would heighten the pleasure by the difficulty, by desire, and a certain kind of glory, and was of Tiberius's mind, who in his amours was as much taken with modesty and birth as any other quality, and of the courtesan Flora's humor, who never lent herself to less than a dictator, a consul, or a censor, and took pleasure in the dignity of her lovers. Doubtless pearls and gold tissue, titles and train, add something to it. As to the rest, I had a great esteem for wit, provided the person was not exceptionable; for, to confess the truth, if the one or the other of these two attractions must of necessity be wanting, I should rather have quitted that of the understanding, that has its use in better things; but in the subject of love, a subject principally relating to the senses of seeing and touching, something may be done without the graces of the mind: without the graces of the body, nothing. Beauty is the true prerogative of women, and so peculiarly their own, that ours, though naturally requiring another sort of feature, is never in its lustre but when youthful and beardless, a sort of confused image of theirs. 'Tis said that such as serve the Grand Signior upon the account of beauty, who are an infinite number, are, at the latest, dismissed at two-and-twenty years of age.

Reason, prudence, and the offices of friendship are better found among men, and therefore it is that they govern the affairs of the world.

These two engagements are fortuitous, and depending upon others; the one is troublesome by its rarity, the other withers with age, so that they could never have been sufficient for the business of my life. That of books, which is the third, is much more certain, and much more our own. It yields all other advantages to the two first, but has the constancy and facility of its service for its own share. It goes side by side with me in my whole course, and everywhere is assisting me: it comforts me in old age and solitude; it eases me of a troublesome weight of idleness, and delivers me at all hours from company that I dislike: it blunts the point of griefs, if they are not extreme, and have not got an entire possession of my soul. To divert myself from a troublesome fancy, 'tis but to run to my books; they presently fix me to them and drive the other out of my thoughts, and do not mutiny at seeing that I have only recourse to them for want of other more real, natural, and lively commodities; they always receive me with the same kindness.

He may well go a foot, they say, who leads his horse in his hand; and our James, king of Naples and Sicily, who, handsome, young and healthful, caused himself to be carried about on a barrow, extended upon a pitiful mattress in a poor robe of grey cloth, and a cap of the same, yet attended withal by a royal train, litters, led horses of all sorts, gentlemen and officers, did yet herein represent a tender and unsteady authority: "The sick man has not to complain who has his cure in his sleeve." In the experience and practice of this maxim, which is a very true one, consists all the benefit I reap from books. As a matter of fact, I make no more use of them, as it were, than those who know them not. I enjoy them as misers do their money, in knowing that I may enjoy them when I please: my mind is satisfied with this right of possession. I never travel without books, either in peace or war; and yet sometimes I pass over several days, and sometimes months, without looking on them. I will read by-and-by, say I to myself, or to-morrow, or when I please; and in the interim, time steals away without any inconvenience. For it is not to be imagined to what degree I please myself and rest content in this consideration, that I have them by me to divert myself with them when I am so disposed, and to call to mind what a refreshment they are to my life. 'Tis the best viaticum I have yet found out for this human journey, and I very much pity those men of understanding who are unprovided of it. I rather accept of any other sort of diversion, how light soever, because this can never fail me.

When at home, I a little more frequent my library, whence I overlook at once all the concerns of my family. 'Tis situated at the entrance into my house, and I thence see under me my garden, court, and base-court, and almost all parts of the building. There I turn over now one book, and then another, on various subjects, without method or design. One while I meditate, another I record and dictate, as I walk to and fro, such whimsies as these I present to you here.

'Tis in the third storey of a tower, of which the ground-room is my chapel, the second storey a chamber with a withdrawing-room and closet, where I often lie, to be more retired; and above is a great wardrobe. This formerly was the most useless part of the house. I there pass away both most of the days of my life and most of the hours of those days. In the night I am never there. There is by the side of it a cabinet handsome enough, with a fireplace very commodiously contrived, and plenty of light; and were I not more afraid of the trouble than the expense—the trouble that frights me from all business—I could very easily adjoin on either side, and on the same floor, a gallery of an hundred paces long and twelve broad, having found walls already raised for some other design to the requisite height. Every place of retirement requires a walk: my thoughts sleep if I sit still: my fancy does not go by itself, as when my legs move it: and all those who study without a book are in the same condition.

The figure of my study is round, and there is no more open wall than what is taken up by my table and my chair, so that the remaining parts of the circle present me a view of all my books at once, ranged upon five rows of shelves round about me. It has three noble and free prospects, and is sixteen paces in diameter. I am not so continually there in winter; for my house is built upon an eminence, as its name imports, and no part of it is

so much exposed to the wind and weather as this, which pleases me the better, as being of more difficult access and a little remote, as well upon the account of exercise, as also being there more retired from the crowd. 'Tis there that I am in my kingdom, and there I endeavor to make myself an absolute monarch, and to sequester this one corner from all society, conjugal, filial, and civil; elsewhere I have but verbal authority only, and of a confused essence. That man, in my opinion, is very miserable, who has not at home where to be by himself, where to entertain himself alone, or to conceal himself from others. Ambition sufficiently plagues her proselytes, by keeping them always in show, like the statue of a public, square: *Magna servitus est magna fortuna*. They cannot so much as be private in the watercloset. I have thought nothing so severe in the austerity of life that our monks affect, as what I have observed in some of their communities; namely, by rule, to have a perpetual society of place, and numerous persons present in every action whatever; and think it much more supportable to be always alone than never to be so.

A great fortune is a great slavery. •
SEN., CONS. POLYB., 26

If any one shall tell me that it is to undervalue the Muses to make use of them only for sport and to pass away the time, I shall tell him, that he does not know so well as I the value of the sport, the pleasure, and the pastime; I can hardly forbear to add that all other end is ridiculous. I live from day to day, and, with reverence be it spoken, I only live for myself; there all my designs terminate. I studied, when young, for ostentation; since, to make myself a little wiser; and now for my diversion, but never for any profit. A vain and prodigal humor I had after this sort of furniture, not only for the supplying my own need, but, moreover, for ornament and outward show, I have since quite cured myself of.

Books have many charming qualities to such as know how to choose them; but every good has its ill; 'tis a pleasure that is not pure and clean, no more than others: it has its inconveniences, and great ones too. The soul indeed is exercised therein; but the body, the care of which I must withal never neglect, remains in the meantime without action, and grows heavy and somber. I know no excess more prejudicial to me, nor more to be avoided in this my declining age.

These have been my three favorite and particular occupations; I speak not of those I owe to the world by civil obligation.

NOTES

- 1 I.e. to speak affectedly.
- 2 In the passage Montaigne quotes, Seneca is talking about young dandies: *Nosti comptulos iuvenes, barba et coma nitidos, de capsula totos*, You are familiar with the young dandies, natty as to their beards and locks, fresh from the bandbox (Seneca. Epistles, Volume III: Epistles 93-124. Translated by Richard M. Gummere. Loeb Classical Library 77. Cambridge, MA: Harvard

University Press, 1925). Olson (2014) translates “capsula” as “book storage box.” Seneca’s description would then imply that his dandies are pretentious intellectuals.

MONTAIGNE’S SOURCES

Cic., Parad.	Cicero, <i>Stoic Paradoxes</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Ov., Tri.	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>
Sen., Cons. Polyb.	Seneca, <i>De Consolatione ad Polybium</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Tac., Ann.	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>