

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 26

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It is follie to referre Truth or Falsehood to our sufficiencie

It is not peradventure without reason, that we ascribe the facilitie of beleiving, and easines of perswasion, unto simplicitie and ignorance: For, me semeth to have learnt heretofore, that beliefe was, as it were an impression conceived in our minde, and according as the same was found either more soft, or of lesse resistance, it was easier to imprint any thing therein. *Ut necesse est lancem in libra ponderibus impositis deprimi: sic animum perspicuis cedere.* As it is necessarie a scale must goe downe the ballance when weights are put into it, so must a minde yeelde to things that are manifest. Forasmuch therefore, as the minde being most emptie and without counterpoize, so much the more easily doth-it yeelde under the burthen of the first perswasion. And that's the reason why children, those of the common sorte, women, and sicke-folkes, are so subject to be mis-led, and so easie to swallow gudgeons. Yet on the other side it is a sottish presumption to disdaine and condemne that for false, which unto us seemeth to beare no shew of likelyhood or trueth: which is an ordinarie fault in those, who perswade themselves to be of more sufficiencie than the vulgar sorte. So was I sometimes wont to doe, and if I heard any body speake, either of ghosts walking, of foretelling future things, of enchantments, of witchcrafts, or any other thing reported, which I could not well conceive, or that was beyond my reach,

*Somnia, terrores magicos, miracula, sagas,
Nocturnos lemures, portentâque Thessala*

*Dreames, magike terrors, witches, uncouth-wonders,
Night-walking spirits, Thessalian conjur'd-thunders.*

I could not but feele a kinde of compassion to see the poore and seely people abused with such follies. And now I perceive, that I was as much to be moaned my-selfe: Not that experience hath since made me to discern any thing beyond my former opinions: yet was not my curiositie the cause of it, but reason hath taught-me, that so resolutely to condemne a thing for false, and impossible, is to assume unto him-selfe the advantage, to have the bounds and limits of Gods will, and of the power of our common

mother Nature, tied to his sleeve: And that there is no greater folly in the world, then to reduce them to the measure of our capacitie, and bounds of our sufficiencie. If wee terme those things monsters or miracles to which our reason cannot attaine, how many such doe daily present themselves unto our sight? Let us consider through what clowdes, and how blindefolde we are led to the knowledge of most things, that passe our hands: verily we shal finde, it is rather Custome, than Science that remooveth the strangenes of them from-us:

*iam nemo fessus saturúsque videndi,
Suspicere in cæli dignatur lucida templa.*

*Now no man tir'd with glut of contemplation
Deignes to have heav'ns bright Church in admiration.*

And that those things, were they newly presented unto-us, we should doubtles deeme them, as much, or more unlikely, and incredible, then any other.

*si nunc primùm mortalibus adsint
Ex improviso, ceu sint obiecta repenti,
Nil magis his rebus poterat mirabile dici,
Aut minus antè quod auderent fore credere gentes.*

*If now first on a sodaine they were here
Mongst mortal men, object to eye or eare,
Nothing, than these things, would more wondrous bee,
Or that, men durst lesse thinke, ever to see.*

He who had never seene a river before, the first he saw, he thought-it to be the *Ocean*: and things that are the greatest in our knowledge, we judge them to be the extreamest that nature worketh in that kinde.

*Scilicet & fluvius qui non est maximus, ei est
Qui non antè aliquem maiorem uidit, & ingens
Arbor homóque uidetur, & omnia de genere omni
Maxima quæ uidit quisque, hæc ingentia fingit.*

*A streame none of the greatest, may so seeme
To him, that never sawe a greater streame.
Trees, men, seeme huge, and all things of all sortes,
The greatest one hath seene, he huge reports.*

Consuetudine oculorum assuescunt animi, neque admirantur, neque requirunt rationes earum rerum, quas semper vident. Mindes are acquainted by custome of their eyes, nor doe they admire, or enquire the reasons of those things, which they continually beholde. The noveltie of things doth more incite-us to search-out the causes, than their greatnes: we must judge of this infinit power of nature, with more reverence, and with more acknowledgement of our owne ignorance and weakenes. How many things of small likelihoode are there, witnessed by men, worthie of credit, whereof if we cannot be perswaded, we should at least leave them in suspence? For, to deeme them impossible, is by rash presumption to presume and knowe how farre

possibilitie reacheth. If a man did well understand, what difference there is betweene impossibilitie, and that which is unwonted, and betweene that which is against the course of nature, and the common opinion of men, in not beleiving rashly, and in not disbeleiving easily; the rule of *Nothing too-much*, commanded by *Chilon*, should be observed. When we find in *Froysard*, that the Earle of *Foix*, (being in *Bearne*) had knowledge of the defeature at *Iuberoth*, of king *Iohn* of *Castile*, the morrow-next it hapned, and the meanes he alleageth for it, a man may well laugh at-it: And of that which our *Annales* report, that Pope *Honorius*, the very same day, that King *Philip Augustus* died at *Mantes*, caused his publike funeralles to be solemnized, and commaunded them to be celebrated through-out all *Italie*. For, the authoritie of the witnesses hath peradventure no sufficient warrant to restraine-us. But what? if *Plutarke*, besides divers examples which he alleageth of antiquitie, saith to have certainly knowne, that in *Domitians time*, the newes of the battle lost by *Antonius* in *Germanie* many daies journeies thence, was published at *Rome*, and divulged through the world, the very same day it succeeded: And if *Cæsar* holdes, that it hath many times happened, that reporte hath fore-gon the accident: Shall we not say, that those simple people have suffered themselves to be cousoned¹ and seduced by the vulgar sorte, because they were not as cleare-sighted as we? Is there any thing more dainty, more unspotted, and more lively then *Plimies* judgement, whensoever it pleaseth him to make shewe of it? Is there any farther from vanity? I omitte the excellency of his learning and knowledge, whereof I make but small reckoning: in which of those two partes doe we exceed him? Yet is there² no scholer so meanelly learned, but will convince him of lying, and read a lecture of contradiction against him upon the progresse of natures workes. When wee reade in *Bouchet* the myracles wrought by the reliques of Saint *Hillarie*, his credite is not sufficient to barre-us the libertie of contradicting him: yet at randon to condemne all such like histories, seemeth to mee a notable impudencie. That famous man Saint *Augustine*, witnesseth to have seene a blinde childe, to recover his sight, over the reliques of Saint *Gervase* and *Protaise* at *Milane*: and a woman at *Carthage*, to have beene cured of a canker, by the signe of the holy Crosse, which a woman newly baptized made unto hir: and *Hesperius* a familiar friend of his, to have expelled certaine spirits, that molested his house, with a little of the earth of our Saviors sepulcher; which earth being afterwards transported into a Church, a Paralitike man was immediately therewith cured: and a woman going in procession, having as shee passt-by with a nose-gaie toucht the case wherein Saint *Stevens* bones were, and with the same afterwarde rubbed hir eies, shee recovered her sight, which long before she had utterly lost: and divers other examples, where he affirmeth to have bin an assistant him-selfe. What shal we accuse him of, and two other holy Bishops, *Aurelius* and *Maximinus*, whom he calleth for his witnesses? Shall it be of ignorance, of simplicity, of malice, of facilitie or of imposture? Is any living man so impudent, that thinks he may be compared to them, whether it be in vertue or pietie, in knowledge or judgement, in wisdome or sufficiencie? *Qui ut rationem nullam afferrent, ipsa autoritate me frangerent: Who though they alleadged no reason, yet might subdue me with their verie authoritie.* It is a dangerous fond-hardines and of consequence, besides the absurd temerity it draws with-it, to despise what we conceive not. For, after that, according to your best understanding, you have established the limites of truth, and boundes of falsehood, and that it

is found, you must necessarily believe things, wherein is more strangenesse, then in those you deny; you have alreadie bounde your-selfe to abandon them. Now that which me thinks brings as much disorder in our consciences, namely in these troubles of religion wherein we are, is, the dispensation Catholikes make of their beliefe. They suppose to shewe themselves very moderate and skilfull, when they yeeld their adversaries any of those articles now in question. But besides that, they perceive not what an advantage it is for him that chargeth you, if you but once beginne to yeeld and give them ground; and how much that encorageth him to pursue his point: those articles which they chuse for the lightest, are oftentimes most important. Either a man must wholly submit himselfe to the authority of our Ecclesiasticall pollicy, or altogether dispence him-selfe from-it: It is not for us to determine what part of obedience we owe unto-it. And moreover, I may say-it, bicause I have made triall of it, having sometimes used this liberty of my choice, and particular election, not regarding certaine pointes of the observaunce of our Church, which seeme to beare a face, either more vaine, or more strange; comming to communicate them with wise men, I have founde that those things have a most solide and steady foundation, and that it is but foolishnes and ignorance, makes-us receive them with lesse respect and reverence then the rest. Why remember we not, what, and how many contradictions we finde and feele even in our owne judgement? Howe many things served-us but yesterday as articles of faith, which to day wee deeme but fables? Glory and curiositie are the scourges of our soules. The latter induceth us to have an oare in every shippe, and the former forbids-us to leave any thing unresolved or undecided.

NOTES

- 1 *cozened*, i.e. *deceived* or *persuaded*.
- 2 Subsequent editions correct the placement of *is* and *there* to follow Montaigne's text: *there is...*