

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 29



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Of Moderation

AS IF our sense of feeling were infected, wee corrupt by our touching, things that in themselves are faire and good. We may so seize on vertue, that if we embrace it with an over-greedie and violent desire, it may become vitious. Those who say, *There is never excesse in vertue, because it is no longer vertue if any excesse be in it*, doe but jeast at words.

*Insani sapiens nomen ferat, æquus iniqui,
Vltra quàm satis est, uirtutem si petat ipsam.*

*A wise man mad, just unjust, may I name,
More then is meete, ev'n vertue if he claime.*

Philosophie is a subtile consideration. A man may love vertue too much, and excessively demeane himselfe in a just action. Gods holy word doth apply it selfe to this byase. *Be not wiser then you should, and be soberly wise.* I have seene some great men, blemish the reputation of their religion, by shewing themselves religious beyond the example of men of their qualitie. I love temperate and indifferent natures. Immoderation towards good, if it offend me not, it amazeth, and troubleth me how I should call it. Neither *Pausanias* his mother, who gave the first instruction, and at her sonnes death threw the first stone: Not *Posthumius* the Dictator, that brought his owne sonne to his end, whom the heate and forwardnesse of youth, had haply before his rancke, made to charge his enemies, seeme so just as strange unto me. And I neither love to perswade or follow so savage and so deare a vertue. The Archer that over-shootes his marke, doth no otherwise then he that shooteth short. Mine eyes trouble me as much in climbing up toward a great light, as to goe downe in the darke. *Callicles* in *Plato* saith, *The extremitie of Philosophie to bee hurtefull: and perswades no man to wade further into-it, then the bounds of profit: And that taken with moderation, it is pleasant and commodious, but in the end it makes a man wilde and vicious, disdainfull of religion and of common lawes: an enemie of civill conversation: a foe to humane sensualitie, and worldly pleasures: incapable of all politike administration; and unfit to assist others or to helpe himselfe: apt to be scot-free, buffeted, and baffled.* He saith true: for in her excesse, she enthralleth our naturall libertie, and by an importunate wile, diverts-us from the faire and plaine path, which nature traceth out for-us. The love we beare to women, is very

lawfull; yet doth Divinitie bridle and restraine the same. I remember to have read in Saint *Thomas*, in a place where he condemneth marriages of kinsfolkes in forbidden degrees, this one reason amongst others: that the love a man beareth to such a woman may be immoderate; for, if the wedlocke, or husband-like affection be sound and perfect, as it ought to be, and also surcharged with that a man oweth to alliance and kindred, there is no doubt, but that surcrease may easily transporte a husband beyond the bounds of reason. Those Sciences that direct the manners of men, as Divinitie and Philosophie, meddle with all things. There is no action so private and secret may be concealed from their knowledge and jurisdiction. Well do they learne that search and censure their libertie. It is women communicate their partes as much as a man list to wantonize with them: but to phisicke them bashfulnesse forbids them. I will then in their behalfe teach husbands this, if yet there be any too much flesh upon them: which is, that the very pleasures they have by the familiaritie of their wives, except moderately used; they are reprooved: and not onely in that, but in any other unlawfull subjects, a man may trespasse in licentiousnesse and offend in excesse. Those shamelesse endearings, which the first heate suggests unto us in that sportefull delight, are not onely undecently, but hurtfully employed towards our wives. Let them at least learne impudencie from another hand. They are ever broade-waking when we neede them. I have used no meanes but naturall and simple instruction. Marriage is a religious and devout bond: and that is the reason the pleasure a man hath of it, should be a moderate, staied, and serious pleasure, and mixed with severitie: it ought to bee a voluptuousnesse somewhat circumspect and conscientious. And because it is the chieffest of generation, there are that make a question, whether it be lawfull to require them of copulation, as well when wee have no hope of children, as when they are over-aged, or bigge with childe. *It is an homicide*, according to *Plato*. Certaine nations (and amongst others, the Mahometane) abhorre Conjunction with women great with childe. Many also with those that have their monethly disease. *Zenobia* received her husband but for one charge; which done, al the time of hir conception, she let him goe at randon, and that past, shee gave him leave to beginne againe: a notable and generous example of marriage.

Plato borroweth the narration of some needy and hunger-starven Poet of this sporte. That *Jupiter* one daie gave his wife so hote a charge, impatient to staie till she came to bed, he laide hir along upon the floore, and by the vehemence of his pleasure forgot the urgent and weighty resolutions lately concluded-upon with the other Gods of his caelestiall court; boasting he found-it as sweete that time, as he had done, when first he spoiled hir of hir virginity, by stealth and unknowne to their parents. The Kings of *Persia*, called for their wives, when they went to any solemne feast, but when much drinking and wine beganne to heate them in good earnest, they sent them to their chambers, seeing they could no longer refraine, but must needes yeeld to sensualitie, lest they should be partakers of their immoderate lust; and in their steade sent for other women, whome this duty of respect might not concerne. *All pleasures and gratifications are not well placed in all sortes of people*. *Epaminondas* had caused a dissolute yoong man to be imprisoned: *Pelopidas* entreated him, that for his sake he would set-him at libertie, but he refused him, and yeelded to free-him at the request of an harlot of his, which likewise sued for his enlargement; saying, *it was a gratification due unto a Courtizan, and not to a Captaine*. *Sophocles* beeing

partner with *Pericles* in the Pretorship, seeing by chance a faire boy to passe by: *Oh what a beauteous boy goeth yonder!* saide he to *Pericles*: *That speach were more fitting another then a Pretor, answered Pericles, who ought not onely to have chaste handes, but also unpolluted eyes.* *Ælius Verus* the Emperor, his wife complaining that he followed the love of other women, answered *he did it for conscience-sake, for somuch as mariage was a name of honor, and dignity, and not of foolish and lascivious lust.* And our Ecclesiasticall History, hath with honor preserved the memory of that wife, which sued to be devorced from hir husband, because shee woulde not second and consent to his over-insolent and lewde embracements. To conclude, there is no voluptuousnesse so just, wherein excesse and intemperance is not reproachfull unto-us. But to speake in good sooth, is not a man a miserable creature? He is scarce come to his owne strength by his naturall conditions, to taste one onely compleate, entire and pure pleasure, but he laboreth by discourse to cut it off: he is not wretched enough, except by arte and study he augment his miserie.

Fortunæ miseræ auximus arte, uias.

*Fortunes unhappy ill,
We amplifie by skill.*

Humane wisdom doth foolishly seeke to be ingenious in exercising hir selfe to abate the number, and diminish the pleasure of sensualities, that pertaine to-us: as it doth favourably and industriously in employing hir devises, to paint and set a luster on evils, before our eyes, and therewith to recreate our sense. Had I bin chiefe of a faction, I woulde have followed a more naturall course, which to say true, is both commodious and sacred, and shoulde peradventure have made my selfe strong enough to limite the same. Although our spirituall and corporall Physitians, as by covenant agreed-upon betweene them, finde no way of recoverie, nor remedie for diseases of bodie and minde, but by torment, griefe and paine, watching, fasting, haire-shirtes, farre and solitary exile, perpetuall prison, roddes and other afflictions, have therefore beene invented: But so, that they be truely afflictions, and that there bee some stinging-sharpenesse in them: And that the successe be not as *Gallios* was, who having beene confined to the ile of *Lesbos*, newes came to *Rome*, that there he lived a merry life; and what the Senate had laide upon him for a punishment, redounded to his commodity: wherupon they agreed to revoke him home to his owne house and wife, strictly enjoyning him to keepe the same, thereby to accommodate their punishment to his sense and feeling. For he to whom fasting should procure health and a merry heart, or he to whom poison shoulde be more healthie then meate, it would be no longer a wholesome receipt, no more then drugs in other medicines, are of no effect to him that takes them with appetite and pleasure. Bitternesse and difficultie are circumstances fitting their operation. That nature which should take Reubarb as familiar, shoulde no doubt corrupt the use of it; it must bee a thing that hurts the stomacke, if it shall cure it: and heere the common rule failes, that infirmities are cured by their contraries: for one ill cureth another. This impression hath some reference to this other so ancient, where some thinke they gratifie both heaven and earth by killing and massacring themselves, which was universally embraced in all religions. Even in our fathers age; *Amurath* at the taking of *Isthmus*, sacrificed six hundred yoong Græcians to his

fathers soule: to the end their blood might serve as a propitiation to expiate the sinnes of the deceased. And in the newe countries discovered in our dayes yet uncorrupted, and virgins, in regard of ours, it is a custome well nigh received every-where. All their idolles are sprinkled with humane blood, not without divers examples of horrible crueltie. Some are burnt alive, and halfe roasted drawne from the fire, that so they may pull out their hart and entrailles; othersome, yea women are fleade quicke, and with their yet-bleeding skins, they invest and cover others. And no lesse of examples of constant resolution. For these wretched sacrificable people, olde men, women and children, some dayes before, goe themselves begging their almes, for the offering of their sacrifice, and all ful of glee, singing, and dancing with the rest, they present themselves to the slaughter. The Ambassadors of the kings of *Mexico*, in declaring and magnifying the greatnesse of their Maister to *Fernando Cortez*, after they had tolde him, that he had thirty vassals, whereof each one was able to levy a hundred thousand combatants, and that he had his residence in the fairest and strongest Cittie under heaven, added moreover, that he had fifty thousand to sacrifice for every yeere: verily some affirme that they maintaine continuall warres with certaine mighty neighbouring Nations, not so much for the exercise and training of their youth, as that they may have store of prisoners taken in warre to supplie their sacrifices. In another province, to welcome the saide *Cortez*, they sacrificed fiftie men at one clappe. I will tell this one storie more: Some of those people having beene beaten by him, sent to knowe him, and to intreate him of friendship. The messengers presented-him with three kinds of presents, in this manner: *Lord, if thou be a fierce God, that lovest to feede on flesh and bloud, here are five slaves, eate them, and we will bring thee more: if thou bee a gentlie-milde God, heere is incense and feathers; but if thou bee a man, take these birdes and fruites, that heere wee present and offer unto thee.*