

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 31



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That a man ought soberly to meddle with judging of divine lawes

THINGS UNKNOWNNE are the true scope of imposture, and subject of Legerdemaine: forasmuch as strangenes it selfe doth first give credite unto matters, and not being subject to our ordinarie discourses, they deprive-us of meanes to withstand them. To this purpose, said *Plato*, it is an easie matter to please, speaking of the nature of the Gods, then of mens: For the Auditors ignorance lends a faire and large carriere, and free libertie, to the handling of secret-hidden matters. Whence it followeth, that nothing is so firmly beleaved, as that which a man knoweth least; nor are there people more assured in their reportes, then such as tell-us fables, as Alchumists, Prognosticators, Fortune-tellers, Palmesters, Phisitians, *id genus omne, and such like*. To which, if I durst, I would joyne a rable of men, that are ordinarie interpreters and controulers of Gods secret desseignes, presuming to finde out the causes of every accident, and to prie into the secrets of Gods divine will, the incomprehensible motives of his workes. And howbeit, the continuall varietie and discordance of events drive them from one corner to another, and from East to West, they will not leave to follow their bowle, and with one small pensill drawe both white and blacke. There is this commendable observance in a certaine Indian nation, who if they chance to be discomfited in any skirmish or battle, they publikely beg pardon of the Sunne, who is their God, as for an unjust action, referring their good or ill fortune to divine reason, submitting their judgement and discourses unto it. It suffiseth a Christian to beleave, that all things come from God, to receive them from his divine, and inscrutable wisdom with thanks-giving, and in what manner soever they are sent him, to take them in good parte. But I utterly disalow a common custome amongst-us, which is to ground and establish our religion upon the prosperitie of our enterprises. Our beleefe hath other sufficient foundations, and need not be authorized by events. For the people accustomed to these plausible arguments, and agreeing with his taste, when events sort contrarie and dis-advantageous to their expectation, they are in hazard to waver in their faith: As in the civill warres, wherein we are now for religions-sake, those which gotte the advantage, at the conflict of *Rochelabeille*, making great joy and bone-fires for that accident, and using that fortune, as an assured approbation of their faction: when afterward they come to excuse their disaster of *Mont-contour* and *Jarnac*, which are scourges and fatherly chastizements: if they

have not a people wholly at their mercy, they will easily make him perceive, what it is to take two kinds of corne out of one sacke: and from one and the same mouth to blow both hote and colde. It were better to entertaine-it with the true foundations of veritie. It was a notable Seabattle, which was lately gained against the Turkes, under the conduct of *Don John of Austria*. But it hath pleased God to make-us at other times both see and feele other such, to our no small losse and detriment. To conclude, it is no easie matter to reduce divine things unto our ballance, so they suffer no empeachment: And he that would yelde a reason, why *Arrius* and *Leo* his Pope, chiefe Principalles, and maine supporters of this heresie, dyed both at severall times, of so semblable and so strange deaths (for beeing forced through a violent bellie-ache to go from their disputations to their cloase-stoole, both sodainely yeilded up their ghosts on them) and exaggerate that divine vengeance by the circumstance of the place, might also adde the death of *Heliogabalus* unto-it, who likewise was slaine upon a privie. But what? *Ireneus* is found to be engaged in like fortune: Gods intent being to teach us, that the good have some thing else to hope-for, and the wicked somewhat else to feare, then the good or bad fortune of this world: He manageth and applieth them according to his secret disposition: and depriveth us of the meanes, thereby foolishly to make our profit. And those, that according to humane reason will thereby prevaile, doe but mocke them-selves. They never give one touch of-it, that they receive not two for-it. *S. Augustine* giveth a notable triall of it upon his adversaries. It is a conflict, no more decided by the armes of memory, then by the weapons of reason. A man should be satisfied with the light, which it pleaseth the Sunne to communicate unto us by vertue of his beames; and he that shall lift up his eyes to take a greater within his bodie, let him not thinke-it strange, if for a reward of his over-weening and arrogancie he loose his sight. *Quis hominum potest scire consilium Dei? aut quis poterit cogitare, quid velit dominus? Who amongst men can know Gods counsell, or who can thinke what God will doe?*