

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 42



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Of the inequality that is between us

PLUTARKE SAITH in some place, *That he findes no such great difference betweene beast and beast, as he findeth diversitie betweene man and man.* He speaketh of the sufficiencie of the minde, and of internall qualities. Verily I finde *Epaminondas* so farre (taking him as I suppose him) from some that I know (I meane capable of common sense) as I coulde finde in my heart to endeaure upon *Plutarke*; and say there is more difference betweene such and such a man, than there is diversitie betweene such a man, and such a beast.

Hem uir uiro quid præstat!

*O Sir, how much hath one,
An other man out-gone?*

And that there be so many degrees of spirits, as there are steps betweene heaven and earth, and as innumerable. But concerning the estimation of men, it is marvell, that except our selves, no one thing is esteemed but for it's proper qualities. We commend a horse, because he is strong and nimble,

*uolucrum
Sic laudamus equum, facili cui plurima palma
Feruet, & exultat rauco uictoria circo,*

*We praise the horse, that beares most belles with flying,
And triumphs most in races, hoarce with crying,*

and not for his furniture: a graie-hound for his swiftnesse, not for his choller: a hawke for hir wing, not for hir cranes or belles. Why doe we not likewise esteeme a man for that which is his owne? He hath a goodly traine of men following him, a stately pallace to dwell-in, so great credit amongst men; and so much rent comming in: Alas, all that is about him, and not in him. No man will buy a pig in a poke. If you cheapen a horse, you will take his saddle and clothes from him, you will see him bare and abroade: or if he be covered, as in olde times they wont to present them unto Princes to be solde, it is onely his least necessarie parts, least you

should amuse your selfe to consider his colour, or breadth of his crupper; but chiefly to view his legges, his head, his eyes, and his foote, which are the most remarkable partes, and above all to be considered and required in him,

*Regibus hic mos est, ubi equos mercantur, opertos
Inspiciunt, ne si facies, ut saepe, decora
Molli fulva pede est, emptorem inducat hiantem,
Quòd pulchræ clunes, breve quòd caput, ardua ceruix.*

*This is Kings manner, when they horses buy,
They see them bare, lest if, as oft we try,
Faire face have soft hoofes, gull'd the buyer be,
They buttokes rounde, short head, high crest may see.*

When you will esteeme a man, why should you survey him all wrapt, and envelopped? He then but sheweth-us those partes, that are no whit his owne: and hideth those from-us, by which alone his worth is to be judged. It is the goodnes of the sworde you seeke-after, and not the worth of the scabbard; for which peradventure you would not give a farthing, if it want his lyming. A man should be judged by himselfe, and not by his complements. And as an ancient saith very pleasantly: Doe you know wherefore you esteeme him talle? You account the height of his pattins: The Base is no part of his stature: Measure him without his stiltes. Let him lay a side his ritches and externall honours, and shew himselfe in his shirt. Hath he a body proper to his functions, sound and cheerefull? What minde hath he? Is it faire, capable and unpolluted, and happily provided with all hir necessarie partes? Is she ritch of hir owne, or of others goodes? Hath fortune nothing of hers to surway therein? If brode-waking she will looke upon a naked sworde: If shee care not which way hir life goeth from hir, whether by the mouth or by the throte; whether it be settled, equable, and contented: It is that a man must see and consider, and thereby judge the extreame differences that are betweene-us: Is he

*sapiens, sibi que imperiosus,
Quem neque pauperies, neque mors, neque uincula terrent,
Responsare cupidinibus, contemnere honores
Fortis, & in seipso totus teres atque rotundus,
Externi ne quid ualeat per læue morari,
In quem manca ruit semper fortuna?*

*A wise man, of himselfe commaunder high,
Whom want, nor death, nor bands can terrifie,
Resolud t' affront desires, honors to skorne,
All in himselfe, close, round and neatly-borne,
As nothing outward on his smooth can stay,
Gainst whom still fortune makes a lame assay.*

Such a man is five hundred degrees beyond kingdomes and principalities: Himselfe is a kingdome unto himselfe.

Sapiens polipse singit fortunam sibi.

*Trust me, who beares a wise-mans name,
His fortune to himselfe may frame.*

What is there else for him to wish for?

*nónne videmus
Nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi ut quoi
Corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur,
Iucundo sensu cura semotus metúque?*

*See we not nature nothing else doth barke
Unto hir selfe, but he, whose bodie barke
Is free from paines-touch, should his minde enjoy,
Remou'd from care and feare, with sense of joy?*

Compare the vulgar troupes of our men unto him, stupide, base, servile, wavering, and continually floting on the tempestuous Ocean of divers passions, which tosse and retosse the same, wholly depending of others: There is more difference, then is betweene heaven and earth, and yet such is the blindnes of our custome, that we make little or no account of-it. Whereas, if we consider a Cottager and a King, a noble and a handie-crafts-man, a magistrate and a private man, a ritch man and a poore; an extreame disparitie doth imediatly present it self unto our eies, which, as a man may say, differ in nothing, but in their clothes. In *Thrace*, the King was after a pleasant manner distinguished from his people, and which was much endeared: He had a religion apart: a God severall unto himselfe, whom his subjects might no waies adore: It was *Mercurie*: And he disdained their Gods, which were *Mars*, *Bacchus*, and *Diana*; yet are they but pictures, which make no essential dissemblance. For, as enterlude-plaiers, you shall now see them on the stage, play a King, an Emperour, or a Duke, but they are no soner of the stage, but they are base raskals, vagabond abjects, and porterly-hirelings, which is their naturall and originall condition: evenso the Emperour, whose glorious pomp doth so dazle you in publike:

*Scilicet & grandes viridi cum luce smaragdi
Auro includuntur, teriturque Thalassina vestis
Assidué, & Ueneris sudorem exercita potat.*

*Great emerald's with their grasse-greene-light in gold
Are clos'd, nor long can mariage-linnen holde,
But worne with use and heate
of venery drink's the heate.*

View him behinde the curtaine, and you see but an ordinarie man, and peradventure more vile, and more seelie, then the least of his subjects. *Ille beatus introrsum est; istius bracteata felicitas est. One is inwardly happy: an others felicitie is plated and guilt-over.* Cowardise, irresolution, ambition, spight, anger, and envie, move and worke in him as in another:

*Non enim gazæ, neque consularis
Summouet lictor, miseros tumltus
Mentis & curas laqueata circum
Tecta uoluntés:*

*Nor treasures, nor Maires officers remove
The miserable tumult's of the mind.
Or cares that lie about, or flie above
Their high-roof't houses with huge beames combinde.*

And feare, and care, and suspect, haunt and follow him, even in the midst of his armed troupes.

*Reueráque metus hominum, curæque sequaces,
Nec metuunt sonitus armorum, nec fera tela,
Audactérque inter reges, rerúmque potentes
Uersantur, neque fulgorem reuerentur ab auro.*

*Indeede mens still-attending cares and feare,
Nor armor's clashing, nor fierce weapons feare,
With Kings converse they boldly, and kings peeres,
Fearing no lightning that from golde appeeres.*

Doth the ague, the megrim, or the gowt spare him more then us? When age shall once seize on his shoulders, can then the tall yeomen of his garde discharge him of-it? When the terror of ruthles-balefull death shall assaile him, can he be comforted by the assistance of the gentlemen of his chamber? If he chance to be jealous or capricious, will our lowting-curtzies, or putting-off of hattes, bring him in tune againe? His bedstead enchased all with gold and pearles hath no vertue to allay the pinching pangues of the cholike.

*Nec calidæ citius decedunt corpore febres,
Textilibus si in picturis ostróque rubenti
Iacteris, quàm si plebeia in ueste cubandum est.*

*Feavers no sooner from thy body flie
If thou on arras¹ or red scarlet lie
Tossing, then if thou rest
On coverlets home-drest.*

The flatterers of *Alexander* the great, made him beleeve, that he was the sonne of *Jupiter*; but being one day sore-hurt, and seeing the blood gush out of his woundes: *And what thinke you of this?* (Said he unto them) *Is not this blood of a lively-red hew, and meere humane?* Me thinkes, it is not of that temper, which *Homer* faineth to trill from the gods woundes. *Hermodorus* the Poet made certaine verses in honour of *Antigonus*, in which he called him the sonne of *Phæbus*; to whom he replied; *My friend, He that emptieth my close-stoole knoweth well, there is no such matter.* He is but a man at all assaies: And if of himselfe he be a man ill borne, the Empire of the whole world cannot restore-him.

*puellæ
Hunc rapiant, quidquid calcauerit, hic rosa fiat.*

*Wenches must ravish him, what ever he
Shall treade upon, eftsoones a rose must be.*

What of that? If he be of a grose, stupide, and senseles minde: voluptuousnes and good fortune it selfe, are not perceived without vigor, wit, and livelines.

*Hæc perinde sunt, ut illius animus qui ea possidet,
Qui uti sit, ei bona, illi qui non utitur rectè, mala.*

*These things are such, as the possessors minde,
Good, if well us'd; if ill, them ill we finde.*

Whatsoever the goods of fortune are, a man must have a proper sense to favour them: It is the enjoying, and not the possessing of them, that makes-us happie.

*Non domus & fundus, non æris aceruus & auri,
Ægroto domini deduxit corpore febres,
Non animo curas, valeat possessor oportet,
Qui comportatis rebus benè cogitat uti.
Qui cupit, aut metuit, inuat illum sic domus aut res,
Ut lippum pictæ tabulæ, fomenta podagram.*

*Not house and land, and heapes of coine and gold
Rid agues, which their sicke Lordes body hold,
Or cares from minde: th'owner must be in health,
That well doth thinke to use his hoarded wealth.
Him that desires or feares, house, goods, delight,
As foment doe the gout, pictures sore-sight.
Be not caske cleane, all that you powre
Into the caske, will straight be sowre.*

He is a foole, his taste is wallowish and distracted, he enjoyeth it more, then one that hath a great colde, dooth the sweetnesse of Greeke wine, or a horse the riches of a costly-faire furniture, wherewith he is trapped. Even as *Plato* saith, *That health, beautie, strength, riches, and all things else he calleth good, are equally as ill to the unjust, as good to the just; and the evill contrariwise.* And then, where the body and the soule are in ill plight, what neede these externall commodities? Seeing the least pricke of a needle, and passion of the minde is able to deprive-us of the pleasure of the worlds Monarchie. The first fit of an ague, or the first guird that the gowt gives him, what availe his goodly titles of Majestie?

Totus & argento conflatus, totus & auro.

*All made of silver fine,
All gold pure from the mine.*

doth he not fourthwith loose the remembrance of his pallaces and states? If he be angry or vexed, can his principalitie keepe-him from blushing, from growing pale, from fretting, from gnashing his teeth? Now if it be a man of worth, and well-borne, his royaltie, and his glorious titles will adde but little unto his good fortune.

*Si ventri bene, si lateri est pedibúque tuis, nil
Divitiæ poterunt regales addere maius.*

*If it be well with belly, feete, and sides,
A Kings estate no greater good provides.*

He seeth they are but illusions, and vaine deceits. Hee may happily be of King *Seleucus* his advise: *That he who fore-knew the weight of a Scepter, should he finde-it lying on the ground, he would not daigne to take-it up.* This he said, by reason of the weightie, irksome and painefull charges, that are incident unto a good King. Truely, it is no small matter to governe others, since so many crosses and difficulties offer themselves, if we will governe our selves well. Touching commaunding of others, which in shew seemeth to be so sweete, considering the imbecilitie of mans judgement, and the difficultie of choise in new and doubtfull things. I am confidently of this opinion, that it is much more easie and plausible to follow, then to guide: and that it is a great settling of the minde, to be tied but to one beaten-path, and to answere but for himselfe.

*Ut satiùs multo iam sit, parere quietum,
Quàm regere imperio res uelle.*

*Much better t'is, in quiet to obey,
Then to desire with Kings-power all to sway.*

Seeing *Cirus* saide, *That it belongs not to a man to command, that is not of more worth, then those whom he commandeth.* But King *Hieron* in *Xenophon* addeth moreover, *That in truely-enjoying of carnall sensualities, they are of much worse condition, then private men; forasmuch as ease and facilitie, depriveth them of that sowre-sweete tickling, which we finde in them.*

*Pinguis amor nimumque potens, in tædia nobis
Uertitur, & stomacho dulcis ut esca nocet.*

*Fat over powerfull love doth loathsome grow,
As fullsome sweete-meates stomackes overthrow.*

Thinke-we, that high-minded men take great pleasure in musicke? The satietie thereof makes it rather tedious unto them. Feasts, banquets, revells, dancings, maskes and turneys, rejoyce them that but seldome see them, and that have much desired to see them: the taste of which-becommeth cloyesome and unpleasing to those that dayly see, and ordinarily have them: Nor doe Ladies tickle those, that at pleasure and without suspect may be glutted with them. He that cannot stay till he be thirstie, can take no pleasure in drinking. Enterludes and commedies rejoyce and make-us merry, but to players they are tedious and tastelesse. Which to prove, we see, it is a delight for Princes, and a recreation for them, sometimes to disguise themselves, and to take upon them a base and popular kinde of life.

*Plerumque gratæ principibus uices,
Mundæque paruo sub lare pauperum
Cœnæ sine aulæis & ostro,
Solicitam explicuere frontem.*

*Princes doe commonly like enterchange,
And cleanly meales where poore-men poorely house,*

*Without all tapistry or carpets strange,
Unwrinkled have their care-knit, thought-bent browes.*

Nothing doth sooner breede a distaste or satietie, then plentie. What longing-lust would not be alaide, to see three hundred women at his dispose and pleasure, as hath the Grand *Turke* in his Seraille? And what a desire and shew of hawking had he reserved to himselfe from his ancestors, that never went abroad without seaven thousand falkners at least? Besides which, I thinke, the luster of greatnesse, brings no small incommodities to the enjoying of sweeter pleasures: They lie too open, and are too much in sight. And I wot not why a man should longer desire them to conceale or hide their fault: For, what in us is indiscretion, the people judgeth to be tyranny, contempt, and disdain of the lawes in them: And besides the readie inclination unto vice, it seemeth they also adde unto-it the pleasure of gourmandizing, and to prostrate publike observances under their feete. Verily *Plato* in his *Gorgias*, defineth him to be a tyrant, that in a Cittie hath leave and power to doe what ever hee list. And therefore often, the shew and publication of their vice hurteth more then the sinne in selfe. Every man feareth to be spied and controlled; which they are even in their countenances and thoughts: All the people esteeming to have right and interest to judge of them. And we see that blemishes grow either lesser or bigger, according to the eminence, and light of the place, where they are set, and that a mole or a wart in ones forehead is more apparently perceived, then a scarre in another place. And that is the reason why Poets faine *Jupiters* loves to have bene effected under other countenances, than his owne; And of so many amorous-shifts, and love-practises, they impute to him, there is but one (as farre as I remember) where he is to be seene in his greatnesse and majestie. But returne we to *Hieron*: he also relateth, how many incommodities he findeth in his royaltie, being so barred, that hee cannot at his libertie travell to goe whither he pleaseth, being as it were a prisoner within the limites of his country; and that in all his actions he is encircled and hemd-in with an importunate and tedious multitude. Truely, to see our Princes all-alone, sitting at their meate, beleagred-round with so many talkers, whisperers, and gazing-beholders, unknowne what they are or whence they come, I have often rather pittied then envied them. King *Alphonsus* was wont to say, that burthen-bearing asses were in that, in farre better condition then Kings; for, their maisters suffer them to feede at their ease, whereas Kings cannot obtaine that priviledge of their servants. And it could never fall into my minde, that it might be any speciall commoditie to the life of a man of understanding, to have a score of finde-faults, picke-thanks, and controlers about his close-stoole; nor that the service of a man, that hath a thousand pound rent a yeare, or that hath taken *Cales*, or defended *Sienna*, is more commodious or acceptable to him, then that of a sufficient, and well-experienced groome. Prince-like advantages, are in a maner but imaginary preheminences. Every degree of fortune, hath some image of Principallitie. *Cæsar* termeth all the Lordes, which in his time had justice in *France*, to be Kinglets, or petie-kings. And truely, except the name of *Sire*, we goe very farre with our Kings. Looke but in the Provinces remote and farre from the court: As for example, in *Brittanie*, the attending traine, the flocking subjects, the number of officers, the many affaires, the diligent service, the obsequious ceremonies of a Lord, that liveth retired, and in his owne house, brought-up amongst his owne servants, tenants, and followers: And note also the

high pitch of his imaginations, and humours, there is no greater roialtie can be seene: He heareth no more talke of his maister, then of the *Persian* King, and happily but once a yeare: And knowes but some farre-fetcht, and old kinred or pedigree, which his Secretary findes or keepes upon some ancient record or evidence. Verily our lawes are very free, and the burthen of soveraigntie, doth scarsly concerne a gentleman of *France* twice in his whole life. Essentiall and effectuall subjection amongst us doth not respect any, but such as allure themselves unto-it, and that affect to honour, and love to enrich themselves by such service: For he that can shrowd and retire himselfe in his owne home, and can manage and direct his house without sutes in lawe, or quarrell with his neighbours, or domesticall encombrances, is as free as the Duke of *Venice*. *Paucos servitus, plures servitatem tenent. Service holds few, but many hold service.* But above all things *Hieron* seemeth to complaine, that he perceiveth himselfe deprived of all mutuall friendship, reciprocally societie, and familiar conversation, wherein consisteth the most perfect and sweetest fruite of humane life. For, what undoubted testimonie of affection and good will, can I expect or exact from him, that will-he or nill-he, oweth me all he hath, all he can? Can I make accompt of his humble speech, of his low-lowting curtzie, or of his curteous offers, since it lieth not in his power to refuse them me? The honour we receive of those which feare and stand in awe of us, is no true honour. Such respects are rather due to roialtie, to majestie, then to me.

*maximum hoc regni bonum est,
Quòd facta domini cogitur populus sui
Quàm ferre, tàm laudare.*

*This is chiefe good of Princes dominations,
Subjects are forc't their sov'raignes acts and fashions
To beare with patience, passe with commendations.*

Doe I not see, that both the badde and the good King are served alike? That hee who is hated, and he that is beloved are both courted alike? And the one as much fawned upon as the other? My predecessor was served with the same apparances, and waited upon with the like ceremonies, and so shall my successor be. If my subjects offend mee not, it is no testimony of any good affection. Wherefore shall I take-it in that sense, sithence they cannot, if they would? No man foloweth me for any friendship that is betweene him and me: inasmuch as no firme friendship can be contracted, where is so small relation, so slender correspondencie, and such disparity. My high degree hath excluded me from the commerce of men. There is too great an inequality, and distant disproportion. They follow for countenance, and of custome, or rather my fortune then my-selfe: hoping thereby to encrease theirs. Whatsoever they say, all they doe unto me, is but a glosse, and but dissimulation, their liberty being everie where brideled, and checked by the great power I have over them. I see nothing about me, but inscrutable hearts, hollow mindes, fained lookes, dissembled speeches, and counterfet actions. His Courtiers one day commended *Julian* the Emperour for ministring of right, and doing of justice; *I should easily grow proud* (said he) *for these praises, if they came from such, as durst eyther accuse or discommend my contrary actions, should I commit any.* Al the true commodities that Princes have, are common unto them with men of meane fortune. It is for Gods to mount

winged horses, and to feed on Ambrosia. They have no other sleep, nor no other appetite then ours. Their steele is of no better temper, then that wherewith wee arme our selves. Their crowne, their diademe can neither hide them from the Sun, nor shelter them from the raine. *Dioclesian* that wore one so much reverenced, and so fortunate, did voluntarily resigne the same, to with-draw himselfe unto the pleasure of a private life; but a while after, the urgent necessitie of publike affaires requiring his presence, and that he should returne to re-assume his charge againe, he answered those that solicited him unto it; you would never undertake to perswade me to that, had you but seene the goodly rankes of trees, which myselfe have planted in mine Orchard, or the faire muske-melons, I have set in my garden. According to *Anacharsis* his opinion, *The happiest estate of a well-ordered common wealth should be, where all other things being equally common, precedency should be measured, and preferments suted according to vertue and desert, and the contrary according to vice.* At what time King *Pirrhus* undertooke to passe into *Italy*, *Cyneas* his wise and trusty counsellor, going about to make him perceive the vanity of his ambition, one day bespake him thus. *My good sir, (said he) To what end do you prepare for so great an enterprise? He answered sodainly, To make my selflord of Italie. That done, what will you doe then? (replied Cyneas) I will then passe (said Pirrhus) into Gaule, and then into Spayne: And what afterwards? I will then invade Affrike, and subdue the same, and at last, when I shall have brought all the world under my subjection, I will then take my rest, and live contented at mine ease. Now, for Gods sake Sir, (replied Cyneas) Tell me, what hinders you, that you be not now, if so you please, in that estate? Wherefore doe you not now place your selfe, where you meane to aspire, and save so much danger, so many hazards, and so great troubles as you enterpose betweene both?*

*Nimirum quia non bene norat quæ esset habendi
Finis, & omnino quoad crescat vera voluptas.*

*The cause forsooth, he knew not what should be the end
Ofhaving, nor how farre true pleasure should extend.*

I will conclude and shut up this treatise with an ancient verse, which I singularly applaud, and deeme fit to this purpose.

Mores cuique sui fingunt fortunam.

*Ev'ry mans maners and his mind,
His fortune to him frame and find.*

NOTES

- 1 Tapestry or fine cloth