

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 53

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Of a saying of Cæsar

IF WE SHALL sometimes amuse our selves and consider our estate, and the time we spend in controlling others, and to knowe the thinges that are without-us; would we but employ the same in sounding our selves throughly, we should easily perceiue how all this our contexture is built of weake and decaying pieces. It is not an especiall testimonie of imperfection, that we cannot settle our contentment on any one thing, and that even of our owne desire and imagination, it is beyond our power to chuse what wee stande in neede-of? Whereof the disputation that hath ever beene amongst Philosophers beareth sufficient witnes, to finde-out the chiefe felicitie or *summum bonum* of man, and which yet doth, and shall eternally last without resolution or agreement.

*dum abest quod avemus, id exuperare uidetur
Cætera, post aliud cum contigit illud auemus,
Et sitis æqua tenet.*

*While that is absent which we wish, the rest
That seemes to passe, when ought else is adrest,
That we desire, with equall thirst opprest.*

Whatsoever it be that falleth into our knowledge and jouissance, we finde, it doth not satisfie-us, and we still follow and gape after future, uncertaine, and unknowne things, because the present and unknowne please-us not, and doe not satisfie-us. Nor (as I think) because they have not sufficiently wherewith to satiate and please-us, but the reason is, that we apprehend and seize on them with an unruly, disordered, and diseased taste and holde-fast.

*Nam cum uidit hic ad usum quæ flagitat usus,
Omnia iam fermè mortalibus esse parata,
Diuitiis homines & honore & laude potentes
Affluere, atque bona natorum excellere fama,
Nec minus esse domi, cuiquam tamen anxia corda,
Atque animum infestis cogi seruire querelis:*

*Intellexit ibi uitium uas facere ipsum,
Omniáque illius uitio corrumpier intus
Quæ collata foris & commoda quæque uenirent.*

*For when the wiseman saw, that all almost,
That use requires, for men prepared was,
That men enriches, honors, praises boast,
In good reporte of children others passe,
Yet none at home did beare lesse pensive heart,
But that the minde was forst to serve complaint,
He knew, that fault the vessell did empart,
That all was marr'd within by vessels taint,
What ever good was wrought by any art.*

Our appetite is irresolute, and uncertaine; it can neither holde nor enjoy anything handsomly and after a good fashion. Man supposing it is the vice and fault of things he possesseth, feedeth and filleth himselfe with other things, which he neither knoweth, nor hath understanding-of, whereto he applyeth both his desires and hopes, and taketh them as an honor and reverence to himself; as saith *Cæsar*, *Communi fit uitio naturæ, ut inuisis, latitantibus atque incognitis rebus magis confidamus, uehementiusque exterreamur.* It hapneth by the common fault of nature, that both wee are more confident, and more terrified by things unseene, things hidden, and unknowne.