

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 1

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Of the inconstancie of our actions

THOSE WHICH EXERCISE themselves in controuling humane actions, find no such let in any one parte, as to peece them together, and bring them to one same lustre: For, they commonly contradict one an other so strangely, as it seemeth impossible they should be parcells of one ware-house. Yong *Marius* is sometimes found to be the sonne of *Mars*, and other times the childe of *Venus*. Pope *Boniface* the eight, is reported to have entred into his charge, as a Foxe; to have carried himselfe therein, as a Lion; and to have died like a dog. And who would thinke it was *Nero*, that lively image of crueltie, who being required to signe (as the custome was) the sentence of a criminall offender, that had beene condemned to die, that ever he should answer? Oh would to God I could never have written! So neare was his heart grieved to doome a man to death. The world is so full of such examples, that every man may store himselfe; and I woonder to see men of understanding trouble themselves with sorting these parcels: Sithence (me seemeth) irresolution is the most apparant and common vice of our nature; as witnesseth that famous verse of *Publius* the Comœdian:

Malum consilium est, quod mutari non potest.

*The counsell is but bad,
Whose change may not be had.*

There is some apparance to judge a man by the most common conditions of his life; but seeing the naturall instabilitie of our customes and opinions; I have often thought, that even good Authors doe ill, and take a wrong course, wilfully to opinionate themselves about framing a constant and solide contexture of us. They chuse an universall ayre, and following that image, range and interpret al a mans actions; which if they cannot wrest sufficiently, they remitte them unto dissimulation. *Augustus* hath escaped their hands; for there is so apparant, so sodaine and continuall a variety of actions found in him, through the course of his life, that even the boldest judges and strictest censurers, have bin faine to give him over, and leave him undecided. *There is nothing I so hardly beleeve to be in man, as constancy, and nothing so easy to be found in him, as inconstancy.* He that should

distinctly and part by part, judge of him, should often jumpe to speake trueth. View all antiquity over, and you shall finde-it a hard matter, to chuse out a dozen of men, that have directed their life unto one certaine, settled, and assured course; which is the surest drift of wisdom. For, to comprehend all in one worde, saith an ancient writer, and to embrace all the rules of our life into one, it is at all times to will, and not to will one same thing. I woulde not vouchsafe, (saieth hee) to adde anie thing; alwayes provided the will be just: for, if it be unjust, it is impossible it should ever continue one. Verily, I have heeretofore learned, that vice is nothing but a disorder, and want of measure, and by consequence, it is impossible to fasten constancy unto it. It is a saying of *Demosthenes*, (as some report.) *That consultation and deliberation, is the beginning of all vertue; and constancie, the end and perfection.* If by reason or discourse we should take a certaine waie, we should then take the fairest: but no man hath thought on-it.

*Quod petiit, spernit, repetit quod nuper omisit,
Æstuat, & uitæ disconuenit ordine toto.*

*He scorn's that which he sought, seek's that he scorn'd of late,
He flowes, ebbes, disagrees in his lifes whole estate.*

Our ordinarie maner is to follow the inclination of our appetite, this way and that way; on the left, and on the right hand; upward and downward, according as the wind of occasions doth transport-us: we never think on what we would have, but at the instant we would have it: and change as that beast that takes the colour of the place wherein it is layd. What we even now purposed, we alter by and by, and presently returne to our former byase: all is but changing, motion, and inconstancy:

Ducimur ut neruis alienis mobile lignum.

*So are we drawne, as wood is shooved,
By others sinnewes each way mooved.*

We goe not, but we are carried: as things that flote, now gliding gentle, now hulling violently; according as the water is, either stormy or calme.

*nónne uidemus
Quid sibi quisque uelit nescire & quærere semper,
Commutare locum quasi onus deponere possit?*

*See we not, every man in his thoughts height
Knowes not what he would have, yet seekes he straight
To change place, as he could lay downe his weight?*

Everie day new toyes, each houre new fantasies, and our humours move and fleete with the fleetings and movings of time.

*Tales sunt hominum mentes, quali Pater ipse
Iuppiter auctifero lustrauit lumine terras.*

*Such are mens mindes, as that great God of might
Survayes the earth with encrease-bearing light.*

We floate and waver betweene divers opinions: we wil nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly. Had any man prescribed certaine Lawes, or established assured policies in his owne head; in his life should we dayly see, to shine an equalitie of customes, an assured order, and an infallible relation from one thing to another (*Empedocles* noted this deformitie to be amongst the Agrigentines, that they gave themselves so over unto delights, as if they should die to morrow next, and built as if they should never die) the discourse thereof were easie to be made. As is seene in yong *Cato*: He that toucht but one step of it, hath touched all. It is an harmony of wel-according tunes and which cannot contradict it selfe. With us it is clean contrary, so many actions, so many particular judgements are there requir'd. The surest way (in mine opinion) were to referre them unto the next circumstances, without entering into further search, and without concluding any other consequence of them. During the late tumultuous broyles of our mangled estate, it was told mee, that a yoong woman, not farre from mee, had headlong cast hir selfe out of a high window, with intent to kill hirselfe, onely to avoyde the ravishment of a rascalie-base souldier, that lay in hir house, who offred to force-hir: and perceiving that with the fall she had not killed hirselfe, to make an end of hir enterprize, she would have cutte hir owne throate with a knife, but that she was hindered by some that came-in to her: Neverthelesse having sore wounded hir selfe, she voluntarily confessed, that the Souldier had yet but urged hir with importunate requests, suing-solicitations, and golden bribes, but she feared he would in the end have obtained his purpose by compulsion: by whose earnest speaches, resolute countenance, and gored bloud (a true testimony of hir chaste vertue) she might appeare to be the lively patterne of an other *Lucrece*; yet know I certainly, that both before that time, and afterward, she had bin enjoyed of others upon easier composition. And as the common saying is; Faire and soft, as squeamish-honest as she seemes, although you misse of your intent, conclude not rashly an inviolable chastitie to be in your Mistresse; For, a groome or a horse-keeper may find an houre to thrive-in; and a dog hath a day. *Antigonus* having taken upon him to favour a Souldier of his, by reason of his vertue and valour, commaunded his Physicians to have great care of him, and see whether they could recover him of a lingring and inward disease, which had long tormented him, who being perfectly cured, he afterward perceived him to bee nothing so earnest and diligent in his affaires, demaunded of him, how he was so changed from himselfe, and become so cowardish: your selfe good sir (answered he) have made me so, by ridding me of those infirmities, which so did grieve me, that I made no accompt of my life. A souldier of *Lucullus*, having by his enemies beene robbed of all he had, to revenge himself undertooke a notable and desperat atempt upon them; and having recovered his losses, *Lucullus* conceived a very good opinion of him, and with the greatest shewes of assured trust and loving kindnesse he could bethinke himselfe, made especiall accompt of him, and in any daungerous enterprize seemed to trust and employ him onely:

Uerbis quæ timido quoque possent addere mentem:

*With words, which to a coward might
Adde courage, had he any spright.*

Imploy (said he unto him) some wretch- stripped and robbed souldier

*(quantumuis rusticus ibit,
Ibit eò, quò uis, qui zonam perdidit, inquit.)*

*(None is, saith he, so clownish, but will-on,
Where you will have him, if his purse be gone)*

and absolutely refused to obey him. When we reade that *Mahomet*, having outrageouslie rated *Chasan*, chiefe leader of his Janizers, because he saw his troupe wel-nigh defeated by the Hungarians, and hee to behave himselfe but faintly in the fight, *Chasan* without making other reply, alone as he was, and without more adoe, with his weapon in his hand rushed furiously in the thickest throng of his enemies that the first mette withall, of whom hee was instantly slaine: This may haply be deemed, rather a rash conceite, than a justification; and a new spight, then a natural prowes. He whom you saw yesterday so boldly-venturous, wonder not if you see him a dastardly meacocke to morrow next: for either anger or necessitie, company or wine, a sodaine fury or the clang of a trumpet, might rowze-up his hart, and stir up his courage. It is no hart nor courage so framed by discourse or deliberation: These circumstances have setled the same in him: Therefore is it no marvell if by other contrary circumstance he become a craven and change copy. This supple variation, and easie-yeelding contradiction, which is seene in us, hath made some to imagine, that wee had two soules; and others, two faculties; wherof every one as best she pleaseth, accompanieth and doth agitate-us; the one towards good, the other towards evil. Forsomuch as such a rough diversitie cannot wel sort and agree in one simple subject. The blast of accidents, doth not only remove me according to his inclination; for besides, I remove and trouble my selfe by the instability of my posture, and whosoever looketh narrowly about himselfe, shall hardly see himselfe twice in one same state. Sometimes I give my soule one visage, and sometimes another, according unto the posture or side I lay hir-in. If I speake diversly of my selfe, it is because I looke diversly upon my selfe. All contrarieties are found in hir, according to some turne or remooving, and in some fashion or other. Shamefast, bashfull, insolent, chaste, luxurious, peevish, prating, silent, fond, doting, labourious, nice, delicate, ingenious, slowe, dull, froward, humorous, debonaire, wise, ignorant, false in wordes, true-speaking, both liberall, covetous, and prodigall. All these I perceive in some measure or other to bee in mee, according as I stirre or turne my selfe; And whosoever shall heedfully survey and consider himselfe, shall finde this volubilitie and discordance to be in himselfe, yea and in his very judgement. I have nothing to say entirely, simply, and with soliditie of my selfe, without confusion, disorder, blending, mingling; and in one word, *Distinguo* is the most universal part of my logike. Although I ever purpose to speake good of good, and rather to interpret those things, that will beare-it, unto a good sense; yet is it that, the strangenes of our condition admitteth that we are often urged to doe wel by vice it selfe, if wel doing were not judged by the intention only. Therefore may not a couragious acte conclude a man to be valiant. He that is so, when just occasion serveth, shall

ever be so, and upon all occasions. If it were an habitude of vertue, and not a sodaine humour, it would make a man equally resolute at all assayes, in all accidents: Such alone, as in company; such in a single combate, as in a set battell; For, whatsoever some say, valour is all alike, and not one in the street or towne, and another in the campe or field. As courageously should a man beare a sickenes in his bed, as a hurt in the field, and feare death no more at home in his house, then abroad in an assault. We should not then see one same man enter the breach, or charge his enemy with an assured and undanted fiercenesse, and afterward having escaped that, to vexe, to grieve and torment himselfe like unto a seely woman, or faint-hearted milkesoppe for the losse of a sute, or death of a childe. If one chance to be carelesly base-minded in his infancie, and constantly-resolute in povertie; if he be timorously-fearefull at sight of a Barbers razor, and afterward stowtly-undismayed against his enemies swordes: The action is commendable, but not the man. Divers Græcians (saith *Cicero*) can not endure to looke their enemy in the face, yet are they most constant in their sicknesses; whereas the *Cimbrians*, and *Celtiberians*, are meere contrary. *Nihil enim potest esse æquabile, quod non à certa ratione proficiscatur: For nothing can beare it selfe even, which proceedeth not from resolved reason.* There is no valor more extreame in his kinde, than that of *Alexander*; yet is it but in *species*, nor every where sufficiently full and universall. As incomparable as it is, it hath his blemishes, which is the reason that in the idlest suspitions, he apprehendeth at the conspiracies of his followers against his life, we see him so earnestly to vex, and so desperately to trouble himselfe: In search and pursuite whereof he demeaneth himselfe with so vehement and indiscreet an injustice, and with such a demisse feare, that even his naturall reason is thereby subverted. Also the superstition, wherewith he is so thoroughly tainted, beareth some shew of pusilanimitie. And the unlimited excesse of the repentance he shewed for the murther of *Clitus*, is also a witnesse of the inequalitye of his courage. Our matters are but parcells hudled-up, and peeces patched together, and we endeavour to acquire honour by false meanes, and untrue tokens. *Vertue will not bee followed, but by her-selfe:* And if at any time we borrow her maske, upon some other occasion, she will as soone pull-it from our face. It is a lively hew, and strong die, if the soule be once dyde with the same perfectly, and which wil never fade or be gone, except it carry the skinne away with-it. Therefore to judge a man, we must a long time follow, and very curiously marke his steppes; whether constancie doe wholly subsist and continue upon hir owne foundation in him, *Cui uiuendi uia considerata atque prouisa est, who hath forecast and considered the way of life;* whether the variety of occurrences make him change his pace (I meane his way, for his pace may eyther be hastened or slowed) let him runne-on: such a one (as sayeth the imprease of our good Talbot) goeth before the winde. It is no marvaile (saith an olde writer) that hazard hath such power over-us, since wee live by hazard. It is impossible for him to dispose of his particular actions, that hath not in grose directed his life unto one certaine end. It is impossible for him to range all pieces in order, that hath not a plot or forme of the totall frame in his head. What avayleth the provision of all sortes of colours unto one that knowes not what he is to draw? No man makes any certaine designe of his life, and we deliberate of-it but by parcels. A skilfull archer ought first to know the marke he aimeth at, and then apply his hand, his bow, his string, his arrow and his motion accordingly. Our counsels goe a stray, because they are not

rightly addressed, and have no fixed end. *No winde makes for him, that hath no intended port to saile-unto.* As for me, I allow not greatly of that judgement, which some made of *Sophocles*, and to have concluded him sufficient in the managing of domestical matters, against the accusation of his owne Sonne, only by the sight of one of his tragedies. Nor do I commend the conjecture of the *Parians*, sent to reforme the *Milesians*, as sufficient to the consequence they drew thence. In visiting and surveying the Ile, they marked the Landes that were best husbanded, and observed the country houses that were best governed. And having registred the names of their owners; and afterward made an assemblie of the Townes-men of the Cittie, they named and instituted those owners as new governours and magistrates; judging and concluding, that beeing good husbands and carefull of their household affaires, they must consequently be so of publike matters. We are all framed of flappes and patches and of so shapelesse and diverse a contexture, that everie piece, and everie moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference found betweene us and our selves, as there is betweene our selves and others. *Magnam rem puta, unum hominem agere. Esteeme it a great matter, to play but one man.*

Since ambition may teach men both valour, temperance, liberality, yea and justice: Sith covetousnesse may settle in the minde of a shop-prentis-boy, brought up in ease and idlenes, a dreadlesse assurance to leave his home-bredde ease, and forgoe his place of education, and in a small barke to yeeld him-selfe unto the mercy of blustering waves, mercilesse windes and wrathfull *Neptune*; and that it also teacheth discretion and wisdom; And that *Venus* herself ministreth resolution and hardinesse unto tender youth as yet subject to the discipline of the rodde, and teacheth the ruthlesse Souldier, the soft and tenderly-effeminate heart of women in their mothers lappes.

*Hac duce custodes furtim transgressa iacentes,
Ad iuuenem tenebris sola puella uenit.*

*The wench by stealth her lodg'd guards having stript,
By this guide, sole, i'th darke, to'th yonker skipt.*

It is no parte of a well-grounded judgement, simply to judge our selves by our exterior actions: A man must thoroughly sound himself, and dive into his hart, and there see by what wards or springs the motions stirre. But forasmuch as it is a hazardous and high enrerprise, I would not have so many to medle with it as doe.