

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 20

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We taste nothing purely

THE WEAKENES of our condition, causeth, that things in their naturall simplicitie and puritie cannot fall into our use. The elements we enjoy are altered: Metalls likewise, yea golde must be empared with some other stuffe to make it fit for our service. Nor vertue so simple, which *Ariston*, *Pyrrho*, and the Stoickes, made the end of their life, hath beene able to doe no good with¹ composition: Nor the Cirenaike sensualitie or Aristippian voluptuousnes. *Of the pleasures and goods we have, there is none exempted from some mixture of evil, and incommodie.*

*medio de fonte leporum
Surgit amari aliquid, quod in ipsis floribus angat.*

*From middle spring of sweetes some bitter springs,
Which in the very flower smartly stings.*

Our exceeding voluptuousnes hath some aire of groning and wailing: Would you not say, it dieth with anguish? Yea when we forge it's image in hir excellencie, we decke it with Epithets, of sickish and dolorous qualities: languor, effeminacie, weaknesse, fainting and *Morbidezza*, a great testimony of their consanguinitie and consubstantialitie: Excessive joy hath more severitie, then jolitie: Extreame and full content, more settlednesse, then cheerefulness. *Ipsa faelicitas, se nisi temperat, premit. Felicitie it selfe, unlesse it temper it selfe, distempers us.* Ease consumeth us. It is that, which on old Greeke verse saith, of such a sense. The Gods sell us all the goods they give us; that is to say, they give us not one pure and perfect, and that which we buy not with the price of some evill. Travell and pleasure, most unlike in nature, are notwithstanding followed together by a kinde of I wot not what naturall conjunction of *Socrates* saith, that some God attempted to huddle up together, and confound sorrow and voluptuousnesse: but being unable to effect it, he bethought himselfe to couple them together, at least by the taile. *Metrodorus* said, that in sadnesse there is some aloy of pleasure. I know not whether he meant any thing else, but I imagine, that for one to enure himselfe to melancholy, there is some kinde of purpose, of consent, and mutuall delight: I meane besides ambition, which may also be joynd unto it. There is some shadow of delicacie, and quaintnesse, which smileth and

fawneth upon us, even in the lappe of melancholy. Are there not some complexions, that of it make their nourishment?

est quædam flere uoluptas.

*It is some pleasure yet,
With teares our cheekes to wet.*

And one *Attalus* in *Seneca* saith, the remembrance of our last friends is as pleasing to us, as bitternesse in wine that is over old;

*Minister ueteris puer falerni
Ingere mi calices amariores:*

*Sir boy, my servitor of good old wine,
Bring me my cup thereof bitter, but fine.*

and as of sweetly-sowre apples. Nature discovereth this confusion unto us: Painters are of opinion, that *the motions and wrinkles in the face, which serve to weepe, serve also to laugh*. Verely, before one or other be determined to expresse which; behold the pictures successe, you are in doubt toward which one enclineth. And the extremitie of laughing entermingles it selfe with teares. *Nullum sine auctoramento malum est. There is no evill without some obligation*. When I imagine man fraughted with al the commodities may be wished; let us suppose, al his severall members were for ever possessed with a pleasure like unto that of generation, even in the highest point that may be: I finde him to sinke under the burthen of his ease, and perceive him altogether unable to beare so pure, so constant, and so universall a sensualitie. Truely he flies when he is even upon the nicke, and naturally hastneth to escape it, as from a step, whereon he cannot stay or containe himselfe, and feareth to sinke into it. When I religiously confesse my selfe unto my selfe, I finde, the best good I have, hath some vicious tainte. And I feare that *Plato* in his purest vertue (I that am as sincere and loyall an esteemer thereof, and of the vertues of such a stampe, as any other can possibly be) if he had neerely listned unto it (and sure he listned very neere) hee would therein have heard some harsh tune, of humane mixture, but an obscure tune, and onely sensible unto himselfe. *Man all in all, is but a botching and party-coloured worke. The very Lawes of Justice, can not subsist without seme commixture of Unjustice: And Plato saieth, They undertake to cutte off Hidraes heades, that pretend to remoove all incommodities and inconveniences from the Lawes. Omne magnum exemplum habet aliquid ex iniquo, quod contra singulos utilitate publica rependitur. Every great example hath some touch of injustice, which is requited by the common good against particulars*, saith *Tacitus*. It is likewise true, that for the use of life and service of publike societie, there may be excesse in the puritie and perspicuities of our spirites. This piercing brightnesse hath overmuch subtilitie and curiositie. They should be made heavy and dull, to make them the more obedient to example and practise; and they must be thickned and obscured, to proportion them to this shadie and terrestriall life. Therefore are vulgar and lesse-wire-drawnnewits found to be more fitte and happy in the conduct of affaires. And the exquisite and high-raised opinions of Philosophie, unapt and unfit to exercise. This sharpe vivacitie of the spirit, and this supple and restlesse volubilitie, troubleth our negotiations. Humane enterprises should be managed more grosely and superficially, and have a good and

great part of them left for the rights of fortune. Affaires neede not be sifted so nicely and so profoundly. A man looseth himselfe about the considerations of so many contrary lusters and diverse formes. *Uolutantibus res inter se pugnantes, obtorpuerant animi. Their mindes were astonished, while they revolved things so different.* It is that which our elders report of *Simonides*; because his imagination, concerning the question *Hieron* the King had made unto him (which the better to answere he had diverse dates allowed him to thinke of it) presented sundry subtile and sharpe considerations unto him; doubting which might be the likeliest; he altogether dispaired of the truth. Whosoever searcheth all the circumstances, and embraceth all the consequences thereof, hindereth his election. *A meane engine doth equally conduct, and sufficeth for the executions of great and little weights.* It is commonly seene, that the best husbandes and the thriftiest, are those who cannot tell how they are so; and that these cunning Arithmeticians doe seldome thrive by it. I know a notable pratler, and an excellent blazoner of all sorts of husbandry and thrift, who hath most pitteously let ten thousand pound sterline a yeare passe from him. I know another, who saith, he consulteth better then any man of his counsell, and there cannot be a properer man to see unto, or of more sufficiencie; notwithstanding when hee commeth to any execution; his owne servants finde he is farre-otherwise: This I say without mentioning or accompting his ill lucke.

NOTES

- 1 *With* is a mistake or a typo. It should be *without*.