

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 5



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Of Conscience

MY BROTHER the Lord of *Brouze* and my selfe, during the time of our civill wars, travelling one day together, we fortun'd to meete upon the way with a Gentleman, in outward semblance, of good demeanour: He was of our contrary faction, but forasmuch as he counterfai'ted himselfe otherwise, I knew it not. And the worst of these tumultuous intestine broyles, is, that the cardes are so shuffled (your enemy being neither by language nor by fashion, nor by any other apparant marke distinguished from you; nay, which is more, brought up under the same lawes and customes, and breathing the same ayre) that it is a very hard matter to avoyde confusion and shun disorder. Which consideration, made me not a little fearfull to meete with our troopes, especially where I was not knowne, lest I should be urged to tell my name, and haply doe worse. As other times before it had befallne me; for, by such a chaunce, or rather mistaking, I fortun'd once to loose al my men and horses, and hardly escaped my selfe: and amongst other my losses, and servants that were slaine, the thing that most griev'd me, was the untimely and miserable death of a yoong Italian Gentleman, whom I kept as my Page, and very carefully brought-up, with whom dyed, as forward, as budding and as hopefull a youth as ever I saw. But this man seem'd so fearfully-dismayd, and at every encounter of horsemen, and passage, by, or through any Towne that helde for the King, I observed him to be so strangely distracted, that in the end I perceived, and guessed they were but guilty alarums that his conscience gave him. It seem'd unto this seely man, that all might apparantly, both through his blushing selfe-accusing countenance, and by the crosses he wore upon his upper garments, reade the secret intentions of his faint-hart. Of such marvailous-working power is the sting of conscience: which often induceth us to bewray, to accuse, and to combate our selves; and for want of other evidences shee produceth our selves against our selves,

Occultum quatiēte animo tortore flagellum.

*Their minde, the tormentour of sinne,
Shaking an unseene whippe within.*

The story of *Bessus* the *Pœnian* is so common, that even children have it in their mouths, who being found fault withall, that in mirth hee had beaten-downe a neast of yong sparrowes and then killed them, answered, he had great reason to do-it, forsomuch as those yong birdes ceased not falsely to accuse him to have murdered his father, which parricide was never suspected to have beene committed by him; and untill that day had layen secret; but the revengefull furies of the conscience, made the same party to reveale it, that by all right was to doe penance for so hatefull and unnaturall a murther. *Hesiodus* correcteth the saying of *Plato*. That punishment doth commonly succeed the guilt, and follow sinne at-hand: for, he affirmeth, that it rather is borne at the instant, and together with sinne it selfe, and they are as twinnes borne at one birth together. *Whosoever expects punishment, suffereth the same, and whosoever deferveth it, he doth expect-it. Impietie doth invent, and iniquitie dooth frame torments against it selfe.*

Malum consilium consultori pessimum.

Bad counsell is worst for the counseller that gives the counsell.

Even as the *Wasp* stingeth and offendeth others, but hir selfe much more; for, in hurting others, she looseth hir force and sting for ever.

vitásque in vulnere ponunt.

*They, while they others sting,
Death to themselves doe bring.*

The *Cantarides* have some part in them, which by a contrarietie of nature serveth as an antidot or counterpoison against their poison: so likewise, as one taketh pleasure in vice, there is a certaine contrarie displeasure engendred in the conscience, which by sundrie yrksome and painefull imaginations, perplexeth and tormenteth us, both waking and asleepe.

*Quippe ubi se multi per somnia sæpe loquentes,
Aut morbo delirantes procraxe ferantur,
Et celata diu in medium peccata dedisse.*

*Many in dreames oft speaking, or unhealed,
In sicknes raving have themselves revealed,
And brought to light their sinnes long time concealed.*

Apollodorus dreamed he saw himselfe first fleade by the *Scythians*, and then boyled in a pot, and that his owne heart murmured, saying; I onely have caused this mischief to light upon thee. *Epicurus* was wont to say, that no lurking hole can shroud the wicked; for, they can never assure themselves to be sufficiently hidden, sithence conscience is ever readie to disclose them to themselves.

*prima est hæc ultio, quòd se
Iudice nemo nocens absolvitur.*

*This is the first revenge, no guiltie minde
Is quitted, though itselbe be judge assign'd.*

Which as it doth fill us with feare and doubt, so doth it store us with assurance and trust. And I may boldely say, that I have waded through many dangerous hazards, with a more untired pace, onely in consideration of the secret knowledge I had of mine owne will, and innocencie of my desseignes.

*Conscia mens ut cuique sua est, ita concipit intra
Pectora pro facto spémque metúmque suo.*

*As each mans minde is guiltie, so doth he
Inlie breede hope and feare, as his deedes be.*

Of examples, there are thousands; It shall suffice us to alleage three onely, and all of one man. *Scipio* being one day accused before the Romane people, of an urgent and capitall accusation; in stead of excusing himselfe, or flattering the Judges; turning to them, he said. It will well beseeme you to undertake to judge of his head, by whose meanes you have authoritie to judge of all the world. The same man, another time, being vehemently urged by a *Tribune* of the people, who charged him with sundrie imputations, in lieu of pleading or excusing his cause, gave him this sodaine and short answer. Let us goe (quoth he) my good citizens; let-us forthwith goe (I say) to give heartie thankes unto the Gods for the victorie, which even upon such a day as this is, they gave me against the Carthaginians. And therewith advancing himselfe to march before the people, all the assemblie, and even his accuser himselfe did undelayedly follow him towards the temple. After that, *Petilius* having beene animated and stirred up by *Cato* to sollicite and demaund a strict accompt of him, of the money he had managed, and which was committed to his trust, whilst he was in the Province of *Antioche*; *Scipio* being come into the senate-house, of purpose to answer for himselfe, pulling out the booke of his accompts from under his gowne, tolde them all, that that booke contained truely, both the receipt and laying out thereof; and being required to deliver the same unto a clarke to register it, he refused to doe-it, saying, he would not doe himselfe that wrong or indignitie, and thereupon with his owne hands, in presence of all the Senate, tore the booke in pieces. I cannot apprehend or beleeve, that a guiltie-cauterized conscience could possibly dissemble or counterfet such an undismaied assurance: His heart was naturally too great, and enured to overhigh fortune (saith *Titus Livius*) to know how to be a criminall offender, and stoopingly to yeelde himselfe to the basenes, to defend his innocencie. Torture and racking are dangerous inventions, and seeme rather to be trialles of patience then Essayes of truth. And both he that can, and he that cannot endure them, conceale the truth. For, wherefore shall paine or smart, rather compell me to confesse that, which is so indeede, then force me to tell that which is not? And contrariwise, if he who hath not done that whereof he is accused, is sufficiently patient to endure those torments; why shall not he be able to tolerate them, who hath doone-it, and is guiltie indeede; so deare and worthie a reward as life being proposed unto him? I am of opinion, that the ground of his invention, proceedeth from the consideration of the power and facultie of the conscience. For, to the guiltie, it seemeth to give a kinde of furtherance to the torture, to make him confesse his fault, and weakeneth and dismayeth him: and on the other part, it encourageth and strengthneth the innocent against torture. To say truth, it is a meane full of

uncertaintie and danger. What would not a man say; nay, what not doe, to avoide so grievous paines, and shunne such torments?

Etiam innocentes cogit mentiri dolor.

*Torment to lie sometimes will drive,
Ev'n the most innocent alive.*

Whence it followeth, that he whom the Judge hath tortured, because he shall not die an innocent, he shall bring him to his death, both innocent and tortured. Many thousands have thereby charged their heads with false confessions. Amongst which I may well place *Phylotas*, considering the circumstances of the enditment that *Alexander* framed against him, and the progresse of his torture. But so it is, that (as men say) it is the least evill humane weakenes could invent: though, in my conceit, verie inhumanely, and therewithall most unprofitably. Many nations lesse barbarous in that, then the Græcian or the Romane, who terme them so, judge it a horrible and cruell thing, to racke and torment a man for a fault whereof you are yet in doubt. Is your ignorance long of him? What can he doe withall? Are not you unjust, who because you will not put him to death without some cause, you doe worse then kill him? And that it is so, consider but how often he rather chuseth to die guiltles, then passe by this information, much more painfull, then the punishment or torment; and who many times, by reason of the sharpnes of it, preventeth, furthereth, yea and executeth the punishment. I wot not whence I heard this storie, but it exactly hath reference unto the conscience of our justice. A countrie woman accused a souldier before his Generall, being a most severe justicier, that he, with violence, had snatched from out hir poore childrens hands, the small remainder of some pappe or water-gruell, which shee had onely left to sustaine them, forsomuch as the Armie had ravaged and wasted all. The poore woman, had neither witnes nor prooffe of it; It was but hir yea, and his no; which the Generall perceiving, after he had summoned hir to be well advised what she spake, and that she should not accuse him wrongfully; for, if she spake an untruth, she should then be culpable of his accusation: But she constantly persisting to charge him, he forthwith, to discover the truth, and to be throughly resolved, caused the accused Souldiers belly to be ripped, who was found faultie, and the poore woman to have said true; whereupon she was discharged. A condemnation instructive to others.