

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 3 · Chapter 11



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Of the Lame or Cripple

TWO OR THREE yeeres are now past, since the yeere hath beene shortned tenne dayes in *France*. Oh how manie changes are like to ensue this reformation! It was a right remooving of Heaven and Earth together, yet nothing remooveth from it's owne place: My Neighbours finde the season of their seede and Harvest time, the opportunitie of their affaires, their lucky and unlucky dayes, to answer just those seasons to which they had from al ages assigned them. Neither was the errour heeretofore perceived, nor is the reformation now discerned in our use. So much uncertaintie is there in al things: So grose, so obscure and so dull is our understanding. Some are of opinion, this reformation might have bin redressed after a lesse incommodious maner; substracting according to the example of *Augustus*, for some yeeres, the bissextile or leape day: Which in some sort, is but a day of hinderance and trouble: Untill they might more exactly have satisfied the debt: Which by this late reformation is not doone: For we are yet some dayes in arrerages: And if by such a meane, we might provide for times to come, appoynting that after the revolution of such or such a number of yeeres, that extraordinary day might for ever be eclipsed: so that our misreckoning should not henceforward exceede foure and twenty houres. Wee have no other computation of time, but yeeres: The World hath used them so manie ages: And yet is it a measure, we have not untill this day perfectly established. And such, as wee daylie doubt, what forme other Nations have diversly given the same, and which was the true use of it. And what if some say, that the Heavens in growing olde presse themselves towards us, and cast us into an uncertainty of houres and dayes? And as *Plutarke* saith of moneths; that even in his dayes, Astrologie could not yet limmite the motion of the Moone? Are not we then well holp-up, to keepe a register of things past? I was even now plodding (as often I doe) upon this, what a free and gadding instrument humane reason is. I ordinarily see, that men, in matters proposed them, doe more willingly ammuze and busie themselves in seeking out the reasons, than in searching out the trueth of them. They omit presuppositions, but curiously examine consequences. They leave things, and runne to causes. Oh conceited discourses! The knowledge of causes doth onely concerne him, who hath the conduct of things: Not us, that have but the sufferance of them. And who according to our neede, without entering into their beginning and

essence, have perfectly the full and absolute use of them. Nor is wine more pleasant unto him that knowes the first faculties of it. Contrariwise; both the bodie and the minde, interrupt and alter the right, which they have of the Worlde-use and of themselves, commixing therewith the opinion of learning. The effects concerne us, but the meanes, nothing at all. To determine and distribute, belongeth to superioritie and regency; as accepting, to subjection and apprenticeshippe. Let us re-assume our custome. They commonly beginne thus: *How is such a thing done?* Whereas they should say: *Is such a thing done?* Our discourse is capable to frame a hundred other Worlde, and finde the beginnings and contexture of them. It needeth neyther matter nor ground. Let it but runne-on: It will as well build upon emptinesse, as upon fulnesse and with inanitie as with matter.

Dare pondus idonea fumo.

*That things which vanish straight
In smoke, should yet beare weight.*

I finde, that we should say most times: *There is no such thing.* And I would often employ this answer; but I dare not: for they cry; It is a defeature produced by ignorance and weakenesse of spirite. And I must commonly juggle for company sake, to treat of idle subjects and frivolous discourses. which I believe nothing at all. Since truely, it is a rude and quareulous humour, flatly to deny a proposition. And few misse (especially in things hard to be perswaded) to affirme, that they have seene it: Or to alleadge such witnesses, as their authoritie shall stay our contradiction. According to which use, we know the foundations and meanes of a thousand things that never were. And the World is in a thousand questions descanted and bandied too and fro; the *pro* and *contra* of which is meerly false. *Ita finitima sunt falsa ueris, ut in præcipitem locum non debeat se sapiens committere. Falsehood is so neere Neighbour to truth, that a wiseman should not put himselfe upon a slipperie downefal. Truth and falsehood have both alike countenances, their port, their taste and their proceedings semblable.* Wee beholde them with one same eyes. I observe that we are not onely slowe in defending ourselves from deceipt, but that we seeke and sue to embrace it. We love to meddle and entangle ourselves with vanitie, as conformable unto our being. I have seene the birth of divers miracles in my dayes. Although they be smothered in their first growth, we omit not to foresee the course they would have taken, had they lived their full age. The matter is to finde the end of the clue; that found, one may winde-off what he list: And *there is afurther distance from nothing to the least thing in the World, than betweene that and the greatest.* Now the first that are embrued with the beginning of strangenesse, comming to publish their history, finde by the oppositions made against them, where the difficultie of perswasion lodgeth; and goe about with some false patch, to botch uppe those places. Besides that, *Insita hominibus libidine alendi de industria rumores: Men having a natural desire to norish reports.* We naturally make it a matter of conscience, to restore what hath bin lent us, without some usury and accession of our encrease. *A particular errour, doeth first breede a publike errour.* And when his turne commeth, *A publike errour begetteth a particular errour.* So goeth all this vast frame, from hand to hand, confounding and composing it selfe; in such sort that the furthest-abiding testimonie, is better instructed of

it, then the nearest: and the last informed, better persuaded then the first. It is naturall progresse: For, whosoever beleeveth anie thing, thinkes it a deede of charitie, to perswade it unto another: Which, that he may the better effect, he feareth not to adde somthing of his owne invention thereunto, so farre as he seeth necessarie in his discourse, to supply the resistance and defect, he imagineth to be in anothers conception. My selfe, who make an especial matter of conscience to ly, and care not greatly to add credit or authority to what I say, perceive nevertheles, by the discourses I have in hand, that being ernested, either by the resistance of another, or by the earnestnes of my narration ; I swell and amplifie my subject by my voice, motions, vigor and force of words: as also by extension and amplification, not without some prejudice to the naked truth. But yet I doe it upon condition, that to the first that brings me home againe, and enquireth for the bare and simple truth at my hands: I sodainely give over my hold, and without exaggeration, emphasis or amplification, I yeeld both my selfe and it unto him. A lively, earnest and ready speech as mine, is easily transported unto hyperboles. There is nothing whereunto men are ordinarily more prone, then to give way to their opinions. Where ever usuall meanes faile us, we adde commandement, force, fire and sword. It is not without some ill fortune, to come to that passe, that the multitude of believers, in a throng where fooles doe in number so farre exceede the wise, should be the best touchstone of truth. *Quasi uerò quidquam sit tam ualdè, quàm nil sapere uulgare. Sanitatis patrocinium est, insanientium turba. As though any thing were so common as to have no wit. The multitude of them that are mad, is a defence for them that are in their wits.* It is a hard matter for a man to resolve his judgement against common opinions. The first perswasion taken from the very subject, seizeth on the simple: whence under th'authoritie of the number and antiquitie of testimonies, it extends it selfe on the wiser sort. As for me, in a matter, which I could not believe being reported by one: I should never credite the same, though affirmed by a hundred. And I judge not opinions, by yeares. It is not long since one of our Princes, in whom the gowt had spoiled a gentle disposition and a blithe composition; suffered himselfe so farre to be perswaded or mis-led, by the reporte made unto him of the wondrous deedes of a Priest, who by way of charmes, spells and gestures cured all diseases; that he undertooke a long-tedious journie to finde him out: and by the vertue of his apprehension did so perswade, and for certaine houres so lull his legs asleepe, that for a while he brought them to doe him that service, which for a long time they had forgotten. Had fortune heaped five or six like accidents one in the necke of another, they had doubtlesse beene able to bring this miracle into nature. Whereas afterward there was so much simplicitie and so little skill found in the architect of these workes, that he was deemed unworthy of any punishment: As likewise should be done with most such-like things, were they throughly knowne in their nature. *Miramur ex interuallo fallentia: We wonder at those things that deceive us by distance.* Our sight doth in such sorte, often represent us a farre-off with strange images, which vanish in aproaching neerer. *Nunquam ad liquidum fama perducitur. Fame is never brought to be cleare.* It is a wonder, to see how from many vaine beginnings and frivolous causes, so famous impressions doe ordinarily arise and ensue. Even that hindereth the information of them: For, whilst a man endevoureth to finde out causes, forcible and weightie ends, and worthy so great a name, he looseth the true and essentiall. They are so little, that they escape our sight. And

verely a right wise, heedy and subtile inquisitor is required in such questings; imparciall and not preoccupied. All these miracles and strange events, are untill this day hidden from me: I have seene no such monster, or more expresse wonder in this world, then my selfe. *With time and custome a man doth acquaint and enure himselfe to all strangenesse:* But the more I frequent and know my selfe, the more my deformitie astonieth me: and the lesse I understand my selfe. The chieftest priviledge to produce and advance such accidents, is reserved unto fortune. Travelling yesterday thorough a village, within two leagues of my house, I found the place yet warme of a miracle that was but newly failed and discovered, wherewith all the countrie thereabout had for many months beene ammused and abused; and diverse bordering Provinces beganne to listen unto it, and severall troupes of all qualities ceased not thicke and threefold to flocke thither. A yong man of that towne, undertooke one night in his owne house (never dreaming of any knavery) to counterfeit the voice of a spirit or ghost, but onely for sporte, to make himselfe merry for that present, which succeeding better then he had imagined; to make the jest extend further, and himselfe the merrier, he made a countrie-maiden acquainted with his devise; who because she was both seely and harmelesse, consented to be secret and to second him: In the end they got another, and were now three, all of one age and like sufficiencie: and from private spirit-talking, they beganne with hideous voices to crie and roare aloud, and in, and about churches hiding themselves under the chiefe Altar, speaking but by night, forbidding any light to be set up: From speeches tending the worlds subversion, and threatning of the day of judgement (which are the subjects, by whose authoritie and abusive reverence, imposture and illusion, is more easily lurked) they proceeded to certaine visions and strange gestures, so foolish and ridiculous, that there is scarce any thing more grose and absurd used among Children, in their childish sports. Suppose I pray you, that fortune would have seconded this harmelesse devise or juggling tricke; Who knoweth how farre it would have extended, and to what it would have growne? The poore seelie three Divels are now in prison, and may happily e're long pay deere for their common sottishnesse; and I wot not whether some cheverell judge or other, will be avenged of them for his. It is manifestly seene in this, which now is discovered; as also in divers other things of like qualitie, exceeding our knowledge; I am of opinion that we uphold our judgement, as well to reject, as to receive. Many abuses are engendered in the World; or to speake more boldly, all the abuses of the World are engendered upon this, that we are taught to feare to make profession of our ignorance; and are bound to accept and allow, all that wee can not refute. We speake of all things by precepts and resolution. The Stile of *Rome* did beare, that even the same, that a witnes deposed, because he had seene it with his owne eyes; and that which a Judge ordained of his most assured knowlege, was conceived in this form of speach, *It seemeth so unto me.* I am drawne to hate likely things, when men goe about to set them downe as infallible. I love these wordes or phrases, which mollifie and moderate the temeritie of our propositions: *It may be: Peradventure: In some sort: Some: It is saide: I thinke,* and such like: And had I beene to instruct children, I would so often have put this manner of answering in their mouth; enquiring, and not resolving: *What meanes it? I understand it not: It may well be: Is it true?* that they should rather have kept the forme of learners, untill three score yeeres of age, than present themselves Doctors at ten; as many doe.

Whosoever will be cured of ignorance, must confesse the same. Iris is the daughter of Thaumantis. Admiration is the ground of al Philosophie: Inquisition the progresse: Ignorance the end. Yea but there is some kinde of ignorance strong and generous, that for honor and courage is nothing beholding to knowledge: An ignorance, which to conceive rightly, there is required no lesse learning, than to conceive true learning.

Being yong, I saw a law-case, which Corras a Counsellor of Tholouse caused to be printed of a strange accident of two men, who presented themselves one for another. I remember (and I remember nothing else so well) that me thought, he proved his imposture, whom he condemned as guiltie, so wondrous-strange and so far-exceeding both our knowledge and his owne, who was judge, that I found much boldnes in the sentence which had condemned him to be hanged. Let us receive some forme of sentence that may say: *The Court understands nothing of it*; more freely and ingenuously, then did the *Areopagites*; who finding themselves urged and entangled in a case they could not well cleare or determine, appointed the parties to come againe and appeare before them a hundred yeares after. The witches about my countrie, are in hazard of their life, upon the opinion of every new authour, that may come to give their dreames a body. To apply such examples as the holy word of God offreth us of such things (assured and irrefragable examples) and joine them to our moderne events; since we neither see the causes nor meanes of them, some other better wit then ours is thereunto required. Peradventure it appertaineth to that onely most-mightie testimonie, to tell us: This here, and that there; and not this other are of them. God must be believed; and good reason he should be so. Yet is there not one amongst us, that wil be amazed at his owne narration (and he ought necessarily to be astonished at it, if he be not out of his wits) whether he employ it about others matters; or against himselfe. I am plaine and homely, and take hold on the maine point, and on that which is most likely; avoiding ancient reproches. *Maiorem fidem homines adhibent iis quæ non intelligunt. Cupidine humani ingenii libentius obscura creduntur. Men give more credite to things they understand not: Things obscure are more willingly believed through a strange desire of mans wit.* I see that men will be angry: and am forbid to doubt of it upon paine of execrable injuries. A new maner of perswading. *Mercie for Gods sake.* My believe is not carried away with blowes. Let them tyrannize over such as accuse their opinion of falsehood; I onely accuse mine of difficultie and boldnesse. And equally to them I condemne the opposite affirmation: if not so imperiously. He that with braverie and by comaundement will establish his discourse, declareth his reason to be weake: For a verball and scholasticall altercation, that they have as much apparance as their contradictors. *Videantur sanè, non affirmentur modò. Indeede let them seeme, so they be not avouched.* But in the effectuall consequence they draw from it, these have great ods. *To kill men; there is required a bright-shining and cleare light.* And our life is over-reall and essentiall, to warrant these supernaturall and fantastick accidents. As for drugges and poisons, they are out of my element: they are homicides, and of the worst kinde. In which neverthelesse, it is said, that one must not alwayes reliee upon the meere confession of those people: For, they have sometimes beene seene to accuse themselves, to have made away men which were both sound and living. In these other extravagant accusations, I should easily say, that it sufficeth, what commendations soever he hath, a man be believed in such things as are humane: but of

such as are beyond his conception and of a supernaturall effect, hee ought then onely be believed, when a supernaturall approbation hath authorized him. That priviledge it hath pleased God to give some of our testimonies, ought not to be vilified, or slightly communicated. Mine eares are full of a thousand such tales. Three saw him such a day in the East; three saw him the next day in the West, at such an houre, in such a place; and thus and thus attired; verely in such a case I could not believe my selfe. How much more naturall and more likely doe I finde it, that two men should lie, then one in twelve houres, passe with the windes, from East to West? How much more naturall, that our understanding may by the volubilitie of our loose-caping minde be transported from his place? then that one of us should by a strange spirit, in flesh and bone, be carried upon a broome through the tunnell of a chimnie? Let-us, who are perpetually tossed too and fro with domesticall and our owne illusions, not seeke for forraigne and unknowne illusions. I deeme it a matter pardonable, not to believe a wonder, so farreforth at least as one may divert and exclude the verification by no miraculous way. And I follow Saint Augustines opinion, that *a man were better bend towards doubt, than encline towards certaintie, in matters of difficult triall and daungerous believe.* Some yeares are now past, that I travelled through the country of a soveraigne Prince: who in favour of mee, and to abate my incredulitie, did mee the grace, in his owne presence, and in a particular place, to make mee see tenne or twelve prisoners of that kinde; and amongst others an olde beldam witch; a true and perfect sorceresse, both by her uglines and deformitie; and such a one as long before was most famous in that profession. I sawe both proofes, witnesses, voluntary confessions, and some other insensible markes about this miserable olde woman; I enquired and talked with her a long time, with the greatest heed and attention I could; yet am I not easily carried away by preoccupation. In the end, and in my conscience, I should rather have appointed them Eleborum, than Hemlocke. *Captisque res magis mentibus, quàm consceleratis similis uisa. The matter seemed liker to mindes captivate than guiltie.* Lawe hath her owne corrections for such diseases. Touching the oppositions and arguments, that honest men have made unto me, both there, and often else-where, I have found none that tie me; and that admit not alwayes a more likely solution, than their conclusions. True it is, that proofes and reasons grounded upon the fact and experience, I untie not: for indeede they have no end; but often cut them, as *Alexander* did his knotte. When all is done, it is an over-valuing of ones conjectures, by them to cause a man to be burned alive. It is reported by diverse examples (and *Præstantius* saith of his father) that being in a slumber much more deeply, then in a full-sound sleepe, he dreamed and verily thought himselfe to be a Mare, and served certaine souldiers for a sumpter-horse, and was indeede what he imagined to bee. If sorcerers dreame thus materially: If dreames may sometimes be thus incorporated into effects: I cannot possibly believe, that our wil should therefore be bound to the lawes and justice: which I say, as one who am neither a Judge, nor a Counsellor unto Kings, and furthest from any such worthinesse: but rather a man of the common stamp, and both by my deedes and sayings, borne and vowed to the obedience of publike reason. He that should register my humours, to the prejudice of the simplest lawe, or opinion, or custome of his village, should greatly wrong himselfe, and injurie me as much. For in what I say, I gape for no other certaintie, but that such was then my thought. A tumultuous and wavering thought. It is by way of discourse

that I speake of all; and of nothing by way of advise. *Nec me pudet, ut istos, fateri nescire, quod nesciam.* Nor am I ashamed, as they are, to confesse I know not that which I doe not knowe.

I would not be so hardy to speake, if of duty I ought to be believed: and so I answered a great man, who blamed the sharpenesse and contention of my exhortations. When I see you bent and prepared on one side; with all the endevour I can, I will propose the contrarie unto you; to resolve and enlighten your judgement, not to subdue or binde the same: God hath your hearts in his handes, and he will furnish you with choise. I am so malapert, as to desire, that my opinions alone, should give motion to a matter of such importance. My fortune hath not raised them to so powerfull and deepe conclusions. Truly, I have not onely a great number of complexions, but an infinite many of opinions, from which, had I a sonne of mine owne, I would disswade him, and willingly make him to distaste them. What? If the truest are not ever the most commodious for man; he being of so strange and untamed a composition: Whether it be to the purpose, or from the purpose, it is no great matter. It is a common Proverbe in *Italie*, that *He knowes not the perfect pleasure of Venus, that hath not layne with a limping Woman.* Either fortune, or some particular accident, have long since brought this by-saying in the peoples mouth: and it is as well spoken of men as of women: For the Queene of the Amazons answered the Scithian, that wooed her to loves-embracements. *ἄριστα χολὸς ὀφεί,* *The croked man doeth it best.* In that feminine commonwealth of theirs, to avoyde the domination of men, they were wont in their infancie to maime them, both their armes and legges and other limmes, that might any way advantage their strength over them, and made onely that use of them, that we in our World make of Women. I would have saide, that the loose or disjointed motion of a limping or crooke-backt Woman, might adde some new kinde of pleasure unto that businesse or sweet sinne, and some un-assaid sensuall sweetnesse, to such as make triall of it: but I have lately learnt, that even ancient Philosophie hath decided the matter: Who saith, that the legs and thighs of the crooked-backt or halting-lame, by reason of their imperfection, not receiving the nourishment, due unto them, it followeth that the Genitall partes, that are above them, are more full, better nourished and more vigorous. Or else, that such a defect having the exercise, such as are therewith possessed, do lesse waste their strength and consume their vertue, and so much the stronger and fuller, they come to *Venus sportes.* Which is also the reason why the Græcians described their Women-Weavers, to bee more hotte and earnestly-luxurious, than other Women: Because of their sitting-trade, without any violent exercise of the body. What cannot we dispute-of according to that rate? I might like-wise say of these, that the same stirring, which their labour, so sitting doth give them, doth rouze and sollicite them, as the jogging and shaking of their Coaches, doth our Ladies. Doe not these examples fit that whereof I spake in the beginning? That our reasons doe often anticipate the effect, and have the extension of their jurisdiction so infinite, that they judge and exercise themselves in inanitie, and to a not being? Besides the flexibilitie of our invention, to frame reasons unto all manner of dreames; our imagination is likewise found easie, to receive impressions from falsehood, by very frivolous apparances. For, by the onely authoritie of the ancient and publike use of this word or phrase, I have heretofore perswaded my-selfe, to have received more pleasure of a Woman, in that

she was not straight, and have accompted hir crookednesse in the number of hir graces. *Torquato Tasso*, in the comparison he makes betweene *Italy* and *France*, reporteth to have noted, that we commonly have more slender and spinie legges, than the Italian Gentlemen; and imputeth the cause unto our continuall riding and sitting on horsebacke. Which is the very same, from which *Suetonius* draweth another cleane contrary conclusion: For, he saith, that *Germanicus* had by the frequent use of this exercise, brought his to be very bigge. *There is nothing so supple and wandering, as our understanding.* It is like to *Theramenez* shooe, fit for all feet. It is double and diverse, and so are matters diverse and double. Give me a Dragma of silver, said a Cinike Philosopher to *Antigonus*: It is not the present of a King, answered he; Give mee then a talent: It is no gift for a Cinike, quoth he:

*Seu plures calor ille uias, & cæca relaxat
Spiramenta, nouas ueniat qua succus in herbas:
Seu durat magis, & uenas astringit hiantes,
Ne tenues pluuiæ, rapidiue potentia solis
Acrior, aut Boreæ penetrabile frigus adurat.*

*Whether the heate layes open holes unseene,
Whereby the sappe may passe to hearbs fresh-greene:
Or rather hardens and bindes gaping vaines,
Lest sharp powre of hot sunne, or thinning raines,
Of piercing North-cold blaste,
Should scorch, consume and waste.*

Ogni medaglia ha il suo riverscio; Each outside hath his inside, saith the Italian. Lo why *Clitomachus* was wont to say, that *Carneades* had surmounted the labours of *Hercules*; because he had exacted consent from men; that is to say opinion and temeritie to judge. This fantasie of *Carneades*, so vigorous (as I imagine) proceeded anciently, from the impudencie of those, who make profession to know; and from their excessive selfe-overweening. *Æsope* was set to sale, together with two other slaves; a Chapman enquired of the first, what he could do: he to endeare himselfe, answerd, mountaines and wonders, and what not? For he knew and could doe all things. The second answered even so for himselfe, and more too: But when he came to *Æsope*, and demaunded of him what he could doe: Nothing (saide he) for these two have forestaled all, and know and can doe all things, and have left nothing for mee. So hath it happened in the schoole of philosophie. The rashnes of those who ascribed the capacitie of all things to mans witte, through spight and emulation produced this opinion in others, that humane witte was not capable of any thing. Some holde the same extremitie in ignorance, that others hold in knowledge. To the end none may deny, that man is not immoderate in all and every where: and hath no other sentence or arest, than that of necessitie, and impuissance to proceede further.