

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 31

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Hazarding an Opinion on God's Plans Demands Caution

The true field and subject of imposture are things unknown, forasmuch as, in the first place, their very strangeness lends them credit, and moreover, by not being subjected to our ordinary reasons, they deprive us of the means to question and dispute them: For which reason, says Plato, it is much more easy to satisfy the hearers, when speaking of the nature of the gods than of the nature of men, because the ignorance of the auditory affords a fair and large career and all manner of liberty in the handling of abstruse things.

Thence it comes to pass, that nothing is so firmly believed, as what we least know; nor any people so confident, as those who entertain us with fables, such as your alchemists, judicial astrologers, fortune-tellers, and physicians, *Id genus omne*. To which I would willingly, if I dared, join a pack of people that take upon them to interpret and control the designs of God Himself, pretending to find out the cause of every accident, and to pry into the secrets of the divine will, there to discover the incomprehensible motive, of His works; and although the variety, and the continual discordance of events, throw them from corner to corner, and toss them from east to west, yet do they still persist in their vain inquisition, and with the same pencil to paint black and white.

All that sort of people. • HOR., SAT.,
1.2.2

In a nation of the Indies, there is this commendable custom, that when anything befalls them amiss in any encounter or battle, they publicly ask pardon of the sun, who is their god, as having committed an unjust action, always imputing their good or evil fortune to the divine justice, and to that submitting their own judgment and reason.

'Tis enough for a Christian to believe that all things come from God, to receive them with acknowledgment of His divine and inscrutable wisdom, and also thankfully to accept and receive them, with what face soever they may present themselves. But I do not approve of what I see in use, that is, to seek to affirm and support our religion by the prosperity of our enterprises. Our belief has other foundation enough, without going about to authorize it by events: for the people being accustomed to such

plausible arguments as these and so proper to their taste, it is to be feared, lest when they fail of success they should also stagger in their faith: as in the war wherein we are now engaged upon the account of religion, those who had the better in the business of Rochelabeille, making great brags of that success as an infallible approbation of their cause, when they came afterward to excuse their misfortunes of Moncontour and Jarnac, by saying they were fatherly scourges and corrections that they had not a people wholly at their mercy, they make it manifestly enough appear, what it is to take two sorts of grist out of the same sack, and with the same mouth to blow hot and cold. It were better to possess the vulgar with the solid and real foundations of truth. 'Twas a fine naval battle that was gained under the command of Don John of Austria a few months since against the Turks; but it has also pleased God at other times to let us see as great victories at our own expense. In fine, 'tis a hard matter to reduce divine things to our balance, without waste and losing a great deal of the weight. And who would take upon him to give a reason that Arius and his Pope Leo, the principal heads of the Arian heresy, should die, at several times, of so like and strange deaths (for being withdrawn from the disputation by a griping in the bowels, they both of them suddenly gave up the ghost upon the stool), and would aggravate this divine vengeance by the circumstances of the place, might as well add the death of Heliogabalus, who was also slain in a house of office. And, indeed, Irenaeus was involved in the same fortune. God, being pleased to show us, that the good have something else to hope for and the wicked something else to fear, than the fortunes or misfortunes of this world, manages and applies these according to His own occult will and pleasure, and deprives us of the means foolishly to make thereof our own profit. And those people abuse themselves who will pretend to dive into these mysteries by the strength of human reason. They never give one hit that they do not receive two for it; of which Saint Augustine makes out a great proof upon his adversaries. 'Tis a conflict that is more decided by strength of memory than by the force of reason. We are to content ourselves with the light it pleases the sun to communicate to us, by virtue of his rays; and who will lift up his eyes to take in a greater, let him not think it strange, if for the reward of his presumption, he there lose his sight. *Quis hominum potest scire consilium Dei? aut quis poterit cogitare quid velit dominus?*

Who of men can know the counsel of God? or who can think what the will of the Lord is? • WIS., 9.13

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Hor., Sat.

Horace, *Satires*

Wis.

Wisdom of Solomon