

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 26

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It Is Folly to Measure the True and the False by Our Own Capacity

'Tis not, perhaps, without reason, that we attribute facility of belief and easiness of persuasion to simplicity and ignorance: for I fancy I have heard belief compared to the impression of a seal upon the soul, which by how much softer and of less resistance it is, is the more easy to be impressed upon.

Ut necesse est, lancem in Libra, ponderibus impositis, deprimi, sic animum perspicuis cedere.

By how much the soul is more empty and without counterpoise, with so much greater facility it yields under the weight of the first persuasion. And this is the reason that children, the common people, women, and sick folks, are most apt to be led by the ears. But then, on the other hand, 'tis a foolish presumption to slight and condemn all things for false that do not appear to us probable; which is the ordinary vice of such as fancy themselves wiser than their neighbors. I was myself once one of those; and if I heard talk of dead folks walking, of prophecies, enchantments, witchcrafts, or any other story I had no mind to believe:

*Somnia, terrores magicos, miracula, sagas,
Nocturnos lemures, portentaque Thessala,*

I presently pitied the poor people that were abused by these follies. Whereas I now find, that I myself was to be pitied as much, at least, as they; not that experience has taught me anything to alter my former opinions, though my curiosity has endeavored that way; but reason has instructed me, that thus resolutely to condemn anything for false and impossible, is arrogantly and impiously to circumscribe and limit the will of God, and the power of our mother nature, within the bounds of my own capacity, than which no folly can be greater. If we give the names of monster and miracle to everything our reason cannot comprehend, how many are continually presented before our eyes? Let us but consider through what clouds, and as it were groping in the dark, our teachers lead us to the knowledge of most of the things about

As the scale of the balance must give way to the weight that presses it down, so the mind yields to demonstration. • CIC., ACAD., 2.12

Dreams, magic terrors, marvels, sorceries, Thessalian prodigies. • HOR., EPIST., 2.3.208

us; assuredly we shall find that it is rather custom than knowledge that takes away their strangeness—

*iam nemo, fessus satiate uidendi,
Susplicere in cœli dignatur lucida templa;*

and that if those things were now newly presented to us, we should think them as incredible, if not more, than any others.

*si nunc primum mortalibus adsint
Ex improviso, si sint objecta repente,
Nil magis his rebus poterat mirabile dici,
Aute minus ante quod auderent fore credere gentes.*

He that had never seen a river, imagined the first he met with to be the sea; and the greatest things that have fallen within our knowledge, we conclude the extremes that nature makes of the kind.

*Scilicet et fluuius qui non est maximus, eij est
Qui non ante aliquem maiorem uidit, et ingens
Arbor, homôque uidetur, et omnia de genere omni
Maxima quæ uidit quisque, hæc ingentia fingit.*

Consuetudine oculorum assuescunt animi, neque admirantur, neque requirunt rationes earum rerum, quas semper uident.

The novelty, rather than the greatness of things, tempts us to inquire into their causes. We are to judge with more reverence, and with greater acknowledgment of our own ignorance and infirmity, of the infinite power of nature. How many unlikely things are there testified by people worthy of faith, which, if we cannot persuade ourselves absolutely to believe, we ought at least to leave them in suspense; for, to condemn them as impossible, is by a temerarious presumption to pretend to know the utmost bounds of possibility. Did we rightly understand the difference betwixt the impossible and the unusual, and betwixt that which is contrary to the order and course of nature and contrary to the common opinion of men, in not believing rashly, and on the other hand, in not being too incredulous, we should observe the rule of *Ne quid nimis* enjoined by Chilo.

When we find in Froissart, that the Comte de Foix knew in Bearn the defeat of John, king of Castile, at Jubera the next day after it happened, and the means by which he tells us he came to do so, we may be allowed to be a little merry at it, as also at what our annals report, that Pope Honorius, the same day that King Philip Augustus died at Mantes, performed his public obsequies at Rome, and commanded the like throughout Italy, the testimony of these authors not being, perhaps, of authority enough to restrain us. But what if Plutarch, besides several examples that he produces out of antiquity, tells us, he knows of certain knowledge, that in the time of Domitian, the news of the battle lost by Antony in Germany was published at Rome, many days' journey from thence, and dispersed throughout the whole world, the same day it was fought; and if Caesar was of opinion, that it has often happened, that the

Weary of the sight, now no one deigns to look up to heaven's lucid temples. • LUCR., 2.1038

The meaning of the passage is in the preceding sentence. • LUCR., 2.1033

A little river seems to him, who has never seen a larger river, a mighty stream; and so with other things—a tree, a man—anything appears greatest to him that never knew a greater. • LUCR., 6.674

Things grow familiar to men's minds by being often seen; so that they neither admire nor are they inquisitive about things they daily see. • CIC., NAT. D., 2.38

report has preceded the incident, shall we not say, that these simple people have suffered themselves to be deceived with the vulgar, for not having been so clear-sighted as we? Is there anything more delicate, more clear, more sprightly; than Pliny's judgment, when he is pleased to set it to work? Anything more remote from vanity? Setting aside his learning, of which I make less account, in which of these excellences do any of us excel him? And yet there is scarce a young schoolboy that does not convict him of untruth, and that pretends not to instruct him in the progress of the works of nature. When we read in Bouchet the miracles of St. Hilary's relics, away with them: his authority is not sufficient to deprive us of the liberty of contradicting him; but generally and offhand to condemn all suchlike stories, seems to me a singular impudence. That great Saint Augustine testifies to have seen a blind child recover sight upon the relics of St. Gervasius and St. Protasius at Milan; a woman at Carthage cured of a cancer, by the sign of the cross made upon her by a woman newly baptized; Hesperius, a familiar friend of his, to have driven away the spirits that haunted his house, with a little earth of the sepulchre of our Lord; which earth, being also transported thence into the church, a paralytic to have there been suddenly cured by it; a woman in a procession, having touched St. Stephen's shrine with a nosegay, and rubbing her eyes with it, to have recovered her sight, lost many years before; with several other miracles of which he professes himself to have been an eyewitness: of what shall we excuse him and the two holy bishops, Aurelius and Maximinus, both of whom he attests to the truth of these things? Shall it be of ignorance, simplicity, and facility; or of malice and imposture? Is any man now living so impudent as to think himself comparable to them in virtue, piety, learning, judgment, or any kind of perfection?

Qui, ut rationem nullam afferrent, ipsa auctoritate me frangerent.

'Tis a presumption of great danger and consequence, besides the absurd temerity it draws after it, to condemn what we do not comprehend. For after, according to your fine understanding, you have established the limits of truth and error, and that, afterward, there appears a necessity upon you of believing stranger things than those you have contradicted, you are already obliged to quit your limits. Now, that which seems to me so much to disorder our consciences in the commotions we are now in concerning religion, is the Catholics dispensing so much with their belief. They fancy they appear moderate, and wise, when they grant to their opponents some of the articles in question; but, besides that they do not discern what advantage it is to those with whom we contend, to begin to give ground and to retire, and how much this animates our enemy to follow his blow: these articles which they select as things indifferent, are sometimes of very great importance. We are either wholly and absolutely to submit ourselves to the authority of our ecclesiastical polity, or totally throw off all obedience to it: 'tis not for us to determine what and how much obedience we owe to it. And this I can say, as having myself made trial of it, that having formerly taken the liberty of my own swing and fancy, and omitted or neglected certain rules of the discipline of our Church, which seemed to me vain and strange coming afterwards to discourse of it with learned men, I have found those same things to be built upon very good and solid ground and strong foundation; and that

Who, though they should adduce no reason, would convince me with their authority alone. • CIC., TUSC., 1.21

nothing but stupidity and ignorance makes us receive them with less reverence than the rest. Why do we not consider what contradictions we find in our own judgments; how many things were yesterday articles of our faith, that to-day appear no other than fables? Glory and curiosity are the scourges of the soul; the last prompts us to thrust our noses into everything, the other forbids us to leave anything doubtful and undecided.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Acad.	Cicero, <i>Academica</i>
Cic., Nat. D.	Cicero, <i>On the Nature of the Gods</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Lucret.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>