Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 9

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ESSAYS-1-9-20240221-101728

On Liars

a There is no one less suited to speak on the topic of memory. I see not a trace of it in me and think there is none other in the world so remarkably flawed. All other parts of me are base and common, but in this one I am unique and very rare and ought to be known and recognized for it, b in spite of the natural inconvenience that it is to me c (for, indeed, given how necessary it is, Plato is right to call it a great and powerful goddess).

b In my country, when they want to say that someone lacks common sense they say that they have no memory. When I complain about how bad mine is, they argue with me and refuse to believe me, as if I were accusing myself of being senseless. They see no difference between memory and intelligence. A raw deal for me! But indeed they wrong me because experience shows that it is rather the other way around: an excellent memory will readily go hand in hand with a limited intellect. And they wrong me also in that the very words they use to malign my disability imply ingratitude when being a friend is one of the things I do best. They are saying that if I cannot remember I cannot love, and turn a natural shortcoming into a character flaw. "He forgot about this request or that promise," they say. "He has forgotten about his friends. He forgot he would say, do, or not say something for my sake." Yes, I can easily forget. But ignoring a commitment made to a friend I do not do. Have at my affliction but do not call it malice, especially not of a kind so against my nature.

b I try not to let it bother me too much. First, c because it is the flaw which most inspired me to correct a worst one that would have grown easily in me, by which I mean ambition, an unacceptable weakness for anyone caught up in the negotiations of the world. Also because, as we see in many similar instances of nature taking its course, some of my other faculties improved as my memory grew weaker. Had it made the ideas and opinions of others easily available to me, my wit and my intelligence would have become passive and sluggish, dependent on someone else and expending no effort of their own. Also because b I am less talkative for it since memory's storehouse is more easily filled with material than that of ideas. c If my memory had been better, I would have talked my friends' ears off. I

can examine and talk about anything; any subject gets me going, energizing and extending my conversations. b It is a pity. I see examples of this in some of my close friends: they tell their stories by going backward in time for as long as their memory can paint a vivid and full picture, adding so many useless details that, if their tale is any good, they spoil it, and if it is not, you curse either their excellent memory or their terrible judgment. c Yes, it is difficult to end a conversation, to interrupt it when it is moving along. A horse's power is never more obvious than when it is made to stop short. Even among those who stay on track, I see some who do not want to keep going but cannot help it. They look for an opportunity to stop yet carry on babbling and wavering like someone ready to pass out from exhaustion. The most dangerous are the elderly who have kept their recollections of the past but have lost track of their sharing them. I know of pleasant tales told by a certain gentleman that turned quite boring after each member of his audience had been regaled with it a hundred times. b Second, because I remember fewer of the times someone offended me, much like what this ancient author said. c I would need a system, like Darius, who did not want to forget the Athenians' offense against him and had a page tell him three times to his ears every time he sat down to eat: "Sire, remember the Athenians." b Also because those places and books I revisit always have a fresh and new appeal to me.

a It makes sense to say that those without a solid memory should not get in the habit of telling lies. I know that grammarians differentiate between telling a lie and lying. They say that to tell a lie is to say something false that we believe to be true, and that the definition of the verb "to lie" in Latin,[1] from which our French language is derived, implies, however, speaking against one's conscience and therefore concerns those who speak the opposite of what they know. They are the ones I am talking about; and among them, some make everything up and others change and twist some basic truth. Those who change and embellish are likely to trip themselves up from having to tell the same story often. That is because their memory will have encountered the facts of the story first and later absorbed them, by knowing and understanding them, so that when they are presented again to the imagination, they are likely to displace falsehoods, which are not so firmly planted and established. Also the context in which facts were first learned, which reenters the mind with each new lie, is likely to erase the memory of their patchwork of false and bastardized parts. Those who make everything up, since there is nothing contradictory to recall that would disrupt their lie, they would seem to have to worry less about making mistakes. However, because their lie is a mirage, with nothing firm to hold on to, it can easily escape their memory if it is uncertain. b And I have seen this happening many times — and have laughed — at the expense of those who only live by the lies they tell, sometimes to suit the business they are in, sometimes to please the powerful people they are with. With the circumstances they tie their word and conscience to subjects to so many changes, they must constantly revise their story. Which leads to the same thing: what they call gray one day, they call yellow the next; one way to one person, another way to another. And if, by chance, these people with contradictory stories compare notes, what of all this hard work? Not to mention that they often make careless mistakes themselves. What memory could be good enough to remember all the

variations they have concocted on a single subject? In my time, I knew a few who thought it a fine kind of skill to possess but could not see that what looked enviable produced, in fact, nothing good.

c In truth, lying is a terrible vice. Nothing but our word makes us who we are and binds us to one another. If we truly understood the horror and gravity of it, we would fight it with fire, more justifiably than other crimes. I find that we think nothing of reprimanding children for innocent mistakes, very unnecessarily, and that we give them a hard time for acting up when it has no lasting consequences. In my mind, only lying and, to a lesser degree, stubbornness deserve to be consistently nipped in the bud and checked. Those will get worse with age. And after the tongue is permitted this bad habit, it is unbelievably hard to take it back. Which is why we see otherwise honest people still subject to it and under its influence. I know a tailor's apprentice, a good kid, whom I have never heard say anything true, not even when it would be useful to him.

c If, like truth, falsehood had only one face, we would be better off. We could trust that the opposite of whatever a liar says is true. But the flip side of the truth is endless and has a hundred thousand faces.

c Pythagoreans imagine good as certain and finite, and evil as infinite and uncertain. One bullseye; a thousand ways to miss it. I am not sure, in fact, that I could exhaust all my objections to telling one complete and outright lie, even to prevent clear and extreme danger.

cAn ancient father says that we are better off sitting with a dog we know than with someone whose language we do not. *Ut externus alieno non sit hominis vice.* And how much more alienating is the language of lies than silence!

A foreigner is not quite a person to a stranger. • Plin., HN, 7.2

a King Francis I used to brag about taking advantage of this fact to corner Francesco Taberna, ambassador for Francesco Sforza, the duke of Milan, and a man known to be a skillful communicator. This man had been dispatched to provide an explanation, on his master's behalf, to his Majesty for something of great consequence, which was this: The king, in order to continue receiving intelligence from Italy (from where he had recently been driven), including from the duchy of Milan, had devised to keep a gentleman of his close to the duke, effectively an ambassador but seemingly a private citizen, who would pretend to be there for personal affairs. Because the duke depended much more on the emperor, particularly as he was negotiating a marriage to his niece, the daughter of the king of Denmark[2] who is now the dowager of Lorraine, he could not be known to have dealings and connections with us without attracting the emperor's attention. The perfect individual for this post was a Milanese gentleman, groom of the stable of the king, by the name of Merveille. He, having been dispatched with secret letters of introduction, his instructions as ambassador, and a few other letters of recommendation to the duke for his private business — his cover and alibi — spent so much time with the duke that the emperor became suspicious, giving rise, we believe, to what happened next. On the pretext of some murder, the duke had him decapitated in the middle of the night, his trial over and done with in two days. Sir Francesco, who had prepared a long and false explanation for this

story — since the king had been in contact with all the princes of Christendom, including the duke himself, to demand satisfaction — was heard at morning audience and delivered several neatly told versions of the story elaborated to make his case. He said that his master had never considered our man to be anything but a private gentleman, a subject of his, who had come to Milan on business and had never appeared to be otherwise, denying even that he knew him to be connected to the king's house, or to have known him at all, and therefore never could have thought of him as an ambassador. The king, in turn, put various objections and questions to him, cross-examined him, and finally pressed him on the matter of the execution at night, as if in secret. To which the poor man, in trouble and hoping to seem honest, replied that out of respect for his Majesty, it would have been wrong of the duke to order that the execution be conducted by day. It comes as no surprise that he was recalled, having fouled up so miserably under King Francis's keen nose.

a When Pope Julius II sent an ambassador to the king of England,[3] to encourage him to turn against King Francis,[4] and after the ambassador made his case, the king of England had no answer for him. He was considering the difficulties involved in preparing for war against such a powerful king and presented some his arguments. The ambassador's reply was unexpected: He said that he had considered these things too and told the pope about them. The king of England concluded, based on this answer and how incompatible it was with its objective, which was to draw him into a war outright, what he later found out to be true, that the ambassador was privately on the side of France. His master was informed of it and everything was taken from him save for his life, though he nearly lost that too.

Notes

1 *mentior* (to lie) vs. *mendacium dico* (to tell a lie). The difference is mentioned in Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights,* 11.11, citing Publius Nigidius.

2 Christina of Denmark

3 Henry VIII

4 Francis's predecessor, actually: Louis XII.

Montaigne's Sources

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Hdt.	Herodotus, *Histories*
Plin., HN	Pliny, *Natural History*