

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 53

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On a Saying of Caesar

If we would sometimes bestow a little consideration upon ourselves, and employ the time we spend in prying into other men's actions, and discovering things without us, in examining our own abilities we should soon perceive of how infirm and decaying material this fabric of ours is composed. Is it not a singular testimony of imperfection that we cannot establish our satisfaction in any one thing, and that even our own fancy and desire should deprive us of the power to choose what is most proper and useful for us? A very good proof of this is the great dispute that has ever been among the philosophers, of finding out man's sovereign good, that continues yet, and will eternally continue, without solution or accord;

*dum abest quod avemus, id exsuperare videtur
Cetera; post aliud, quum contigit illud, avemus,
et sitis aequa tenet.*

Whatever it is that falls into our knowledge and possession, we find that it satisfies not, and we still pant after things to come and unknown, inasmuch as those present do not suffice for us; not that, in my judgment, they have not in them wherewith to do it, but because we seize them with an unruly and immoderate haste,

*Nam cum vidit hic, ad usum quæ flagitat usus,
Omnia jam ferme mortalibus esse parata,
Divitiis homines, et honore, et laude potentes
Affluere, atque bona natorum excellere fama,
Nec minus esse domi cuiquam tamen anxia corda,
Atque animum infestis cogi servire querelis:
Intellexit ibi vitium vas efficere ipsum,
Omniâque illius vitio corrumpier intus,
Quæ collata foris et commoda quæque venirent.*

Our appetite is irresolute and fickle; it can neither keep nor enjoy anything with a good grace: and man concluding it to be the fault of the things he is possessed of, fills himself with and feeds upon the idea of things he

While that which we desire is wanting, it seems to surpass all the rest; then, when we have got it, we want something else; 'tis ever the same thirst. • LUCR., 3.1082

For when he saw that almost all things necessarily required for subsistence are already prepared to their hand, that men may abundantly attain wealth, honor, praise, may rejoice in the reputation of their children, yet that, notwithstanding, every one has none the less in his heart and home anxieties and a mind enslaved by wearing complaints, he saw that the vessel itself was in fault, and that all good things which were brought into

neither knows nor understands, to which he devotes his hopes and his desires, paying them all reverence and honor, according to the saying of Caesar: *communi fit vitio naturae, ut invis, latitantibus atque incognitis rebus magis confidamas, vehementiusque exterreamur.*

it from without were spoiled by its own imperfections. • LUCR., 6.9

Tis the common vice of nature, that we at once repose most confidence, and receive the greatest apprehensions, from things unseen, concealed, and unknown. • CAES., BCIV., 11.4

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Caes., BCiv.

Caesar, *Civil War*

Lucr.

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*