

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 5

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On Conscience

The lord of La Brousse, my brother, and I, traveling one day together during the time of our civil wars, met a gentleman of good sort. He was of the contrary party, though I did not know so much, for he pretended otherwise: and the mischief on it is, that in this sort of war the cards are so shuffled, your enemy not being distinguished from yourself by any apparent mark either of language or habit, and being nourished under the same law, air, and manners, it is very hard to avoid disorder and confusion. This made me afraid myself of meeting any of our troops in a place where I was not known, that I might not be in fear to tell my name, and peradventure of something worse; as it had befallen me before, where, by such a mistake, I lost both men and horses, and among others an Italian gentleman my page, whom I bred with the greatest care and affection, was miserably slain, in whom a youth of great promise and expectation was extinguished. But the gentleman my brother and I met had so desperate, half-dead a fear upon him at meeting with any horse, or passing by any of the towns that held for the King, that I at last discovered it to be alarms of conscience. It seemed to the poor man as if through his visor and the crosses upon his cassock, one would have penetrated into his bosom and read the most secret intentions of his heart; so wonderful is the power of conscience. It makes us betray, accuse, and fight against ourselves, and for want of other witnesses, to give evidence against ourselves:

Occultum quatiens animo tortore flagellum.

This story is in every child's mouth: Bessus the Paeonian, being reproached for wantonly pulling down a nest of young sparrows and killing them, replied, that he had reason to do so, seeing that those little birds never ceased falsely to accuse him of the murder of his father. This parricide had till then been concealed and unknown, but the revenging fury of conscience caused it to be discovered by him himself, who was to suffer for it.

Hesiod corrects the saying of Plato, that punishment closely follows sin, it being, as he says, born at the same time with it. Whoever expects

The torturer of the soul brandishing
a sharp scourge within. • JUV., 3.195

punishment already suffers it, and whoever has deserved it expects it. Wickedness contrives torments against itself,

Malum consilium consultori pessimum.

as the wasp stings and hurts another, but most of all itself, for it there loses its sting and its use for ever,

vitásque in vulnere ponunt.

Cantharides have somewhere about them, by a contrariety of nature, a counterpoison against their poison. In like manner, at the same time that men take delight in vice, there springs in the conscience a displeasure that afflicts us sleeping and waking with various tormenting imaginations,

*Quippe ubi se multi, per somnia saepe loquentes,
Aut morbo delirantes, protraxe ferantur,
Et celata diu in medium peccata dedisse.*

Apollodorus dreamed that he saw himself flayed by the Scythians and afterwards boiled in a cauldron, and that his heart muttered these words "I am the cause of all these mischiefs that have befallen thee." Epicurus said that no hiding-hole could conceal the wicked, since they could never assure themselves of being hid whilst their conscience discovered them to themselves.

*prima est haec ultio, quod se
Judice nemo nocens absolvitur.*

As an ill conscience fills us with fear, so a good one gives us greater confidence and assurance; and I can truly say that I have gone through several hazards with a more steady pace in consideration of the secret knowledge I had of my own will and the innocence of my intentions.

*Conscia mens ut cuique sua est, ita concipit intra
Pectora pro facto spemque metùmque suo.*

Of this are a thousand examples; but it will be enough to instance three of one and the same person.

Scipio, being one day accused before the people of Rome of some crimes of a very high nature, instead of excusing himself or flattering his judges: "It will become you well," said he, "to sit in judgment upon a head, by whose means you have the power to judge all the world." Another time, all the answer he gave to several impeachments brought against him by a tribune of the people, instead of making his defense: "Let us go, citizens," said he, "let us go render thanks to the gods for the victory they gave me over the Carthaginians as this day," and advancing himself before toward the Temple, he had presently all the assembly and his very accuser himself following at his heels. And Petilius, having been set on by Cato to demand an account of the money that had passed through his hands in the province of Antioch, Scipio being come into the senate to that purpose,

Ill designs are worst to the contriver.

• GELL., 4.5

And leave their own lives in the wound. • VERG., G., 4.238

Surely where many, often talking in their sleep, or raving in disease, are said to have betrayed themselves, and to have given publicity to offenses long concealed. • LUCR., 5.1157

'Tis the first punishment of sin that no man absolves himself. • JUV., 13.2

As a man's conscience is, so within hope or fear prevails, suiting to his design. • OV., FAST., 1.485

produced a book from under his robe, wherein he told them was an exact account of his receipts and disbursements; but being required to deliver it to the prothonotary to be examined, he refused, saying, he would not do himself so great a disgrace; and in the presence of the whole senate tore the book with his own hands to pieces. I do not believe that the most seared conscience could have counterfeited so great an assurance. He had naturally too high a spirit and was accustomed to too high a fortune, says Titius Livius, to know how to be criminal, and to lower himself to the meanness of defending his innocence.

The putting men to the rack is a dangerous invention, and seems to be rather a trial of patience than of truth. Both he who has the fortitude to endure it conceals the truth, and he who has not: for why should pain sooner make me confess what really is, than force me to say what is not? And, on the contrary, if he who is not guilty of that whereof he is accused, has the courage to undergo those torments, why should not he who is guilty have the same, so fair a reward as life being in his prospect? I believe the ground of this invention proceeds from the consideration of the force of conscience: for, to the guilty, it seems to assist the rack to make him confess his fault and to shake his resolution; and, on the other side, that it fortifies the innocent against the torture. But when all is done, 'tis, in plain truth, a trial full of uncertainty and danger what would not a man say, what would not a man do, to avoid so intolerable torments?

Etiam innocentes cogit mentiri dolor.

Whence it comes to pass, that him whom the judge has racked that he may not die innocent, he makes him die both innocent and racked. A thousand and a thousand have charged their own heads by false confessions, among whom I place Philotas, considering the circumstances of the trial Alexander put upon him and the progress of his torture.

But so it is that some say it is the least evil human weakness could invent; very inhumanly, notwithstanding, and to very little purpose, in my opinion.

Many nations less barbarous in this than the Greeks and Romans who call them so, repute it horrible and cruel to torment and pull a man to pieces for a fault of which they are yet in doubt. How can he help your ignorance? Are not you unjust, that, not to kill him without cause, do worse than kill him? And that this is so, do but observe how often men prefer to die without reason than undergo this examination, more painful than execution itself; and that oft-times by its extremity anticipates execution, and perform it. I know not where I had this story, but it exactly matches the conscience of our justice in this particular. A country-woman, to a general of a very severe discipline, accused one of his soldiers that he had taken from her children the little soup meat she had left to nourish them withal, the army having consumed all the rest; but of this proof there was none. The general, after having cautioned the woman to take good heed to what she said, for that she would make herself guilty of a false accusation if she told a lie, and she persisting, he presently caused the soldier's belly to be ripped up to clear the truth of the fact, and the woman was found to be right. An instructive sentence.

Pain will make even the innocent lie.

• P. SYRUS, SENT., E

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Gell.	Aulus Gellius, <i>Attic Nights</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Ov., Fast.	Ovid, <i>Fasti</i>
P. Syrus, Sent.	Publilius Syrus, <i>Sententiae</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>