

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 32

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On Fleeing from Pleasures at the Cost of One's Life

I had long ago observed most of the opinions of the ancients to concur in this, that it is high time to die when there is more ill than good in living, and that to preserve life to our own torment and inconvenience is contrary to the very rules of nature, as these old laws instruct us.

*Ἡ ζῆν ἀλύπως, ἢ θανεῖν εὐδαιμόνως.
Καλὸν θνήσκειν οἷς ὕβριν τὸ ζῆν φέρει.
Κρεῖσσον τὸ μὴ ζῆν ἐστὶν ἢ ζῆν ἀθλίως.*

Either tranquil life, or happy death.
It is well to die when life is
wearisome. It is better to die than
to live miserable. • STOB., FLOR., 20

But to push this contempt of death so far as to employ it to the removing our thoughts from the honors, riches, dignities, and other favors and goods, as we call them, of fortune, as if reason were not sufficient to persuade us to avoid them, without adding this new injunction, I had never seen it either commanded or practised, till this passage of Seneca fell into my hands; who advising Lucilius, a man of great power and authority about the emperor, to alter his voluptuous and magnificent way of living, and to retire himself from this worldly vanity and ambition, to some solitary, quiet, and philosophical life, and the other alleging some difficulties: "I am of opinion," says he, "either that thou leave that life of thine, or life itself; I would, indeed, advise thee to the gentle way, and to untie, rather than to break, the knot thou hast indiscreetly knit, provided, that if it be not otherwise to be untied, thou resolutely break it. There is no man so great a coward, that had not rather once fall than to be always falling." I should have found this counsel conformable enough to the Stoical roughness: but it appears the more strange, for being borrowed from Epicurus, who writes the same thing upon the like occasion to Idomeneus.

And I think I have observed something like it, but with Christian moderation, among our own people. St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers, that famous enemy of the Arian heresy, being in Syria, had intelligence thither sent him, that Abra, his only daughter, whom he left at home under the eye and tuition of her mother, was sought in marriage by the greatest noblemen of the country, as being a virgin virtuously brought up, fair, rich, and in the flower of her age; whereupon he wrote to her (as appears upon record), that she should remove her affection from all the

pleasures and advantages proposed to her; for that he had in his travels found out a much greater and more worthy fortune for her, a husband of much greater power and magnificence, who would present her with robes and jewels of inestimable value; wherein his design was to dispossess her of the appetite and use of worldly delights, to join her wholly to God; but the nearest and most certain way to this, being, as he conceived, the death of his daughter; he never ceased, by vows, prayers, and orisons, to beg of the Almighty, that He would please to call her out of this world, and to take her to Himself; as accordingly it came to pass; for soon after his return, she died, at which he expressed a singular joy. This seems to outdo the other, forasmuch as he applies himself to this means at the outset, which they only take subsidiarily; and, besides, it was toward his only daughter. But I will not omit the latter end of this story, though it be for my purpose; St. Hilary's wife, having understood from him how the death of their daughter was brought about by his desire and design, and how much happier she was to be removed out of this world than to have stayed in it, conceived so vivid an apprehension of the eternal and heavenly beatitude, that she begged of her husband, with the extremest importunity, to do as much for her; and God, at their joint request, shortly after calling her to Him, it was a death embraced with singular and mutual content.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Stob., Flor.

Stobaeus, *Florilegium*