Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 3

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ESSAYS-1-3-20250106-191353

Our Attachments Outlive Us

b Those who accuse mankind of always chasing what is next and who teach us to seize and focus on what is in front of us, since our grasp on what is yet to come is even weaker than on what is past, hit upon the most common of human mistakes. They also know better than to call a mistake what nature herself does when, c eyeing our deeds more than our words, b she uses us for the continuation of her work c by planting this and many other deceitful notions in us. b We are never home, always out and about. Anxiety, desire, and hope drive us toward the future and rob us of the sensation and the awareness of what is to entice us into what will be, when really we will be no more. c *Calamitosus est animus futuri anxius.*

Unhappy is a mind worried about the future. • Sen., Ep., 98

c This excellent piece of advice is usually attributed to Plato: "Do your own work and know thyself." Each part broadly covers all that we ought to do and relates to the other as well. Anyone with their own work to carry out will see that their first task is to know who they are and what defines them. And no one who knows themselves mistakes the work of others for their own anymore. They love and better themselves first of all. They stay away from unnecessary pursuits and from useless thoughts and propositions. *Ut stultitia etsi adepta est quod concupiuit numquam se tamen satis consecutam putat: sic sapientia semper eo contenta est quod adest, neque eam uquam sui paenitet.*

As madness, obtaining what it wants, cannot be satisfied, so is wisdom, content with what is, never unhappy with itself. • Cic., Tusc., 5.18

c Epicurus frees the wise from speculations and worries about the future.

b Among those laws concerning the dead, one seems rather sound to me which says that we must examine the deeds of monarchs after their death. What Justice could not do to them — they who are the likes of laws, if not their masters — it makes sense that it should do to their reputation and the estate of their successors, both of which we often value more than life. This custom brings unique advantages to those nations that observe it and it is attractive to all good princes c who wish we did not treat their legacy like that of bad ones. Our obedience and subjection, we owe to all kings equally, because they pertain to their position. But esteem, let alone affection, we owe only to their virtue. Let us then contribute to political propriety our patience even when they do not deserve it, our discretion with their vices, and our advice when they act indiscriminately, for as long

as their authority requires our assistance. But when our duty is done, there is no reason to deprive justice, and our own freedom, of the expression of our true feelings. Neither should we take away the credit of good subjects who humbly and faithfully served a master whose imperfections they knew full well, thereby robbing posterity of so useful an example. Meanwhile, those who cowardly stay faithful to the memory of an unworthy prince, out of some respect for personal obligations, exercise a private form of justice detrimental to the common one. Livy is right to say that the language of those raised under a monarchy is always full of pointless ostentation and false testimony, each indiscriminately elevating their king to extremes of royal valor and grandeur.

c Some may condemn the presumption of these two soldiers who replied to Nero, to his face, when one of them was asked why he wished him ill: "You were once worthy of my affection. But since you have become a parricide, an arsonist, a player, a coachman, you have earned nothing but my hatred." And the other, about why he wanted to kill him: "Because I see no other remedy to your perpetual villainy." But the public and universal testimonies given after his death, and which will continue to be given about his tyrannical and wicked excesses, who in their right mind could condemn those?

c I do dislike that so virtuous a city as Lacedaemon could engage in such a sham of a ceremony: Upon the death of kings, all allies and neighbors, helots, men, and women, would come together, cut their forehead in mourning, and express in cries and wails that this king, whoever he had been, was their best, crediting to rank what merit would have earned, and relegating those first in merit to last place in rank. Aristotle, who looks into all things, wonders about Solon's statement[1] that no one can be called happy while still alive — even though this one who had lived well and died well could be called happy — if their reputation is poor, their descendants miserable. While we are kicking, we move from one thing to another as we please. But once we are no more, we have no awareness of what is. Therefore it might be best to tell Solon that no one is ever happy since one is only so after one is no more.

b *Quisquam*
Uix radicitus e uita se tollit, et eiicit:
Sed facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse,
Nec remouet satis a proiecto corpore sese, et
Uindicat.[2]

They will not pull hard enough on their roots to weed themselves out of life, imagining instead that there can be another self, unaware of the first. They will not give up and fully part with this body of theirs that has been cast aside. • Lucr., 3.877 and 3.882

a Bertrand du Glesquin died during the siege of the fortress of Rancon, near Le Puy, in Auvergne. The besieged party, having afterward surrendered, were made to bring the keys of the town to the body of the deceased.

a To bring back to Venice the body of Bartolomeo d'Alviano, general of the Venetian army who had died in their wars in Brescia, and to do so go through Verona, in enemy territory, most in his army were inclined to ask for safe conduct from the Veronese. But Teodoro Trivulzio spoke against it and chose instead to fight their way through, come what may. "It would not be fitting, he said, that he who never once in his life was afraid of his enemies should, in death, appear to fear them."

b And really, while on the subject, when the Greeks requested a body back from the enemy to bury, according to their laws they conceded defeat and could no longer set up a trophy. And those who were asked had earned a victory. That is how Nicias lost all the gains he had clearly made against the Corinthians and, conversely, how Agesilaus secured a dubious victory against the Beotians.

a These anecdotes would seem strange if it had not always been the case not only that we extend the care that we take of ourselves beyond this life but also that we believe that divine favors will follow us to the grave and extend to our remains. So many ancient examples exist, therefore, that I do not need to dwell on this except for a few in our time. Edward the First, King of England, having witnessed in his long wars between him and Robert, King of Scotland, how much his affairs benefited from his presence, always achieving victory in those things he was personally involved in, as he was dying, made his son solemnly swear that, once dead, his body would be boiled, his flesh stripped from his bones and buried. As for the bones, his son should set them aside to take with him, to have on the battlefield anytime he would fight the Scots, as if destiny had forever bound victory in his limbs.

b Jan Žižka, who brought trouble to Bohemia to defend Wycliffe's fallacy, wanted to be flayed after his death so that his skin could be turned into a small drum to be played in the war against his enemies, judging that it would help preserve the good fortune he had accumulated on the battlefield when he had led the charge. Likewise, some Indians wore in battles against the Spaniards the bones of their leaders, on account of the luck they had had when alive. And other peoples on the same continent dragged with them to war the body of brave men who had died in battle to bring them luck and courage.

a In the former examples, only a reputation acquired in past deeds is to be preserved after death. In these latter ones, even the power to act is to remain. This story is a finer one yet: A Captain Bayard, wounded by an arquebus shot, and aware that he was dying, was being encouraged to withdraw from the fray when he replied that he was not about, in his final hour, to start backing away from the enemy. After having fought as much as he could but feeling himself fading and slipping off his horse, he ordered his footman to lay him down at the foot of a tree in such a way that he could die facing the enemy, and did.

a I must add this other example, more remarkable in this regard than any of the preceding ones. Emperor Maximilian, great-grandfather of the current king, Philip, was a monarch of many qualities, one of which was his remarkable handsomeness. But among his quirks, he had one quite unlike that of kings who use their close stool as a throne in order to press on with their most important affairs. He never once had a valet, even a private one, whom he allowed into his dressing room. He would hide to go make water, like a virgin determined to show neither doctors nor anyone else those parts we usually keep out of sight. b As for me, although never one to be afraid to open his mouth, I am by nature disposed to this kind of shame. Unless greatly persuaded by necessity or pleasure, I give hardly anyone a view of those parts and activities that custom compels us to keep hidden. I do find it inconvenient and unmanly, particularly for a

man in my profession. a Yet he became so irrational about it that he explicitly commanded in his will that he should be fitted with breeches upon his death. He went on to specify in an amendment that he who was to dress him should wear a blindfold. c Cyrus's instructions to his children that neither they nor anyone else touch his body after his soul leaves it, I ascribe to his own beliefs. For both he and his historian, among their many great qualities, paid careful attention to religion in all aspects of their personal life.

b I was disappointed by this story which a powerful man told about of a friend of mine, a person of some renown in peace and war now an old man racked with pain from kidney stones and dying at home, who wasted his final hours frantically planning and obsessing over the service and pomp of his funeral, and who made all from the nobility who had come to visit him swear that they would attend his procession. To the man himself, who saw him at his final moment, he made an urgent plea to make his entire household attend, citing all manners of examples and reasons why it would be fitting to a man of his position, only to die seemingly happy to have extracted this promise and arranged all the parts of his ceremony. I have rarely seen vanity so persistent.

b This curious perversion, which I really do not miss in my family life, seems related to this other where we become absorbed by this final act and embrace some rare and peculiar form of frugality to limit our procession to one servant and one lantern. I see some praising this urge as they do Marcus Aemilius Lepidus's injunction to his heirs forbidding them to pay for the ceremonies customarily held for such things. But does avoiding costs and pleasures we cannot benefit from or experience still count as being frugal and measured? What an easy way to change and save! c If it were up to me, I would advise that in this, as in other things in life, one should follow custom, as befit one's fortune. So Lyco, the philosopher, wisely encouraged his friends to do with his body what they thought best and to make his funerals neither excessive nor impersonal. b As for me, I will simply let custom sort out the ceremony and put myself at the mercy of whomever will have to take care of me. c *Totus hic locus est contemnendus in nobis, non negligendus in nostris.* And those saintly words to a saint: *Curatio funeris, conditio sepulturae, pompa exequiarum, magis sunt uiuorum solatia, quam subsidia mortuorum.* And still, from Socrates who, upon his final hour when Crito asked how he wished to be buried, replied: "As you see fit." b If I had to say any more about it, I would argue that it is more elegant to follow the example of those who set out to enjoy, while they are living and breathing, the beauty and dignity of their tomb and who take pleasure in seeing their likeness in marble. Blessed are they who know to find happiness and pleasure being not so sensitive and who know to live by their death.

All of this should be of no importance to us but it should not be ignored for ours. • Cic., Tusc., 1.45

Our concern for funerals, for the quality of tombs and the decorum of processions, is comfort for the living more than relief for the dead. • Aug., De civ. D., 1.12

c I come very close to conceiving a permanent hatred for popular rule, although it does seem to me the most natural and fair, when I remember the inhuman injustice of the people of Athens who put to death, with no remission or will to hear their defense, the brave officers who had just won a battle at sea against the Lacedaemonians near the Arginusae islands, the fiercest and toughest navy battle ever won by the Greeks, because they had chosen to pursue the advantages afforded to them by the laws of war after their victory rather than to stop to collect and bury

their dead. The story of Diomedon, one of the officers on trial and a man of considerable military and political virtue, makes this execution even more terrible.[3] After hearing the charges against them, he stepped forward to speak, finding only then a time for people to hear him out, and instead of using it to make his own case and expose the obvious injustice of so cruel a verdict, pleaded for the well-being of his judges by asking the gods that good things come of this trial for them. To that end, and so as not to attract divine anger upon them for breaking the oaths that he and his companions had taken in thanks for so illustrious a fortune, he informed them of what oaths they were. Finally, without saying another word, without negotiating, he walked off to receive his punishment. A few years later, Fortune dished out its retribution in kind. For Chabrias, senior officer of their navy, who had prevailed over Pollis, Sparta's admiral, at the island of Naxos, lost all of the benefits of his victory, which mattered a lot to them, for fear of facing the same consequences: To avoid leaving any of the bodies of his dead companions floating at sea, he let escape with their lives boatloads of his enemies who have since made them pay for this unfortunate superstition.

c *Quaeris, quo iaceas, post obitum, loco?*
Quo non nata iacent.

You ask where you lie after death? Where those who are not yet lie. • Sen., Tro., 2.407

c This other gives back to an inanimate body the feeling of peace:

c *Neque sepulcrum, quo recipiatur, habeat portum corporis,*
Ubi, remissa humana uita, corpus requiescat a malis.

And let him not have a grave in which to lay, a haven for the body where, life gone from it, it may be safe from harm. • Cic., Tusc., 1.44 (citing Ennius)

c So too nature shows us that many dead things maintain mysterious connections to life. Wine in cellars will turn by some seasonal change of its vine. And some say that the condition and taste of venison in curing cellars change like living flesh does.

Notes

1 Aristotle mentions Solon's answer to King Croesus's question about happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.8). The dialog itself is related by Herodotus. Montaigne brings this story up again in *Let Others Judge of our Happiness after Our Death*.

2 Montaigne slightly reworked Lucretius's text which reads: *nec radicitus e vita se tollit et eicit, / sed facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse / … / nec removet satis a proiecto corpore.*

3 The story the aftermath of the battle of Arginusae and of Diomedon's speech are related in Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 13.101 and following.

Montaigne's Sources

Aug., De civ. D.	Augustine, *City of God*
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*
Hdt.	Herodotus, *Histories*
Lucr.	Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, *Epistles*
Sen., Tro.	Seneca, *Trojan Women*