Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 40

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The Taste of Good and Bad Things Depends Mostly on the Opinion We Have of Them

a According to an ancient Greek saying,[1] people suffer not because of things per se, but because of their opinions about things. What a victory for the relief of our miserable human condition if anyone could show that this is indeed always true. Because if bad things get to us only through our judgment, it seems that we should be able to shun them or turn them into something good. If things place themselves at our mercy, why not get rid of them or force them to serve us? If what we call affliction and suffering is neither affliction nor suffering in and of itself, but only so because we see it that way, it is up to us to see it otherwise. And when we are free to choose, if no one presses us, it is strangely crazy of us to side with the forces which aggrieve us most, to give diseases, poverty, and scorn a bad and bitter taste if we can give it a good one, and if it is up to us to shape the material fortune only provides. Now let us see if it can be argued that what we call bad is not bad per se, or at least not as it appears to be, and that we have the ability to give it a different flavor, and a different face, since it is all the same.

a If the original essence of these things we fear got to us of its own authority, it would possess us all alike and similarly. For there is but one species of humans and, by and large, they are provided with the same tools and instruments with which to think and judge. Yet the diversity of opinions we have of these things clearly shows that they negotiate their way to us: Sometimes, one will put them up as they really are. A thousand others, meanwhile, will offer to take them in under a new and deceptive identity.

a The main forces, as we see it, are death, poverty, and pain.

a Yet, is it not common knowledge that death, which some call the most horrific of all horrific things, is regarded by others as the only way out of life's sufferings? The ultimate good in nature? The only leverage of our freedom? And the common and quick fix to all ills? And while some await it shaking and in fear, others c bear it more easily than life.

b This one deplores its indulgence:

b *Mors, utinam pauidos uita subducere nolles.*
Sed uirtus te sola daret!

If only, Death, you refused to snatch the fearful from life; if only courage alone surrendered to you instead! • Luc., 4.580

c Never mind these glorious examples of courage. Theodorus told Lysimachus who was threatening to kill him: "What an accomplishment for you to be as strong as a Spanish fly!"[2] Most philosophers have either hastened to their death on purpose or rushed and helped it along.

a So often we see common folks led to their death—not a straightforward death but one involving shame and terrible sufferings sometimes—go to it with such confidence, some out of stubbornness, others out of natural simplicity, that their ordinary behavior seems unaffected. They settle their private business, acknowledge their friends, sing, preach, and entertain the crowd. Sometimes they even crack a joke and drink to their companions, just like Socrates. One said, being led to the gallows, that they should not use such a street for fear that an old debt he owed a shopkeeper there could get him arrested. Another asked the executioner to leave his neck alone else he would wiggle from laughter for being so ticklish. Yet another answered his confessor who had promised him he would dine with our Lord that same day: "You go on ahead. I'm fasting." This other one, who asked for a drink and saw the hangman taking a swig first, said he would not drink after him for fear of catching syphilis. Everyone has heard the story of the man from Picardy who, while on the ladder, was shown a prostitute and told (as our justice sometimes allows) that should he choose to marry her, he would be spared. After he paused to look at her, and saw that she limped, he said: "Hang me! Hang me! She's lame." Similarly, in Denmark, they say that a man condemned to have his head cut off, as he was presented on the scaffold with the same choice, turned it down because the girl he was offered had sunken cheeks and too long a nose. A servant in Toulouse, accused of heresy, gave as the sole reason for his belief that of his master, a young student jailed with him. He chose to die rather than accepting that his master could have been wrong. And we have read about the people of Arras and the many among them who, after King Louis XI took the city, let themselves be hanged rather than say "Long live the King!"

c In the kingdom of Narsinga,[3] to this day still, the wives of their priests are buried alive with their dead husbands. All other wives are burnt alive at their husbands' funerals, not only with great resolve but happily. And when the body of their deceased king is being cremated, all his wives and concubines, his favorites and all kinds of officers and servants, a mass of people, rush to the fire so gladly, to throw themselves in it with their master, that they seem to consider it an honor to accompany him in death.

a Among those vulgar minds of buffoons, there were a few who, even in death, would not to give up their clowning. This one whom the hangman was dispatching yelled "Anchors aweigh!," which was his catchphrase. And this other one, at death's door, who had been laid down on a straw mat by the fire, when a doctor asked him where he was hurting: "On a straw mat, by the fire," was his answer. And to the priest administering the extreme unction and feeling for his feet stiffened and shriveled by the disease: "You will find them, he said, at the end of my legs." To the man who was encouraging him to recommend himself to God, he asked: "Who is departing?" The other replied: "You, by day's end, if He wills it." —

"Tomorrow evening would be just as well," he answered. — "Just recommend yourself to Him, said the other. You will be with Him soon." — "Better I did it in person then," he added.

a During our last wars in Milan, with so many towns taken and retaken, people lost hope from so many reversals of fortune. They saw death as so inevitable that my father, whom I have heard tell the story, counted twenty five heads of household killing themselves in a week. Likewise the Xanthians, whose town Brutus besieged, all rushed to their death — men, women, and children — with such an intense desire to die that there is nothing we do to avoid death that they did not do to leave life. So much so that Brutus could barely save a few.

c All opinions have the power to impose themselves on us at the cost of our lives. The first part of the beautiful oath the Greek took and stuck by in the war against the Medes was that any one of them would sooner trade life for death rather than their own laws for those of the Persians.[4] How many men do we see, in the war between the Turks and the Greeks, accept the most bitter death rather than uncircumcision in order to be baptized? To speak of something from which no religion is exempt.

cAfter the kings of Castile banished the Jews from their lands, King John of Portugal sold them, for eight crowns a head, the right to move to his temporarily. The condition was that, one day, they would leave, and that he would provide ships to take them to Africa. When the time came, after which anyone found in violation of the agreement would remain as a slave, only a few meager vessels were made available. Those who boarded the ships were treated roughly and dishonestly by the crew who, among many other humiliations, wasted their time sailing back and forth until they ran out of food and had to buy some from them at so high a price and for so long that by the time they landed they had nothing left but the clothes on their back. When the news of their inhumane treatment reached those still on land, most accepted slavery. Some pretended to convert.

c When Manuel, John's successor, became king, he first set them free. He changed his mind later and ordered them to leave his lands, assigning three ports for their passage. He hoped, according to Bishop Osório, the best Latin historian of our times, that although the benefits of the freedom he had restored to them had failed to convert them to Christianity, the hardships of subjecting themselves, like their companions, to the thievery of sailors and of abandoning a country in which they lived in great wealth to take a chance on an unknown and strange land, would make them reconsider.

c But his hopes were dashed: they were determined to leave. He denied them two of the ports he had promised so that the length and inconvenience of the journey might change the mind of some, or perhaps to gather them all in one place to make the execution of his plan easier. He commanded that all children under fourteen be taken from their mothers and fathers, where they would neither see nor hear them, to a place where they would be taught our religion. They say that it caused a horrible scene: the natural affection between fathers and children and their devotion to their traditional belief clashed against this violent decree. Many saw fathers and mothers killing themselves. And more

dreadful still: some dropped their young children down wells, out of love and compassion, to save them from this law. In the end, the terms of the king's agreement expired and they had no other recourse than to become slaves again. Some became Christians. Yet still to this day, one hundred years later, few Portuguese trust them, or their faith, even though custom and time are far stronger guides than any other force. In the town of Castelnaudary, fifty Albigensian heretics all suffered, with brave determination, being burnt alive rather than renounce their belief. *Quoties non modo ductores nostri,* says Cicero, *Sed uniuersi etiam exercitus ad non dubiam mortem concurrerunt.*

How often have not only our generals but whole armies even rushed together to a certain death? • Cic., Tusc., 1.8

b I have seen one of my closest friends court death relentlessly, with a true passion which various kinds of speeches had planted in his heart and from which I was unable to dissuade him. Fired up, eager, and fooled by appearances, he rushed to the first one that flashed a glint of honor at him.

a In our own times, we know of several examples of people, including children, so afraid of some slight discomfort that they killed themselves. Speaking of which, an ancient author[5] said: Is there anything we will not fear if we fear even cowardice's own shelter? Were I to list here those of all sexes, conditions, and sects, from happier centuries, who have awaited death with calm, or have sought it, looking not only to escape the evils of this life but, for some, fleeing simply for having lived enough, and, for others, in hope for a better existence elsewhere, I would never be done. Their number is endless. I would be better off counting those who dreaded it.

a Simply this: Pyrrho the Philosopher, who found himself once in a great tempest at sea, reassured those he saw most frightened around him by showing them a pig, on board with them, who was completely unbothered by the storm. Can we dare say that the advantage of reason, which we celebrate so much and which makes us feel superior to other creatures, was placed in us for our suffering? What is the point of knowledge if it robs us of sleep and peace, which we would have without it, and if it makes us feel worse than Pyrrho's pig? Is our intelligence, given to us for our benefit, to be used for our destruction, to fight nature's design and the universal order of things which intends for everyone to take advantage of the tools and means at their disposal?

a Fine! they will tell me; your principle is useful against death. But what about poverty? And what about pain which Aristippus, Hieronymus, and most wise souls have agreed was the ultimate evil? Those who denied it in theory admitted it in practice! Pompey once paid a visit to Posidonius who was terribly afflicted by a serious and painful disease. After he apologized for choosing such an unfortunate time to hear him talk about philosophy, Posidonius replied: "God forbid that pain should be so strong as to prevent me for debating and talking about it." And he began speaking about disregarding pain. Meanwhile pain was doing what pain does and hurting him relentlessly. So he shouted back: "Keep going, Pain, but I will not say you are bad." What does this story, which they like so much, have to do with scorning pain? It speaks only of the word. If Posidonius is so indifferent to its stings, why does he stop to mention it? And why does he think it matters to not call it bad?

a In this case, it is not all a matter of imagination. We may give our opinion about the rest but, here, facts come into play. Our very senses confirm it,

a *Qui nisi sunt ueri, ratio quoque falsa sit omnis.*

If those are not true, let all reasoning be wrong too. • Lucr., 4.485

a Could we persuade our skin that the lashes of a leather strap tickle? Our taste buds that aloe juice is a fine wine? Pyrrho's pig is ours now: it might have no fear of death, but kick it and it will squeal and hurt. Could we really go against nature's universal rule, seen in all living things under the sun, that pain makes us wince? Even trees seem to groan when we harm them. Death is only felt in words, not least because it happens in an instant:

a *Aut fuit, aut veniet, nihil est praesentis in illa.*

It either was or will be. There is no now in it. • LB, Xen., 115r

a *Morsque minus poenae quam mora mortis habet*

Dying is less painful than awaiting death. • Ov., Her., 10.82

a A thousand animals, a thousand people chose death over the threat of pain. So it sounds like what we fear most about death is actually pain, its customary forerunner.

c However, if we are to believe a holy father: *Malam mortem non facit, nisi quod sequitur mortem*. I would say rather that neither what precedes death, nor what follows it, has much to do with it. We have been using this as an excuse. In fact, I have learned from experience that we cannot stand pain because we cannot stand the idea of death. Also that pain is twice as painful when it makes us fear for our life. But reason faults the coward in us dreading something so sudden, so inevitable, so immaterial, and so we invoke this other, more excusable, explanation.

Nothing but that which follows death makes it bad. • Aug., De civ. D., 1.11

c When illnesses are only painful, we say that they are not dangerous. Who would let the pain of a toothache or gout, which is not fatal even when it is severe, speak for the disease itself? Yet, let us be honest, when it comes to death, we listen mostly to pain. a The same goes with poverty, which is not to be feared, except for the pain it subjects us to through thirst, hunger, cold, heat, and exhaustion.

a So, let us deal with pain alone. I grant them, and gladly, that it is the worse state in which we can find ourselves. No one else in the world hates it more than me. No one else keeps away from it more — thus far not having had to deal with it much, thank God! But it is up to us, if not to eradicate it, at least to lessen it with patience and to keep our mind and soul strong, even when the body is taken by it.

a If it were not so, would anyone value virtue, courage, strength, magnanimity, and determination in us? Would these serve any purpose if there were no pain to withstand? *Auida est periculi uirtus*. How will we earn the advantage that we wish to have over the common folk if not by sleeping on hard ground, by enduring in full gear the heat of midday sun, by feeding on horse meat, donkey meat too, by being cut open and having a bullet pried from our bones, and by feeling the pain of being stitched up, cauterized, and probed? How very far we are from staying away from evil and pain — which is what philosophers say — when, among equally good courses of action, the most desirable one is also the most painful.

Courage courts danger. • Sen., Prov., 1.4

Being happy does not require hilarity, leisure, laughter, or jokes — those companions of fun — but strength and perseverance, often even in sadness. • Cic., Fin., 2.65

Non enim hilaritate, nec lasciuia, nec risu, aut ioco comite leuitatis, Sed saepe etiam tristes firmitate et constantia sunt beati. And that is the reason why it has been impossible to convince our fathers that gains made by force, in dangerous wars, were not more deserving than those made safely by intrigue and deception.

a *Laetius est, quoties magno sibi constat honestum.*

Virtue is rewarding when it demands much of itself. • Luc., 9.404

a We should take more comfort in this: if pain is intense, naturally it is short; and if it is long, it is light; c *si grauis breuis, si longus leuis.* a You will not feel it for very long if you feel it too much: it will either end or end you. Either amounts to the same. c If you cannot take it, it will take you. *Memineris maximos morte finiri; paruos multa habere interualla requietis; mediocrium nos esse dominos: ut si tolerabiles sint feramus, sin minus, e vita, quum ea non placeat, tanquam e theatro exeamus.*

If it serious, it is short; if it lasts, it is light. • Cic., Fin., 2.22

Remember that the worst ones end in death; the lightest ones let you rest by stopping often; and we are in control of what is in between. So if they are tolerable, we bear them. If they are less so, we may leave life as we leave a show when we do not like it. • Cic., Fin., 1.49

a Pain is unbearable to us when we have not made it a habit of finding peace c chiefly a in our soul, c when we do not rely enough on it, the one and only ruler of our condition and behavior. The body has but one way to be, more or less. The soul is adaptable. It conforms feelings, and anything else arising from the body, to itself, to whatever its state is. Still, it must be studied and sought; its powers must be awakened. There is no argument, no obligation, no force than can go against what it wants and chooses. If we can find for it the right groove, the one, out of the many available to it, that will keep us steady and safe, soon not only will we be protected from any injury but also, if it deems it appropriate, feeling satisfaction and confidence from offenses and ills.

c It can take advantage of anything: It finds legitimate material in delusion and dreams to offer us support and peace of mind.

c It is easy to see that the grit of our thoughts sharpens in us pain and pleasure. Animals, whose thoughts are limited, let their bodies handle their feelings: free, innocent, and consequently, whole. And, in nearly all species, we see this in the consistency of their behavior. If we did not mix up in ourselves the parts that rule over such things, it is likely that we would be better off. Nature has given them a just and moderate disposition toward pleasure and toward pain. Being equal and even, it cannot fail to be just. But since we have freed ourselves from its rules, to enjoy the freedom to follow our wildest ideas, we should at least try to arrange them in the most satisfying way.

c Plato worries about our bitter relationship with pain and pleasure because it gives the body too much power over the soul and binds the two too closely. I do too, but for the opposite reason: because of how much it releases and unbinds the soul from the body.

a Just as the enemy becomes more bitter when we run, so does pain take pride in watching us writhe in it. Those who stand up to it will find it much easier to deal with. One must meet and fight it. When we dig ourselves in and shoot back, we call and draw to us what threatens to destroy us. c Our body is firmer when it straightens up in a charge. And so is the soul.

a But let us turn to some examples that will be familiar to people with kidney problems, like me. We will see that pain is like gemstones whose colors are brighter or duller depending on the background we place them on. And that it only takes up as much room as we give it in us. *Tantum doluerunt,* said Saint Augustine, *quantum doloribus se inseruerunt.* We feel a surgeon's single incision more than ten cuts of a sword in the heat of battle. The pains of childbirth, which must be great according to doctors and God himself, and which we handle with such formality, there are whole nations that make nothing of it. Forget about Spartan women! What about the Swiss, among our foot soldiers? Can you tell the difference in them, aside from the fact that today, as they trot behind their husbands, you see them holding in their arms the baby they carried in their belly yesterday? Those so-called Egyptians,[6] settled here among us, walk alone to the nearest river to bathe themselves and their newborn babies. c And, aside from so many prostitutes who routinely conceive and carry their children in secret, there is also this honorable woman — the wife of a Roman patrician, Sabinus — who, for someone else's sake, went through the labor of birthing twins, all alone, without any help, and without moaning or saying a word. a In Sparta, a mere boy who had stolen a fox — they feared the shame of their stupidity in petty theft more than we fear its punishment — and who put it under his cloak, endured the bites to his belly rather than being found out. Another one who carried incense to a sacrifice and let coal fall into his sleeve, let his flesh burn to the bone so as not to disrupt the ceremony. And many, at the age of seven, have been known to show no emotions while being whipped to death when their character was being tested as part of their education. c Cicero saw them fighting together, punching, kicking, biting, and passing out rather than admitting defeat. *Nunquam naturam mos uinceret: est enim ea semper inuicta; Sed nos umbris, deliciis, otio, languore, desidia animum infecimus; opinionibus maloque more delinitum molliuimus.*

They suffered as much pain as they took in. • Aug., De civ. D., 1.10

Behavior cannot triumph over nature. There is no way ever to defeat her. But we have spoiled our minds with leisure, pleasure, idleness, sluggishness, and sloth. We have made them lazy and soft with our opinions and bad habits. • Cic., Tusc., 5.78

a Everyone knows the story of Scaevola who, having slipped into the enemy camp to kill their leader but failing to strike his target, continued his mission — and freed his country — by more unconventional means. Not only did he reveal his plan to Porsenna, the king he intended to kill, but he also added that his camp was full of Romans like him, all sharing the same objective. And, to show what he was made of, he had a brazier brought to him and watched while he let his arm burn over it until his enemy, in shock, had the brazier taken away. And what of the one who would not put down his book while they were making an incision in him? Or the one who kept on joking and laughing in anticipation of the pain they were inflicting on him, to the point where the frustrated cruelty of his executioners and their efforts to find new ways to torture him gave him the upper hand. But he was a philosopher! What now? A gladiator of Caesar's suffered the pain of his wounds being probed and cut clean with a smile on his face! c *Quis mediocris gladiator ingemuit; quis uultum mutauit unquam? Quis non modo stetit, uerum etiam decubuit turpiter? Quis cum decubuisset, ferrum recipere iussus, collum contraxit?* a Let us throw some women into the mix. Who has not heard of this one in Paris who had her skin peeled merely to achieve the fresh glow of a newer one? There are some who have their teeth pulled — healthy, living teeth! — looking for a smoother and sweeter voice, or a more even smile. We can think of so many examples of this kind of disregard for pain! What are they not capable of? What will scare them if there is some hope of enhancing their beauty?

What kind of gladiator whines? Or loses his countenance? Or does not stand up, or worse yet, lies down in disgrace? Or, if down already and destined to be executed, covers his neck? • Cic., Tusc., 2.41

b *Uellere queis cura est albos a stirpe capillos,*
Et faciem, dempta pelle, referre nouam.

Careful to pull out white hairs at the root and to rejuvenate their face by peeling away a layer of skin. • Tib., 1.8.45

a I have seen some eat sand, or ashes, and torture themselves to the point of ruining their stomach, all for a paler complexion. What abuse will they not endure for a fine Spanish figure,[7] laced up and bound, their sides cut raw and deep? And, yes, dying because of it sometimes!

c In many nations, nowadays, it is common to hurt oneself on purpose to prove one's sincerity. Our king gives many notable examples of it, which he witnessed himself in Poland.[8] Apart from some who I know have done the same in France, I saw a young woman in Picardy,[9] before I came up for those infamous Estates General of Blois,[10] stab herself four or five times hard in the arm with a hairpin, breaking the skin and drawing blood on purpose, to show her commitment and the intensity of her vows. The Turks cut long gashes on themselves for their women. To make the mark permanent, they take their wounds to a flame and keep it there for an incredibly long time to stop the bleeding and create a scar. People who witnessed it have written to me about it and sworn it. Still, it is easy enough to find one of them who will give himself a deep cut in the arm or thigh for ten akçe.[11]

a I am glad that we have handier witnesses where we have more to discuss. Christendom provides us with plenty. Many following the example of our blessed guide have sought to bear the cross as a show of devotion. We know from very reputable sources that King Louis the Saint wore a hair shirt until, in his old age, his confessor relieved him of it. And, every Friday, he had his priest beat his shoulders with five little iron chains which he kept with him at all times in a box. Every day for the last ten or twelve years of his life, William, our last duke of Guyenne, father to the Eleanor who brought this duchy to the houses of France and England, wore a cuirass under a religious habit as penance. Fulk, the count of Anjou, traveled all the way to Jerusalem to be whipped, wearing a rope around his neck, by two of his servants before the sepulchre of our lord. Do we not see still, on every Good Friday, in various places, men and women flog themselves, their flesh cut bone-deep? I have witnessed it often enough. And I have heard it said that some (since they walk with their faces covered) would uphold the good religious standing of others for money, with an impressive tolerance for pain given how much harder the lashes of devotion hit than those of greed.

c Q. Maximus buried his son made consul, M. Cato his elected praetor, and L. Paullus two of his a few days apart, with quiet expressions on their faces and no display of grief. I once joked that someone had outsmarted divine justice when he took almost with pride the news of the violent death of three of his adult children in one day,[12] a bitter blow to be sure. As for me, I have felt sadness, but not heartbreak, at the loss of two or three of mine[13] still in the care of wet-nurses. Few misfortunes hurt us more deeply, though. A few other common examples of affliction come to mind of which people paint such an ugly picture that I could not admit in public, without blushing, that I would barely feel them if I experienced them, and that I suppressed them when I did. *Ex quo intelligitur, non in natura, Sed in opinione, esse aegritudinem.*

From which one understands that sadness is not found in nature but in our opinions. • Cic., Tusc., 3.71

b Opinion is a powerful, stubborn, and wild thing. Who ever looked for safety and rest as greedily as Alexander and Caesar looked for worry and hardship. Teres,[14] father of Sitalces, would never tire to say that, when he was not waging war, he thought there was no difference between him and his groom.

c When Cato, as consul, merely forbade the inhabitants of some of the cities of Spain he wished to control to carry their weapons, many killed themselves: *ferox gens nullam uitam rati sine armis esse.* b And how about all of those who fled the sweetness of a quiet life at home, among neighbors and friends, to live in dreadful and hostile deserts, and who willingly became abject, repulsive, and shunned by all yet came to love it there? Cardinal Borromeo, who recently passed away in Milan surrounded by the kind of depravity his noble birth, his great wealth, Italy's atmosphere, and his youth called him to, always lived the most austere life: He had only one robe for summer and winter. He slept on nothing but straw. And he used whatever free time he had to study, always on his knees, keeping by his book some bread and water, the only food he would take the time to eat. I know of some who chose to benefit from and take advantage of a spouse's affair, the mere mention of which frightens so many. Sight may not be the most necessary of our senses but it is at least the most pleasant. In our body parts, the most pleasant and useful ones are those used in procreation. However, many have grown to hate them only because they were too pleasant, and have rejected them because of their cost and value. He who blinded himself[15] made similar calculations.

Fierce people for whom there could be no life without weapons. • Livy, 34.17

c Most common and healthy people believe that having many children is a blessing. To me, and to some others, it is a blessing not to have any.

c And when they asked Thales why he was not married, he said he did not care to start a bloodline.

c That it is our opinion which gives things their value is evident in how we appraise them not by looking at them but by looking to ourselves. We take into account neither their quality nor their usefulness but only what it costs us to acquire them, as if it were a tangible part of them. What we call their value is not what they bring us but what we bring them. Which leads me to conclude that we are the principal managers of our wealth. Whatever it amounts to, what we get out of it amounts to the same. Our opinion will never trade it for less. Money spent gives a diamond its value, as hardship gives to virtue, and pain to devotion, and bitterness to medicine.

b This one,[16] seeking poverty, threw his money into the very sea so many others scour looking for wealth. Epicurus says that to become rich is not a relief but a change of troubles. Truly, abundance rather than want causes stinginess. Let me speak of my experience with this matter.

b I have lived in three kinds of situations since I left childhood behind. For the first twenty years or so, I had no real profession and was entitled to nothing. I relied on what chance would provide and on the generosity and help of others. My reliance on them was as joyful as it was careless, guided as it was by the audacity of fortune. I was never better. I never once found my friends' purses closed to me because I had made it a

priority, above all other priorities, not to miss a payment on the agreed upon day, which they extended a thousand times once they saw the effort I had put in meeting my obligations to them. In return, I offered them my financial and somewhat calculated loyalty.

b I feel naturally quite happy when pay my debts. It is as if a weight, a mark of servitude, had been taken off my shoulders. There is a certain satisfaction that tickles me when I do what is right and satisfy someone else. Payments which require bargaining and calculations are a different matter. If I cannot find someone else to do it for me, I keep away from it for as long as possible, in shame and disgust, fearing this negotiation for which my character and my conversation are not at all well-suited. There is nothing I hate more than haggling. It is simply a petty and brazen business: Two parties will negotiate and argue for an hour only to renege and go back on their promises over five pennies' worth of profit.

b And so I borrowed money at a disadvantage. When I did not have the courage to ask in person, I put my requests down on paper which costs nothing but is easily denied. I used to leave my business up to the stars more happily and more freely than I have left it since to prudence and judgment.

b Most responsible people find it horrible to live like this, in uncertainty. First, they do not realize that most of the world lives this way. How many good people have had to give up on certainty, and do so every day, looking to get ahead by the good graces of kings or fortune? Caesar borrowed a million more in gold than he was worth to become Caesar. And how many merchants get a start by selling their farm and shipping it to the Indies

b *Tot per impotentia freta?*

Across so many raging seas? • Catull., 4.18

b And in this long drought of devotion, we have thousands upon thousands of congregations who manage to cross it too, counting on the heavens to provide enough for their dinner everyday.

b Second, they do not realize that the certainty they rely on is no less uncertain and chancy than chance itself. I see poverty, from a distance of two thousands crowns of income, as clearly as if it were right next to me. Indeed, fate knows a hundred ways to break through our wealth to let poverty in c — often having no recourse against the highest and the lowest of fortunes:

c *Fortuna uitrea est; tunc quum splendet frangitur;*

Fortune is glass: shiny then, now shattered. • P. Syrus, Sent., f

b and knows how to overcome all our defenses and levees. And so I find that, for a variety of reasons, poverty dwells as frequently with those who have as with those who have not. And, in fact, that it is somewhat less inconvenient alone than when found in the company of riches. c (Riches come from order more than income. *Faber est suae quisque fortunae.* b A rich person fallen on hard times, in need and preoccupied, seems to me more miserable than someone who is just poor. c *In diuitiis inopes, quod genus egestatis grauissimum est.*

Everyone is the maker of their own fortune.) • Sall., Ad C., 2.1

Poor and surrounded by wealth is the worse kind of poverty. • Sen., Ep., 74

c The greatest and richest princes usually face the most extreme consequences because of poverty and want. For is there anything more

extreme than for them to be made tyrannical and unfair usurpers of their subjects' wealth by those circumstances?

b In my second phase, I had money. Once I got a feel for it, I soon accumulated a good amount of it going by this principle: I figured that to have enough meant to have more than one usually spends, and that I could not consider any future income as mine, no matter how certain it seemed. What if something came up? I told myself. And so, under this false and unsound assumption, I thought myself clever for building this reserve with which to meet all challenges. I had an answer for those who would put it to me that the number of challenges was too great, and that unless I could meet all of them, I would meet some and many. None of this happened without constantly worrying. c I kept it a secret. I, never one to shy away from talking about himself, would only tell lies about my money, as do so many others who, wealthy, call themselves poor, or poor, call themselves wealthy, and who allow their conscience never to show them as they really are. What a ridiculous and shameful precaution! b On the road, I never thought I had enough for the journey. But the more money I took with me, the more worried I became, about how safe the roads were, about how reliable the people in charge of my luggage were. And like others I know, I could never relax unless I could keep an eye on it at all times. If I left my cash box at home: what suspicions! what painful —and worse yet, secret—worries! I was always distracted.

c All told, keeping money is a sadder business than making it. b Even when I was not behaving as I just described, I had to try hard to stop myself from doing so. As for convenience, I enjoyed little to none from it: c Even though I had more to spend, doing so weighed no less on me. b For, as Bion used to say, the hairy and the bald get equally mad if someone plucks out their hair. Once you have gotten used to and taken a fancy to a certain amount, it is no longer of any use to you. c You dare not wear it down. b To you, it is a tower that would crumble if you touched it. Only by force will necessity compel you to dig into it. Before, I would pawn my belongings and sell a horse far more easily, and with less regret, than I did once I kept my precious purse undisturbed and shut tight. But it was a trap: it is hard for us to keep this impulse under control c (particularly so with things we consider positive) b and to be frugal only to a point. We keep growing this pile, adding to it one sum after another, until, grotesquely, we deny ourselves the enjoyment of its benefits, think of nothing but preserving it, and make no use of it.

c Those who control the gates and walls of a fine city have the most money for the same kind of reason. Anyone who hoards this much cash is a miser, in my opinion.

c Plato lists physical and human qualities in this order: health, beauty, strength, wealth. And wealth, he says, is not blind but very insightful when it is illuminated by prudence.

b Dionysius the Younger had some good sense in this regard: He was told that one of his subjects, in Syracuse, kept a treasure hidden underground. Dionysius commanded him to bring it to him, which he did, but not without secretly keeping a part of it with which he ran to another city. Once there, he lost his appetite for amassing a fortune and

began living a more generous life. Dionysius heard about it and returned what remained of his treasure to him, saying that now that he knew how to use it, he was happy for him to have it back.

b I stayed like this for a few years. Fortunately, some good daemon knocked it out of me, as it did for the man from Syracuse, and made me ditch this cautiousness. The pleasure of some very expensive journey[17] put an end to this ridiculous notion. And that is how I found myself in a third phase of my life (as I see it), a much quieter and more pleasant one: I let my income and expenses fluctuate. Sometimes one is ahead; sometimes the other is. But they are usually close. I live day to day, content with having enough for regular and on-going business. As for extraordinary business, no planning in the world will make it manageable. c How silly to think that fortune could ever arm us enough against itself ! We must fight it with our own weapons. Those that fortune provides will turn against us in the thick of it. b If I am saving, I am doing it only for the sake of some future project, not to buy land c (which I do not need) b but to buy pleasure. c *Non esse cupidum pecunia est; non esse emacem, uectigal est.* b I am neither worried about not having enough, nor wishing for there to be more. c *Diuitiarum fructus est in copia, copiam declarat satietas.* b And I am particularly grateful that this change in me happened at an age naturally predisposed to greediness, and that I am now rid of this disease so common in the old, the most ridiculous of all human follies.

To have enough is wealth; to not want ever more is income. • Cic., Parad., 51

Wealth bears abundance; satisfaction demonstrates abundance. • Cic., Parad., 47

c Pheraulas, who had known both wealth and poverty, found that an increase in wealth did not increase his appetite for eating, drinking, sleeping, and hugging his wife. Like me, he also felt burdened by the weight of managing his money. So he decided to surprise a good friend of his, a poor young man who was chasing after wealth, by giving him all of his, great and overflowing such as it was, as well as all that was added to it everyday by the generosity of his master, Cyrus, and by war. In exchange, he committed to feeding and caring for him responsibly, as a host and a friend. After which they lived very happily and equally satisfied of the change in their condition. Now, that is an arrangement I find very inspiring.

c I also very much admire the choice of an old prelate whom I have watched leaving his money, his income, and his wealth in the care of this or that servant, doing so in such serenity that he spent many quiet years as unconcerned about his affairs as a stranger would be. Trust in the goodness of others truly testifies to the goodness in ourselves. And so God favors it gladly. As for the prelate, I know of no house managed as rightly and carefully as his. Happy are they whose needs are so well adjusted that their wealth meets them without care or worry, and that whatever occupations they take up, more appropriate, more peaceful, and more to their liking is not interrupted by its ebb and flow.

b Affluence and poverty, therefore, depend on each person's opinion. And wealth, glory, and health hold only as much beauty and pleasure as those who possess them lend them. c Each of us is as well or unwell as we think we are. Those who believe themselves to be happy are, not those who are believed to be. In this respect only, belief becomes real and true.

c Fortune is neither good nor bad to us. It offers us only the material and the seed which our mind, stronger than it and sole cause and master of its own happy or unhappy condition, shapes and applies as it sees fit.

b What is taken in from outside acquires taste and color based on what is stored up inside, as clothes warm us not by their heat but by ours which they can keep and sustain. Putting them on something cold would do the same with cold, which is how snow and ice are preserved.

a Just like studying is painful to the lazy, as is sobriety to the drunk, restraint is torture to the self-indulgent, and exercise a bother to the frail and inactive; so it is with the rest. Things are not so painful or difficult in and of themselves. But our weakness and cowardice make them so. For us to judge of great and big things, we need a soul to match, otherwise we find our own faults in them. A straight oar looks crooked in the water. What matters is not only that we see a thing but how we see it.

Now then, tell me why, out of the multitude of reasons that persuade humanity to scorn death and endure pain, can we not find one that works for us? And why, out of all the ideas that have inspired others to do so, do we not each follow the one that suits us best? If we cannot stomach the powerful drug that eradicates the disease, let us at least take the pain killer that soothes us. c *Opinio est quaedam effaeminata ac leuis, nec in dolore magis, quam eadem in uoluptate: qua, cum liquescimus fluimusque mollitia, apis aculeum sine clamore ferre non possumus. Totum in eo est, ut tibi imperes.*

Our thinking is weak and unmanly (not only with respect to pain but pleasure too), when, softened and mollycoddled by ease, we cannot bear the sting of a bee without crying out. Being in control of yourself is everything. • Cic., Tusc., 2.52

a Ultimately, we cannot avoid philosophy by exaggerating human weakness and the harshness of pain. We would only force it to resort to these unbeatable replies: If living in need is bad, at least there is no need to live in need. c No one suffers long but through their own fault. c Those who tolerate neither life nor death, who will neither fight nor run, what can we do with them?

Notes

1 Montaigne is referring to the following sentence from Epictetus's *Enchiridion*: *ταράσσει τοὺς ἀνθρώπους οὐ τὰ πράγματα, ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων δόγματα* ("Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things;" tr. George Long). It is one of the 57 sentences painted on the joists of his library.

2 The Spanish fly (*Lytta vesicatoria*) is a beetle. Males produces cantharidin, a poison.

3 *Narsinga* (*Narsinque* in the sixteenth-century French edition) is what Portuguese historian Jerónimo Osório, the source of this anecdote, calls Vira Narasimha, king of the Vijayanagar empire in South India. The king's name appears to stand in for the name of his empire. Vira Narasimha III reigned from 1505 to 1509.

4 A reference to the oath taken before the battle of Plataea, in 479 BCE, which, according to Lycurgus in *Against Leocrates,* began: *Οὐ ποιήσομαι περὶ πλείονος τὸ ζῆν τῆς ἐλευθερίας* ("I will not hold life dearer than freedom;" tr. J. O. Burtt)

5 Seneca

6 An old, outmoded synonym for *Romani*.

7 In the mid- to late sixteenth century, Spanish hooped skirts, or farthingales (verdugado), were in fashion among wealthy and aristocratic women in Europe. Worn with boned bodices, sometimes referred to in England as *Spanish bodies,* they created a narrow, conical silhouette which Montaigne calls, in French, *un corps bien espaignolé.*

8 Henry III was, briefly, king of Poland before he became king of France in 1575.

9 In the Fall of 1588, around the time of the Estates General of Blois, Montaigne and Marie de Gournay, his "adopted daughter," spent time together at her family home in Picardy. The young woman is likely Marie herself.

10 The king of France could gather representatives of his subjects in an assembly organized according to the three orders (*estates*) of society: nobility, clergy, and commoners. These estates-general were temporary and usually only gave counsel to the king. During the estates-general of 1588, in Blois, King Henry III had Henry of Guise, his rival, assassinated.

11 A silver coin of the Ottoman Empire.

12 The three sons of Montaigne's neighbor and political patron, Germain-Gaston de Foix, died on the same day, in 1587, fighting for the king of Navarre. All three were friends of Montaigne's.

13 Montaigne and his wife, Françoise de la Chassaigne, had six daughters, five of whom died in infancy.

14 Teres I, fifth-century BCE king of Thrace

15 Democritus

16 Aristippus or maybe Crates.

17 Between 1580 and 1581, Montaigne spent 14 months traveling through Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy.

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