

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 20

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) · Last updated on June 18, 2026

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ESSAYS-2-20-20260831-212236

We Taste Nothing Pure

The feebleness of our condition is such that things cannot, in their natural simplicity and purity, fall into our use; the elements that we enjoy are changed, and so 'tis with metals; and gold must be debased with some other matter to fit it for our service.

Neither has virtue, so simple as that which Aristo, Pyrrho, and also the Stoics, made the end of life; nor the Cyrenaic and Aristippic pleasure, been without mixture useful to it.

Of the pleasure and goods that we enjoy, there is not one exempt from some mixture of ill and inconvenience,

*medio de fonte leporum,
Surgit amari aliquid, quod in ipsis floribus angat.*

Our extremest pleasure has some sort of groaning and complaining in it; would you not say that it is dying of pain? Nay, when we frame the image of it in its full excellence, we stuff it with sickly and painful epithets and qualities, languor, softness, feebleness, faintness, *morbidezza*: a great testimony of their consanguinity and consubstantiality.

The most profound joy has more of severity than gaiety, in it. The highest and fullest contentment offers more of the grave than of the merry: *Ipsa felicitas, se nisi temperat, premit.*

Pleasure chews and grinds us; according to the old Greek verse, which says that the gods sell us all the goods they give us; that is to say, that they give us nothing pure and perfect, and that we do not purchase but at the price of some evil.

Labor and pleasure, very unlike in nature, associate, nevertheless, by I know not what natural conjunction.

From the very fountain of our pleasure, something rises that is bitter, which even in flowers destroys. • LUCR., 4.1130

Even felicity, unless it moderate itself, oppresses? • SEN., EP., 74

Socrate says, that some god tried to mix in one mass and to confound pain and pleasure, but not being able to do it; he bethought him at least to couple them by the tail.

Metrodorus said, that in sorrow there is some mixture of pleasure. I know not whether or no he intended anything else by that saying; but for my part, I am of opinion that there is design, consent, and complacency in giving a man's self up to melancholy. I say, that besides ambition, which may also have a stroke in the business, there is some shadow of delight and delicacy which smiles upon and flatters us even in the very lap of melancholy. Are there not some constitutions that feed upon it?

est quædam flere voluptas.

and one Attalus in Seneca says, that the memory of our lost friends is as grateful to us, as bitterness in wine, when too old, is to the palate,

*Minister vetuli, puer, falerni
Inger mi calices amariores*

and as apples that have a sweet tartness.

Nature discovers this confusion to us; painters hold that the same motions and grimaces of the face that serve for weeping; serve for laughter too; and indeed, before the one or the other be finished, do but observe the painter's manner of handling, and you will be in doubt to which of the two the design tends; and the extreme of laughter does at last bring tears: *Nullum sine auctoramento malum est.* When I imagine man abounding with all the conveniences that are to be desired (let us put the case that all his members were always seized with a pleasure like that of generation, in its most excessive height) I feel him melting under the weight of his delight, and see him utterly unable to support so pure, so continual, and so universal a pleasure. Indeed, he is running away whilst he is there, and naturally makes haste to escape, as from a place where he cannot stand firm, and where he is afraid of sinking.

When I religiously confess myself to myself, I find that the best virtue I have has in it some tincture of vice; and I am afraid that Plato, in his purest virtue (I, who am as sincere and loyal a lover of virtue of that stamp as any other whatever), if he had listened and laid his ear close to himself and he did so no doubt — would have heard some jarring note of human mixture, but faint and only perceptible to himself. Man is wholly and throughout but patch and motley.

Even the laws of justice themselves cannot subsist without mixture of injustice; insomuch that Plato says, they undertake to cut off the hydra's head, who pretend to clear the law of all inconveniences. *Omne magnum exemplum habet aliquid ex iniquo, quod contra singulos utilitate publica rependitur,* says Tacitus.

It is likewise true, that for the use of life and the service of public commerce, there may be some excesses in the purity and perspicacity of

'Tis a certain kind of pleasure to weep. • OV., TRI., 4.3.27

Come, boy, you who serve out the old Falernian,¹ fill up stronger cups for me. • CATULL., 27.1

No evil is without its compensation. • SEN., EP., 69

Every great example has in it some mixture of injustice, which recompenses the wrong done to particular men by the public utility, • TAC., ANN., 11.44

our minds; that penetrating light has in it too much of subtlety and curiosity: we must a little stupefy and blunt them to render them more obedient to example and practice, and a little veil and obscure them, the better to proportion them to this dark and earthly life. And therefore common and less speculative souls are found to be more proper for and more successful in the management of affairs, and the elevated and exquisite opinions of philosophy unfit for business. This sharp vivacity of soul, and the supple and restless volubility attending it, disturb our negotiations. We are to manage human enterprises more superficially and roughly, and leave a great part to fortune; it is not necessary to examine affairs with so much subtlety and so deep: a man loses himself in the consideration of many contrary lustres, and so many various forms: *Voluntantibus res inter se pugnantes, obtorpuerant animi.*

'Tis what the ancients say of Simonides, that by reason his imagination suggested to him, upon the question King Hiero had put to him (to answer which he had had many days for thought), several sharp and subtle considerations, whilst he doubted which was the most likely, he totally despaired of the truth.

He who dives into and in his inquisition comprehends all circumstances and consequences, hinders his election: a little engine well handled is sufficient for executions, whether of less or greater weight. The best managers are those who can worst give account how they are so; while the greatest talkers, for the most part, do nothing to purpose; I know one of this sort of men, and a most excellent discourser upon all sorts of good husbandry, who has miserably let a hundred thousand livres yearly revenue slip through his hands; I know another who talks, who better advises than any man of his counsel, and there is not in the world a fairer show of soul and understanding than he has; nevertheless, when he comes to the test, his servants find him quite another thing; not to make any mention of his misfortunes.

Whilst they considered of things so indifferent in themselves, they were astonished, and knew not what to do. • LIVY, 32.20

NOTES

- 1 A popular white wine in ancient Rome.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Ov., Tri.	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>

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Sen., Ep.

Seneca, *Epistles*

Tac., Ann.

Tacitus, *Annals*