

Essays, Book I

Michel de Montaigne

1580

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —Montaigne kept adding to this work. Following most modern editions, the present version uses tags in the following way:

[A]: material in the first edition (1580) or added soon thereafter,

[B]: material added in the greatly enlarged second edition (1588),

[C]: material added in the first posthumous edition (1595) following Montaigne's notes in his own copy.

The tags are omitted where they seem unimportant. The ones that are retained are kept very small to make them neglectable by readers who aren't interested in those details. Sometimes, as on pages 34 and 54, they are crucial. —The footnotes are all editorial. —Contemporary spellings of French words are used in the glossary and in references in the text to the glossary. —In the original, all the quotations from Latin writers are given in Latin.

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Glossary

coutume: Where the *coutume* is social, it is translated as ‘custom’; where it is individual, as ‘habit’, especially in Essay 23.

essai: An *essai* (French) may be a test, or an attempt, or an exercise, or a certain kind of literary production. The last meaning came solely from Montaigne’s way of labelling these ‘attempts’ or ‘exercises’ of his, and occasionally in the text there is some play on the word.

magistrate: In this work, ‘a magistrate’ is any official who applies the law; ‘the magistrate’ of a given nation is its system of such officials.

moeurs: The *moeurs* of a people include their morality, their basic customs, their attitudes and expectations about how people will behave, their ideas about what is decent. . . and so on. This word—rhyming approximately with ‘worse’—is left untranslated because there’s no good English equivalent to it. The Oxford *English* dictionary includes it for the same reason it has for including *Schadenfreude*.

pédant: Montaigne uses this to mean ‘schoolmaster’ much more than to mean what ‘pedant’ does to us, ‘person who parades excessively academic learning [or] insists on strict adherence to formal rules’ (OED). His title for Essay 25 is *Du pédantisme* = ‘On pedantry’, which is seriously misleading because the essay extends beyond •schoolmasters and •pedants to •learned men generally.

prince: Like the English ‘prince’, this in early modern times could refer to any rank up to that of king (or monarch; Queen Elizabeth I referred to herself as a ‘prince’), though the phrase *un Prince ou un Roi* on page 57 seems to belie that. Anyway, *prince* is translated by ‘prince’ throughout.

rêverie: This can be a day-dream, or a fancy, or a straggling thought (page 63) or (perhaps on page 38) a mental set.

science: Translated as ‘branch of learning’ or simply ‘learning’, except in a few cases where those seem stylistically impossible. Then ‘science’ is used, but it never means anything much like ‘science’ in our sense.

To the reader

[A] This is a book written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the start that my only goal here is a private family one. I have not been concerned to serve you or my reputation: my powers are inadequate for that. I have dedicated this book to the private benefit of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as they must do soon) they can find here some outlines of my character and of my temperament, thus keeping their knowledge of me more full, more alive. If I had wanted to seek the favour of the world, I would have decked myself out in borrowed beauties. Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without cunning or artifice, for it is my own self that I am painting. Here, drawn from life, you will read of my defects and my native form so far as respect for social convention allows. If I were among the peoples who are said still to live under the sweet liberty of nature's primal laws, I assure you that I would most willingly have portrayed myself whole, and wholly naked. Thus, reader, I myself am the subject of my book: there is no good reason for you to employ your leisure on such frivolous and vain topic. Therefore, farewell from Montaigne 1.iii.1580

* * * * *

1. We reach the same end by different means

[A] The most common way of softening the hearts of those we have offended, once they have us at their mercy with vengeance in their hand, is to move them to commiseration and pity [C] by our submissiveness. [A] Yet bravery, steadfastness and resolution—flatly contrary means—have sometimes produced the same effect.

Edward Prince of Wales—the one who long governed our Guyenne and whose rank and fortune had many notable marks of greatness—having been offended by the people of Limoges, took their town by force. The lamentations of the townsfolk, the women and the children left behind to be butchered, crying for mercy and throwing themselves at his feet, did not stop him until deep in the town he saw three French noblemen who with incredible bravery were, *alone*,

resisting the thrust of his victorious army. Deference and respect for such remarkable valour at first blunted the spear of his anger; then starting with those three he showed mercy on all the other inhabitants of the town.

Scanderbeg, Prince of Epirus, was pursuing one of his soldiers in order to kill him. The soldier, having tried to appease him by all kinds of submissiveness and supplications, as a last resort resolved to await him, sword in hand. Such resolution stopped his master's fury short; having seen him take such an honourable course he pardoned him. (This episode might be differently interpreted by those who have not read of the prodigious strength and courage of that prince.)

The Emperor Conrad III had besieged Guelph, Duke of Bavaria; no matter how base and cowardly were the satisfactions offered him, the gentlest condition he would grant was to allow the noblewomen who had been besieged with the Duke to come out honourably on foot, with whatever

they could *carry*. They, with greatness of heart, carried out on their shoulders their husbands, their children and the Duke himself. The Emperor took such pleasure at seeing their lovely courage that he wept for joy and quenched all the bitterness of his mortal deadly hatred against the Duke; from then on he treated him and his people kindly.

[B] Both of these means would have swayed me easily, for I have a marvellous weakness towards mercy and clemency—so much so that I would more naturally surrender to compassion than to admiration. Yet for the Stoics pity is a bad emotion: they want us to help the afflicted but not to soften and commiserate with them.

[A] Now, it seems to me that these episodes are made more instructive by the fact that in them souls that have been assaulted and tested by both those methods are seen to resist one without flinching, only to bow to the other.

It could be said that yielding one's soul to pity is an effect of affability, meekness, softness, which is why weaker natures such as those of women, children and the common people are more subject to it, whereas disdaining tears and supplications and then yielding only out of respect for the holy image of valour is the action of a strong, unbending soul that offers its affection and honour only to stubborn, masculine vigour. However, in less lofty souls admiration and amazement can produce a similar effect. Witness the citizens of Thebes, who had impeached their generals on the capital charge of having stayed in their posts beyond the period they had prescribed and preordained for them. Of the two generals,

Pelopidas, bending beneath the weight of such accusations, used only pleas and supplications in his defence; and they could hardly bring themselves to pardon him;

Epaminondas gloriously related the deeds he had

done, and proudly and arrogantly reproached the people with them; and they had no heart for even taking the ballots into their hands; the meeting broke up, greatly praising the man's level of courage.

[C] The elder Dionysius had after long delays and great difficulties captured the town of Rhegium together with its commander Phyton, a fine man who had stubbornly defended it. He resolved to make Phyton a terrible example of vengeance. Dionysius first told him how he had had his son and all his relatives drowned on the previous day. Phyton merely replied that they were one day happier than he was. Next he had him stripped, seized by executioners and dragged through the town while being cruelly and ignominiously flogged, and also being subjected to harsh and shameful insults. But Phyton's heart remained steadfast and he did not give way. On the contrary, with his face set firm he loudly recalled the honourable and glorious cause of his being condemned to death—his refusal to surrender his country into the hands of a tyrant—and threatened Dionysius with prompt punishment from the gods. Dionysius read in the eyes of his army's rank and file that rather than being provoked by the taunts of this vanquished enemy, they were •thunder-struck by such rare valour, •beginning to soften, •wondering whether to mutiny and even to rescue Phyton from the hands of his guards; so he brought Phyton's martyrdom to an end and secretly sent him to be drowned in the sea.

[A] Man is indeed a wonderfully vain, various and wavering thing. It is hard to find a basis for any steady and uniform judgement on him. Look at Pompey pardoning the whole city of the Mamertines, against which he was deeply incensed, because of the valour and great-heartedness of Stheno, a citizen who took all the blame for the public wrong-doing and asked for no other favour than to bear the punishment

for it alone. Then look at the army of Sylla, which showed similar bravery in the city of Praeneste, and gained nothing by that for itself or for the others in the city.

[B] And directly against my first examples, Alexander—the bravest of men and the most generous towards the vanquished—took with great difficulty the town of Gaza. In it he came across Betis who commanded it and of whose courage during the siege Alexander had witnessed amazing proofs; now Betis was alone, deserted by his own men, his weapons shattered; all covered with blood and wounds, he was still fighting inside a cluster of several Macedonians who were slashing at him on every side. Alexander was angered by how dearly won his victory had been (among other set-backs he had received two fresh wounds in his own body); he said to him: ‘You shall not die as you wanted to, Betis; prepare to suffer every kind of torture that can be thought up against a prisoner!’ Betis, with an expression that was not only assured but insolent and haughty, said not a word in reply to these threats. Then Alexander, seeing his stubborn silence said: ‘Has he bent his knee? Has he let a word of entreaty slip out? I will overcome this silence; if I cannot force a word from it I will at least force a groan.’ And as his anger turned to fury he ordered Betis’s heels to be pierced, a rope threaded through them, and had him lacerated and dismembered by being dragged alive behind a cart.

Was it because strength of courage was so natural and usual to him that he was never struck with wonder by it and therefore respected it less? [C] or because he thought it to be so exclusively *his* that he could not bear to see it at such a height in anyone else without anger arising from an emotion of envy? or because the natural surge of his anger swept everything aside?

Truly if his anger could ever have been bridled one would think this would have happened in the capture and sacking of Thebes, at the sight of so many valiant men cruelly put to the sword, men lost and with no remaining means of collective defence. For a good six thousand of them were killed, none of whom was seen to run away or beg for mercy; on the contrary all were seeking through the streets, some here, some there, to confront the victorious enemy and to provoke them into giving them an honourable death. None was seen who wasn’t trying with his last breath to get revenge and—armed with despair—to find consolation for his own death in the death of an enemy. Yet their afflicted valour evoked no pity; a day was not long enough to satisfy Alexander’s desire for vengeance. This slaughter continued until the last drop of blood remained to be spilt; it stopped only at those who were unarmed, old men, women and children, so that 30,000 of them could be taken as slaves.

2. Sadness

[B] I am among those who are most free from this emotion; [C] I neither like it nor respect it, though the world as though by common consent has decided to honour it with special favour. Wisdom is decked out in it—a stupid and monstrous adornment—as are virtue and conscience. . . . The Stoics forbid this emotion to their sages as being base and cowardly.

[The remaining two or three pages of this essay are mostly occupied by reports on episodes of extreme grief, and some of extreme happiness manifested in a similar way. Montaigne winds up the essay thus:] Violent emotions like these have little hold on me. By nature my sense of feeling has a hard skin, which I daily toughen and thicken by arguing with people.

3. Our feelings reach out beyond us

^[B] Those who accuse men of always gaping towards the future, and who teach us to grasp and be satisfied with present goods because we have no grip on what is to come (less indeed than on what is past), touch on the most common of human errors—if we dare describe as an ‘error’ something that nature itself brings to us in the furtherance of its handiwork, ^[C] impressing on us this false idea along with many others, more concerned with how we act than with what we know. ^[B] We are never *at home*; we are always *out* somewhere. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and thoughts about what *is*, in order to preoccupy us with what *will be*—including what will be when we no longer exist. ^[C] ‘Dreadful is the state of a soul that is anxious about the future’ (Seneca).

‘Do what you have to do, and know yourself—this great precept is often cited by Plato; each of its clauses generally takes in our entire duty, and similarly takes in the other clause. Anyone wanting to do what he has to do will see that the first thing he must learn is to know *what he is and what is his*. And whoever does know himself never regards external affairs as his: he loves himself and cultivates himself above all other things; he rejects superfluous occupations and useless thoughts and projects. ‘Just as folly will not be satisfied even when it gets what it wants, so also wisdom is happy with what is to hand and is never vexed with itself [Cicero; Montaigne gives this in French].

[The half-dozen pages of this essay focus on attitudes to people who have died. **(a)** Political orderliness requires that monarchs—even very bad ones—not be judged during their reign, but it is right that ‘what justice could not bring down on *them* can rightly be brought down on their reputations and on the goods of their heirs—things we often prefer to life

itself.’ This practice might even act as a deterrent to potential tyrants. Displeasingly, ancient Sparta went the opposite way, lamenting each royal death and ‘declaring that the dead king was the best they had ever had’. **(b)** Commenting on the saying that no man can be called happy until he has died, Montaigne says that in that case no man can be called happy at all, because you can’t be happy when you don’t exist. **(c)** Several anecdotes illustrating the widespread willingness ‘to project beyond this life the care we have for ourselves, and to believe moreover that divine favours often accompany us to the tomb and extend to our remains’, e.g. carrying a dead king’s bones into battle ‘as though it were fated by destiny that victory should reside in his joints’. **(d)** A weird story about a monarch who never let anyone see him using a toilet = lavatory, and who ‘commanded in his will that linen drawers should be tied on him when he was dead’, to which Montaigne adds ‘He should have added a codicil saying that the man who pulled them on ought to be blindfold!’ The real interest here is in Montaigne’s confession: ‘I myself, so shameless in speech, have nevertheless in my make-up a touch of such modesty: except when strongly moved by necessity or pleasure I rarely let anyone’s eyes see the members or actions that our customs ordain to be hidden. I find this all the more constraining in that I do not think it becoming in a man, above all in one of my profession.’ [Montaigne once did military service, and is here thinking of himself as a soldier.] **(e)** Anecdotes about dying people fussing over their funeral arrangements: wanting them to be grand (‘vanity’), or very inexpensive, which Montaigne also disapproves, citing with approval the philosopher who ‘wisely prescribed that his friends should lay his body where they thought best, and make the funeral neither excessive nor niggardly’. **(f)** In ancient Athens it was a capital offence for a commander to fail to collect his dead soldiers’ bodies for burial, even at the

expense of failing to pursue an advantage against the enemy. Montaigne explodes with anger at this: 'I can almost enter into an implacable hatred against all democratic rule (even though it seems to me to be the most natural and the most fair) when I think of the inhuman injustice of the people of Athens' who executed some military commanders under this rule, without giving them a hearing. He also thinks the rule was stupid: a few years later one of their commanders after winning a sea-battle, 'rather than lose a few dead bodies of his friends floating in the water, allowed to sail away in safety a vast array of living enemies, who later on made them pay dearly for such a grievous superstition'.]

4. How the soul discharges its emotions against false objects when lacking real ones

[A] A local gentleman who is wondrously subject to gout would answer his doctors quite amusingly when asked to give up salted meats entirely. He would say that he liked to have something to blame when tortured by the onslaughts of that illness: the more he yelled out curses against the saveloy or the tongue or the ham, the more relief he felt. Seriously though, when our arm is raised to strike, it pains us if the blow lands nowhere and merely beats the air; similarly, if a prospect is to be made pleasing it must not be dissipated and scattered over an airy void but have some object at a reasonable distance to sustain it. . . .

It seems that the soul too, in the same way, loses itself in itself when shaken and disturbed, unless it is given something to grasp onto; and so we must always provide it with an object to butt up against and to act upon. . . .

[This short essay is devoted to anecdotes illustrating this

theme: episodes in which people tear their hair in grief, flog the ocean in anger, shoot arrows into the sky 'to bring God to his senses', and so on.]

* * * * *

[Essays 5 and 6 concern uses of trickery to achieve military success, with many anecdotes illustrating different attitudes to this in different times and places.]

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7. Our deeds are judged by the intention

[A] 'Death', they say, 'settles all obligations'. I know some who have taken that in a perverse sense. King Henry VII of England made an agreement with Don Felipe, the son of the Emperor Maximilian—or (to place him more honourably) the father of the Emperor Charles V—by which Don Felipe would hand over to him his enemy the Duke of Suffolk. . . .who had fled into hiding in the Low Countries, in exchange for which he promised to make no attempt on the Duke's life. Yet as he lay dying Henry ordered his son in his testament to have the Duke killed as soon as his own death was over.

Recently in the tragedy put on for us by the Duke of Alba with the deaths of Count Horn and Count Egmont [who were both beheaded in 1568], there were many noteworthy events, including this: Count Egmont, on whose faith and assurances Count Horn had put himself into the hands of the Duke of Alba, insistently begged that he be executed first, so that his death should free him from his obligation to Count Horn.

It seems to me that death did not free King Henry from his sworn undertaking, but that Count Egmont was quit of his even before he died. We cannot be held to promises

beyond our power and means. That is why—since we have no power to *achieve* anything, and nothing is *really* in our power but our will—all the rules and duties of man have to be based and established on the will. And so, since Count Egmont held his soul and his will to be in debt to his promise, though it was not in his power to carry it out, he would doubtless have been absolved of his obligation even if he had survived Count Horn. But the King of England, by breaking his word intentionally, cannot be excused just because he put off the act of treachery until after his death—any more than can the mason in Herodotus who loyally kept the secret of the treasures of his master the king of Egypt during his lifetime, only to reveal it to his children on his death-bed.

^[c] I have seen several men in my time, convicted by their conscience of having withheld other men's goods, arrange in their testaments to put things right after they are dead. This does no good: postponing such an urgent matter, or wanting to right wrongs with so little feeling or sacrifice. They owe more of what is *theirs*. The more burdensome and inconvenient their payment is, the more just and deserving is their restitution. Repentance begs for burdens.

Even worse are those who reserve for their dying wish some hate-ridden provision aimed at a near one, having concealed this hatred during their lifetime. They show little regard for their own honour when they stir up hatred against their memory; and even less regard for their conscience, because they have not been able, even out of respect for death, to make their animosities die with them. They are unjust judges, postponing judgement until they can no longer hear the facts of the case.

If I can, I will prevent my death from saying anything that was not first said openly by my life.

8. Idleness

^[A] Just as fallow lands, when rich and fertile, are seen to abound in a hundred thousand different kinds of useless weeds, so that to make them do their duty we must subdue them and keep them busy with seeds chosen for our service; and just as women left alone are seen to produce shapeless lumps of flesh, and need to be fertilised by another seed to produce good natural offspring; so too with our minds. If we do not keep them busy with some definite subject that can serve as a bridle to reign them in, they stamp around uncontrollably, ranging to and fro over the wastelands of our thoughts: ^[B] 'As when ruffled water in a bronze pot reflects the light of the sun and the shining face of the moon, sending shimmers flying high into the air and striking against the panelled ceilings' (Virgil). ^[A] And there is no mad or idle fantasy that they do not produce when that happens: 'They form vain apparitions as in a sick man's dreams' (Horace). When the soul has no definite aim it gets lost, because—as they say—being everywhere is being nowhere. . . .

Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself exclusively, as far as I could, to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately. It seemed to me that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on, since with the passage of time it had become weightier and more mature. But I find—'Idleness always produces wandering thoughts' [Lucan]—that on the contrary it bolts off like a runaway horse, giving itself a hundred times freer rein over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another without order or fitness, that I have started to keep a record of them so as to contemplate at my ease their

stupidity and strangeness, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.

9. Liars

^[A] No-one is less suited than I am to get involved in talking about memory. I can find almost no trace of it in myself; I doubt if any other memory in the world is as grotesquely faulty as mine. All my other abilities are low and ordinary; but where memory is concerned I think I am singular and very rare, worthy of both name and reputation!

^[B] Apart from the natural inconvenience I suffer because of this—^[C] for memory is so necessary that Plato was right to call it a great and mighty goddess—^[B] in my part of the world when they want to say that a man has no sense they say that he ‘has no memory’. When I complain that my memory is defective they reproach me and disbelieve me, as though I were accusing myself of being witless. They see no difference between memory and intelligence. That makes me seem worse than I am.

But they do me wrong. Experience shows us that it is almost the contrary: excellent memories are apt to be associated with weak judgement. They also do me another wrong, taking it that the words that I use to acknowledge that I have this affliction signify *ingratitude*—I who am better at friendship than at anything else! They judge my affection by my memory and turn a natural defect into a deliberate one. ‘He has forgotten’ they say ‘this request or that promise. He has forgotten his friends. He did not remember—even for my sake—to say this, to do that or not to mention something else.’ I certainly do easily forget things, but treating with indifference a charge a friend has entrusted me with—that is something I do not do. Let them be satisfied with my

misfortune without turning it into a kind of malice, the kind that is so greatly the enemy of my character.

I find ways of consoling myself. **First** by the fact that ^[C] a poor memory is an evil that has enabled me to correct a worse one that might easily have arisen in me: *ambition*. A bad memory is an intolerable defect for anyone concerned with worldly affairs.

Also, nature has strengthened other faculties of mine to match the weakening of this one (it does this in other contexts also). If my memory had always kept other people’s discoveries and opinions before me, I would have found it easy to let my intellect and my judgement idle along behind other men’s footsteps without using their own powers.

Then again ^[B] I talk less; for the storehouse of memory contains more stuff than the storehouse of invention. ^[C] (If my memory had stood fast, I would have deafened my friends with my chatter, as the subjects themselves would have stimulated my faculty, such as it is, for arranging and exploiting them, warming up my arguments and leading them on.) ^[B] It is a pity that remembering is easier than thinking. I see this confirmed by some of my closest friends: to the extent that their memory supplies them with the thing as present and entire, they push their narrative further and further back, loading it with so many pointless details that if their story is a good one they smother its quality, and if it is not good you are left cursing either their good memory or their bad judgement.

^[C] Once you are off, it is hard to cut it short and stop talking. Nothing tells you more about a horse’s power than its ability to pull up short. Even among men who are speaking to the point, I have seen some who wanted to stop their gallop but did not know how to do so. While looking for a way to stop, they stumble on like men fainting from weakness. Especially dangerous are old men who

remember the past but do not remember having told you about it already. I have seen several amusing tales become boring in one nobleman's mouth because his listeners have had their fill of it a hundred times already.

^[B] A **second** consolation ·for having a bad memory· is that. . . I remember less any insults received. ^[C] I would need a prompter, as Darius did: so as not to forget an insult suffered at the hands of the Athenians he made a page intone three times in his ear, every time he came to sit at table: 'Sire, remember the Athenians.' ^[B] And when I revisit books and places they always smile at me with a fresh newness.

^[A] There is truth in the saying that someone who does not feel his memory to be strong enough has no business lying. I am well aware that grammarians distinguish *telling an untruth* from *lying*; they assert that 'to tell an untruth' is to say something false that one takes to be true, and that the definition of the Latin *mentiri* [= 'to lie'], which our French *mentir* comes from, implies going against one's conscience, which restricts it to those who say something that conflicts with what they know—and they are the ones I am talking about.

Now, a liar either •makes up a story out of the whole cloth or •takes something true and disguises and spoils it. In the latter case you can normally hobble the liar by making him tell the same tale several times over. Since the real facts were lodged in his memory first and were printed there by means of awareness and knowledge, it is hard for those facts not to spring to his mind and dislodge the falsehoods, which cannot gain such a settled and firm a footing there; hard too for the details as he first learned them not to make him—by continually flowing into his mind—lose all memory of the false additions and distortions.

When the whole thing has been made up, the liar might seem to have less reason to be afraid of getting things wrong

because there is ·in his mind· no counter-impression to clash with his falsehoods. Yet even here the lie is an empty thing that is hard to get a grip on, and can easily slip out of any but a very strong memory.

^[B] Experience has often shown me this, amusingly, at the expense of men whose profession requires them always to make their speech fit whatever business is being negotiated at the time, and to please the great ones with whom they are speaking. The details for which they are prepared to sacrifice their honour and their conscience are apt to change, and their words must vary accordingly. They have to call one thing first grey then yellow, saying one thing to this man and another to another. If the persons who receive such contrary reports happen to compare their haul, what becomes of this fine ·diplomatic· art?

Apart from that, they very often imprudently betray themselves; for what memory could ever suffice for them to remember all the various shapes they have given to the same subject? I have seen several of my contemporaries hankering after a *reputation* for this fine sort of prudence; they don't see that if the reputation is there, the effect cannot be!

Lying is truly an accursed vice. It is only our words that bind us together and make us human. If we realised the horror and gravity of lying we would send liars to the stake—more justly than other criminals. I find that people normally waste time quite inappropriately punishing children for innocent faults, tormenting them for thoughtless actions that lead nowhere and leave no trace. It seems to me that the only faults we should vigorously attack as soon as they arise and start to develop are •lying and, just behind that, •obstinacy of opinion. Those faults grow with the child; once let the tongue set off on this wrong track and it is astonishing how impossible it is to call it back. That is why

some otherwise decent men are abject slaves to it. . . .

We would be in better shape if a lie, like truth, had only one face, for we could take as certain the opposite of what the liar said. But the reverse side of truth has a hundred thousand shapes and a limitless field. The Pythagoreans make good to be certain and finite; evil they make infinite and uncertain. A thousand directions miss the bull's-eye; one goes straight to it.

I am not sure that I could bring myself to tell a solemn and shameless lie, even to ward off some obvious and immense danger. One of the old Church Fathers says that a dog we do know is better company than a man whose language we do not know. 'Just as any foreigner is not fully human' [Pliny]. How much less companionable the language of falsehood is than silence!

[After a wearily long anecdote about a king's exposure of a lying ambassador by tangling him in his inconsistencies, Montaigne offers this shorter one to the same effect:]

Pope Julius II sent an ambassador to the King of England to rouse his animosity against King Francis. The ambassador having been heard out, the King of England in his reply dwelt on the difficulties he could see in making all the preparations needed for waging war against such a powerful monarch, and cited some of the reasons. The ambassador answered, most inappropriately, that he too had thought of these and had pointed them out to the Pope. These words were so different from the case he had just put forward, which was to urge the English to go headlong into war, that the King of England began to suspect (what he later found to be actually true) that the private inclinations of the ambassador leaned towards the French. The Pope, being informed of this, confiscated his property and the man nearly lost his life.

10. Prompt or slow speech

[A] 'Never to all men were all graces given' [La Boétie]. So we see that in the case of eloquence some have such a prompt facility and such ease in 'getting it out' (as they say) that they are ready at every turn; others, slower, never speak without thinking and working it all out beforehand.

In the spirit in which ladies are advised to take up sports and physical exercises that show off their charms, if I had to give advice relating to these two aspects of eloquence—which seems in our time to be mainly the province of preachers and lawyers—I would advise the slow man that he would do better as a preacher and the other man that he would do better as a lawyer. The preacher's duties allow him as much time as he wishes to make things ready, and in his sermon he runs an uninterrupted race in a straight line; whereas the lawyer's needs can require him to enter the fray at a moment's notice; and the unforeseeable replies of the opposite party can throw him off his stride into a situation where a new decision has to be made as he goes.

Yet in the meeting between Pope Clement and King Francis at Marseilles the reverse applied. Monsieur Poyet, a man whose whole life had been nurtured at the bar and who was highly regarded, had the duty of making the oration before the Pope; he had given it long thought and was said to have brought it from Paris already prepared; but on the very day that it was to be delivered the Pope (fearing that something in it might give offence to the other princes' [see Glossary] ambassadors who were in attendance) notified the king of the topic that seemed to him most proper to that time and place, which happened to be totally different from the one Monsieur Poyet had toiled over; so his oration was now useless and he had to be quickly ready with another. But as he realised that he was incapable of doing that, Cardinal du

Bellay had to take on the task.

[B] The lawyer's work is harder than the preacher's, and yet in France at least we can find more passable lawyers, in my opinion, than passable preachers.

[A] It seems to be the special feature of *l'esprit* [the mind, here = 'the intellect'] that it acts readily and quickly, while the special feature of the judgement is that it is slow and poised. But •the man who is struck dumb if he has no time to prepare his speech and •the man who cannot profit by the advantage of more time and speak better are equally abnormal cases. They say that •the ancient orator• Severus Cassius spoke better when he had not thought about it beforehand; that he owed more to fortune than to hard work; that he profited from being interrupted; that his opponents were afraid of provoking him, for fear that anger would make him redouble his eloquence.

I know from experience this kind of character that cannot bear intense and laborious preparation, that cannot go anywhere worth going unless it runs along gaily and freely. We say that some books 'stink of lamp-oil' because of the harshness and roughness that are stamped by *work* on writings that have involved a lot of it. But in addition to that the anxiety to do well, and the tension in the soul that is unduly bent and strained towards its purpose, make the soul inoperative—like water that is rushing so fast and so abundantly that it cannot find its way through an open outlet.

One aspect of the character I am speaking of is that it wants to be roused and warmed up by events that are external, immediate, and fortuitous. Leave it to act by itself and it will merely drag along languidly. Its life and its grace consist in activity. (It does not want to be driven and spurred on by strong passions such as Cassius's too-violent anger; it wants to be not jolted but drawn out.)

[B] I have little control over my faculties and my moods. Chance plays a greater part in all this than I do. The occasion, the company, the very sound of my voice, draw from my mind more than I find in it when I draw from it without outside help.

[A] Thus spoken words are worth more than written ones—if a choice can be made between things of no value.

[C] Something else that happens in my case: I do not find myself in the place where I look; I find myself more by chance encounter than by searching my judgement. I will have tossed off something subtle as I write—

I mean, of course, something that would be dull in others, sharp in me. Enough of these courtesies! Anyone who says such things is speaking by the standard of *his* abilities

—then later I'll have so completely lost it that I do not know what I meant to say; and sometimes someone else rediscovers my meaning before I do. If I took my razor to every passage where that happened, there would be nothing left. The chance encounter may recur, making what I wrote clearer than the noon-day sun; and that will make me astonished at my former hesitations.

11. Prognostications

[A] As for oracles, it is certain that they had begun to lose their credit well before the coming of Jesus Christ, because we see Cicero labouring to find the cause of their decline.

[Then a couple of pages about supposed methods of foretelling the future, especially ones based on the entrails of sacrificial animals. Montaigne quotes various writers who were sceptical about these, and adds his own scepticism:]

[B] I would rather order my affairs by the outcome of throwing

dice than by such fanciful nonsense. [C] And indeed in all republics a good share of authority has been left to chance. Plato, freely drawing up his constitution as he pleased, left many important decisions to lots. . . .

[B] I know people who study and annotate their almanacs, citing their authority in current events. But almanacs say so much that they are bound to tell both truth and falsehood. [C] As Cicero wrote: ‘Who can shoot all day without striking the target occasionally?’ [B] I think none the better of them when I see them sometimes happen to hit the truth; there would be more certainty in it if it were the rule that they always lied. [C] Besides, no-one keeps a record of their mistakes, because there are so many of them and they are so ordinary; and their correct divinations are made much of because they are rare, incredible, and prodigious.

[C] When Diagoras ‘the Atheist’ (as they called him) was in Samothrace, he was shown many vows and votive portraits from those who have survived shipwreck and was asked, ‘You who think that the gods are indifferent to human affairs, what do you say about so many men saved by their grace?’, and he replied: ‘There are no portraits here of the much larger number of those who drowned!’ Cicero says that among all the philosophers who believed in gods only Xenophanes of Colophon tried to eradicate all forms of divination. This makes it less surprising that we have [B] seen some of our princely souls linger on this empty nonsense, occasionally to their disadvantage.

[C] I would like to have seen with my own eyes those two marvels: •the book of Joachim, the Calabrian abbot, which predicted all the future popes, their names and appearance; and •that of the Emperor Leo, which predicted the emperors and patriarchs of Greece. I *have* seen with my own eyes men who were stunned by their fate in our civil disturbances

resorting, as to any superstition, to searching in books about the heavens for ancient threats and causes of their ills. They have been so strangely successful in this, in my days, that they have convinced me that (since this is a pastime for sharp minds with time to kill) those who are skilled in the subtle art of wrapping and unravelling would be able to find whatever they want in any piece of writing. But their odds of success are especially favoured by the obscure, ambiguous, fantastical language of prophetic jargon, to which their authors give no clear meaning, so that posterity can give them any meaning it chooses.

[B] The daemon of Socrates was perhaps a certain thrust of the will that presented itself to him without advice from his reason. In a soul like his, well purified and prepared by the continual exercise of wisdom and virtue, it is likely that such inclinations, though [C] intrusive and undigested, were significant and worthy to be followed. Everyone detects in himself signs of such stirrings of a prompt, vehement, accidental opinion. It is open to me to allow them some authority, to me who allow little enough to our prudence! And I have had some—as weak in reason as they were yet violent in persuasion (or in dissuasion, which was more common in Socrates’ case)—[B] by which I have allowed myself to be swept along so usefully and so successfully that they could have been judged to contain something of divine inspiration.

12. Constancy

[A] There is no law of resolution and constancy that forbids us to protect ourselves, as far as we can, from the evils and troubles that threaten us, and (therefore) none that forbids us to fear that they may spring upon us. On the

contrary, all honourable means of protecting oneself from evils are not only permissible; they are praiseworthy. The role of constancy consists chiefly in standing firm under misfortunes for which there is no remedy. So there is no bodily agility or handling of weapons that we judge wrong if it serves to protect us from the blow that is struck at us.

[C] Many very warlike nations used flight as a principal resource in their armed encounters; they were more dangerous with their backs turned towards the enemy than when they faced him. The Turks retain something of this.

Socrates in Plato mocks Laches for defining fortitude as 'standing firm in line against the enemy'. 'What!' he says, 'would it be cowardice to beat them by giving ground?' And he cites Homer who praises Aeneas for knowing when to flee. And when Laches, on thinking it over, allows that the Scythians did use that method as do cavalrymen in general, Socrates goes on to cite the example of the infantry of Sparta, a nation trained above all to fight standing their ground: being unable break open the Persian phalanx in the battle of Plataea they decided to disengage and fall back so that the Persians, thinking they were in full flight, would break up their dense formation in pursuing them. By which means the Spartans obtained the victory. . . .

[A] However, in cannonades, once a man is in the direct line of fire (as often happens in a battle), it is unbecoming for him to duck or dodge in fear of a cannon-ball, all the more so as it is thought that cannon-balls have such force and speed that they cannot be avoided. There are many cases of soldiers shielding behind their arms or ducking their heads and at least providing their comrades with a laugh.

Yet in the expedition that the Emperor Charles V led against us in Provence, when the Marquis de Guast went to reconnoitre the city of Arles and suddenly appeared from behind a windmill under cover of which he had made his

advance, he was spotted by the seigneur de Bonneval and the seneschal d'Aginois who were strolling along the top of the city's amphitheatre. They pointed him out to the seigneur de Villier, head of the artillery, who aimed a culverin so accurately that if the Marquis had not seen the fuse being lit and jumped aside it was thought he would have been struck in the body. Similarly a few years before, when Lorenzo de' Medici (the Duke of Urbino and the father of our Queen Mother) was laying siege to Mondolfo, a fortress in Italy in the territory they call the Vicariate, he saw fire applied to a cannon pointing right at him and ducked; luckily for him, for otherwise the shot, which only grazed the top of his head, would have certainly struck him in the chest.

To tell the truth, I do not believe that these movements are deliberate; for in such a sudden matter how can you judge whether the aim is high or low? It is easier to believe that they were *lucky* in their fear, and that another time this would have been as good a way to throw oneself into the path of the shot as to avoid it.

[B] I cannot help jumping if, in a place where I would not have expected this, the shattering sound of an arquebus suddenly strikes my ear; I have seen that happen to better men than I am. [C] Not even the Stoics claim that their sage can resist visual stimuli or ideas when they first come upon him; they concede that it is part of man's natural condition that he should become tense and pale when there is a loud noise in the heavens or a building collapses. Likewise for the other passions, provided that his thoughts remain sound and secure, that the seat of his reason is not spoiled in any way, and that he does not *assent* to his fright and suffering. As for anyone who is not a sage, the first part applies to him but not the second. For in his case the impress of the emotions does not remain on the surface but penetrates through to the seat of his reason, infecting and corrupting

it; he judges by his emotions and conforms to them ·in his actions·. Here, very fully and elegantly, is the state of the Stoic sage: ‘His mind remains unmoved; the tears all useless flow.’ [Virgil]

The Aristotelian sage is not exempt from emotional upsets, but he moderates them.

13. Ceremonial at the meeting of kings

[A] No topic is too minor to deserve a place in this mish-mash.

Our normal rules lay down that it would be a marked discourtesy towards an equal and even more so towards one of the great if you failed to be at home after he had advised you that he planned to pay you a visit. Indeed Queen Margaret of Navarre took this further: she said that it would be impolite for a nobleman to leave his house even (as is frequently done) to go and meet the visitor, no matter how grand he may be; that it is more civil and more respectful to wait to receive him when he does arrive, if only because you might miss him on way; and that ·for the demands of civility· it suffices if you accompany him when he takes his leave.

[B] As for me, I often neglect both these trivial duties, just as I reduce formality as far as I can in my home. Someone takes offence: what of it? It is better to offend him once than to offend myself daily—that would be perpetual! What good do we do in fleeing from the slavery of the court if we drag it back into our lairs?

[A] Another common rule governing all gatherings is that the lesser participants should arrive at the appointment first because it is the privilege of the more prominent to keep others waiting. Yet at the meeting arranged between Pope Clement and King Francis at Marseilles, the King after

making the necessary arrangements withdrew from the town, allowing the Pope two or three days to arrive and rest before the King returned to find him. Similarly with the entry of Pope and Emperor into Bologna: the Emperor arranged for the Pope to be there first, himself arriving afterwards. It is the normal courtesy, they say, when princes [see Glossary] such as these arrange a conference that the greatest should arrive at the appointed place before all the others, and even before the person on whose territory the meeting takes place. They look at it this way: it is a way of showing that it is the greater whom the lesser are coming to visit: they call on him, not he on them.

[C] Not only each country but each city and each profession has its own particular forms of politeness. From childhood I was quite carefully trained in these and have lived in sufficiently good company not to be ignorant of the rules of our French civility: I could even teach it. I like to follow those rules, but not so timidly that they constrict my daily life. Some forms of politeness are bothersome; there is no disgrace in *not* following them, provided this is done by discretion and not through ignorant mistake. I have often seen men *rude* from an excess of politeness, *pushy* with courtesies.

Still, the knowledge of social dexterity is very useful knowledge. Like grace and beauty, it smooths the beginnings of fellowship and intimacy; as a result it opens the way •to our learning from the examples of others and •to ourselves producing and showing our own example, if it is worth noting and passing on.

14. That the taste of goods and evils depends largely on our opinion of them

^[A] Men, says an old Greek maxim, are tormented by their opinions of things and not by the things themselves. If this could be proved to be universally true, that would be an important point gained for alleviating our wretched human condition. For if evils can enter us only through our judgement, it seems that it would be in our power either to despise them or to deflect them towards the good. If the things themselves are at our disposal, why do we not dominate them or manipulate them to our advantage? If what we call 'evil' and 'torment' is neither evil nor torment in itself but only insofar as our fancy endows it with that quality, then it is for us to change it. And if we have such a choice and are free from constraint—if fortune simply provides the matter, leaving it to us to give it form—we are weirdly crazy to pull in the direction that hurts us most, giving to sickness, poverty or insolence a bad and bitter taste when we could give them a pleasant one. Well, let us see whether this can be maintained:

- what we call evil is not evil in itself
or (this being really the same)
- whatever it is, it's up to us to give it a different flavour,
a different look.

If the original essence of the things we fear had the power to lodge itself within us by its own authority, it would lodge alike in all men; for men are all of one kind, and their tools and instruments for thinking and judging are all the same except for differences of degree. But the diversity among our opinions regarding those things shows clearly that they enter us only by *interacting with* us: one man may lodge them within himself in their true essence but a thousand others let them in with a new and contrary essence.

We regard **death**, **poverty** and **pain** as our main enemies. Now, this death that some call the most horrible of horrible things—who does not know that others call it the only shelter from this life's torments, nature's sovereign blessing, the only support of our freedom, the common and ready cure for all ills? Some await it trembling and afraid: others ^[C] bear it more easily than life. ^[B] One man complains that death is too available: 'Death, would that you scorned to take the coward's life, and came only to valour!' [Lucan]

But let us set aside such boasting valour. Theodorus replied to Lysimachus who was threatening to kill him, 'What an achievement, matching the force of a poisonous fly!' Most of the philosophers either deliberately went to meet death or else hastened and helped it along. ^[A] And how many common people we see being led forth to die—and not a simple death but one mixed with disgrace and grievous torments—showing such assurance (some out of stubbornness, others from a natural simplicity) that no difference from their normal behaviour can be seen: they settle their family affairs and commend themselves to those they love, singing, preaching and addressing the crowd—indeed even including a few jokes and drinking the health of their acquaintances every bit as well as Socrates did. [Montaigne now presents a series of anecdotes illustrating death being taken relatively lightly. In some condemned men make jokes. In others they decline offers to spare them from execution in return for their marrying someone who has a limp or an ugly face. Also:] When King Louis XI took Arras, many of the citizens let themselves be hanged rather than cry 'Long live the King!'

^[C] Even today in the kingdom of Narsinga the wives of their priests are buried alive with their dead husbands. All other wives are burned alive at their husbands' funeral, not only with fortitude but with gaiety. And when their dead king is burned, all his wives and concubines, his

favourites, and all sorts of officials and servants—a whole people in themselves—run so lightly towards the fire to throw themselves into it with their master that they seem to hold it an honour to be his comrades in death.

[There follow three episodes in which professional comedians joke on their death-beds. Then:]

[A] During our recent wars in Milan with so many captures and recaptures, the people became weary of so many changes of fortune and firmly resolved to die—so firmly that I have heard my father say that he saw a count made of 25 heads of family who took their own lives in a week. . . .

[C] Any opinion is powerful enough for somebody to hold onto it at the cost of his life. In the fine oath that Greece swore and kept in the war against the Medes, the first article was that each man would rather exchange life for death than exchange his country's laws for Persian ones. In the wars of the Turks and the Greeks how many men can be seen accepting a cruel death rather than renouncing circumcision for baptism! An example of which no sort of religion is incapable.

[Montaigne now tells a story about Jews exiled from Castile, given temporary refuge in Portugal, and then faced with a royal decree giving them a choice between •brutal and poverty-stricken exile, •converting to Christianity, and •having their children taken away and brought up as Christians. After a page of this, he brings it around to his present topic.] This is said to have produced a dreadful spectacle: the natural love between fathers and children together with their zeal for their ancient faith rebelling against this harsh decree. It was common to see fathers and mothers killing themselves or (an even harsher example) in love and compassion putting their little children out of reach of the law by throwing them into wells. The remainder, when the stipulated time for their exile had run out, could do nothing but return to slavery.

Some became Christians: even today, a century later, few Portuguese are sure of their sincerity or their descendants', though custom and the passage of time are much more powerful counsellors than any other compulsion. Cicero says: 'How often have not only our generals but entire armies charged to certain death!'

[B] I have seen one of my close friends rush towards death with real feeling. He was bound to this by several lines of argument that I could not weaken in his mind; for no apparent reason he seized with a fierce hunger on the first death that came his way crowned with a gleam of honour.

[A] In our own time we have many examples of people—even children—killing themselves for fear of some slight setback. Something one of the ancients said is relevant here: 'What shall we not go in fear of if we fear what cowardice itself has chosen for its refuge?' If I were to *list* the people of both sexes and of social ranks and schools of thought who even in happier times have awaited death with constancy or have willingly sought it—

- to fly from the ills of this life or merely
- to fly from a sense of having had enough of life, or
- in the hope of a better condition elsewhere

—I would never complete the list. The number of them is so infinite that in fact it would be an easier task to list those who *did* fear death. So just this one. The philosopher Pyrrho was on a ship during a mighty storm; he tried to put courage into those whom he saw to be most terrified by pointing out a pig that was there, quite unconcerned with the storm. Will we then venture to say that the benefit of reason—which we celebrate so highly and on account of which we see ourselves as the masters and emperors of all creation—was placed in us for our torment? What good is the knowledge of things if by it we lose the calm and repose we would enjoy without it, and if it makes our condition worse than that of Pyrrho's

pig? Intelligence was given us for our greater good; shall we use it to bring about our downfall, fighting against the plan of nature and the universal order of things which requires each man to use his faculties and resources for his own advantage?

Very well, someone will tell me, your rule holds for **death**, but what will you say about **poverty**? And what will you say about **pain**, which. . . the majority of sages judge to be the ultimate evil? And those who denied this in words accepted it in practice. Possidonius was extremely tormented by an acutely painful illness; Pompey went to see him and apologised for having picked such a bad time for hearing him talk about philosophy: 'God forbid', said Possidonius, 'that pain should gain such a hold over me as to hinder me from talking about it.' And he launched into this very topic, contempt for pain. But pain played its part and kept pressing on him. At which he cried 'Pain, do your worst! I will never say you are an evil!' This anecdote that they make so much of—what does it imply about contempt for pain? He is arguing only about the word. If those stabbing pangs do not trouble him, why does he interrupt what he is saying? Why does he think it is a big achievement not to call pain an evil?

This is not all a matter of imagination. We also have relevant beliefs that are based on definite knowledge. Our very senses are judges of that: 'If they are not true then all reason is false' [Lucretius]. Are we to make our skin believe that the lash is merely tickling it? or make our palate believe that 'bitter' aloes is sweet wine? In this matter, Pyrrho's pig is one of us: it has indeed no fear of death, but beat it and it squeals and tries to get away. Are we to go against the natural characteristic that can be seen in every living creature under heaven, the characteristic of trembling when in pain? The very trees seem to shudder beneath the axe.

Becoming dead is instantaneous; it is something we are aware of ·not through experience but· only through reasoning. 'It was or it will be; there is nothing of the present in it' [La Boétie]; 'There is less pain in death than in waiting for it' [Ovid]. A thousand beasts, a thousand men, are dead before they are threatened. In truth, **what we say** we chiefly fear in death is what usually precedes it: pain.

[C] Still, if we are to believe a holy Father, 'Death is no evil unless what follows it is' [Augustine]. And I say, still more probably, neither what precedes death nor what follows it has anything to do with death itself. ·In **what we say**· we are making false excuses. I find from experience that our inability to stand the thought of dying is what makes us unable to stand pain, and that we suffer twice as grievously from pain that threatens us with death. But as reason accuses our cowardice of fearing something so momentary, so inevitable, so imperceptible as death is, we seize upon a more excusable pretext. We do not put on the danger list any painful ailment that involves no danger but the pain itself. Toothache and gout, however painful, are not fatal—so who counts them as illnesses?

Now, let us suppose that ·**what we say** is true, and that· where dying is concerned we are chiefly concerned with the pain, [A] just as in poverty there is nothing to fear except its delivering us into the hands of pain by the thirst, hunger, cold, heat and sleepless nights that it makes us suffer.

Thus, let us deal only with pain. I grant people that pain is the worst thing that can happen to us. I say this willingly because of all men in the world I am the most hostile to pain and the most avoidant of it, the more so because I have had little acquaintance with it, thank God. But it lies within us not to eliminate pain but at least to lessen it by patience [= 'by putting up with it calmly'] and, even if the body is disturbed by it, by keeping our soul and our reason in good trim.

If this were not so, what could have brought us to respect manly courage, valour, fortitude, greatness of soul and determination? What role would they play if there were no pain to defy? ‘Courage is hungry for danger’ [Seneca]. If we do not have to

- sleep rough,
- endure in full armour the midday sun,
- make a meal of horseflesh or donkey,
- watch as they slice us open to extract a bullet from between our bones,
- allow ourselves to be stitched up again, cauterized and probed,

what will give us the superiority that we wish to have over the common herd? Fleeing evil and pain is a far cry from what the sages say, ·namely· that between equally good actions the one that involves more trouble is the one that it is more desirable to perform. ^[C] ‘For people are happy not in gaiety, sensuality, laughter, or in joking (the comrade of levity), but often in sadness through firmness and constancy’ [Cicero]. ^[A] That is why it has been impossible to convince our forebears that conquests made by force of arms with the risks of war were not more advantageous than those achieved quite safely by intrigues and plotting: ‘Whenever virtue costs us dear, our joy is greater’ [Lucan].

Furthermore, it ought to console us that in the course of nature if pain is violent it is short; if it is long, it is light. . . . You will not feel it for long if you feel it grievously: it will put an end to itself or—the same thing—put an end to you. ^[C] If you find it unbearable, it will bear you away. ‘Remember that the greatest pains are ended by death, the small ones are only intermittent, and we are masters of the moderate ones: if they are bearable we shall bear them; if they are not, we shall leave our life as we leave the theatre if the play does not please us’ [Cicero].

^[A] What causes us to endure pain so poorly is that we are not accustomed to finding our principal happiness in the soul—^[C] not concentrating enough on this one supreme mistress of our condition and our conduct. The body has only one way of moving and one posture, apart from differences of degree. The soul is diversified into all sorts of forms; it takes bodily sensations and everything else that happens to it and shapes them ·to fit· itself and whatever current state it is in. That is why we must study it, inquire into it, and call its all-powerful springs into action. No reason, power, or command can override its inclination and its choice. Out of the thousands of attitudes at its disposal, let us give it one that is conducive to our peace and preservation, and then we are not only sheltered from harm but, if it pleases the soul, gratified and flattered by harms and ills. The soul profits from everything, without distinction. Errors and dreams serve it usefully, being suitable stuff to give us security and contentment.

It is easy to see that what makes pain and pleasure keen in us is the sharpness of our mind. The beasts, which keep the mind on a leash, leave it to their bodies to have their feelings which, being free and untutored, are nearly the same in all species, as we can see from the similarity of their reactions. If we did not interfere with the jurisdiction that our bodies have in such matters, it is to be believed that we would be better off and that nature has given our bodies a just and measured temperance towards pleasure and towards pain. Being equal and common to all, it cannot fail to be just. But since we have freed ourselves from nature’s rules and given ourselves over to the vagabond liberty of our imaginations, let us at least help them to turn in the most agreeable direction.

Plato is afraid of our hard bondage to pain and to pleasure because it too firmly shackles the soul to the body; I on the contrary ·fear it· because it detaches and unbinds the soul

from the body.

[A] Just as the enemy becomes fiercer when we retreat, so pain swells with pride when it sees us tremble under it. It will settle for better terms with anyone who stands up to it. We must brace ourselves against it. By backing away in retreat we beckon it on, drawing on ourselves the collapse we are threatened by. [C] As the body is firmer against attacks when it is tense, so is the soul.

[A] But let us to come to examples (which are the right quarry for people with weak backs, like me) in which we shall find that it is with pain as with ·precious· stones that take on brighter or duller colours according to the leaf on which they are lying, and that it occupies only as much space in us as we make for it. Saint Augustine says ‘They suffered to the extent that they gave in to pain’. We feel more from one cut of the surgeon’s scalpel than from ten sword-cuts in the heat of battle. The pains of childbirth are reckoned to be great by doctors and by God himself, and we surround them with so many ceremonies; yet there are whole nations that take no account of them.

[Montaigne now embarks on several pages of anecdotes illustrating this. •Women who have silently given birth to children and then gone straight back to work. •Spartan boys who endured terrible pains without change of facial expression. •Someone who burned much of his arm off, to show that he could be trusted. •Men who laughed or read books while being tortured to death. •Women who do painful and dangerous things to themselves to improve their appearance. •Men and women who inflict pain on themselves as an act of piety. Most of this is [A] first-edition material. Then we get [C] something that doesn’t concern pain:]

[C] With calm faces, betraying no signs of grief, Quintus Maximus buried his son the consul, Marcus Cato buried his son the praetor elect, and Lucius Paulus both of his sons

within a few days of each other. . . . I myself have lost two or three children (though before they were weaned), not without grief but without brooding over it. Yet hardly anything that can happen to men cuts them more to the quick. I have seen plenty of other misfortunes that commonly cause great affliction but which I would hardly notice if they happened to me—and when they have done so I have been contemptuous of them, ones that people in general regard as so hideous that I would not venture to boast in public of my indifference to them without blushing. ‘From which we may learn that grief lies not in nature but opinion’ [Cicero].

[B] Opinion is a powerful performer, bold and immoderate. Who was ever as hungry for security and repose as Alexander and Caesar were for insecurity and hardships? Teres, the father of Sitalces, used to say that when he was not waging war he felt that there was no difference between him and his stable-boy.

[C] When Cato the consul sought to secure a number of Spanish towns, many of their citizens killed themselves simply because he forbade them to bear arms: ‘a fierce race for whom life without arms was not life’ [Cicero].

[B] How many we know of who have fled from the sweetness of a calm life at home among their friends in order to undergo the horrors of uninhabitable deserts, throwing themselves into humiliation, degradation and the contempt of the world, and have enjoyed these and even sought them out!

Cardinal Borromeo who recently died in Milan was surrounded by debauchery; everything incited him to it: his rank, his immense wealth, the atmosphere of Italy, and his youth; yet his way of life was so austere that the same garment served him winter and summer; he slept only on straw; any time left over after the duties of his office he spent on his knees studying, with a little bread and water beside his book—the only food he took and the only time he took it.

I know some who have knowingly derived profit and advancement from cuckoldry—the mere name of which terrifies so many people.

If sight is not the most necessary of our senses it is at least the most pleasurable; but the most useful and pleasurable of bodily parts are those that serve to beget us. Yet plenty of people have had a mortal hatred for them just because they are so likable; they rejected them because of their value and worth. The man who plucked out his own eyes held the same opinion about *them*.

^[C] An abundance of children is a blessing for the commonest and healthiest sort of men; for me and for some others it is an equal blessing not to have any. And when Thales is asked why he does not get married, he replies that he does not want to leave any descendants.

That our opinion is what gives things their value is seen by the many things that we evaluate while attending not to *them* but only to ourselves. We consider neither their qualities nor their uses but only what it cost us to procure them—as if that were a part of their substance. What we call their ‘value’ is not what they bring but what we bring to them. A propos of that, I note that we are careful accountants of our expenditure. Our value for a thing is tied to what it cost us, and our opinion will never let it be undervalued. The purchase ·price· gives value to the diamond, difficulty to virtue, pain to piety, and bitterness to medicine.

^[B] To achieve **poverty** one man threw his money into the same sea that others ransack to fish out riches. Epicurus says that wealth changes our troubles but does not lessen them. Indeed it is not want that produces avarice but abundance. I want to report my experience in this matter.

(i) Since I left childhood I have lived in three kinds of situation. Through the first period (which lasted nearly twenty years) I had only a sporadic income, dependent on

the orders of other people and on their help, with no security and no rules. I spent my money all the more easily and cheerfully because it was at the hazard of fortune. I have never lived better. I never found my friends’ purses closed to me, since I had instructed myself to put first among all my needs the need to pay back loans on the agreed date. Seeing the efforts I made to do this, my friends extended the terms a thousand times; so I repaid them with a thrifty honesty that was not quite straightforward. It is in my nature to get a sensuous pleasure from paying my debts, as though I were freeing my shoulders from a burdensome weight and from the image of slavery that goes with it; and there is also a gentle satisfaction in doing the right thing and in satisfying others. I make an exception for repayments that involve haggling and bargaining; if I cannot find someone to take charge of them for me I shamefully and harmfully put off such payments as long as I can, for fear of the sort of quarrel that is totally incompatible with my temperament and my way of speaking. There is nothing I hate like bargaining. It is a pure exchange of trickery and effrontery: after an hour of arguing and haggling, each side goes back on his word and his oaths to gain five sous more. So I was always at a disadvantage in borrowing; having no heart to make my request in person, I ran the risk of applying on paper—an approach that is not forceful and makes refusal much easier. Arrangements for my needs I consigned light-heartedly to the stars—more freely than I have since consigned them to my own foresight and good sense.

Most thrifty people regard living in such uncertainty as horrible, not realising **(a)** that most people do live like that. How many honourable men have thrown all their security overboard, and still do so every day, seeking the wind of royal favour and of fortune! Caesar took out an unsecured loan of a million in gold in order to become Caesar.

And how many merchants begin trading by selling up their agricultural estates and dispatching it all to the Indies ‘across so many raging seas!’ [Catullus]. And in the present drought of devotion we have thousands and thousands of religious communities that easily do without it, looking to the bounty of heaven to provide what they need for dinner.

They also do not realise **(b)** that this certainty that they rely on is hardly less uncertain and chancy than chance itself. From behind an income of two thousand crowns I see misery as close as if I were running right into it. For, besides the fact that

fate has the means •to make a hundred breaches for poverty to find a way into our riches, ^[C] there often being no intermediate state between the highest and the lowest fortunes (‘Fortune is glass: it glitters, then it shatters’ [Publilius Syrus]), and ^[B] •to turn all our defences and ramparts topsy-turvy,

I find that for various reasons poverty makes a home with those who have possessions as often as with those who have none; and that it is perhaps less troublesome when it is alone than when it is encountered accompanied by riches. ^[C] Riches are more a matter of careful living than of income: ‘Each man is the maker of his own fortune’ [Sallust]. ^[B] And a rich man who is worried, hard up and over-busy seems to me more wretched than one who is simply poor. ^[C] ‘Poverty amid riches is the most grievous form of want’ [Seneca]. The greatest and richest of princes are regularly driven by poverty and lack of cash to extreme measures; for what is more extreme than becoming tyrants and unjustly usurping the property of their subjects?

^[B] **(ii)** My second situation was to have money. When this happened I soon set aside savings that were considerable for a man in my circumstances; because I •counted as a man’s *possessions* only what is over and above his ordinary

expenses and •thought that one should not count on what one hopes to get, however clear that hope may be. ‘For what if such-and-such a mishap occurred,’ I said, ‘and took me by surprise?’ And in the wake of these vain and pernicious imaginings I put my brain to work using my savings to provide against all emergencies; and if anyone maintained that the number of emergencies was too infinite, I could reply that if I wasn’t secure against all I was secure against some, *many*. None of this happened without painful anxiety. ^[C] I made a secret of it: I, who venture to talk so much about myself, only told lies about my money—like rich people who make out to be poor and poor ones who make out to be rich, dispensing their consciences from ever speaking truthfully about what they own; a ridiculous and shameful prudence!

^[B] Going on a journey, I never thought I was adequately provided for. The more loaded I was with money the more loaded I was with fear: wondering whether the roads were safe, and then about the trustworthiness of the men in charge of my baggage (like others that I know, I was only sure enough about my baggage when I had it before my eyes). When I left my strong-box at home, how many suspicions I had, how many thoughts that were thorny and, worse, incommunicable! My mind was always turned in that direction. ^[C] When you add it all up, there is more trouble in keeping money than in getting it. ^[B] And if I did not actually do all the things I have spoken of, there was a cost to me in stopping myself from doing them.

My affluence gave me little or nothing: ^[C] I had more to spend, but spending weighed no less heavily on me, ^[B] because, as Bion used to say, having a hair pulled out is as annoying to a man with plenty of hair as to one who is nearly bald; once you have grown used to having a certain pile and set your fancy on it, it is no longer available to you; ^[C] you wouldn’t dare to make a dent in it. ^[B] It strikes you as

a building that will fall to bits if you touch it. You will not cut into it unless necessity takes you by the throat. Back then I would pawn my clothes and sell a horse far less unwillingly and with less regret than I would have drawn on that beloved purse that I was keeping in reserve. But the danger lay in its not being easy to put definite limits on such desires ^[C]limits are hard to find for things we think to be good ^[B]and so to know when to stop saving. You go on making your pile bigger, increasing it from one sum to another until, like a peasant, you sordidly deprive yourself of the enjoyment of your own goods, standing guard over them and never actually using them. ^[C]If this is 'using' money, then the richest in cash are the guards on the walls and gates of a good city! To my way of thinking, any man with money is a miser.

Plato ranks physical or human goods in this order: health, beauty, strength, wealth. And wealth, he says, is not blind but extremely clear-sighted when enlightened by wisdom. ^[B]The younger Dionysius did a graceful thing in this connection. He was told that one of his Syracusans had hidden a treasure by burying it. He commanded the man to bring it to him, which he did, secretly keeping back a part of it which he went off to spend in another city. While there he lost his taste for hoarding and began to live more expensively. When Dionysius heard about this he had the remainder of the man's treasure returned to him, saying that he was welcome to have it now that he had learned how to use it.

I remained like this for ^[C]a few years; then some good daemon or other ^[B]pushed me out of it—most usefully, like the Syracusan—and scattered all my parsimony to the winds, when the pleasure of a certain very expensive journey forced that stupid notion to *dismount*.

(iii) That is how I have dropped into a third way of life which (I really do feel this) is certainly much more enjoyable and also more orderly; it consists in keeping my expendi-

tures in step with my income; sometimes one pulls ahead, sometimes the other, but they are never far apart. I live from day to day, and content myself with having enough to meet my present and ordinary needs: extraordinary ones could not be met by all the provision in the world.

[The present version omits this paragraph's *four* shifts from ^[C]to ^[B]and back again.] And it is madness to look to fortune to arm us adequately against itself. We have to fight it with our own weapons. Fortuitous ones will let us down at the crucial moment. If I do save up now, it is only because I hope to use the money soon—not to buy lands that I have no use for, but to buy pleasure. 'Not being covetous is *money*; not being extravagant is *income*' [Cicero]. I have no fear, really, that my money will run out, and no desire to increase it. 'The fruit of riches consists in abundance; abundance is shown by having enough' [Cicero]. I am especially gratified that this amendment of life has come to me at an age that is naturally inclined to avarice, and that I see myself rid of this malady that is so common among the old and is the most ridiculous of all human manias.

^[C]Pheraulas had experienced both kinds of fortune, and found that an increase in goods was not an increase in appetite for eating, drinking, sleeping or lying with his wife; and on the other hand he did feel the troubles of running his household pressing heavily on his shoulders (as it does on mine); so he decided to gratify a poor young man, a faithful friend, who was baying after riches; he made him a gift of all his own, which were great, as well as of everything that was daily coming in through the generosity of his good master Cyrus and also through the wars; on condition that the young man would maintain him and feed him as an honoured guest and friend. Thus they lived thereafter very happily and equally pleased with the change in their circumstances. That is a course I would love to imitate!

And I highly praise the situation of an old bishop whom I know to have so completely entrusted his purse, his income and his expenditures to a succession of chosen servants that for many long years he has known as little of the financial affairs of his own household as an outsider would. Trust in others' goodness is no slight testimony to one's own goodness, which is why God looks favourably on it. As for that bishop, I know no household that is run more worthily or more smoothly than his. Happy the man who has ordered his needs so appropriately that his wealth can satisfy them without his care and trouble, and without the spending and the gathering of his wealth interrupting his other pursuits that are better suited to him, quieter, and more congenial.

^[B] So affluence or poverty depend on each man's opinion: wealth, fame and health have no more beauty and pleasure than he who has them lends to them. ^[C] Each man is as well or badly off as he thinks he is. A happy man is not one who is believed ·by others· to be so but one who himself believes he is so. And by that fact the belief acquires reality and truth.

Fortune does us neither good nor harm: it only offers us the matter and the seeds for good or harm, and our soul, more powerful than fortune is, moulds the matter or sows the seeds as it pleases. It alone causes and controls our happy or unhappy state. ^[B] Whatever comes to us from outside takes its savour and its colour from our inner constitution, just as our garments warm us not with their heat but with ours, which they are fitted to preserve and sustain. Shelter a cold body under them and they will help it preserve its coldness; that is how snow and ice are preserved.

^[A] Indeed, just as •study is a torment to a lazy man, •abstinence from wine to a drunkard, •frugal living to a pleasure-lover, and •exercise to a languid idle man, so it is with the rest. Things are not so painful or difficult in

themselves: our weakness and slackness makes them so. To judge great and lofty things we need a soul of the same calibre; otherwise we attribute to them faults that are our own. A straight oar seems bent in water. What matters is not just *that* one sees the thing but *how* one sees it.

Well then, why is it that among so many arguments that persuade men in various ways to despise death and to endure pain we never find one that applies to ourselves? And of all the many kinds of fancies that have persuaded others, why cannot each person find—and apply to himself—the one that best suits his own temperament? If a man cannot digest the strong purgative drug to root out the malady, let him at least take a palliative one to relieve it. ^[C] 'As much in pain as in pleasure, our opinions are trivial and womanish; when we have been melted and dissolved by wantonness, we cannot even endure the sting of a bee without making a fuss. The whole thing is to be master of yourself' [Cicero].

^[A] For the rest, we do not evade philosophy by overstressing the sharpness of pain and human frailty. For that will force philosophy to fall back on these unanswerable replies: •If it is bad to live in need, at least there is no need to live in need. ^[C] •No-one suffers long except by his own fault. •If a man has not the courage to endure either living or dying—if he has no will either to resist or to run away—what is to be done with him?

* * * * *

[Essay 15 is a brief discussion of the (capital) punishments inflicted on soldiers who have continued defending their positions long after it became clear that they could not succeed. It ends: '^[B] Above all, then, you must avoid (if you can) falling into the hands of a judge who is your enemy, victorious and armed.']

16. Punishing cowardice

[A] I once heard a prince [see Glossary], a very great general, maintain that a soldier could not be condemned to death for faint-heartedness; he was at table, being told about the trial of the seigneur de Vervins who was sentenced to death for having surrendered Boulogne.

In truth it is right to make a great distinction between faults that come from our weakness and those that come from our wickedness. In the latter we deliberately brace ourselves against the rules of reason that nature has imprinted on us; in the former it seems we could call on nature itself to speak for us, having left us so weak and imperfect. That is why many people have thought that only what we do against our conscience can be held against us. On this rule is partly based the opinion of those who condemn the capital punishment of heretics and misbelievers, and the opinion that a lawyer or a judge cannot be blamed for failures in duty that come from ignorance.

As for cowardice, it is certain that the commonest way to punish it is by shame and ignominy. It is said that this rule was first introduced by the legislator Charondas, and that before him the laws of Greece condemned to death those who had fled from battle. He ordered merely that they be made to sit for three days in the public square dressed in women's clothes, hoping he could still make use of them once he had restored their courage by this shame. 'Bring a bad man's blood to his cheeks rather than shedding it' [Tertullian].

[A] It seems too that in ancient times Roman laws condemned deserters to death. For Ammianus Marcellinus says that the Emperor Julian was 'following the ancient laws' when he condemned ten of his soldiers, who had turned away from a charge against the Parthians, to be stripped of their rank and then to suffer death. Yet elsewhere for a

similar fault he condemns others merely to be held among the prisoners under the ensign in charge of the baggage. [C] The Roman people's harsh punishment of soldiers who had fled at Cannae, and of those who in that war followed Gnaeus Fulvius in his defeat, did not go so far as death.

Yet it is to be feared that shame will make men desperate, turning them not merely into estranged friends but into enemies.

[A] In our fathers' time the seigneur de Franget. . . , having surrendered Fuentarabia (of which he was governor) to the Spaniards, was sentenced to be deprived of his nobility, and he and his descendants were declared to be commoners, liable to taxation and unfit to bear arms. . . . Later all the noblemen who were in Guise when the Count of Nassau entered it suffered a similar punishment; and subsequently others still.

At all events, if there were a case of ignorance or cowardice that was so flagrant and obvious that it went beyond all the ordinary examples, it would be right to take that as sufficient proof of wickedness and malice and to punish it as such.

17. A thing that certain ambassadors do

[A] On my travels, in order to be always learning something from conversations with others (which is one of the best schools there can be), I maintain this practice: I always steer those with whom I am talking back to the subjects they know best. 'Let the sailor talk only of the winds, the farmer of oxen, the soldier of his wounds, the herdsman of his cattle' [Propertius, quoted by Montaigne in an Italian translation].

For what usually happens is the opposite of that, with

each man choosing to hold forth about someone else's occupation rather than his own, reckoning that this will increase his reputation; witness Archidamus's reproach to Periander, that he was abandoning the glory of a good doctor to acquire that of a bad poet.

[C] See how broadly Caesar spreads himself to make us understand his ingenuity in building bridges and siege-machines, and how narrowly he goes when talking of the functions of his profession, his valour, his handling of his army. His exploits sufficiently testify to his being an excellent general; he wants to be known as an excellent engineer, a somewhat different matter.

The other day a professional jurist was taken to see a library furnished with every sort of book including many kinds of legal ones. He had nothing to say about them. But he stopped to make blunt and lordly comments on a defence-work at the head of the library's spiral staircase; yet a hundred officers and soldiers came across it every day without comment or displeasure.

The elder Dionysius was a great leader in battle, as befitted his rank, but he laboured to be famed principally for his poetry—about which he knew nothing. [A] 'The lumbering ox wants the saddle; the horse wants the plough' [Horace].

[C] Going that way you will never achieve anything worthwhile. [A] So we should always make the architect, the painter, the shoemaker etc. stay on the track of his own quarry. A propos of that: in my reading of histories (an activity that is everyone's business) I make it a habit to attend to who the authors are:

- if they are persons whose only profession is writing I chiefly learn style and language from them;
- if they are medical men I am more willing to believe what they tell us about the climate, the health and constitution of princes, wounds and illnesses;

- if they are legal theorists we should accept what they say about legal controversies, laws, the bases of systems of government and the like;
- if theologians, church affairs, ecclesiastical censures, dispensations and marriages;
- if courtiers, manners and ceremonies;
- if warriors, whatever concerns war and chiefly detailed accounts of great actions at which they were present in person;
- if ambassadors, intrigues, understandings or negotiations, and how they were conducted.

The last of those are matters with which the seigneur de Langey was very well informed; which is why I noted and weighed in his history something I would have passed over in another's. He reports on the *edifying* remonstrances made by the Emperor Charles V to the Roman Consistory in the presence of our ambassadors the bishop of Mâcon and the seigneur du Velly. They included several outrageous remarks addressed to us.

Among other things •the emperor declared that if his own officers and soldiers had been no more loyal or skilled in warfare than our king's were, he would have put a halter around his own neck and gone to beg our king for mercy. (It seems he may have to some extent meant this, for he said it again two or three times since then.) •He then challenged our king to single combat, with sword or poniard, in a boat, wearing only a doublet.

[This essay now starts to fit Montaigne's title for it!] The seigneur de Langey, continuing his history, adds that when these two ambassadors sent their dispatch to the king, they disguised most of it and even hid the preceding two items from him.

Now I found it very strange that an ambassador should have the power to *select* what he should tell his master,

especially in material of such importance, coming from such a person, and spoken in such a large assembly. I would have thought that the servant's duty is fully and faithfully to report events just as they occurred, leaving it to his master to arrange, judge and select for himself. Altering or hiding the truth from someone out of fear that he might take it otherwise than he should and be pushed by it into some bad course of action, meanwhile leaving him ignorant of his own affairs—I would have thought that this was for the lawgiver and not the subject, for the appointed guardian and the schoolmaster and not to someone who ought to consider himself as being on a lower level not merely in authority but also in prudence and good judgment. Be that as it may, I would not care to be served in that way in my little affairs.

[C] We are so eager to find some pretext for getting out from under command and usurp mastery—it is so natural for each person to aspire to freedom and authority—that to a superior no quality should be dearer in those who serve him than simple, straightforward obedience.

The function of command is corrupted when we obey at our discretion not from subordination. When Publius Crassus (the one the Romans considered to be 'five-times blessed') was consul in Asia, he wrote to a Greek engineer ordering him to bring him the larger of two ship's masts he had seen in Athens for some battering machine he wanted to make. The engineer, on the strength of his scientific knowledge, allowed himself to choose otherwise, bringing the smaller one which was more suitable according to the rules of his craft. After listening patiently to his reasons, Crassus had him well whipped, putting the interests of discipline ahead of those of the work.

On the other hand, one might think that such strict obedience is appropriate only to precise orders previously given. Ambassadors have a freer commission, much of which

depends ultimately on their own judgment; they do not simply carry out their master's will, but shape it and direct it by their counsel. In my time I have seen persons in authority reprimanded for having followed the king's dispatches to the letter rather than adapting them to local circumstances. Men of understanding still condemn the practice of the kings of Persia who used to break down their orders to their agents and representatives into such fine detail that they had to be consulted for rulings on the most trivial matters; this slowed things down, and that—over so wide an empire—often did notable harm to their affairs.

As for Crassus, when he told the specialist what the mast was to be used for, did he not seem to be consulting his judgment and inviting him to use his own discretion?

18. Fear

[A] 'I stood stunned; my hair stood on end and my voice stuck in my throat' [Virgil].

I am not much of a 'naturalist' (that is the term they use); I have hardly any idea of the springs that drive fear in us; but anyway it is a strange passion, and the doctors say that no passion more readily carries our judgement away from its proper seat. Indeed, I have seen many men driven out of their minds by fear, and while fear lasts it creates terrible bewilderment in the most stable men.

I leave aside simple folk, for whom fear sometimes conjures up visions of their great-grandfathers rising from their tombs still wrapped in their shrouds, of werewolves, goblins or chimeras. But even among *soldiers*, where fear ought to occur less, how often it has changed a flock of sheep into a squadron of knights in armour! reeds and rushes into men-at-arms and lancers! our friends into our enemies!

a white cross into a red one!

[Now **two** anecdotes about standard-bearers: one was so overcome by fear that he rushed out towards the enemy, and came to himself just in time to scuttle back to safety; the other did something similar and was not so lucky. Then:] And in the same siege there was a memorable case when the heart of a certain nobleman was so strongly seized, held and frozen by fear that he dropped dead in the breach without a wound.

^[B] A similar fear sometimes takes hold of a whole multitude. In one of the engagements between Germanicus and the Allemani, two large troops of soldiers took fright and fled opposite ways, one going to the place the other had just left.

^[A] Sometimes fear puts wings on our heels, as in the first **two** examples; at others it hobbles us and nails our feet to the ground. This happened to the Emperor Theophilus in a battle he lost against the Agarenes; we read that he was so stunned and paralysed that he could not make up his mind to flee—^[B] ‘so much is fear afraid even of help’ [Quintus Curtius]—^[A] until Manuel, one of the principal commanders in his army, tugged and shook him as though rousing him from a deep sleep, and said ‘If you do not follow me I will kill you; for it is better for you to lose your life than as a prisoner to lose the empire.’

^[C] Fear expresses its utmost force when in its own service it throws us back on the courage that it has snatched away from our duty and our honour. In the first pitched battle that the Romans lost to Hannibal during the consulship of Sempronius, a body of at least ten thousand infantrymen took fright and, seeing no other way to make their cowardly escape, fought their way through the thick of the enemy, driving right through them with by a wonderful effort, with great slaughter of Carthaginians, buying a shameful flight for the price they would have paid for a glorious victory.

What I have most fear of is fear.

In harshness it surpasses all other disorders. . . . Men who have been mauled in a military engagement, still all wounded and bloody, can be brought back to the attack the following day. But those who have a healthy fear of the enemy cannot be brought even to look at them again. People with a pressing fear of losing their property, or of being driven into exile or enslaved, live in constant anguish, going without drink, food, and sleep. Whereas paupers, exiles and slaves often enjoy life as much as anyone else. And ever so many people, unable to endure the stabbing pains of fear, have hanged themselves, drowned themselves or jumped to their deaths, showing us that fear is even more unwelcome and more unbearable than death.

The Greeks recognise another sort of fear that does not come from any failure of our reason but, they say, comes without any apparent cause from some celestial impulsion. Whole peoples have been seized by it, and whole armies. Such was the fear that brought amazing desolation to Carthage. Nothing was heard but shouts and terrified voices; people were seen dashing out of their houses as if an alarm had been sounded, attacking, wounding and killing each other as though they were enemies coming to occupy their city. All was disorder and tumult until they calmed the anger of their gods with prayer and sacrifice. Such outbursts are called ‘panic terrors’.

19. That we should not be deemed happy until after our death

‘You must always await a man’s last day: no-one should be called happy before his death and last funeral rites’ [Ovid].

There is a story about this that children know: King

Croesus, having been captured by Cyrus and condemned to death, he cried out as he awaited execution 'O Solon, Solon!' This was reported to Cyrus who asked what it meant and was given to understand that Croesus was now encountering, at his cost, a warning Solon had once given him, namely

that men, no matter how fortune may smile on them, can never be called happy until they have been seen to pass through the last day of their life, because of the uncertainty and variability of human affairs, which the slightest shift changes from one state to an entirely different one.

That is why Agesilaus replied to someone who called the King of Persia happy because he had come very young to such a powerful estate, 'Yes: but Priam was not wretched when he was that age.' Kings of Macedonia (successors to Alexander the Great) become cabinet-makers and clerks in Rome; tyrants of Sicily become schoolmasters in Corinth; a conqueror of half the world and commander of many armies becomes a wretched suppliant to the worthless officials of a king of Egypt (that is what it cost Pompey the Great to add five or six months to his life). And in our fathers' time Ludovico Sforza, tenth duke of Milan, who had kept all Italy unsettled for so many years, died a prisoner at Loches—but after living there for ten years, which was the worst part of his bargain. ^[C] The fairest queen, widow of the greatest king in Christendom—Mary Queen of Scots—has she not just died by the hand of an executioner? Unworthy and barbarous cruelty! ^[A] And many other examples.

For it seems that just as storms and tempests rage against the pride and arrogance of our buildings, there are also spirits above us that envy any greatness here below. 'Some hidden force topples the affairs of men, trampling the gleaming rods and fierce axes, all that speaks of human eminence, and laughs them all to scorn' [Lucretius]. And it

seems that fortune sometimes lies in ambush for the last day of our life, in order to display its power by overturning in a moment what it had built up over many years, and to make us echo Laberius's cry 'Truly this day I have lived one day longer than I should have' [Macrobius].

Solon's good advice could reasonably be understood in that way. But given that

he is a philosopher, one of those for whom fortune's favours and disfavours do not rank as happiness or unhappiness, and for whom grandeurs, riches and powers are non-essential properties that hardly count for anything,

I think that he was probably looking beyond that, and that he meant that happiness in life—depending as it does on the tranquility and contentment of a well-born spirit and on the resolution and assurance of an orderly soul—should never be attributed to a man until we have seen him act out the last scene in his play, which is indubitably the hardest. Throughout all the rest of life it may be that

- we are wearing an actor's mask, or
- those fine philosophical arguments are nothing but a pose, or
- events that do not touch us to the quick give us a chance to keep our face still composed.

But in that last scene played between death and ourselves there is no more pretending; we must talk plain French; we must show whatever is good and clean at the bottom of the pot: 'Only then are true words uttered from deep in our breast. The mask is ripped off; reality remains' [Lucretius].

That is why all the other actions in our life must be tried on the touchstone of this final episode. It is the master-day, the day that judges all the others; it is (says one of the ancients [Seneca]) the day that should judge all my past years. I leave it to death [here = 'my dying'] to test the fruits of my

studies. That will show whether my reasonings come from my mouth or from my heart.

^[B] I know of several men who by their death gave a good or bad reputation to their entire life. Scipio, Pompey's father-in-law, redressed by a good death the poor opinion people had had of him until then. Epaminondas, asked which of the three—Chabrias, Iphicrates or himself—he admired most, replied 'Before deciding that you must see us die.' Indeed, you would rob him of a great deal if you weighed his worth without the honour and greatness of his end.

God has willed it as he pleased; but in my own times three of the most execrable and infamous men I have known in every abomination of life had deaths that were ordered and perfectly composed in all respects.

^[C] Some deaths are fine and fortunate. I knew a man whose thread of life was progressing towards a brilliant career that was in full flower when it was snapped; his end was so splendid that in my opinion his ambitious and courageous designs had nothing as lofty about them as their interruption. Without *going* there he *reached* the goal he aimed at, more grandly and gloriously than he had desired or hoped for. His fall took him beyond the power and reputation towards which his course aspired.

^[B] When judging another's life I always look to see how its end was borne; and one of my main concerns for my own is that it be borne well—that is, without fuss or noise.

20. Philosophising is learning to die

^[A] Cicero says that philosophising is nothing other than getting ready to die. That is because study and contemplation draw our soul somewhat outside ourselves, keeping

it occupied away from the body, a state that is a kind of apprenticeship for death and even resembles it. Or it is because all the wisdom and argument in the world eventually come down to this one point—to teach us not to be afraid to die.

In truth, either reason does not care either way or its only target should be our happiness, and all its work should be to make us live well and at our ease, as Holy Scripture says. All the opinions in the world agree on this—^[C] that pleasure is our goal—^[A] though they take different routes to it; otherwise they would be thrown out right away, for who would listen to someone whose goal was pain and discomfort for us?

^[C] The quarrels among the philosophical sects about this are verbal. 'Let us skip over such frivolous trivialities' [Seneca]. There is more stubbornness and nagging in them than is appropriate for such a dedicated profession. But whatever role a man undertakes to play he always plays the role of *himself* along with it.

[One dominant meaning of the word *volupté* is 'sexual pleasure'. This is presumably 'the lower one' that Montaigne will speak of. You'll see why the word is left untranslated.] Whatever they say, even in virtue our ultimate aim is *volupté*. I enjoy assaulting their ears with that word, which runs so strongly against their grain. When it means the most profound delight and excessive contentment, virtue is a better companion for it than anything else is. This *volupté* is no less seriously voluptuous for being more lusty, taut, robust and manly. We ought to have given it [i.e. virtue] the more favourable, sweet and natural name 'pleasure', rather than (as we have done) a name derived from *vigour*.

As for that other *volupté*, the lower one, which if it deserved that fine name should have won it in a competition rather than merely being handed it: I find it less free of drawbacks and obstacles than virtue is. Apart from the fact that its enjoyment is more momentary, elusive, and weak,

it has its vigils, its fasts, and its hardships, its sweat and blood. It also has so many different sorts of sufferings, and is accompanied by a satiety so heavy that it feels like penance.

We are thoroughly mistaken when ·in connection with this pleasure· we reckon

- that obstacles serve as a spur and a spice to its sweetness, as in nature things are enhanced by their contraries,

and also when we turn to virtue and say

- similar consequences and difficulties oppress it, making it austere and inaccessible.

In fact, they ennoble, sharpen and enhance the divine and perfect pleasure that virtue provides for us, much more thoroughly than they enhance *volupté*. Someone who weighs what he can get out of virtue against what it will cost him to be virtuous is clearly quite unworthy of an acquaintance with virtue, knowing neither its graces nor its use. Those who go on teaching us that the quest after it is rugged and wearisome whereas the enjoyment of it is agreeable—what are they saying but that it is always disagreeable? For what human means have ever brought anyone to the enjoyment of having it? The most perfect of men have been satisfied with aspiring to virtue—drawing near to it without possessing it. But they—i.e. those who go on teaching us etc.—are wrong, because with every pleasure known to man the mere pursuit of it is pleasurable. The undertaking is tintured by the quality of the object it has in view; it is a large proportion of that object and is inseparable from it. The happiness and blessedness that shine in virtue fill everything that is related to it and all the routes to it, right back to the first way in, the very entrance.

Now, one of virtue's principal benefits is disdain for death. If we have this, it provides our life with a gentle tranquility, giving us a pure and friendly enjoyment of it; if we do not

have it, every other pleasure is snuffed out. ^[A] That is why all the rules meet and agree at this one point. ^[C] And though they also lead us by common accord to despise pain, poverty and the other misfortunes human lives are subject to, they do not do so with the same care. That is partly because such misfortunes are not inevitable (most of mankind spend their lives without tasting poverty, and some without experiencing pain or sickness, like Xenophilus the musician, who reached the age of 106 in good health), and partly because at worst death can end our misfortunes whenever we like. But as for death itself, that is inevitable. ^[B] 'We are all forced down the same road. Our fate, shaken in the dice-cup, will be thrown out sooner or later, sending us into everlasting exile via Charon's boat' [Horace]. ^[A] So if death makes us afraid, that is a subject of continual torment which nothing can alleviate. ^[C] There is no place where death may not come to us. We may continually twist our head this way and that as in suspicious territory: 'It is like the rock for ever hanging over the head of Tantalus' [Cicero]. ^[A] Our law courts often send prisoners to be executed at the scene of their crimes. On the way there, take them past fine houses and ply them with good cheer as much as you like, . . . do you think they can enjoy it? and that having the final purpose of their journey steadily before their eyes won't have changed and spoiled their taste for such entertainment? 'He hears it as it comes, counts the days; the length of his life is the length of those roads. He is tortured by fear of what is to come' [Claudian].

^[A] The goal of our journey is death, the necessary object of our aim; if it frightens us how can we possibly go one step forward without anguish? The common herd's remedy is not to think about it; but what brutish stupidity can produce so gross a blindness? They lead the donkey by the tail, 'walking forward with their heads turned backwards' [Lucretius].

No wonder that they often get caught in a trap! You can frighten such people simply by mentioning death—most of them cross themselves as when the devil is named. And since death is mentioned in wills, don't expect those folk to write one up until the doctor has pronounced the death-sentence. And then, between pain and terror, God only knows with what good judgement they will concoct it!

^[B] Because this syllable 'death' struck their ears too roughly—it was thought to bring ill-luck—the Romans learned to soften it or spread it out in periphrases. Instead of 'He is dead' they said 'He has ceased to live' or 'He has lived'. They found consolation in living, even in a past tense! . . .

^[A] Perhaps it is true, as the saying goes, that the delay is worth the money. I was born between eleven and noon on the last day of February 1593. . . .; just two weeks ago I turned 39, and I need at least that long again. In the meantime it would be folly to be troubled by the thought of something so far off. After all, young and old leave life on the same terms. ^[C] No-one goes out otherwise than as though he had just come in; ^[A] and no-one is so decrepit that he does not—seeing Methuselah ahead of him—think he has another twenty years left in his body. Poor fool that you are! Who has assured you of the term of your life? You are relying on doctors' tales; look rather at facts and experience. As things usually go, you have been extraordinarily lucky to live as long as you have. You have already exceeded the usual term of life; to prove it, just count how many more of your acquaintances have died before reaching your present age than have reached it. And even for people who have ennobled their lives by fame—make a list of them and I'll wager that we shall find more who died before 35 than after. It is completely reasonable and pious to take the example of the humanity of Jesus Christ: his life ended at 33. So did that of Alexander, the greatest man who was simply a man.

Death can surprise us in so many ways! 'No man knows what dangers he should avoid from one hour to another' [Horace]. [Montaigne now gives a page of examples of famous deaths that occurred in surprising ways or at surprising times, ending with the death of his brother Arnaud:] He died at the age of 23 while playing tennis; he was struck by a ball just above the right ear. There was no sign of bruising or of a wound; he did not even sit down or take a rest; yet five or six hours later he was dead from an apoplexy caused by that blow. When such frequent and ordinary examples as these pass before our eyes, how can we ever rid ourselves of thoughts of death, or stop imagining that death has us by the collar at every moment?

You will say 'But what does it matter how it comes, provided we do not worry about it?' I agree with that; and whatever way there is to shelter from blows—even under calf's skin—I am not the man to shrink from it. It is enough for me to spend my time contentedly. I take the best game I can give myself, however inglorious and unexemplary it may be: 'I would rather be a contented lunatic—with my faults pleasing me or at least deceiving me—than be a snarling wise man' [Horace]. But it is folly to think you can get through 'life' in that way. They go, they come, they trot, they dance: and never a word about death. All well and good; but when death does come—to them or to their wives, children, friends—surprising them unawares and unprepared, then what torments, what cries, what fury and what despair overwhelms them! Have you ever seen anything brought so low, so changed, so confused?

We should think about this earlier. This brutish nonchalance—even if it lodged in the head of an intelligent man (which I find quite impossible)—sells its wares too dearly. If it were an enemy that could be avoided, I would advise borrowing the arms of cowardice. But since that cannot be

done; since

[B] death catches a coward on the run just as easily as an honourable man: [A] 'It hounds the man who runs away, and it does not spare the legs or fearful backs of unwarlike youth' [Horace],

[B] and since

no tempered steel protects you: 'It is no use a man hiding cautiously behind iron or brass; death will make him stick out his cowering head' [Propertius],

[A] let us learn to stand firm and to fight it.

To begin removing death's greatest advantage over us, let us go the opposite way from the usual one. Let us remove its strangeness, get to know it, get used to it, have nothing as often in mind as death. At every moment let us picture it in our imagination in all its aspects. At the stumbling of a horse, the fall of a tile, the slightest pin-prick, let us immediately chew on the thought *what if that were death itself?* With that, let us brace ourselves and make an effort. In the midst of joy and feasting let our refrain be one that recalls our human condition, and let us never be carried away by pleasure so strongly that we fail to recall sometimes in how many ways our joys are subject to death and with how many clutches it threatens them. That is what the Egyptians did: in the midst of all their banquets and good cheer they would bring in a mummified corpse to serve as a warning to the guests. 'Believe that each day is your last; then each unexpected hour will be welcome indeed' [Horace].

It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us wait for it everywhere. Preparing for death is preparing for liberty. A man who has learned to die has unlearned being a slave. Knowledge of death frees us from all subjection and constraint. [C] Life has no evil for him who has thoroughly grasped that loss of life is not an evil. [A] Paulus Aemilius was sent a messenger by that miserable king of Macedon who was his

prisoner, begging not to be led in his triumphant procession. He replied: 'Let him ask himself for that.'

The truth is that art and industry do not progress far unless nature lends a hand. I myself am not melancholy but dreamy; there is nothing I was ever concerned with more than images of death—even in the most licentious period of my life, [B] 'when blossoming youth rejoiced in the spring' [Catullus]. [A] Amid the women and the games, some thought I was standing apart chewing over some jealousy or the uncertainty of some hope, when I was actually reflecting on someone or other who a few days earlier had been overtaken by a burning fever, and by his end when leaving festivities just like these, his head full of idleness, love and merriment—just like me; ·thinking· that the same could be close to me. [B] 'It will soon be past, never to be recalled' [Lucretius].

[A] I did not wrinkle my forehead over that thought any more than over any other. It is impossible not to feel the sting of such ideas at first, but in handling them and running through them one eventually tames them—no doubt about that. Otherwise for my part I would be in continual fear and frenzy; for no man ever had less trust in his life, no man ever counted less on his life's duration. Up to now I have enjoyed robust good health almost uninterruptedly, but that does not lengthen my hopes for life any more than sickness shortens them. At every moment it seems to me that I am slipping away from myself. [C] And I constantly sing to myself the refrain 'Anything that can be done another day can be done today'. [A] In truth, risks and dangers do little or nothing to bring us nearer to our end. And if when one threat seems especially menacing we think how many other threats still hang over us, we shall realise that death is equally near when we are vigorous or feverish, at sea or at home, in battle or in repose. [C] 'No man is frailer than another, no man more

certain of the morrow' [Seneca]. ^[A] If I have only one hour's work to do before I die, I am not sure I have time to finish it.

The other day someone going through my notebooks found a memorandum about something I wanted done after my death. I told him truthfully though I was hale and healthy and only a league away from my house, I had hastened to write it there because I was not certain of reaching home. ^[C] As someone who broods over my thoughts and stores them up inside me, I am always about as well prepared as I can be; and the coming of death will teach me nothing new.

^[A] We ought always to have our boots on and be ready to go, as far as we are up to it; above all we should take care to have no outstanding business with anyone else—'Why for such a brief span of life tease ourselves with so many projects?' [Horace]—for we shall have enough to do then without adding to it. One man complains less of death itself than of its interrupting the course of a fine victory; another, that he has to depart before marrying off his daughter or supervising the upbringing of his children; one laments ·losing· the company of his wife, another of his son, as chief comforts of his life.

^[C] I am now, thank God, ready to move out whenever he pleases, regretting nothing whatsoever. I am disengaging on all sides; I have already half-said my adieus to everyone but myself. No man ever prepared to leave the world more simply and completely, or detached himself more comprehensively, than I plan to do. ^[B] "Wretch that I am," they say, "one dreadful day has stripped me of all life's rewards" [Lucretius]. ^[A] And the builder says: 'My work—huge battlements and walls—remains unfinished' [Virgil]. We ought not to plan anything that takes so long, at least not with the idea of flying into a passion if we cannot see it through to the end.

We are born for action: 'When death comes, let it find me at my work' [Ovid]. I want us to be doing things, ^[C] prolonging life's duties as much as we can; ^[A] and I want •death to find

me planting my cabbages, not worrying about •it, still less about the unfinished gardening. I once saw a man die who at the end kept lamenting that the thread of the history he was writing was being cut at the fifteenth or sixteenth of our kings! [Linking with the ^[B]-tagged Lucretius quotation in the preceding paragraph:] ^[B] 'They never add that desire for such things does not linger on in one's remains!' [Lucretius].

^[A] We should rid ourselves of these vulgar and harmful humours. Our graveyards have been located next to churches and in the busiest parts of town (says Lycurgus) so that common people, women and children should get used to seeing a dead man without panicking, and so that this continual spectacle of bones, tombs and funeral processions should remind us of our condition—

^[B] 'It was once the custom, moreover, to enliven feasts with human slaughter and to entertain guests with the cruel sight of gladiators fighting: they often fell among the goblets, flooding the tables with their blood' [Silius Italicus]

—^[C] so too, after their festivities the Egyptians used to display before their guests a huge portrait of death, held up by a man crying 'Drink and be merry: once dead you will look like this'. ^[A] In the same spirit I always have death not only in my imagination but on my lips. There is nothing I inquire about more readily than how men have died: what they said, how they looked, what their bearing was; and there are no ·other· passages in the history books that I note as attentively. ^[C] That I have a particular liking for such matters is shown by how I cram in examples of them. If I were a maker of books I would make a register, with comments, of various deaths; he who would teach men to die would teach them to live. Dicaearchus did write a book with some such title, but for another and less useful purpose.

^[A] I will be told that the reality of death so far exceeds

our thought of it that any fine footwork ·in advance· will amount to nothing when we actually get there. Let them say so: thinking about death in advance certainly brings great advantages; and anyway, is it nothing to get at least that far without disturbance and fever? Furthermore, nature itself lends us its hand and gives us courage. For a short and violent death there is no time to feel afraid; if it is not like that, I have noticed that as an illness progresses I naturally slip into a kind of disdain for life. I find that willingness to die is harder to digest when I am in good health than when I am feverish, especially since I no longer hold so firmly to the pleasures of life once I begin ·through illness· to lose the use and enjoyment of them, and can look on death with far less fear. That leads me to hope that the further I get from good health and the nearer I approach to death the more easily I will exchange one for the other. Just as I have in several other contexts found the truth of Caesar's assertion that things often look bigger from afar than close up, I have found that illness frightened me more when I was well than when I felt ill. Being in a happy state, all pleasure and vigour, leads me to get the other state so out of proportion that I mentally increase all its discomforts by half and imagine them heavier than they prove to be when I have the burden of them on my shoulders. I hope it will be like that when I come to death.

[B] Let us see how, in those ordinary changes and declines that we suffer, nature prevents us from seeing our loss and decay. What does an old man retain of the vigour of his youth and of his earlier life? 'Alas, what little of life's portion remains with the aged!' [Maximianus]. [C] When a soldier of Caesar's guard, broken and worn out, came up to him in the street and asked leave to kill himself, Caesar looked at his decrepit bearing and said with a smile: 'So you think you are alive?' [The 'Caesar' who produced this brutal joke was Caligula.]

[B] If we were plunged ·into old age· all of a sudden, I do

not think we could bear such a change. But nature leads us by the hand down a gentle almost imperceptible slope, little by little, one step at a time; it enfolds us in that wretched state and makes us at home in it. So we feel no jolt when youth dies in us, although that—in essence and in truth—is a harsher death than the total death of a languishing life or the death of old age. For the leap from a wretched existence to non-existence is not so cruel as the change from a sweet existence in full bloom to a grievous and painful existence.

[A] The body when bent and bowed has less strength for carrying burdens; so too for our soul. We must straighten and raise it against the assault of this adversary, ·death·. For the soul cannot be at peace while it remains afraid of death; but once it finds assurance it can boast of something that almost surpasses our human condition, namely that it is impossible for anxiety, anguish, fear or even the slightest dissatisfaction to lodge within it. [B] 'Nothing can shake such firmness: neither the threatening face of a tyrant, nor the south wind (that tempestuous master of the stormy Adriatic), nor even the mighty hand of thundering Jove' [Horace].

[A] The soul has come to be in charge of its passions and lusts, to dominate destitution, shame, poverty and all other injuries of fortune. Let us get this advantage, those of us who can; this is that true and sovereign freedom that enables us to thumb our noses at force and injustice and to laugh at prisons and chains: "I will shackle your hands and feet and keep you under a cruel gaoler."—"God himself will set me free as soon as I ask him to." I think he means "I will die"; for death is the bottom line' [Horace].

Our religion has no surer human foundation than contempt for life. We are summoned to such contempt **not only** by rational argument—

- Why should we fear to lose something which, once lost, cannot be regretted?

•Since we are threatened by so many kinds of death is it not worse to fear them all than to bear one?¹

—**but also** by Nature driving us that way. It says:

·START OF A SPEECH BY NATURE·

[Quotations in this are from Lucretius except where otherwise indicated. The speech as a whole is mainly from Lucretius, secondarily from Seneca.] Leave this world just as you entered it. The same passage from death to life that you once made without suffering or fear, make it again from life to death. Your death is one of the working parts of the order of the universe; it is a part of the life of the world: ^[B] ‘Mortal creatures live lives dependent on each other; like runners in a relay they pass on the torch of life.’ ^[A] Shall I change *for you* this beautiful interwoven structure? It is a condition of your being; death is a part of you; you are running away from yourselves. This existence that you enjoy is equally divided between death and life. The first day of your birth puts you on the path to death as well as to life: ‘Our first hour gave us life and began to devour it’ [Seneca]; ‘In being born we die; the end depends on the beginning’ [Manilius]. ^[C] You have stolen from life everything in your life; you live at life’s expense. Your

life’s continual task is to build death. You are in death while you are in life, for when you are no longer in life you are *after* death. Or if you prefer this way of putting it: after life you are dead, but during life you are dying; and death touches the dying more harshly than the dead, more keenly and essentially.

^[B] ‘If you have profited from life, you have had your fill; go your way satisfied: ‘Why not withdraw from life’s feast like a well-fed guest?’ If you have not known how to use life—if it was useless to you—what does losing it matter to you? What do you still want it for? ‘Why seek to add more, just to lose it again, wretchedly, without joy?’ ^[C] Life itself is neither good nor bad; it is where good and bad things find a place, depending on how you make it for them.

^[A] And if you have lived a day, you have seen everything. One day equals all days. There is no other light, no other night. This sun, this moon, these stars, this arrangement of them—it is the very one that was enjoyed by your ancestors and will entertain your descendants: ‘Your fathers saw no other; nor will your grandsons’ [Manilius]. ^[A] And at the worst estimate, the division and variety of all the acts of my play

¹ Montaigne later inserted at this point a passage that splits ‘not only. . .’ from ‘but also’. Here it is: ^[C] Death is inevitable: does it matter when it comes? When Socrates was told that the thirty tyrants had condemned him to death he retorted, ‘And nature, them!’ What stupidity to torment ourselves over our passing into freedom from all torment! Just as our birth brought us the birth of all things, so our death will be the death of them all. So it is as stupid to weep because we shall not be alive a hundred years from now as to weep because we were not alive a hundred years ago. Death is the origin of another life. Just so did we weep, just so did we struggle against entering this life, just so did we strip off our former veil when we entered it. Nothing can be grievous that occurs only once. Is it reasonable to fear for such a long time something that lasts for such a short time? Long life, short life, death makes them one. For things that no longer exist are neither long nor short. Aristotle says that there are tiny animals on the river Hypanis that live for only a day. Those that die at 8 a.m. die in youth; those that die at 5 p.m. die in decrepitude. Which of us would not laugh to see anyone considering the happiness or unhappiness of this momentary span? Yet if we compare our own span against eternity or even against the duration of mountains, rivers, stars, trees or even some animals, then ‘shorter’ or ‘longer’ is equally ridiculous.

are complete in one year. If you have noticed the revolution of my four seasons they embrace the infancy, youth, manhood and old age of the world. It has played its part; it knows no trick other than to begin again. ^[B] ‘We turn in the same circle, for ever.’ ‘And the year rolls around, following its own track’ [Virgil]. ^[A] I have no plan to create new pastimes for you. ‘For there is nothing else I can make or discover to please you: all things are the same forever.’

Make way for others as others did for you. ^[C] Equality is the principal part of equity. Who can complain of being included where all are included? And you will do yourself no good by going on living; it will not shorten the time you will stay dead. It is all for nothing; you will be in that state you fear just as long as if you had died at the breast: ‘Triumph over time, and live as long as you please: eternal death will still be waiting for you.’

^[B] And I shall arrange that you have no unhappiness. ‘Do you not know that when death comes there will be no other *you* left alive to mourn you and stand over your corpse?’ *You* will not desire the life that now you so much lament. ‘Then no-one mourns his life or himself; . . . we feel no regret for our own being.’ Death is less to be feared than *nothing*—if there were anything less than nothing: ‘We should think death to be less—if anything is *less* than what we can see to be nothing at all.’ ^[C] Death does not concern you, dead or alive; alive, because you exist; dead, because you no longer exist.

^[A] No-one dies before his time; the time you leave behind was no more yours—and no more concerns you—than the time that passed before you were born: ‘Look back and see that past eternities have been nothing to us.’

Wherever your life ends, it is all there. ^[C] The value of a life lies not in its length but in the use made of it. Some have lived long and lived little. Attend to it while you are in it. Whether you have lived enough depends not on the number

of years but on your will. ^[A] ‘Did you think you would never arrive at the place you were ceaselessly heading towards?’ ^[C] Yet every road has its end. ^[A] And if it comforts you to have company, is not the whole world keeping pace with you? ‘All things will follow you when their life is done.’

^[A] Does not everything move with your movement? Is there anything that does not grow old along with you? A thousand men, a thousand beasts, a thousand other creatures die at the same instant when you die. ‘No night has ever followed day, no dawn has ever followed night, without hearing along with the wails of newborn infants the cries of pain attending death and sombre funerals.’

^[C] Why do you recoil when you cannot retreat? You have seen enough men who were better off for dying, avoiding great miseries by doing so: but have you seen anyone who was worse off? How simple-minded it is to condemn something that neither you nor anyone else has experienced. [Nature here switches—for the rest of this paragraph and in the last paragraph of the speech—from *vous* addressing people in general to *tu* addressing an individual.] Why do you complain of me and of destiny? Do we do you wrong? Is it for you to govern us, or us you? You may not have finished your stint but you have finished your life. A short man is a complete man, like a tall one. Neither men nor their lives are measured by the ell.

Chiron refused immortality when he was told of its characteristics by his father Saturn, the god of time and of duration. Think about having a life that lasted for ever—how much less bearable and more painful it would be for man than the life I have given him! If you did not have death, you would constantly curse me for depriving you of it. Seeing what advantages death holds, I have deliberately mixed a little anguish into it to stop you from embracing it too greedily and injudiciously. To lodge you in the moderation that I ask of you—neither fleeing life nor fleeing death—I have tempered

each of them between sweetness and bitterness.

I taught Thales, the first of your sages, that living and dying were matters of indifference; so that when asked why he did not die he very wisely replied 'Because it makes no difference.'

Water, earth, air and fire and the other parts of this structure of mine are no more instruments of your life than instruments of your death. Why are you afraid of your last day? It brings you no closer to your death than any other did. The last step does not create fatigue; it reveals it. All days lead toward death; the last one gets there.

·END OF NATURE'S SPEECH·

[A] Those are the good counsels of our mother, Nature.

I have often pondered how it happens that the face of death, seen in ourselves or in others, appears incomparably less terrifying to us in war than in our own homes—otherwise armies would consist of doctors and weepers!—and why, given that death is always the same, there is always more assurance ·against it· among village-folk and the lower orders than among all the rest. I truly believe that what frightens us more than death itself are those dreadful faces and trappings with which we surround it; a quite new way of life; mothers, wives and children weeping; visits from people dazed and benumbed; the presence of a number of pale and tear-stained servants; a room without daylight; lighted candles; our bedside besieged by doctors and preachers; in short, all about us horror and terror. Look at us—already shrouded and buried! Children are afraid even of their friends when they see them masked. So are we. We should rip the masks off things as well as off people. When it is off, we shall find underneath only that same death that a valet or chambermaid got through recently without fear. Blessed the death that leaves no time for preparing such ceremonies!

21. The power of the imagination

[A] 'A strong imagination creates the event', as the scholars say. I am one of those who experience the strength of the imagination. Everyone is hit by it, but some are bowled over. [C] It cuts a deep impression into me; I lack the power to resist it; so my skill consists in avoiding it, living among people who are healthy and cheerful. The sight of others' sufferings produces physical suffering in me; and my feelings are often taken over by the feelings of someone else. A persistent cough irritates my lungs and my throat. I visit less willingly the sick to whom duty directs me than those towards whom I am less attentive and concerned. When I attend to a disease I catch it and install it within myself. I do not find it strange that imagination brings fevers and death to those who give it a free hand and encourage it.

Simon Thomas was a great doctor in his time. I remember that, encountering me at the home of a rich old consumptive and discussing with his patient ways to cure his illness, told him that one of these would be to provide occasions for *me* to enjoy his company, and that

he could then fix his eyes on the freshness of my countenance and his thoughts on the overflowing cheerfulness and vigour of my young manhood; by filling all his senses with the flower of my youth, his condition might improve.

But he forgot to say that mine might get worse.

[A] Gallus Vibius so strained his soul to understand the essence and impulses of insanity that he dragged his own judgement off its seat and could never get it back again; and could boast of having become mad through wisdom.

There are some who through fear forestall the hand of their executioners; one man was being unbound on the scaffold so that his pardon could be read to him, when he fell

dead on the scaffold, struck down solely by his imagination. When our imaginations strike, we sweat, we tremble, we grow pale or flush crimson; and reclining in our feather-beds we feel our bodies agitated by them, sometimes to the point of expiring. And boiling youth, fast asleep, grows so hot in the harness that it consummates its sexual desires in a dream. 'So that, as though they had actually completed the act, they pour great floods and pollute their garments' [Lucretius].

[Now some anecdotes about imagination leading to a man growing horns, to women turning into men, and to various events—e.g. the stigmata of St Francis of Assisi—taken to be miracles. Montaigne continues:] It is likely that the credit given to miracles, visions, enchantments and such extraordinary events mainly comes from the power of the imagination acting chiefly on the more malleable souls of the common people. Their credence has been so strongly gripped that they think they see what they do not see.

I am moreover of the opinion that those comic bonds that our society thinks itself to be so held back by that nothing else is talked of are probably effects of apprehension and fear.¹ For I know by experience that a man I can vouch for as though he were myself—a man against whom there is no suspicion of sexual inadequacy or being under any spell—heard a friend tell of an extraordinary impotence that struck him just when he could least afford it; and then, on a similar occasion, the horror of this story struck his own imagination so harshly that he incurred a similar fate. [C] And from then on he was subject to relapses, this ugly memory of his mishap nagging him and tyrannising over him. He found some remedy for this *rêverie* [see Glossary] in another *rêverie*: he openly admitted to this infirmity in

advance, thereby relieving the tension in his soul. Through his announcing this trouble as something to be expected, his sense of responsibility grew less and weighed less heavily upon him. When he had a chance of his own choosing—with his mind unencumbered and relaxed and his body in good trim—to have his bodily powers first tested, then seized, then surprised with a partner who knew what was going on, he was clean cured. A man is never incapable, unless from genuine impotence, with a woman with whom he has once been capable.

[A] This mishap is to be feared only in enterprises where our soul is immoderately tense with desire and respect, especially when the opportunity is unexpected and pressing. There is no way of recovering from this trouble. I know one man who found it useful to bring to it a body already partly satisfied elsewhere, [C] in order to quieten the ardour of this frenzy; and this man as he grows older is, though less potent, also less impotent.

[Now a long, tiresome story about a friend of Montaigne's who was worried about wedding-night impotence, and whom Montaigne helped with an elaborate pretence of magical aid. He concludes:] It was a sudden odd whim that led me to do this deed, which is foreign to my nature. I oppose all subtle pretence, and hate sleight of hand, whether recreational or for profit. If the action is not bad, the route to it is.

Amasis, king of Egypt, married Laodice, a very beautiful Greek girl. He was a pleasant companion in every other way, but fell short when it came to enjoying her; he thought that witchcraft had been at work, and threatened to kill her. As is usual in matters of fantasy, she referred him to religion; and having made his vows and prayers to Venus he found that

¹ This refers to the practice of knotting to a wedding ring a strip of material that was supposed to have the effect of preventing a consummation of the marriage until the knot was untied. [Note taken from the Cotton/Hazlitt edition of the work.]

very night, after his sacrificial oblations, that he had been divinely restored.

Women are wrong to greet us with those threatening, quarrelsome and coy countenances that extinguish us in setting fire to us. Pythagoras's daughter-in-law used to say that a woman who goes to bed with a man should take off her modesty with her skirt and put it on again with her petticoat. ^[A] The assailant's soul, troubled by many different alarms, is easily dismayed. And when imagination has once made a man suffer this shame—which it does only in those first encounters, because they are more boiling and eager and also because in this first intimacy the man is most afraid of failing—this occurrence then puts him into a feverish moodiness which persists on later occasions.

^[C] Married men, who have plenty of time, should not press their undertaking, should not try it out if they are not ready. It is better to

fail indecently to use the marriage-bed, full as it is of feverish agitation, waiting for a more private and less challenging opportunity ·when there are not wedding-guests in the next room·

than to

fall into perpetual wretchedness by being struck with despair by the first refusal ·of the penis to become erect·.

Before taking possession, the patient man should try himself out and offer himself lightly, by little sallies at different times, without bringing pride and obstinacy to definitively proving himself. Those who know that their members are naturally obedient should take care only to counteract the tricks of their fancies.

We are right to note the disobedient liberty of this member which thrusts itself forward so inopportunistly when we have nothing for it to do, so inopportunistly lets us down when we

most want to make use of it, and so imperiously battles our will for authority, stubbornly and proudly refusing all our solicitations, both mental and manual.

Yet if this member's rebelliousness were being used to make a case against it, and it retained me to plead on its behalf, I might cast suspicion on our other members—its companions—for having, out of envy of the importance and pleasure of its work, deliberately brought a trumped-up charge, plotting to arm everybody against it and maliciously accusing it alone of their common fault. I invite you to think about whether there is any part of our body that does not often refuse to function when we want it to, yet often does so when we want it not to. Our bodily parts have passions of their own that arouse them or quieten them down without our leave. How often do forced facial movements bear witness to thoughts that we were keeping secret, so betraying us to those who are with us! That same cause that animates this member also—without our knowing it—animates the heart, the lungs and the pulse, when the sight of a pleasing object imperceptibly spreads right through us the flame of a feverish desire. Is it only *these* veins and muscles that stand up and lie down without the consent of our will or even of our thoughts? We do not command our hair to stand on end or our skin to quiver with desire or fear. The hand often goes where we do not send it. The tongue is paralysed, the voice congealed, when this suits them. Even when we have nothing for the pot and would like to order the appetite for food and drink *not* to do so, it nevertheless goes ahead and stirs up the bodily parts that are subject to it—just like that other appetite—and it also deserts us inappropriately whenever it wants to. The organs that serve to discharge the stomach have their own dilations and contractions, beyond and against our wishes; as do those whose role is to discharge the kidneys.

[Then a short paragraph about farting, after which:] But as for our will, on behalf of whose rights we advance this complaint, how much more plausibly can we charge it with sedition and rebellion because of its unruliness and disobedience! Does it always will what we will it to? Does it not often will what we forbid it to—and that to our evident disadvantage? Is it any more amenable to the decisions of our reason?

Finally, on behalf of my honorable client, may it please the court to consider that in this matter my client's case is indissolubly conjoined to an accessory—the female sexual organ—from whom my client cannot be separated. Yet the suit is addressed to my client alone, employing arguments and making charges that cannot possibly be brought against the aforesaid accessory. Which shows the manifest animosity and legal impropriety of the accusers.

Be that as it may, nature will go its own way, protesting that the lawyers' arguments and the judges' sentences are in vain. It would have acted rightly if it had endowed this member with some special privilege, this author of the only immortal work of mortals. According to Socrates this is divine work, and love is a desire for immortality and is itself an immortal daemon.

[Montaigne returns to his earlier theme of imagination's role in enabling worthless medical materials and procedures to get good results, with several more illustrative anecdotes. Then:] ^[A] Even animals are subject as we are to the power of the imagination. Witness dogs that grieve to death when they lose their masters. We can also see dogs yapping and twitching in their dreams, while horses whinny and struggle about.

But all this can be attributed to the close stitching of mind to body, each communicating its fortunes to the other. Something different is going on when, as sometimes happens,

a person's imagination acts not merely on his own body but on someone else's. One body can inflict an illness on a neighbouring one, as can be seen in the case of the plague, the pox, and soreness of the eyes, which are passed on from one person to another—'Looking at sore eyes can make your own eyes sore; and many ills are spread by bodily infection' [Ovid]—and similarly when the imagination is vigorously shaken up it launches darts that can harm an external object. In antiquity it was held that when certain Scythian women were animated by anger against anybody they could kill him just by looking at him. Tortoises and ostriches hatch out their eggs by sight alone—a sign that their eyes have a power to send something out. And as for sorcerers, they are said to have aggressive and harmful eyes: 'An eye, I know not whose, has bewitched my tender lambs' [Virgil].

For me magicians provide poor authority. All the same we know from experience that mothers can transmit marks of their fancies to the bodies of children in their womb—witness that woman who gave birth to a black child. And the Emperor Charles, King of Bohemia, was shown a girl from the Pisa neighbourhood who was all bristly and hairy; her mother claimed to have conceived her like this because of a portrait of John the Baptist hanging above her bed. It is the same with animals: witness Jacob's sheep [Genesis 30:37–9], and the partridges and hares that are turned white by the snow in the mountains. Recently at my house a cat was seen watching a bird perched high up a tree; they stared fixedly at each other for some time, when the bird let itself fall, as though dead, between the cat's paws—either intoxicated by its own imagination or drawn by some attracting power of the cat. Those who are fond of hawking know the tale of the falconer who fixed his gaze purposefully on a kite as it flew and wagered that he could bring it down by the sheer power of his sight, which he did—or so they say. ·I don't vouch

for the truth of this story. When I borrow anecdotes I refer them to the consciences of those I took them from. ^[B] The arguments are my own, and depend on rational proof, not on experience; everyone can add his own examples; if anyone has none of his own he should nevertheless believe that there are plenty, given the number and variety of reported events. ^[C] If I do not apply them well, let someone else do it for me.

In the study I am making of our *moeurs* and motives, fabulous testimonies serve as well as true ones, provided they are possible. Whether it happened or not, to Peter or John, in Rome or in Paris, it still remains within the compass of human capacity; it tells me something useful about that. I can see this and profit by it just as well when it is a shadow as when it is the real thing. There are often different versions of a story: I use the rarest and most memorable one. There are some authors whose goal is to relate what happened; mine, if I could manage it, would be to relate what can happen. Schoolmen are rightly permitted to *suppose* examples when there are none at hand; but I do not. In this respect I excel all historical fidelity in my devoted scrupulousness. Whenever my examples concern what I have read, heard, done or said, I have not allowed myself to venture to change even the slightest and most useless details. I do not consciously falsify one iota. Unconsciously? I don't know.

In this connection, I sometimes fall to thinking about whether it can be fitting for theologians, philosophers and such people, with their exquisite and exacting consciences and wisdom, to write history [here presumably meaning 'contemporary history']. How can they stake their fidelity on the fidelity of ordinary people? How can they be responsible for the thoughts of unknown people, and offer their own *conjectures* as coin of the realm? Concerning complicated events that occurred in their presence, they would refuse to testify under

an oath administered by a judge; and they do not know any man well enough to undertake to give a full account of his intentions. I think it less risky to write about the past than the present, since the author has only to account for borrowed truth.

Some urge me to write about contemporary events, reckoning that my view of them will be less distorted by passion than another man's and closer because of the access fortune has given me to the heads of various parties. What they do not say is that

- for all the glory of Sallust I would not give myself the trouble, being a sworn enemy of obligation, of continuous toil, of perseverance; or that
- nothing is so contrary to my style as an extended narration; or that
- with my freedom being so very free, I might publish judgements which even I would reasonably and readily hold to be unlawful and deserving of punishment.

[Montaigne amplifies the second of those: 'I have to break off so often from shortness of wind; I have neither composition nor development that is worth anything; I am more ignorant than a child of the words and phrases used in the most ordinary affairs. That is why I have undertaken to say only what I *can* say, fitting the subject-matter to my powers. If I took a subject-matter that led me along, I might not measure up to it.'] Plutarch would freely admit that if in his writings all the examples are wholly true, that is the work of his sources; if they are useful to posterity, presenting them with a lustre that lights our path to virtue, that is his work.

With an old story—unlike a medicinal drug—there is no *danger* in its being this way rather than that.

22. One man's profit is another man's loss

[A] Demades condemned a fellow Athenian whose trade was to sell funeral requisites, on the grounds that he demanded too much profit, and that this profit could come to him only from the deaths of many people.

That judgement seems ill-founded, since no profit is made except through somebody's loss; by this standard you would have to condemn every sort of gain. The merchant does well in his business only by the extravagance of youth; the ploughman by the high price of grain; the architect by the collapse of buildings; legal officials by men's lawsuits and quarrels; the honour and function of ministers of religion, even, are drawn from our deaths and our vices. 'No doctor takes pleasure in the good health even of his friends', says the ancient Greek comic writer, 'no soldier in his city's being at peace', and so on for all the others. And, what is worse, if each of us sounds his inner depths he will find that our private wishes are mostly born and nurtured at other people's expense.

Reflecting on this I had the thought that nature here is not belying its general policy; for natural philosophers hold that the birth, nourishment and growth of each thing is the alteration and corruption of another. 'For when anything is changed and moves out from its confines, it instantly brings death to something that previously existed' [Lucretius].

23. Custom, and not easily changing a traditional law

[A] The power of habit¹ was very well understood, it seems to me, by the man who first made up that story about a village woman who, having learned to pet and carry in her arms a calf from the time it was born, and having continued to do so, *gained* by this habit so that she could still carry it when it was a fully grown bull. For, in truth, habit is a violent and treacherous schoolteacher. It establishes in us, little by little and stealthily, the foothold of its authority; and then, having planted it by this gentle and humble beginning with the help of time, it soon reveals to us a furious and tyrannical face against which we no longer have the liberty of even raising our eyes. At every turn we find habit infringing the rules of nature: [C] 'Habit is the most effective teacher of all things' [Pliny].

·I believe that habit explains·:²

- the cave in Plato's *Republic*,
- the doctors who so often yield the reasonings of their art to the authority of habit,
- that king who habituated his stomach to drawing nourishment from poison, and
- the maiden whom Albertus reports as having habituated herself to living on spiders.

[B] In that world of the new Indies, great nations were found in widely different climates that lived on spiders, kept them and fed them; as they also did grasshoppers, ants, lizards and bats: and a toad was sold for six crowns when food was scarce. They cook them and prepare them, with various sauces. Other peoples were found for whom our meats and

¹ For *coutume*, translated as 'custom' or 'habit', see the Glossary.

² This line replaces the phrase *J'en croy*, which has defeated all the translators

foods were fatally poisonous. [C] ‘Great is the power of habit: huntsmen spend nights in the snow, and endure sunburn in the mountains; boxers bruised by studded gloves do not even groan’ [Cicero].

These examples from strange lands are not strange if we consider our everyday experience of how habit stuns our senses. . . .

We need not look to what is said about those who live near the cataracts of the Nile; or to the philosophers’ conclusions about the music of the spheres, namely that those solid material circles rub and lightly play against each other as they roll, and so *must* produce a wonderful harmony. . . .that no creatures in the universe can hear, loud though it is, because our hearing (like that of the Egyptians ·living near the Nile cataracts·) has been dulled by the continuity of the sound.

. . . Blacksmiths, millers and armourers could not put up with the noise that strikes them if they were stunned by it as we are. My scented collar is for my pleasure, but after I have worn it for three days in a row it is noticed only by others.

What is more strange is that habit can link and establish the effect of its impression on our senses across long gaps and intervals, as those who live near belfries discover. At home I live in a tower where an enormous bell rings the Ave Maria at dawn and sunset every day. This din makes my tower itself tremble. At first I found it unbearable; but after a short time I was broken in, so that I can now hear it without annoyance and often without waking.

Plato scolded a boy for playing at cobnuts. He replied: ‘You are scolding me for a small matter.’ ‘Habit’ said Plato ‘is not a small matter’. I find that our greatest vices take shape during our tenderest infancy, and that our most important training is in the hands of our wet-nurses. Mothers think

their boy is playing when they see him wring the neck of a chicken or find sport in wounding a dog or a cat. And a father may be so stupid as to think that •it is a sign of a martial spirit when he sees his son outrageously striking a peasant or a lackey who is not defending himself, or that •it is a charming prank when he sees him cheat a playmate by some cunning deceit or a trick. Yet those are the true seeds and roots of cruelty, of tyranny, of treachery. They germinate there, and then shoot up and flourish, thriving in the grip of habit. Making excuses for such ugly tendencies because of the weakness of childhood or the triviality of the subject—that is a most dangerous educational policy. Firstly, ·when these things are thought to be wrong· it is nature speaking, with a voice that is all the more clear and truthful for being thin and new. Secondly, cheating’s ugliness does not come from the difference between money and pins; it comes from cheating.

I find it more sound to conclude ‘Since he cheats over pins, why wouldn’t he cheat over money?’ than to conclude as they do ‘They are only pins; he would not do that with money.’

Children should be carefully taught to hate vices for what they *are*; they should be taught the natural ugliness of vices, so that they flee them not only in their actions but above all in their hearts, so that the very thought of them—whatever mask they wear—will be odious.

I know very well—

having been trained from boyhood always to stride along the open highway and to find it repugnant to use cunning or deceit in my childish games (and note that children’s games are not *games* and should be judged in the same way as their more serious activities)

—that there is no pastime so trivial that I do not bring to it an internalised, natural, automatic *revulsion* against cheating.

When playing cards I treat pennies like doubloons, just as much when playing with my wife and daughter (when winning or losing does not matter to me) as when I am gambling in earnest. Everywhere and in everything my own eyes suffice to keep me on track; there are none that watch me so closely or that I respect more.

^[A] [Montaigne now reports on a man who, having no arms, cultivated habits enabling him to do dexterous things with his feet; and a boy, also armless, who managed weapons and a whip with his neck.]

But we can discover the effects of habit far better from the impressions it makes on our souls, where it encounters less resistance. What can it *not* do to our judgements and beliefs? Is there any opinion so bizarre—

and I am leaving aside that coarse deceit of religions by which so many great nations and so many learned men are seen to be besotted. Those lie beyond the bounds of human reason, so that a man is excusable for going astray with them unless he is extraordinarily enlightened by divine favour

—that custom has not planted and established it by laws in regions where it saw fit to do so? ^[C] And this is totally right: ‘Is it not a disgrace that the natural philosopher, that observer and tracker of nature, should seek evidence of the truth from minds stupefied by custom?’ [Cicero].

^[B] I reckon that no notion that can occur to the imagination of men is so wild that it is not put into public practice somewhere with no basis in or support from our discursive reason. [He gives examples, including that of a French nobleman who always blew his nose with his fingers, maintaining that the accepted procedure of collecting mucus in a handkerchief and then putting that in one’s pocket was disgusting. Montaigne concludes:] I considered that what he said was not totally unreasonable, but custom had prevented

me from noticing the strangeness that we find so hideous when it is reported in another country. . . . Habituation puts to sleep the eye of our judgement. Barbarians are no more astonishing to us than we are to them; nor with better reason, as each of us would admit if after running through examples from far away he could focus on his own and sanely compare them. Human reason is a tincture infused in about equal strength through all our opinions and *moeurs* [see Glossary], whatever their form—infinite in matter, infinite in diversity.

I now return to the subject. There are peoples ^[B] where the king cannot be directly addressed by anyone but his wife and his children. In one and the same nation virgins openly display their private parts, and married women carefully cover theirs and conceal them. [This continues through several pages of accounts—mostly ^[B]- or ^[C]-tagged—of weird-to-our-eyes customs of various nations. Views about bodily decoration, breast-feeding, cannibalism, death, infanticide, patricide, promising, property, sexual propriety, table manners, urination, the worth of women, and on and on. Gradually winding down:] ^[A] And what all philosophy cannot implant in the heads of the wisest men, does not unaided custom teach the crudest of the common herd? For we know of whole nations where death was not merely scorned but rejoiced in; where seven-year-old children endured being flogged to death without changing their expression; where riches were held in such contempt that the most wretched citizens of the town would not deign to reach down to pick up a purse full of crowns. And we know of regions that were fertile in all sorts of food where nevertheless the usual and the most savoury dishes were bread, mustard-cress and water. ^[B] Did not custom produce a miracle in Chios where after 700 years there is no record of a woman or girl losing her honour?

[A] In short, to my way of thinking there is nothing that custom does not do, nothing that it cannot do; and Pindar rightly calls it (so I have been told) the queen and empress of the world.

[C] The man found beating his father replied that such was the custom in his family; that his father had beaten his grandfather; his grandfather, his great-grandfather; and—pointing to his own son—‘this boy will beat me once he has reached my present age’.

And the father whom the son was dragging and bumping along the street ordered him to stop at a certain doorway, for he had not dragged his own father beyond that point; it marked the limit of the hereditary ill-treatment of fathers practised by the sons of that family.

It is by custom as often as by derangement, says Aristotle, that women tear out their hair, gnaw their nails, eat earth and charcoal; and it is more by custom than by nature that males have sexual relations with males.

The laws of conscience that we say are born of nature are born of custom. Each person inwardly venerates the opinions and *moeurs* approved and accepted in his environment, so he cannot free himself from them without remorse, or conform himself to them without self-congratulation.

[B] When the Cretans in times past wanted to curse someone, they prayed to the gods to make him contract a bad habit.

[A] But the principal effect of custom’s power is to seize us and take us over in such a way that we hardly have what it takes to struggle free and get back into ourselves to reason and argue about its ordinances. Because we drink them in with our mothers’ milk, and because they shape the world as we first see it, it seems to us that we were *born into* the condition of thinking along those lines. And the ideas that we find to be held in common and in high esteem about us,

and that were infused into our souls by our fathers’ seed, seem to be universal and natural. [C] That is why anything that is off the hinges of custom is thought to involve reason’s being unhinged; God knows how unreasonably most of the time! If each man on hearing a wise maxim automatically looked to see how it applied to him in particular—as we who study ourselves have learned to do—he would find that it was not so much a good saying as a good whiplash to the ordinary stupidity of his judgement. But the advice of truth and its precepts are taken to be addressed to *people*, never to *oneself*: each man, instead of incorporating them into his *moeurs*, stupidly and uselessly incorporates them into his memory.

Let us get back to the sovereignty of custom.

·MORE ON THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CUSTOM·

Peoples nurtured on freedom and self-government regard any other form of government as deformed and unnatural. Those who are used to monarchy do the same. And when (with great difficulty) they have rid themselves of the oppression of one master, even if they have a chance to move easily to different form of government, they hurry to establish (with equal difficulty) another master, because they cannot bring themselves to hate mastery. . . .

[A] Darius asked some Greeks what it would take to persuade them to adopt the Indian custom of eating their dead fathers (for that was their way, reckoning that the most auspicious burial they could give their fathers was within themselves); they told him that nothing on earth would make them do it. But when he tried to persuade the Indians to abandon their way and adopt that of Greece (which was to cremate their fathers’ corpses), he horrified them even more. Each of us is like this; usage hides the true aspect of things from us. ‘Nothing seems at first so great or wonderful that

we do not all wonder at it less and less' [Lucretius].

I once had the duty of justifying one of our practices that is accepted as having established authority far and wide around us; I did not want to maintain it in the usual way solely by force of law and examples, and tracked it back to its origin, where I found its basis to be so weak that I nearly became disgusted with it—I who was supposed to confirm it in others.

[C] This is Plato's prescription—he regards it as supreme and fundamental—for driving out the unnatural and perverted loves of his time: public opinion should condemn them, poets and everyone else should give dreadful accounts of them. This would have the result that not even the fairest daughters would attract the love of their fathers, or the most handsome brothers the love of their sisters. The myths of Thyestes, of Oedipus and of Macareus would have planted this useful *creance* [here = 'moral attitude'] in the tender brains of children by the charm of the poetry.

Indeed, chastity is a fine virtue whose usefulness is well enough known; but to discuss and justify it from •nature is as hard as it is easy to do so from •tradition, laws and precepts. The basic universal reasons for it are hard to examine thoroughly. Our teachers either skim over them lightly or, not being game even to touch them, throw themselves immediately into the sanctuary of custom, and preen themselves on easy victories. Those who will not let themselves be dragged out of this original source fail even worse and commit themselves to savage opinions, as Chrysippus did; he strewed throughout his writings his low opinion of incestuous unions of any kind.

[A] A man who wants to free himself from the violent prejudice of custom will find many things accepted as being indubitably settled that have nothing to support them except the hoary whiskers and wrinkles of usage that come with

them; but with that mask torn off and things brought back to truth and reason, he will feel his judgement turned upside-down, yet restored by this to a much surer state.

I will ask him, for example, what could be stranger than seeing a people obliged to obey laws that they have never understood; governed in all their household concerns—marriages, gifts, wills, sales, purchases—by regulations that they cannot know because they are neither written nor published in their own language; they have to *pay* to have them interpreted and applied. [C] Not according to

- the ingenious opinion of Isocrates, who advises his king to make his subjects' trades and negotiations free, unfettered and profitable, and to make their quarrels and disputes onerous, loading them with heavy taxes,

but according to

- a monstrous opinion that puts reason itself on the market and treats laws as merchandise.

[A] I am grateful to fortune that it was, so our historians say, a Gascon gentleman from my part of the country who first opposed Charlemagne when he wanted to give us Latin and imperial laws.

What is more barbarous than a nation [France] where

- by legal custom the office of judge is up for sale and verdicts are simply bought for cash? where
- quite legally justice is denied to anyone who cannot pay for it? where
- this trade is so lucrative those who deal in it constitute a fourth estate to add to the three ancient estates of Church, Nobility and People—an estate which, having charge of the laws and sovereign authority over properties and lives, forms a body distinct from that of the nobility?

From which it comes about that there are two sets of laws—of honour and of justice—which

are strongly opposed in many matters. The former condemns anyone who is called a liar and does not take revenge, the latter condemns the revenge. By the law of arms, a man who *endures* an insult is stripped of his rank and nobility; by the civil law a man who *avenges* an insult is liable to the death penalty. . . .

and where

- of these two estates, so different from each other yet joined to a single head, one is responsible for peace, the other for war; one concerns profit, the other honour; one learning, the other virtue; one words, the other deeds; one justice, the other valour; one reason, the other force; one in a long robe, the other a short one?

As for neutral things such as clothing, if you want to think of this in terms of its true purpose (which is its usefulness and comfort for the body, on which its original grace and fitness depend), I will offer as examples of what I think to be the most monstrous clothes imaginable: •our square bonnets, •that long tail of pleated velvet hanging down from our women's heads with its motley fringes, and •that silly and useless model of a member that we cannot even decently mention by name, which however we show off in public.

These considerations, however, do not deter a thinking man from following the common fashion. It seems to me, on the contrary, that all peculiar and out-of-the-way modes of dress derive from folly and ambitious affectation rather than from true reason, and that internally a wise man should withdraw his soul from the crowd, maintaining its power and freedom to judge things freely, and that externally he should wholly follow the accepted fashions and forms.

Public society has no use for our thoughts; but everything else—our actions, our work, our fortunes, our life—should

be lent and abandoned to its service and to the community's opinions; just as that great and good man Socrates refused to save his life by disobeying the magistrate [see Glossary], even a most unjust and iniquitous magistrate. For the rule of rules, the universal law of laws, is that each man should obey those of the place where he lives. . . .

•CHANGING THE LAWS•

New topic. It is very doubtful whether the profit that can come from changing an accepted law, whatever it may be, is as evident as the harm of disturbing it; for a government is like a building made of interlocked pieces joined in such a way that if one is shaken the whole structure feels it. The lawmaker of the Thurians ordained that anyone wanting to abolish an old law or establish a new one should appear before the people with a rope around his neck, so that if *anyone* failed to approve of his novelty he would be strangled at once. And the lawmaker of the Spartans gave his life to extract from the citizens a solemn promise not to infringe any of his ordinances. The •Spartan• magistrate who so roughly cut the two extra strings that Phrynis added to music is not worried about whether music is improved or whether its chords are richer; for him to condemn them it suffices that this is a departure from the old style. . . .

[B] I hate innovation, in whatever guise, and with reason, because I have seen some of its disastrous effects. The innovation that has been oppressing us for so many years—the Reformation—is not the sole author of our troubles, but it seems to have accidentally caused and engendered them all, even the evils and destruction that have subsequently happened without it, and *against* it; it has itself to blame for them. 'Alas, I suffer wounds made by my own arrows' [Ovid].

Those who give the first shock to the state are apt to be the first to be swallowed up in its ruin. [C] The fruits of

disturbance rarely go to the one who began it; he beats and disturbs the water for other fishermen. ^[B] Once innovation has dislocated and dissolved the unity and organisation of this monarchy, this great structure—especially in its old age—the gates are opened as wide as you wish to similar attacks. . . .

^[C] But if innovators do more harm, their imitators are more at fault for rushing to follow examples after they have experienced the horror of them and punished them. And if there is some degree of honour even in evil-doing, the imitators must concede to the others the glory of innovation and the courage to make the first attempt. [The ‘imitators’ referred to here are the members of the anti-protestant French Catholic League, who have ‘punished’ conduct that they then copy.]

^[B] All kinds of new depravity gleefully draw, from this first abundant source, ideas and models for disturbing our government. In the very laws that were made to remedy the original evil, men read an apprenticeship and excuse for all sorts of wicked actions; and we are experiencing what Thucydides said of the civil wars of his own time, that public vices were baptised with gentler names to excuse them, adulterating and softening their true titles. Yet this is supposed to reform our consciences and our beliefs! . . . But even the best pretext for novelty is exceedingly dangerous: ^[C] ‘So true it is that no change from ancient ways is to be approved’ [Livy].

^[B] To speak frankly, it seems to me that there is much self-love and arrogance in rating one’s opinions so highly that in order to establish them one is willing to •disturb the public peace and introduce so many unavoidable evils and such horrifying corruption of *moeurs* [see Glossary] as civil wars and political upheavals bring in a matter of such weight, and •introduce them into one’s own country. ^[C] Is it not bad management to advance so many certain and known vices

in order to combat alleged and disputable errors? Is any kind of vice more wicked than those that clash with a man’s conscience and natural knowledge?

The •Roman• Senate, in its dispute with the people about the administration of their religion, dared to palm them off with the evasion that ‘this was less a matter for them than for the gods, who would see that their rites were not profaned’ [Livy]. That fits what the oracle replied to the men at Delphi in their war against the Medes; fearing a Persian invasion, they asked the god what they should do with the holy treasures in his temple—hide them or carry them off? He told them to move nothing; they should look after themselves; he was able to take care of what belonged to him.

^[B] The Christian religion has all the marks of the utmost justice and utility, but none is more obvious than the precise injunction to obey the magistrate and to uphold the government. What a wonderful example of this was left for us by God’s wisdom when, to establish the salvation of the human race and to conduct his glorious victory over death and sin, God wanted to do this only through the operations of our political order. He subjected its progress—the conduct of such a lofty and *saving* enterprise—to the blindness and injustice of our observances and usages, letting flow the innocent blood of so many of the beloved elect, allowing a long loss of years in ripening this priceless fruit.

There is a huge gulf between the cause of the man who follows the forms and laws of his country and the cause of the man who undertakes to control and change them. The former justifies himself on grounds of simplicity, obedience and example; whatever he does cannot be from malice, only from misfortune, at the worst. ^[C] ‘Who is not swayed by an antiquity attested and certified by the clearest records?’ [Cicero] —apart from what Isocrates said, that in finding the happy mean it is better to fall short than to go to excess.

[B] The other is in a much tougher position [C] because anyone who undertakes to chop and change usurps the right to judge and must be very sure that he sees the defect in what he is throwing out and the good in what he is bringing in. The following plain consideration has strengthened me in my position and kept me in check even in my rasher youth:

Not to load my shoulders with the heavy burden of claiming knowledge of such importance ·as theology·, or to venture to do •in this area what I could not with a level head venture to do •in the easiest of the disciplines I had been instructed in, where rashness of judgment does no harm.

It seems to me very iniquitous to want to subject immutable public regulations and observances to the instability of private ideas (private reasoning having jurisdiction only in private matters), and to attempt against divine laws something that no government would tolerate against civil ones. These last, though human reason has much more to do with them, are still the sovereign judges of their judges; judicial discretion is limited to explaining and extending accepted usage; it cannot deflect it or make innovations.

If divine Providence has sometimes passed over the rules to which it has necessarily constrained us, this was not to dispense *us* from them. These are strokes of the divine hand, for us not to imitate but to admire. They are extraordinary examples—marked by an express and particular sign—of the kinds of miracles that Providence gives us in witness of its omnipotence, miracles

- that are above our categories and our powers,
- that it is madness and impiety to try to reproduce, and
- that we should not to follow but should contemplate with awe.

They are acts of *its* character, not ours. . . .

[B] In our present quarrel, where a hundred great and profound articles ·of religion· are to be removed or restored, God knows how many men can boast of having mastered in detail the reasons and fundamental positions of both sides. It is a number—if it is indeed a *number!*—that would not have much power to disturb us. But all the rest of the crowd, where are they going? Under what banner do they rush to the battlements? Their remedy acts like other weak and badly prescribed medicines: those humours it was meant to purge from us have been heated, irritated and aggravated by the conflict, while the potion remains in the body. It was too weak to purge us, but it has weakened us in such a way that we cannot evacuate it either—we get from its operation nothing but prolonged internal pains.

[A] Yet fortune, always reserving its authority above our reasonings, sometimes presents us with a need that is so urgent that the laws have to make room for it.

[B] If you are resisting the growth of an innovation that has recently been introduced by violence, it is a dangerous and lopsided handicap to keep yourself everywhere and always in check and within the rules in your struggle against those who run loose, for whom anything is permissible that advances their cause, and who have neither law nor order except to follow their own advantage: [C] 'To trust an untrustworthy man is to give him power to harm' [Seneca]. [B] For the ordinary discipline of a state that is in a healthy condition does not provide for these extraordinary events; it presupposes a body that holds together in its principal parts and functions, and a common consent to acknowledge and obey it. [C] The law-abiding pace is cold, weighty, and constrained; it cannot hold up against a pace that is lawless and unbridled.

[Picking up from ' . . . make room for it. '] [A] It is well known that two great figures in civil wars—Octavius against Sulla and Cato against Caesar—are still reproached for having let their

country suffer any extremity rather than disturb things by rescuing it at the expense of the law. For truly in these ultimate necessities, when all you can do is to hold on, bowing your head and letting the blow fall might be wiser than struggling to let nothing go, when this is impossible, giving violence the opportunity to trample everything underfoot; it would be better to make the laws will what they can do, since they cannot do what they will. That was the solution of the man who ordered that the laws sleep for 24 hours, of the one who for one occasion removed a day from the calendar, of the one who turned the month of June into a second month of May. Even the Spartans, such religious adherents to the ordinances of their country, when they were caught between

•a law forbidding them to elect the same man admiral twice and •a pressing emergency requiring Lysander to reassume that office, made someone called Aracus 'admiral' and made Lysander 'superintendent of the navy'! And similar subtlety was shown by one of their ambassadors who was dispatched to the Athenians to negotiate a change in some law, and was told by Pericles that it was forbidden to remove a tablet once a law had been inscribed on it; he advised him turn the tablet over, which was not forbidden. This is what Plutarch praises Philopoemen for: being born to command, he knew how to issue commands according to the laws and, when public necessity required it, to issue commands to the laws.