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### Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

**Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de**

**London, 1743**

Chap. 5. Of Conscience.

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given me to understand, that *Julius Caesar* had preserved himself, if in going to the Senate, the Day he was assassinated by the Conspirators, he had read a Ticket that was presented to him by the Way. He tells also the Story of *Archias*, the Tyrant of *Thebes*, that the Night before the Execution of the Design *Pelopidas* had laid to kill him, and restore his Country to Liberty, he had an Account sent him in Writing, by another *Archias*, an *Athenian*, of the whole Conspiracy, and that his Packet having been delivered to him while he sat at Supper, he deferred the opening of it, saying, which afterward became a Proverb in *Greece*, *To-morrow is a New Day*. A wise Man may, I confess, out of Respect to another, as not to disturb the Company, as *Rusticus* did, or not to break off another Affair of Importance in Hand, defer to read or hear any new Thing that is brought him; but if for his own Interest, or particular Pleasure, especially if he be a Publick Minister, he will not interrupt his Dinner, or break his Sleep, he is inexcusable. And there was anciently at *Rome* the Consular Place, as they called it, which was the most Honourable at the Table, for being a Place of most Liberty, and of more convenient Access to those who came in to talk with the Person seated there: By which it appears, that for being at Meat, they did not totally abandon the Concern of other Affairs and Accidents. But when all is said, it is very hard in human Actions, to give so exact a Rule upon the best Grounds, that Fortune will not have a Hand in them, and maintain her own Right.



## C H A P. V.

## Of Conscience.

THE *Sieur de la Prouffe*, my Brother, and I, travelling one Day together during the time of our Civil Wars, met a Gentleman of good Fashion: he was of the contrary Party, tho' I did not know so much, for he pretended otherwise: And the Mischief is, that in this sort of War, the Cards are so shuff'd, an Enemy not being distinguished

guish'd from a Friend, by any apparent Mark either of Language or Habit, nourish'd under the same Laws, Air and Manners, that it is very hard to avoid Disorder and Confusion. This made me afraid myself of meeting any of our Troops in a Place where I was not known, that I might not be in fear to tell my Name, and peradventure of something worse; as it had befallen me before, where by such a Mistake, I lost both Men and Horses, and amongst others, an *Italian* Gentleman, my Page, whom I had bred with the greatest Care and Affection, was miserably killed, in whom a promising Youth of great Expectation was unfortunately blasted. But the Gentleman that my Brother and I met, had so strange a Fear upon him, at the meeting of any Horse, or passing by any of the Towns belonging to the King, that I at last discover'd them to be Alarms of Conscience, and the poor Man seem'd to be in such a Condition as if thro' his Vizor, and the Crosses upon his Cassock, one might have penetrated into his Bosom, and read the most secret Intentions of his Heart. So wonderful is the Power of Conscience, that it makes us betray, accuse, and fight against ourselves; and, for want of other Witnesses, to give Evidence against ourselves.

*Occultum quatiens animo tortore flagellum* \*.

Conscience the Torturer of the Soul, unseen  
Does fiercely brandish a sharpe Scourge within.

This Story is in every Child's Mouth, *Bessus* the *Pæonion*, being reproach'd with ill Nature for pulling down a Nest of young Sparrows, and killing them, reply'd, he had Reason so to do, seeing that those little Birds never ceas'd falsely to accuse him of the Murder of his Father.

*Strange Discovery of a Parricide.* This Parricide had till then been conceal'd and unknown, but the revenging Fury of Conscience caus'd it to be discover'd by himself, who was justly to suffer for it. *Hesiod* corrects the Saying of *Plato*, *That Punishment closely follows Sin*, it being as he says, born at the same time with it. Whoever expects Punishment, already suffers it, and whoever has deserv'd it, expects it. Wickedness contrives

\* *Juven. Sat. 13.*

Torments against itself. *Malum consilium consultori pessimum* †. Ill Designs are worst to the Contriver. As the Wasp stings and offends another, but most of all itself; for it there loses the Sting and the Use of it for ever.

————— *Vitasque invulnere ponunt* ‡.

And do their own Lives stake,  
In the small Wound they make.

*Cantharides* have somewhere about them, by a Contrariety of Nature, a Counterpoison against their Poison. In like manner, at the same time that we take delight in Vice, there springs in the Conscience a Displeasure, that afflicts us sleeping and waking with several tormenting Imaginations.

*Quippe ubi se multi per somnia sæpe loquentes  
Aut morbo delirantes procreasse ferantur,  
Et celerata diu in medium peccata dedisse* ||.

The Guilty hardly their own Counsel keep,  
They either will be talking in their Sleep,  
Or in a Fever raving will reveal  
What they long had, and still meant to conceal.

*Apollodorus* dream'd, that he saw himself flead by the *Scythians*, and after boil'd in a Cauldron, and that his Heart mutter'd these Words, *I am the Cause of all these Mischiefs that have befall'n thee.* *Epicurus* said, that no hiding Hole can conceal the Wicked, since they can never assure themselves of being hid, whilst their Consciences discover them to themselves.

————— *Prima est hæc ultio, quod se  
Judice nemo nocens absolvitur* \*.

————— 'Tis the first Punishment of Sin,  
That no Man does absolve himself within.

As Conscience fills us with Fear when ill, so a good one gives us greater Confidence and Assurance; and can truly say, that I have gone thro' several Hazards with a more steady Pace, in Consideration of the secret Know-

† *Erasm. Adag.*

|| *Lucret. lib. 5.*

‡ *Virg. Georg. lib. 4.*

\* *Juven. sat. 13.*

ledge I had of my own Will, and the Innocency of my Intentions,

*Conscia mens ut cuiq; sua est, ita concepit intra  
Peccora pro facto spemque metumque suo †.*

As a Man's Conscience is, so Hope within,  
Or Fear prevails, suiting to his Design,

Of this are a thousand Examples; but it will be enough to instance three, of one and the same Person; *Scipio*, being one Day, accus'd before the People of *Rome* of some Crimes of a very high Nature, instead of excusing himself, or insinuating into the Favour of the Judges, *It will become* *The Confident* you very well, said he, to sit in Judgment *Innocency of* upon a Head, by whom you have the Power *Scipio.* to judge all the World. And another time

all the Answer he gave to several Impeachments brought against him by a Tribune of the People, instead of making his Defence; *Let us go, Citizens*, said he, *let us go render Thanks to the Gods for the Victory they gave me over the Carthaginians, as this Day*; and advancing himself before towards the Temple, he had presently all the Assembly, and his very Accuser himself, following at his Heels. And *Petilius* having been set on by *Cato* to demand an Account of the Money that had pass'd thro' his Hands in the Province of *Antioch*, *Scipio* being come into the Senate to that Purpose, produc'd a Book from under his Robe in which, he told them, was an exact Account of his Receipts and Disbursements; but being requir'd to deliver it to the Prothonotary to be examin'd and enroll'd, he refus'd, saying, *He would not do himself so great a Disgrace*; and in the Presence of the whole Senate tore the Book with his own Hands to Pieces. I do not believe that the most fear'd Conscience could have counterfeited so great an Assurance. *He had naturally too high a Spirit, and was accusom'd to too high a Fortune*, says *Titus Livius*, *to know how to be criminal, and to dispose himself to the Meanness of defending his Innocency*. This putting Men to the Rack is a dangerous Invention, and seems to be rather a Tryal of Patience than Truth. Both he who has the Fortitude to endure

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\* *Ovid. Fast. lib. 13,*

it, conceals the Truth, and he who has not: For why should Pain sooner make me confess what really is, than force me to say what is not? And on the contrary, if he who is not guilty of what he is accus'd of has the Courage to undergo those Torments, why should he not who is guilty have the same, so fair a Reward of Life being in his Prospect? I think the Ground of this Invention proceeds from the Consideration of the Force of Conscience: For to the Guilty it seems to assist the Rack to make him confess his Fault, and to shake his Resolution; and on the other side, that it fortifies the Innocent against the Torture. But when all is done, 'tis in plain Truth a Tryal full of Incertainty and Danger. What would not a Man say? What would not a Man do to avoid such intolerable Torments?

*Etiam innocentes cogit mentiri dolor\*.*

Pain the most Innocent will make to lye.

Whence it comes to pass, that he whom the Judge has rack'd that he may not die innocent, he makes him die both innocent and rack'd. A thousand and a thousand have charg'd their own Heads by false Confessions. Amongst whom I place *Philotas*, considering the Circumstances of the Tryal *Alexander* put him upon, and the Progress of his Torture. *But so it is, says one, that it is the least Evil human Weakness could invent; very inhumanly notwithstanding, and to very little purpose in my Opinion.* Many Nations less barbarous in this, than the *Greek* and *Romans* who call them so, repute it horrible and cruel to torment and pull a Man to pieces for a Fault of which they are yet it doubt. How can he help your Ignorance? Are not you unjust, that not to kill him without Cause, you do worse than kill him? And that this is so, do but observe how many ways he had rather die without Reason, than undergo this Examination, more painful than Execution itself; and which often, by its Extremity, prevents Execution, and dispatches him. I know not where I had this Story, but it exactly matches the Conscience of our Justice in this Particular. A Country-woman came to a General of very severe Discipline, and accus'd one of his Soldiers

\* *Pub. Sym. de dolore.*

that

that he had taken from her Children the little Milk she had left to nourish them withal, the Army having consum'd all the rest; but of this, Proof there was none. The General, after having caution'd the Woman to take good heed to what she said, for that she would make herself guilty of a false Accusation, and should suffer the Punishment due to it if she told a Lie; but she persisting, he presently caus'd the Soldier's Belly to be ript up, to clear the Truth of the Fact, and the Woman was found to be in the right. An instructive Sentence.



## C H A P. VI.

*Use makes Perfection.*

**T**IS not to be expected, that Argument and Instruction, tho' we never so voluntarily surrender our Belief to them, should be powerful enough to lead us on so far as to Action, if we do not over and above exercise and form the Soul by Experience to the Course for which we design it: It will otherwise doubtless find itself at a Loss, when it comes to the Pinch of the Business. This is the reason, why those amongst the Philosophers, who were ambitious to attain to a greater Excellence, were not contented to expect the Severities of Fortune in their Retirement, and the Repose of their own Habitations, lest she should have surpriz'd them raw and unexpert in the Combat; but sally'd out to meet her, and purposely threw themselves into the Proof of Difficulties. Some of whom abandon'd Riches to exercise themselves in a voluntary Poverty: Others have sought out Labour, and an Austerity of Life, to inure themselves to Hardships and Inconveniences; others have depriv'd themselves of their dearest Members; as of their Eyes, and Instruments of Generation, lest their too delightful and effeminate Service should soften and debauch the Stability of their Souls. But in Dying, which is the greatest Work we have to do, Practice is out of Doors, and can give us no Assistance at all. A Man may