



OF BAD MEANS EMPLOYED TO A GOOD END

Michael De Montaigne

There is a wonderful relationship and correspondence to be found in the universal plan of the works of Nature, which manifestly shows that it is neither casual nor directed by a variety of masters. The infirmities and conditions of our bodies are to be found in states and governments. Kingdoms and commonwealths are born, flourish and fade with old age, just as we do. We are subject to a full measure of humors, painful and unprofitable, either of good humors (for even though physicians fear this and because there is nothing stable in us, they say that perfection of health, joyous and strong, must be artificially checked and diminished, lest our nature, unable to settle down to any certain standard, and be unable to improve, might recoil over-violently into disorder; therefore they prescribe for wrestlers purging and bleeding, in order to subtract their super-abundance of health or of bad, which is the ordinary cause of sickness.

States often seem to be sick of such repletion and feel purgations are necessary in order to cleanse them. As we have seen, a large number of families leave a country, chiefly to relieve it, and go elsewhere to seek a place at the expense of others. In this manner the ancient Franks left the high countries of Germany and came to possess Gaul, driving out the first inhabitants. Thus grew that infinite confluence of people, who, afterward, under Brennus and oth-

ers, overran Italy. So the Goths and the Vandals, as also the people who possessed Greece, left their natural countries to go where they might have more living space. There are hardly two or three corners of the world that have not felt the effect of these alterations of movement.

By these means, the Romans created their colonies. Perceiving their city was growing over-populous, they relieved it of superfluous people, whom they sent to inhabit and cultivate the countries they had subdued. They also frequently waged wars with some of their enemies, not only to keep their men active, lest idleness, the mother of corruption, should cause them some worse trouble, but also to bleed the commonwealth and, in a sense, to reduce the over-vehement heat of their youth, to lop off sprigs and thin the branches of the over-spreading tree, growing too rapidly in its foliage. For this purpose they maintained war with the Carthaginians for a long time.

By the treaty of Bretigny, Edward III, King of England, would by no means include in the general peace the quarrel concerning the Duchy of Brittany, so that he might have some way to disburden himself of his soldiers, and in order that the multitude of Englishmen whom he had employed in his wars in France should not return to England. It was one of the reasons which induced Philip, our King, to consent to send his son, John, to war beyond the seas, so that he might carry with him a great number of young hotbloods who were among his trained military men.


There are many among us now who use this argument, because they want those of violent and burning emotion disposed of in some neighboring war, fearing that those offending humors, which at this moment are predominant in our bodies, if not diverted elsewhere, will maintain our fever at its highest force and in the end cause our utter destruction. Indeed a foreign war is never so dangerous a decision as a civil war. But I cannot believe that God could approve an enterprise so unjust as to offend and quarrel with others for our convenience.

In spite of the weakness of our nature, we are often urged to the necessity of using bad means to a good end. Lycurgus, the most virtuous and perfect lawgiver who ever lived, conceived the most unjust device to teach his people to be temperate, by forcibly making the Helots, who were their slaves, drunk, in order that, seeing them lost and buried in wine, the Spartans might abhor the excess of that vice. They also were to be blamed, who, long ago, allowed criminal offenders, no matter what death they were condemned to,

to be torn to pieces while alive by physicians, so that they might see their inward parts while functioning, and thereby establish a greater certainty in their art. For if a man must err or debauch himself, it is far more excusable if he does it for his soul's good than for his body's. The Romans trained and instructed their people in courage and in contempt of dangers and death by means of the outrageous spectacles of gladiators and the deadly duels of fencers who fought, mangled, sliced and killed one another in their presence, a custom which continued even up to the time of Theodosius, the Emperor.

Surely it was a wonderful example, and of exceeding benefit to the assembled people, daily to see one hundred or two hundred, or sometimes even a thousand pairs of men armed, one against another, cutting and hewing one another in pieces with such great display of courage that they were never heard to utter one word of complaint or commiseration; never to turn their backs nor so much as show a sign of faltering in order to avoid their adversaries' blows. Rather they extended their necks to their swords and offered themselves to receive their strokes. It happened to many of them, who, on the verge of death by their many wounds, had asked the spectators whether they were satisfied that they had done their duty, before they would fall down in death. They must not only fight and die courageously, but cheerfully. In many instances they were cursed and bitterly scolded, if in receiving their death-blows they were seen in any way to hesitate. Even the girls incited them to such conduct.

The first Romans disposed of their criminals in this way. After a while, they did so with their innocent slaves and even their free-men, who were sold for that purpose, and Roman senators and knights and women too.

All this I would deem very strange and incredible, were it not that we are daily accustomed to see in our wars many thousands of foreigners who, for a very small sum of money, risk their blood and lives in quarrels in which they have no interest whatever. 

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