

Of Studies

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Francis Bacon

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Francis Bacon (1561-1626) is regarded as a pioneer of essay in English literature as a new literary form. His Essays published in 1597 is his most popular work in this respect. His other famous works are The Advancement of Learning, Novum Organum and The New Atlantis. His essays cover a wide range of topics and convey deep condensed thoughts. His prose is generally rich, clear, concise and often epigrammatic.

The essay 'Of Studies' is one of the most popular of Bacon's essays and it was published in the subsequent edition of his Essays. In this piece Bacon highlights briefly but suggestively all the aspects of studies in their relation to human life. In a style characteristic of Bacon, the essay presents an an illuminating analysis of a complex activity like human pursuit of knowledge.

According to Bacon, ^{the} purpose of reading books is either to get pleasure or to improve the art of conversation. But probably the most important objective of study is to enable one to handle properly the practical affairs of life. Experience may help a man in the judgement and proper execution of a given work. But a learned man can give best advice regarding the general plan of a work before it is actually undertaken. Spending too much time on studies is foolishness as it produces mental dullness. Likewise too much use of studies for conversation may make one's speech unnatural and a judgement taken wholly on the basis of studies may lead

to gross errors. In fact Bacon suggests the need to establish a proper balance between studies and experience. He believed that studies serve only to unfold and develop the natural abilities of a person, and not to create new abilities. Both study and experience are necessary for the proper moulding of our natural abilities. As a tree requires pruning lest it may grow wild, similarly our natural abilities are pruned and shaped by studies. But studies themselves are often vague and generalised, hence these need to be judged and weighed in the light of experience.

Bacon feels that men with different temperaments have different approaches to scholarly pursuit. For a cunning person bookish knowledge has no significance for practical life. For a common man study appears only an object of admiration. But there are also some wise men who know the art of making use of study. Books themselves do not teach the art of making use of study. This wisdom one gathers by experience and observation of life. Thus study do require a judicious combination of experience to make itself fruitful.

In an oft quoted statement Bacon makes classification of books and the different approach to be taken about them. There are wide variety of books available at any time but all are not to be approached in the same manner. There are some books

which require to be read only in excerpts. There may be some other kind of books which are meant to be learnt by heart, without paying much attention to their contents. Bacon places certain books in special category from the viewpoint of their significance. Such books need a very careful perusal and require to be thoroughly mastered and digested. Some busy people may find the brief summary of a book useful for them, but such reading can not ^{provide} ~~give~~ the pleasure of reading in original and hence should be generally avoided.

As far as the practical aspect of any kind of reading is concerned, Bacon suggests that study of books enhances our knowledge and information. But it is the exchange of viewpoints about the material studied, that prepare us for a timely use of ^{such} knowledge. Next, the writing of our understanding and assessment of a book, makes our knowledge a permanent part of our memory. If a man does not take notes, then he ~~must~~ have a very good memory. A man who does not discuss must have a ready wit and presence of mind. Some persons who do not have interest in reading ~~themself~~ may refer the knowledge of books which they might have acquired through discourse from others.

Bacon refers studies in the terms of physiological use as well, particularly human mind. According to him studies are also essential to discipline mind. Different kind of studies have different effects on

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mind. For improving the art of concentration one requires to study mathematics. In order to perceive subtle difference between two things, one should read philosophy. To develop the art of proving a point one may read the examples of legal cases. Likewise a study of history makes one wise and poetry imaginative. The study of natural science makes our knowledge deep whereas ethics may develop gravity of character. personality. The study of logic and rhetoric makes us skilled debator. Hence, various mental defects can be rectified by various the proper kind of studies.

The essay of studies contains all the essential features which mark the specialities of Bacon as father of English essays. The ideas expressed in the essay have universal appeal and these reflect the well processed thoughts of the essayist. Many of the lines of the essay have become immortal part of people's memory from generations.
