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Of Studies – Francis Bacon

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Studies, according to the English essayist Francis Bacon, enhance the knowledge of man. Man can sharpen his intellect and improve his skills by focusing on studies. A prudent person learns from books on different subjects. Studies mould the character of human beings. Education and experiences of life enable human intellect to attain perfection. Francis Bacon's essay 'Of Studies' is about the importance of reading/studies. Bacon discusses the purpose, method and benefits of reading in the essay. He believes that logic must safeguard and guide the methodical acquisition of knowledge. Reading, he opines, is essential to learning. Bacon contends that a study in diverse disciplines of knowledge not only equips a person for his professional life but also enables him to eliminate defects of the mind, like biases, prejudices, low analytical abilities, intellectual incompetence. He asserts that studies/reading empower a person and give him intellectual, moral and spiritual perfection. Bacon's essay removes wrong notions about reading and education prevalent in the Sixteenth century England. He believes that human beings do not just study for lucre/profit/profession but for development /evolution of mind.

Francis Bacon asserts that studies serve three purposes. Human beings derive pleasure from studies when they read in moments of leisure. Man also enjoys reading in loneliness as it gives him relaxation. Reading of different books enhances the communication skills of a person. It helps a person to learn nuances and correct usage of language that enable him converse properly and improve his speaking skills. Reading enables a man to embellish his style of speaking. Reading/studies provide prime assistance in earning livelihood. An educated man can apply the knowledge gained through studies in his profession. A sound knowledge of the subject, acquired over a period of time, makes him competent in professional life. Bacon discusses the role of age/maturity, experience and learning in making a person wise. Though age and maturity enable men to execute plans, learned men can guide and judge in a better manner. The subject/domain knowledge gives the learned men an upper hand to judge a situation or execute a plan.

Francis Bacon alludes to the flaws of using studies in an improper/inappropriate manner. He claims that spending a lot of time on reading reflects laziness (and inattentiveness). He believes that excessive use of bookish knowledge in speech is pretence. Anyone who uses

high-flown words or jargon in excess to impress others sounds strange. Nobody appreciates such pretence or idiosyncrasy. He also draws attention to the folly of excessive usage of the theoretical knowledge in real life situations. Anyone who tries judging cases or situations totally by rules of books will face challenges or failure. Bacon also talks about the presence of innate knowledge in men. Every human being by nature is capable of thinking but his thoughts are suffused with flaws and excesses. Bacon focuses on the fact that the natural knowledge requires perfection. The innate knowledge blends with experiences to give perfection. Just as plants require pruning for proper development, human beings must shape and sharpen their intellect by fusing the lessons learnt from experiences with studies/reading to attain perfection. When experiences supplement innate abilities, the fallacy of exceeding limits and holding biased opinions can be rectified. Reading gives a sense to discern things properly and to adhere to limits (to achieve moderation). Human brain and mind have inadequacies because of which certain concepts or things elude man's comprehension. The vagueness in knowledge, asserts Bacon, can be checked by selective studies. A focused study of a subject can eliminate doubts and misconceptions. Nature and nurture have a great role in rationalizing human mind.

Bacon observes that deceitful men condemn studies. They rely more upon wrong practices and cunning ways to achieve their goals. Humble/simple men admire studies because they owe their understanding to books. Wise men use the knowledge gained from reading books. Reading or book cannot teach its use or utility to men. Men acquire knowledge by reading books, by observing the world and by applying insights to practical situations. The knowledge man gains by reading should not be used to contradict or refute. Books should not be equated to gospel or rigid rule or be misinterpreted. Man must not read books to find topics for discussion or argumentation. He must rather read to develop his analytical abilities (weigh facts rationally).

Bacon also explains the process of reading in this essay. Books with diverse content require different style of reading. He contends that a few books require a cursory reading. Such books that are not of much concern to a reader can be quickly sifted. This kind of reading gives basic information to the reader. When reader wants to gain deep meaning, s/he requires great diligence. The reader can either concentrate on parts of book/read with little attention or read carefully according to his requirements. For matters of lesser interest/significance, assistance for reading can be taken or extracts/summary can be read. In case the print version of book is of low quality reader pays less attention. Low standard, oversimplified, inferior translation and flashy publication should not be of any interest to many readers. Therefore, readers must carefully select the appropriate book/version of text for reading.

Bacon discusses the uses of reading in 'Of Studies'. Reading makes man knowledgeable. Discussion on the read topics gives a person confidence to explain those to others in a better way. Whenever one confers, it makes one articulate. Writing sharpens memory and gives exactness to a person. Man can retrieve written ideas better. Writing commits lessons to memory. If a person writes little, he must have good memory. If a person confers little, he must be witty. If a person reads little, he must maintain a facade of wisdom. Reading, conferring and writing make a person wise. Bacon elaborates upon the use of studying different subjects. Knowledge of history makes men wise. Those who do not learn lessons from history repeat mistakes and worsen their present and future. Reading of poetry, according to Bacon, makes one witty. Poetry acquaints men with universal issues and enables them to understand their present. Mathematics makes a person prudent and skillful. The subject of philosophy deepens intellect. Lessons in morality make man responsible. Once a person learns to balance his rights and duties he becomes a good citizen. Logic and rhetoric make a person assertive. Reading of different subjects moulds personality. The innate abilities and wit can be sharpened through selective reading.

It is a well-known fact that a sound mind resides in a sound body. Various diseases can be cured by different exercises. Just as ailments of the body can be treated by appropriate exercises, wit can be improved and freed of flaws by reading. Bowling is good for reins, shooting for lungs, walking for stomach and riding for head. One must study Mathematics to control one's wandering mind. The mathematical problems train one to improve one's concentration – a slight error results in wrong solution for which one has to begin again. The ways of schoolmen / professors / theologians train intellect to analyze minute details and to infer properly. One can learn from the lawyer's cases a way to prove facts by using precedents. Wandering wit, lack of concentration, biases, prejudices and other fallacies of the mind can be cured through reading of books on diverse subjects. Reading improves memory, enhances knowledge/skills, relaxes mind and makes man wise. Reading helps individuals understand self, others/environment, think constructively, analyze attitudes/problems, assist people and make adjustments for a meaningful existence. Hence, studies are highly beneficial for men.