

What Treatise Concerning the Content and Method of Study Does Bacon Give in his Essay *Of Study*? (part-1)

[BA (Hons.), Part-2, Paper-IV]

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‘The furthest end of knowledge’ is ‘the benefit and use of man’ and ‘the relief of man’s estate’, advocated Francis Bacon, and to this end, his essay *Of Studies* gives a scientific and pragmatic treatment to the age-old source of all knowledge, the study of books. While his contemporaries like Philip Sidney were busy writing criticisms on literature, Bacon turned to practical matters, matters which affect man morally as well as civilly. *Of Studies* is thus one of Bacon’s ‘counsels, civil and moral’. Books have been the greatest friend of mankind, but have also misled, having been misused. Now, as a pragmatic psychologist, who himself has a sound knowledge of human nature and affairs, Bacon defines and categorises study, and in his characteristically aphoristic, epigrammatic and analytical style and drawing analogy from diverse fields of knowledge much in the vein of a Metaphysical poet, elaborates on the uses and abuses of study, the methods of study and finally on the psychological and medicinal effect of books.

Bacon likes coming to the matter without circumstances, and aphorisms are the best way to do this. If *Of Death* starts with the proverbial ‘men fear death as children fear to go in the dark’, *Of Studies* begins directly with the purpose of studying a book: ‘Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability’. To elaborate, books are the greatest of the companions

in loneliness, they enrich one's tongue with ornaments of distinguishing language and ideas, and they enable one to execute matters with prudence. Study is the only means by which a man distinguishes himself from the crowd of experienced men: a learned man has the ability to judge, organise, plan and control a task at a time.

But the propensity of the human mind being at his fingertips, Bacon the psychologist cautions that too much of study to arrive at these good effects usually leads to sloth, lowliness and bookishness. Too much dependence on books becomes an unwanted and impractical obsession, 'the Humour of a scholar'. That is why it is wise to 'use' studies and to enrich and strengthen it with observations. Genuinely learned persons also do not indulge in showy discourse and do abstain from all controversies and debates. They do not also believe and talk for granted what is written in black letters. Studies rather enable one to judge everything with discretion. In other words. Studies nurture an objectivity of mind and a sense of decorum.

Drawing analogy from horticulture in which the gardener prunes the haphazardly growing trees, Bacon propounds that studies, too, do prune human nature which sometimes is carried away with untoward emotions. It is in this regard that he quotes Ovid in *Heroides* (Ch. xv): 'Abeunt studia in mores' ('Studies mould character').

...To be continued in part-2...