

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon is an English philosopher, statesman, scientist, jurist, orator and author. He is often referred to as “the father of English essay”. Bacon, a Renaissance figure is also known as the creator of empiricism and he encouraged scientific advancements. He was influenced hugely by the French essayist, Michel de Montaigne. He was awarded ‘Knighthood’ in 1603. As an essayist, he remained as a keen observer, eagerly scrutinizing the events happening around him. He preferred the epigrammatic style and his essays were pithy/short, terse, and formal in nature. Bacon created ‘Aphoristic Essays’ and it seemed like a collection of short and sharp maxims with tremendous compression. The sentences Bacon used were rhetorical in nature and forceful too. They are quite crisp, short and sententious. Each sentence stands by itself with a concentrated expression of weighty thought. For Bacon, man is the subject of his essays, which is one of the reasons for his works being popular beside other qualities.

Bacon described his essays as “dispersed meditations” and as “brief notes set down rather significantly than curiously”. He focused on a particular subject in his essays and he never digressed from that central concern. According to Dean Church, “They (Bacon’s Essays) come down like the strokes of a hammer”. Critics consider the language of Bacon in prose as supreme as Shakespeare’s in verse. Bacon’s essays were published in three successive editions during the years 1597, 1612 and 1625. His other major works are *The New Atlantis*, *The Advancement of Learning*, *Novum Organum*. Bacon’s *Essays Civil and Moral* is a collection of 58 Essays including the famous “Of Friendship”, “Of Studies”, “Of Truth”, “Of Death”, etc. Alexander Pope has commented, “**If parts allure these think how Bacon shin’d, The wisest, brightest and meanest of mankind**”.

Bacon’s essays are considered as capsules of impersonal wisdom and classic examples of utilitarianism. They are objective and logically constructed. Bacon has extensively employed Latin words and phrases in his essays to convey the ideas to his readers. He wrote on a wide range of topics from religion to architecture, from studies to philosophy, etc. Notable literary historian, Henry Hallam wrote that “They (Bacon’s essays) are deeper and more discriminating than any earlier, or almost any later, work in the English language”.

“Of Studies”

The essay, “Of Studies” deliberates on the significance of books and reading. Bacon attempts to explain the merits and purpose of studies. “Of Studies” is one of the most quoted essays of Francis Bacon. In this essay, he does not only talk about bookish knowledge but also demonstrates the importance of experience. He also lists the benefits of reading and ultimately validates how studies can benefit a reader’s life enormously in different ways. Bacon begins his essay by describing the three purposes of studies.

According to Bacon, studies “**serve for delight**” as it can provide happiness for a lonely individual. A book can be an ideal partner for a person in solitude and it can also provide immense pleasure for a person after retirement from active life. It can be a huge source of entertainment for a man returning after a hectic day’s work. Secondly, studies can be used as an “**ornament**” or decorative device especially in conversation, discourse, etc. With the help of studies/knowledge, one can enhance the quality of his speech and it can easily create an impression among the listeners. A person who is well read can talk more attractively than an uneducated person. The third use of studies according to Bacon is that, they help “**in the judgement, and disposition of business**”. An erudite person can thus manage the affairs in an efficient way with the aid of the studies. Bacon says that, the execution of things can be managed by experienced men also but good counsels or advice, better plans/plots and perfect marshalling comes best from educated men. Thus, Bacon proves the value and different purposes of studies.

In the second paragraph, Bacon writes about the limitations of studies. According to Bacon, if a person invests too much time in studies, it is nothing more than “sloth” or laziness and if someone uses studies extensively in conversation as an ornament, it is nothing but “affectation” or pretension. Such an attitude reveals exaggeration and posing of a person. Anyone who uses high-flown words or jargon in excess to impress others sounds strange. Nobody appreciates such idiosyncrasy. The third limitation is that, if a scholar makes all judgements throughout his life with the help of his knowledge, it is absolute foolishness and can be said as the eccentricity or “humor” of that person or as the ‘humour’ of the scholar. Studies can add perfection to human nature and it gets more accurate when guided by experience. So, Bacon says that, the natural abilities of a man are like natural plants. These plants can grow perfectly if pruning or trimming is done. Similarly, studies can guide and shape the character of a person to attain perfection. Though studies have a vast scope and provide numerous options, it is always better to have experience as a guiding force.

In the next part, Bacon writes about the attitudes of different types of men towards studies. He says that, crafty or cunning men hate and condemn studies because they hate to receive the questions from those who are learned. The common/simple men or those who lack proper knowledge consider studies as great and hence they admire it. But the wise men actually make use of studies to perfection. A person with wisdom perfectly knows how and when to make use of studies. In the next part, Bacon provides a kind of advice. He says that a man should not read to contradict and confute others, neither should he believe and rely completely on words. Also, he should not read to find a point of discussion in conversation but he should read to understand, realize its value and above all to use studies.

Bacon, then categorizes the books into three categories. He writes, **“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested...”**

According to Bacon, there are some books which demands only a quick reading or “to be read in parts”. Such books are useful for a person only at some places and hence it is not worthy to read them word by word. The second category includes those books which are to be read with less curiosity because they lack a serious content. The third category of books is extremely important and such texts are to be read with utmost “diligence and attention”. Bacon says that, these types of books carry immense knowledge and are to be treated as priceless treasures. Later, he includes a fourth category too. This includes the notes/extracts prepared by others based on the original text. A scholar can opt for such books in the case of less important matters but it lacks the quality of the original and will look like “common distilled waters, flashy things”, that is, without a proper taste and smell.

In the next part, Bacon writes, **“Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man”**. This is one of the most quoted lines in world literature. He says, reading provides more knowledge to man and hence it makes him “a full man”. Conversation with others makes a man quick-witted and ready for any sort of step to be taken practically on behalf of his knowledge. Writing can make a person more perfect and accomplished. He will become “an exact man” through writing and he can innovate and generate new ideas. Bacon goes to describe a few more facts regarding studies. He says if a man writes little than he needs to have a great memory to remember all the things he had learnt. Similarly, if a man interacts little, he should be quick-witted or possess a sharp sense of humour and if a man reads little, he should be cunning enough to know what he actually does not.

In the final portion of the essay, Bacon writes about the qualities and objectives of different subjects. He says that learning history can make a person wise as he would not repeat an error. Learning poetry or literature can make a person more imaginative or creative. Mathematics will help to sharpen one’s skills, Natural philosophy will make a person think more, Moral philosophy will help a person to identify what is right and wrong, thus providing him a serious attitude and sense of responsibility and learning logic and rhetoric will help one to combat negative forces. Bacon uses the Latin phrase *“Abeunt studia in mores”* which means “studies pass on to character” to explain how a person’s character will be impacted through the subject he has studied. It often becomes a habit.

Bacon says that every hurdle or impediment in one’s wit or character can be removed/solved through the selection of an appropriate subject to study like a doctor who prescribes suitable exercises to cure the diseases of the human body. For example, bowling is considered excellent for the kidneys, shooting for the lungs, gentle walking

can reduce the tummy or stomach and horse-riding is perfect for achieving a balance or focus (“the head”), etc. Bacon concludes by mentioning different subjects as cure for various shortcomings in the character of human beings. He says that if a man finds it difficult to concentrate, he should learn mathematics as one needs to be extremely vigilant while solving a mathematical problem and he will be forced to return back to the first step for even the slightest mistake made. Similarly, if a person finds hard to identify differences between almost similar things, he should study the texts of the medieval philosophers as they include the details of hair-splitting arguments (*cymini sectores* – these philosophers make excessively fine distinctions in reasoning). Finally, if anyone fails to illustrate or prove something to others, he should carefully study the case diaries of the lawyers to attain that skill. Thus, Bacon concludes by saying that, there is a special remedy in studies for every defect/problem of the mind.

“Of Friendship”

The essay “Of Friendship” by Francis Bacon deals with the theme of friendship, its pros and cons and above all its multidimensional nature. The intimacy between friends is often subjected to both prosperity and adversity without succumbing to the clouds of doubt and jealousy. The essay was written on the request of his friend **Toby Matthew** (Sir Tobie Matthew, an English member of parliament and courtier who later became a priest).

In this essay, Bacon identifies three fruits of friendship – the first one is **affection** or the merit that friends can easily share the emotions and passions among themselves, that is, “the ease and discharge of the fulness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do occasion and promote.” Bacon denotes a tight emotional tie between friends that allows them to convey their emotions and feelings to one another. The second fruit of friendship is the quality of **understanding** one another. The understanding will guide the friends to fight against all challenges and it also helps to receive unbiased advice. The third fruit of friendship is **helping** one another. Bacon compares third fruit to a pomegranate which is filled with many kernels. Friends can help each other in a variety of ways. They offer advice, arbitrate conflicts, and support their friends in any endeavor.

Francis Bacon opens his essay with reference to the views of Aristotle. He says that finding pleasure in solitude is contrary to human character and mind. If someone finds happiness in solitude, Bacon says that he cannot be a human. he should be treated either as a wild beast or God. Love and desire to communicate are inherent with mankind. But Bacon also acknowledges those people who deliberately keeps away from crowds. Such people are actually engaged in deep contemplative thinking. In such moments, the man is able to communicate with his own self and through this process, he is able to rediscover himself. Great personalities like Epimenides (Greek philosopher), Numa (the Roman King), Empedocles (Greek philosopher) and Apollonius (Greek philosopher), etc. enjoyed such unique moments and they were able to generate new thoughts which were

of great philosophical value. Spiritual men who retreat from public eye in and around places of worship have been instrumental in delivering sermons of immense spiritual benefit to mankind. Hence, voluntary abstention from society is not always a bad idea, after all.

In the next part, Bacon says that one should learn to differentiate between a crowd and kinship and also between society and friendship. Being in the middle of many does not mean that a person has so many friends because Bacon considers crowd as just a gallery of fleeting pictures. The conversation that arises on such occasions are devoid of passion or true emotions and those talks are like the sounds of a tinkling cymbal (a futile exercise). Then he uses the Latin saying “*Magna civitas, magna solitudo*” which reveals the fact that there is little love in the cities when compared to villages. Solitude exists in cities as people are separated by long distances. On the other hand, friendship binds well in small towns and villages because people tend to live at a shorter distance from each other.

Bacon then writes in detail about the three fruits of friendship. He identifies the first and foremost fruit of friendship as “the ease and discharge of the fulness and swellings of the heart”, that is, if one has a true friend, he can share all his emotions, feeling and passion with a strong affection. Pleasant and intimate conversation with a friend can revitalize the heart. Bacon says that the most dangerous thing to happen in a human body is the stopping or suffocation of the heart. A true friend can genuinely help to open one’s heart and relieve him from all the suffocations. It can work as a medicine to cure the mind like other methods used by the doctors to cure the diseases of the body. With a friend near, you can share all the griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, etc.

Friendship is considered as a great blessing and for achieving that, even the legendary figures have tried different methods. Bacon gives the examples of the monarchs and kings, and the elite who went to unusual lengths to befriend good and worthy people. At times, the kings gave wealth, power position, etc. to elevate the status of commoners so that they turn to be worthy friends. But Bacon says that, it has a negative side too. Such efforts to cultivate friendship may turn hostile causing harm to their benefactors. Friends of that kind have at times caused problems too for the greats. Bacon writes about two great men to validate his point. Pompey who later became the Roman General was designated as ‘Pompey, the Great’ by Sylla, the ruler of Rome. It was Sylla who raised Pompey as great person but soon Pompey boasted that he achieved all the honours due to his own efforts. He also started to consider himself superior to Sylla and once publicly reminded Sylla that men chiefly adored the rising sun and never the setting sun hinting that he had more clout and power than Sylla. The second incident is in connection with Julius Caesar and Brutus. Caesar trusted Brutus very much and he was Caesar’s closest confidant and advisor. Brutus had cast a spell over Caesar which ultimately led to his

murder. Antonius considered Brutus as 'veefica', a witch, who had 'enchanted' Ceaser for evil designs. These two instances suggest the negative side of close friendships.

Bacon continues to write in the next part regarding various strong friendships. The story of Augustus and Agrippa appears first. Augustus was the Roman Emperor and he befriended Agrippa and was soon appointed as his trusted lieutenant despite him not from a royal family. Agrippa enjoyed all the power and privileges. Once, when Augustus consulted the royal counselor Maecenas about the marriage of his daughter Julia, the counselor proffered an awkward advice. He suggested to Augustus to give his daughter in marriage to Agrippa. There was no way anyone else could win her hand with Agrippa attaining that much social status and if the emperor is not willing to do this, he will be forced to kill Agrippa as there is no other way. The second story is about the friendship between Tiberius Caesar and Tejanus. He was a Roman soldier, friend and confidant of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Their friendship and bonding were so intimate and the emperor had once openly declared that he had shared all the secrets including that of the country to Tejanus, though he was a common soldier. The senate understood the depth of this relationship and hence decided to dedicate an altar to their friendship as if their companionship was as sublime as a Goddess.

The third story is about the close friendship between Septimus Severus, the Roman emperor and Plautianus. Septimus went to the extent that he forced his son into marriage with the daughter of Plautianus. The bonding between the two was so strong that Septimus's praising of his friend had reached to ridiculous levels. In one of his letters to the senate, he had raved over his love for Plautianus saying he wished his friend to outlive him in this world. Bacon says that all the above-mentioned characters were strong in nature and were extremely great leaders but yet they tried to engage in friendships. This proves that even the powerful persons craved for friendship in their quest for worldly happiness. At times, these emperors also failed to draw a line in their relation with their friends which brought defeat, disaster and death for a few.

Bacon then moves to write about Comineus, a writer and diplomat who served under Duke Charles Hardy and later Louis XI of France. Comineus once said that his master, Duke Charles Hardy, would never share any secrets with anyone. He was particularly careful about not divulging any secret he considered critical to him and to his rule. But when age caught up with him, his mental faculty deteriorated and many vital secrets remained as such without sharing. The same happened in the case of Louis XI too. He was a man of reclusive and suspicious nature and hence, he too suffered from loneliness towards the last phase of his life. Bacon suggests these examples to emphasize the importance of having a friend with whom one can share the joys and burdens of one's heart.

Pythagoras once said, “*Cor ne edito*” which means “eat not the heart”. He said that one should never allow anyone to conquer one’s heart before completely understanding the other. Pythagoras here tries to prove the hazards of keen friendship. He felt that a person may locate a worthy friend before whom he could unburden his worries. But, by doing this, he is actually allowing his friend to eat his own heart. Such surrender before even the closest friend might lead to undesirable consequences causing harm. As part of the first goal of friendship, Bacon goes on to conclude that nurturing intimacy excessively might also prove as a double-edged sword sometimes. A strong friendship is sure to enhance joy and reduce the grief encountered in day-to-day life. But on the other side, such happiness may turn illusory too. It is a fact that there is no man who has shared all his grief with his friend and realistically reduced his grief. Similarly, there is no man who has shared all the joys with a friend and experienced more joy. Bacon says that, human friendship has undoubtedly got some curative and embalming effects notwithstanding the risk of it turning foul.

Francis Bacon identifies the second fruit of friendship as “healthful and sovereign for the understanding”, that is the therapeutic or healing purpose. Friendship tempers down the ill effects of the storms of life, and brings sunshine and cheer to one’s life. It enables one to think clearly without any confusions. Genuine friends can guide a person and at time provide perfect advice too. This does not mean that one will always get good advice from friends, but one thing can be assured. If a person is having a confused mind, let him communicate with his friends. When a person communicates his thoughts to a friend by putting them in words, he gets the clarity and understanding and become wiser simply by putting these thoughts in an orderly manner to make the right judgement. This is more beneficial than doing an entire day’s meditation. Thoughts should be communicated so that the friend will understand the mindset of the person and it is similar to the designed cloth of Arras. One should display the cloth so that the people will understand and appreciate its designs. Similarly, when the thoughts are displayed, one can feel relieved.

This second fruit of friendship, that is good judgment and better understanding is not restricted to opening up of one’s mind only to a few intelligent friends, although it is best when you do so. Even if the friend might not be intelligent enough, it nevertheless is beneficial to expound the thoughts before him. By doing this, one can understand them, and possibly throw more light on them. This could sharpen the intelligence and it is like the way we sharpen a tool by rubbing it against a rough stone. In short, it is better for a man to reveal his thoughts to a statue than to bury them in the mind and suffer a lot.

Bacon says that the best advice come from wise friends and it will be unbiased. Such advice seldom leads to undesirable consequences. If a person is guided by his own instincts, intuition and emotions, the judgment might be biased and one-sided and this might lead to difficulties. So, it is better that one should not be guided by one’s own

understanding of the situation, and seek advice from wise friends. Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher termed such independent advice from another person as 'dry light'. Bacon says that the drier it is, the more useful it can be. Bacon also provides a warning while listening to the advice. If it comes from a sycophant or a flatterer, it should be treated with less seriousness and on such occasions, it is good to trust upon one's own self. Advice from a well-meaning wise friend can be for two principal reasons – about a person's manners and conduct and the second might be about his business. A friend's criticism helps to keep the mind free of many undesirable thoughts and influences.

Bacon tells about other options too to correct one's mistakes. Reading books on morality is the first option and the second is by observing the mistakes of others. But these two may not work for all and hence the best option for correcting oneself is to receive the criticism of good friends. It is strange to see how people, especially those who are powerful and wealthy, make blunders and damage their fame and fortune due to the lack of balanced and neutral advice from good friends. The more powerful the person is, the higher will be his propensity to commit such mistakes. St. James had cautioned his followers about such self-deception when one becomes blind to one's own failings and weaknesses. At times, people will feel that they are perfect especially after a few rounds of success. They fail to notice their errors. They will begin to argue that two eyes see no better than one eye, implying that they are able to reach the correct decision themselves and do not need the advice of others. In the same vein, they can say a gambler takes a better call than others watching the game. He can also claim that a musket can be fired from the arm as efficiently as from a rest. These thoughts are born out of boastfulness and ignorance and in the long run, such mindset can be highly damaging. So, it is better to have good and competent advisors always. One should also remain vigilant while receiving an advice and it not good to seek advice from many.

Bacon now talks of another danger from advice from others. The counselor may have genuine intention to help the person in trouble, but may not have been able to study the matter properly. In such a case, he could give a drastic and upsetting advice with all the good intentions. Sadly, the result for the recipient may be harmful and even ruinous. This situation is similar to the one that results when an incompetent doctor, unaware of the patient's medical history, prescribes the wrong medicines to the patient. The patient's problems in fact will get aggravated ultimately leading to his death. Hence, Bacon concludes, by saying that a person must confide in a single counselor, who knows everything about him. This is because he would be well-placed to give a correct advice using his good understanding of the matters.

After discussing the two fruits of friendship, that is, affection and understanding, Bacon talks about the third benefit which is like a pomegranate fruit that has so many kernels inside it. Helping mentality is regarded as the third fruit of friendship. The benefits of

good friendships are endless. It is a great blessing to have a genuine and loyal friend. If a person has such a friend, he is sure to take care of all the responsibilities even after the other's death. He may care for his family, run his business, pay off his debts or do all those things left incomplete after the death of the man. Thus, a man's life span gets prolonged through selfless friends.

A man can delegate his friend to other places too if he trustworthy. There are many things in life a person cannot do alone and with the aid of a true friend, one can smoothen his life. Moreover, if a person talks about his own qualities before others, it will be considered as boasting oneself. But a friend is perfect for such a job. He can lavishly praise the qualities without any hesitation. Similarly, while asking for a favour from others, he may feel very awkward. All these things can be perfectly executed by a loyal and capable friend. A friend may be a good mediator too and can solve many issues with lenience. When a message is to be communicated to an adolescent son or a peeved wife, or a stern enemy, a friend can do the job with aplomb and with great ease. Thus, the benefits of friendship are endless and Bacon concludes with the statement that if a person does not have a friend, it is better for him to "quit the stage".