



Foreword to Edmund Burke's “Scattered Hints Concerning Philosophy and Learning”

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In 1957, Cambridge University Press published a slim volume titled *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke: Poems, Characters, Essays and Other Sketches in the Hands of Edmund and William Burke Now Printed for the First Time in Their Entirety and Edited by H. V. F. Somerset*. Here we reproduce an abridgement of one of the items by Edmund Burke, the full title of which is “Several Scattered Hints Concerning Philosophy and Learning Collected Here from My Papers,” pp. 81–98.

We have omitted three segments thought not worthwhile, a total of about 1290 words. The abridged version here is about 4460 words. Hence, about 22 percent of the original (about 5750 words) has been omitted. Bracketed comments indicated where the omissions occur. And a few other insertions are in brackets.

The essay itself probably derives from notations that Burke made in the 1750s. The *Note-Book* includes a Foreword by Sir Ernest Barker. He writes, “we may therefore use the general substance of the Note-Book as evidence of Burke’s thought and the development of his ideas during his early youth, from the age of 21 (he was 21 when he came to England) to the age of 27, when he published his first work” (1957, x). Barker calls the essay we abridge slightly here “the longest and finest of the essays” in the book (*ibid.*, xi).

We inquired with Cambridge University Press, through PLS Clear, about reproducing what follows here, and received no response, which tends to confirm that Burke’s words are not under copyright. We thank Jacob Hall for typing up the

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piece as printed in 1957.

Within the *Note-Book*, Somerset (1957, 81) writes: “This piece, clearly by Edmund Burke, and inscribed as being so, is one of the most typical of his style and thought in the note-book.” In the piece, Burke warns against “confined” learning. He writes: “The End of learning is not knowledge but virtue; as the End of all speculation should be practice of one sort or another.”

About the Author



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Several Scattered Hints Concerning Philosophy and Learning Collected Here from My Papers

Edmund Burke

[About 100 words omitted here.]

The appearance from real learning is like a complexion had from sound health; it looks lively and natural, and is only the sign of something better.

It signifies much less what we read than how we read, and with a view to what end. To study only for its own sake is a fruitless labour; to learn only to be learned is moving in a strange Circle. The End of learning is not knowledge but virtue; as the End of all speculation should be practice of one sort or another. It is owing to inattention to this that we so often see men of great Erudition immersed as deeply as any in the passions, prejudices, and vain opinions of the vulgar; nay we often see them more servile, more proud, more opinionative, fonder of money, more governed by vanity, more afraid of Death, and captivated more by little appearances and trifling distinctions. In these two last particulars I have often observed it, and always with wonder.

It is worth observing that when anything not a principal itself, and cultivated only as an accessory to something else, is diverted from its proper end, it not only does not promote that end, but it goes a great way to destroy it. The Gymnastic exercises among the Greeks were undoubtedly designed to form their people to war; and they seem well calculated for that purpose. But when they forgot that purpose, when they made that art acquiesce in itself, when they sought a reputation from the exercise alone, it lost its use; and the professed Wrestlers always made the worst Soldiers. Those who make a trade of Tumbling are never very remarkable for their agility in any other way; and in the little Course of my own experience, I have always observed of your prodigious and ostentatious memories that they served for little else than prodigy and ostentation. It has happened in a manner not unlike this to learning. Knowledge is the Culture [cultivation] of the mind; and he who rested

there, would be just as wise as he who should plough his field without any intention of sowing or reaping.

[About 290 words omitted here.]

As learning in some measure answers to the experience of Old age, it seems to produce something of its querulous disposition too. I do not know any discourse worse received than complaints of the times; and I think with some reason; as they usually begin with our own misfortunes and end with them. But such complaints least of all become men of Learning, who by some fatality are always stunning us with the reproaches of the age they live in, and the little encouragement they receive. And it will ever be so whilst men propose to themselves any other views in Learning than the regulation of their minds and their own inward content and repose. If we consider the matter rightly, what reward should I expect for doing myself the greatest service imaginable? If I complain of want of encouragement in this way, it is a sure sign I deserve none. If my Studies are not of such a nature as to enable me to make a figure in the world, or to acquire some better possession instead of it, what have I been doing? And in what a light do I present myself?

We ought rather to be learned *about* Sciences than *in* them (I don't speak here of the particular profession of any). That is, we ought, if possible, rather to master those principles that govern almost all of them than to sift into those particulars that direct and distinguish each of them separately. By these means we can extend our views much more considerably; we keep our minds open, and prevent that littleness and narrowness that almost inevitably attends a confined commerce with any Art or Science however noble in itself. I remember a preface to some book of Heraldry wherein the Author, after giving due commendation to his own Studies, passes a severe Censure on those who are weak enough to mis-spend their time in such trivial pursuits as those of philosophy and poetry, neglecting an art of so much delight in the Study, and advantage in the application, as Heraldry.

Confined reading and company are the Greatest Sources of pride that I know; and I am sure any knowledge that carries this taint along with it does not make amends for the mischief it brings. If a man be a poor narrow minded Creature what does it avail whether he is a Logician or a Shoemaker, a Geometrician or a Taylor? If he has the narrow views of a Mechanic, he is as far from being a philosopher as the mechanic, and farther too, if the other chances to have from nature a more generous way of thinking.

There is inseparably annexed to any confined Studies a number of false admirations that a more general knowledge would go a great way to Cure. When a man is conversant in all the variety of Arts and Sciences, in the Stories, opinions,

Customs, manners, achievements of all ages and all nations, it must by a sure consequence wear away those little prejudices of little parties that Cause such heats and animosities amongst mankind; it must lessen something of that extravagant admiration of power and riches that intoxicates us to our ruin, and overturns the peace and innocence of our lives. It might perhaps humble us, and abate something of our confidence in our opinions, if, after taking a view of the rise and fall of kingdoms, we observed those of science; to see it rise from chance, grow by industry, strengthen by contention, refine by subtilty and ease, fall then into nicety, Error, Guess,—and, dissolving at last, make way for new Systems, which rise by the same means, and fall by the same fortune. Whatever tends to humble us, tends to make us wiser. Whatever makes us wiser, makes us better, and easier, and happier.

I would make an ingenuous and liberal turn of mind the End of all learning and wherever I don't see it I should doubt the reality of the knowledge. For the End of all knowledge ought to be the bettering us in some manner; and whoever has a sour, splenetick, unsocial, malevolent Temper; who is haughty in his own acquirements and contemptuous of others; ostentatious of his knowledge, positive in his Tenets, and abusive to those who differ from him; he may be a Scholar,—and indeed most of those called Scholars are something in this Character,—but sure he is not a man of learning, nor a philosopher. The more he vaunts his reading, the more loudly he proclaims his ignorance. If a deep and general knowledge does not make a man diffident and humble, no human means, I believe, can do it.

To attempt a general knowledge ought not to be thought too bold an undertaking; to have many things in hand will rather advance us in Each, whilst they relieve one another; and prevent that satiety which arises from a confined application, and which can have no relief but in Idleness or some other Study, And which is to be preferred, everyone may judge.

There is certainly, besides, some connexion in all the Sciences which makes them mutually advance one another; though I allow not so much as some contend for. But one of the Strongest reasons I have for admitting great variety into our Studies, and a passing in a pretty Quick Succession from one to another, is that it helps to form that *versatile ingenium* which is of very great use in Life,—Not to be so possessed with any subject, but that we should be able at pleasure to quit it, to turn to another, so to a third, to resume the first again, and to follow the occasion with a suppleness that may suit the infinite intricacy that occurs in many sorts of Business and employments. For we ought if possible to keep all our talents subservient to the uses of Life, and not to make ourselves the Slaves of any of them. Those who lay out their whole time on any one Science, are apt to be carried away by it; and are no longer their own masters so far as to decide when and where, and in what measure they shall indulge their Speculations; and therefore are not so generally fit for the world.

There is great reason to believe that being engaged in business is rather of Service to Speculative knowledge than otherwise; because perhaps the mind can do more in sudden starts than in an even progression. Experience may show that an entire application to study alone is apt to carry men into unprofitable Subtilities and whimsical notions. Man is made for Speculation and action; and when he pursues his nature he succeeds best in both.

I am not moved with what it is common for people to advance about superficial learning. A man who does not seek a reputation from his knowledge, will be indifferent whether it be thought deep or shallow provided it be of any real use to him. One may know all the maxims of a Science, be perfectly conversant in their Grounds, ready in the reasonings about them, and know all that has been thought, written, or experimented on that Subject, and yet have but a superficial knowledge in that Science. Another who knows but few of its principles, if yet he can extend them, can multiply their resources, can strike out something new, can remedy some defect, he has a deeper knowledge in the Science than the other, if this other should not be able to advance its landmarks,—as thousands well conversant in Arts cannot do, and who therefore have a more superficial knowledge, because a less useful one. And such is the weakness of the human mind, that it is found, a great acquaintance and readiness in what is already known in any branch of Learning is rather of prejudice than use in extending it.

It is common with men of a small understanding to think nothing of any use, that is not particularly and avowedly designed for use, and apparently so. But in fact there are things that aim obliquely at their end that often hit it more surely. I speak this of such who depreciate the ornamental parts of Learning as Eloquence, Poetry, and such like—and consider them merely as matter of ornament. I look on them in quite a different light, because I always consider the Chief use of Learning is to implant an elegant disposition into the mind and manners and to root out of them everything sordid, base or illiberal. I conceive that the polite arts are rather better calculated for this purpose than any others; and this for the very reason that some condemn them; because they apply to the passions, in which, more than in any faults of reasoning, the Sources of all our Errors lie.

Those who speak in favour of these studies, on the other hand, do not seem to me truly to discern wherein their advantage consists. Say they, moral precepts when graced with the advantages of Eloquence, invite the inattentive, and by being mixed with something pleasureable, make a deeper impression. It is true they do so; but in fact the great powers of Eloquence and poetry, and the great Benefits that result from them, are not in giving precepts but creating habits. For the preceptive part of poetry makes but a small part of it in all poems; and none at all in many; and yet they all have their use. For the mind when it is entertained with high

fancies, elegant and polite sentiments, beautiful language, and harmonious sounds, is modelled insensibly into a disposition to elegance and humanity. For it is the bias the mind takes that gives direction to our lives; and not any rules or maxims of morals and behavior. It imitates what is called the natural Temper best; and this is the best guide and guard we can have in every Virtue. For though rules, fear, interest, or other motives may induce us to virtue, it is the virtue of a bad soil, harsh and disagreeable.

Most Books, prove, affirm, demonstrate; they come with settled notions to us, and make us settle ours too early. We are too apt to take our parties in everything when our Judgement is very unripe and make the reasoning of our mature years subservient to the rashness of our Youth. I am almost tempted to think we ought to learn not so much to cure our Doubts, of which we have too few, as to learn how to doubt.

We daily hear the words, 'tis impossible, 'tis absurd, 'tis unreasonable, 'tis contradiction, used on many occasions with equal hardiness and ignorance; and that on every side of Questions extremely dark and puzzling, and which seem as it were calculated to suspend and confound the human understanding. If a man seriously set about regarding his opinions of things in several periods of his life, he would see what he thought in one part of it impossible was easy; what he thought absurd, he now finds highly reasonable; how his experience reverses his notions; makes him adopt what he rejected and reject what he was fondest of. These considerations one would think might tend to humble the understanding and make it Cautious and diffident.—Such a review is sometimes made; but with a very different Effect; we view the littleness of our former notions with an exultation on our present Growth; we Triumph in the comparison; and never recollect that we are to tread the same Circle again; affording matter of contempt in our present Triumph to our later, God knows whether wiser, Schemes of things. We should take a quite contrary Course—I once was sure; I now find I was mistaken; I am going to be very positive again; can I say a few years more may not show me that I was positive in an Error?

To have the mind a long time lost in Doubts and uncertainties may have the same Effect on our understandings that fermentation has on liquors. It disturbs them for a while, but it makes them both the Sounder and clearer ever after.

We read too much; and our studies being remote from the occasions of Life cannot so easily be mixt with them afterwards. It were to be wished that matters of moment made a larger part in the conversations even of the greatest men. It is but reasonable that our general conduct should be a good deal modelled by the general Sense of the publick; and that unfortunately leads to amusements, trivial or worse;

but I would willingly give something to reason as well as Custom; I would be its humble Servant but not its Slave. What we learn in Conversation is in some way of a better kind than that we draw from Books; and it certainly goes further towards influencing our Conduct. Discourse is nearer to action and mixes more with it than mere reading, and surely Philosophy of every sort is naturally pleasing to the mind; it is not excluded from conversation because it is sour and pedantick, but it is apt to be sour and pedantick, when it is excluded from conversation.

The more a man's mind is elevated above the vulgar the nearer he comes to them in the simplicity of his appearance, speech, and even not a few of his Notions. He knows his reason very well and therefore he is suspicious of it. He trusts his passions more on some occasions; he reins them, but does not fetter them. A man who considers his nature rightly will be diffident of any reasonings that carry him out of the ordinary roads of Life; Custom is to be regarded with great deference especially if it be an universal Custom; even popular notions are not always to be laughed at. There is some general principle operating to produce Customs, that is a more sure guide than our Theories. They are followed indeed often on odd motives, but that does not make them less reasonable or useful. A man is never in greater danger of being wholly wrong than when he advances far in the road of refinement; nor have I ever that diffidence and suspicion of my reasonings as when they seem to be most curious, exact, and conclusive. Great subtelties and refinements of reasoning are like spirits which disorder the brain and are much less useful than ordinary liquors of a grosser nature; I never would have our reasoning too much dephlegmatic, much less would I have its pernicious activity exerted on the forms and ceremonies that are used in some of the material Businesses and more remarkable changes of Life. I find them in all nations, and at all times; and therefore I judge them suitable to our nature, and do not like to hear them called fopperies. Our fathers, ruder indeed than we, and, if not instructed, at least not misled, practised them; we should follow them. But they ought not to affect us beyond their just value. When Diogenes was dying, his friends desired to know how he would have his Body disposed of. 'Throw it into the fields,' says he. They objected that it might be liable to be devoured by wild Beasts. 'Then set my Staff by me to drive them off.' One answered, 'You will be then insensible and unable to do it.' 'So shall I be' (sayd he) 'of their injuries.'

I like the vivacity of the Turn in this Story. The philosophy is shewy but has no substance; for to what would he persuade us by this odd example? Why, that our Bodies being after Death neither capable of pain nor pleasure, we should not trouble our heads about them. But let this pass into a general principle, and thence into a general practice, and the ill consequence is obvious. The wisdom of nature, or rather providence, is very worthy of admiration in this, as in a thousand other

things, by working its ends by means that seem directed to other purposes. A man is anxious and solicitous about the fate of his body which he knows can have no feeling. He never considers what a nuisance it would be to Society if it was exposed. He considers such an event as personally terrible; and he does piously for others what he would wish done for himself.

It is not easily conceived what use funeral ceremonies (for my story led me to think) are to mankind. Trifling as they may seem, they nourish humanity, they soften in some measure the rigour of Death, and they inspire humble, sober and becoming thoughts. They throw a decent Veil over the weak and dishonourable circumstances of our Nature. What shall we say to that philosophy, that would strip it naked? Of such sort is the wisdom of those who talk of the Love, the sentiment, and the thousand little dalliances that pass between the Sexes, in the gross way of mere procreation. They value themselves as having made a mighty discovery; and turn all pretences to delicacy into ridicule. I have read some authors who talk of the Generation of mankind as getting rid of an excrement; who lament bitterly their being subject to such a weakness. They think they are extremely witty in saying it is a dishonourable action and we are obliged to hide it in the obscurity of night. It is hid it's true, not because it is dishonourable but because it is mysterious. There is no part of our condition, but we ought to submit to with Cheerfulness. Why should I desire to be more than man? I have too much reverence for our nature to wish myself divested even of the weak parts of it. I would not wish, as I have heard some do, that I could live without eating or sleeping. I rather thank providence that has so happily united the subsistence of my body with its satisfaction. When we go into another State we shall have means fitted to it, with equal wisdom no doubt. At the present we ought to make the best of our Condition; and improve our very necessities, our wants, and imperfections, into Elegancies;—if possible, into virtues.

The common people are puzzled about extraordinary Phenomena, and wonder at nothing else. The learned wonder not at uncommon things; 'tis about the most ordinary things they are puzzled and perplexed. They can account for earthquakes and eclipses, but doubt of their seeing feeling hearing etc. In reasoning about abstruse matters and the assent we give to Propositions concerning them, we don't sufficiently distinguish between a Contrariety and a Contradiction. No man in his Senses can agree to a Contradiction; but an apparent, nay a real, Contrariety in things, may not only be proposed and believed, but proved beyond any reasonable doubt. Most of our Enquiries, when carried beyond the very Superficies of things, lead us into the greatest Difficulties and we find qualities repugnant to each other whenever we attempt to dive into the Manner of Existence.

Nec tamen istas questiones Physicorum contemnendas puto. Est enim Ani-

marum Ingeniorumque naturale quoddam quasi pabulum, consideratio contemplatioque Naturae.¹

Perhaps the bottom of most things is unintelligible; and our surest reasoning, when we come to a certain point, is involved not only in obscurity but contradiction.

[About 900 words omitted here.]

Sapere aude—it requires some boldness to make use of one’s reason.

We ought to be earnest not anxious in our Business.

That seems to me the most uneasy state of Life when Men are placed where the high and the low meet—where they [are] distracted with the Ambition and vast Desires of the greatest and have scarce more than the Enjoyment of the lowest State.

The Information[s] we receive from Books about Business and Men are, I believe, to be but cautiously trusted; because even if they should be right, yet being written at a distance of time, tho’ Nature be justly described, yet a Variation in Customes, in the Characters and Manners of the Age, of which every Age has its own, makes a great variation in the Conduct to be pursued in the Management of Affairs.

A Man is not invariably and obstinately to [be] swayed by his own Opinion, but in affairs it is still worse to have no Dependence on your own Opinion. The first may [make in MS.] make you sometimes act wrong, the second will prevent your ever acting steadily. And steadiness is the Soul of all action. But there are Men so weak that they suffer themselves to be persuaded out of their own resolution by those whom they thought to have persuaded. And they are always unsuccessful; because, in imagining themselves always ready to be informed of their Errors, they can by no possibility see their great Error, which is their being easily persuaded that their own Opinions are always Erroneous.

In writing, the wisdom of Nature ought to be strictly imitated; which has made all things necessary to our preservation in the highest Degree pleasing to our Appetites. Dry precepts and reasoning do little. It is from the imagination and will that our Errors rise, and in them, as in their first beginnings, they ought to

1. The quotation is from Cicero’s *Academica Priora*, though the original reads a bit differently: *Nec tamen istas quaestiones physicorum exterminandas puto. Est enim animorum ingeniorumque naturale quoddam quasi pabulum consideratio contemplatioque naturae.* Harris Rackham’s translation ([link](#)) is: “And all the same I do not think that these physical investigations of yours should be put out of bounds. For the study and observation of nature affords a sort of natural pasturage for the spirit and intellect.”

be attacked. Men are full as inclined to Vice as to Virtue. Now suppose a piece was written describing the Nature and extent of any Vice, suppose that it shewed its Limits, described its several Species, gave Directions about the encrease and furtherance of it;—suppose this done in such a manner as to avoid carefully the Affecting any of our passions, and then see how little the reader shall be incited to profit from the Lecture. I believe very little. But then, try what a Lascivious Song will do. This is directed to the imagination and in a Moment the Desires are raised. And so undoubtedly and much more will it hold in Virtue. Therefore they who would introduce new Religions must aim at the Imagination not the Understanding. Thus Mahomet's paradise is famed for the Indulgence of all the soft Eastern passions; While in our colder Climates the Methodist, by painting hell torments in all its terrors,—like the Rattle-Snake does the Squirrel—terrifies the poor wretch into his Snare. But neither Mahomet nor the Methodist have anything to do with the Understanding. To instance in the Methodist;—all their terms with a wicked wisdom, are chosen by them too unintelligible and inexplicable, for fear the Understanding should have any play. Thus *'the new light'*, *'the inward feeling'*, *'born again'*. When a reason of their faith is demanded, this cant is the answer you receive. A plain man who can make neither head nor tail of this, desires it to be explained. They are embarrassed. By the pride natural to the Mind of Man they chuse rather to think you reprobate, than themselves absurd. And thus, wrapped up in terms which themselves do not understand, but by which their Imagination is engaged, they continue their folly.

The Action of a play ought to be like a Rack to make Actors discover the bottom of their Souls, the most hidden part of their Characters. Else 'tis good for little.

It is not enough that the discourses of the Actors should be such as are not unnatural. They ought to be natural for the time, the occasion, the person who speaks, the person spoken to. But above all they ought to be natural to the End i.e. such as is proper to carry on the principle Action; and natural in such an Action.

As there are different manners of expressing knowledge, why not a different manner of gaining it too? Quacks prescribe but one remedy for all Constitutions. We see the Absurdity, yet expect that the school method should suit all Geniuses. Their Masters are too much above them, their play-fellows too much on a level. From the first they will not learn much, from the latter they can learn nothing. They are expected to be more at their Books than they chuse; and less is attempted in Conversation with them than they are capable of.

As those who draw charts mark the Sands and Rocks as well as the safe harbours, why should not Philosophers tell us the ill success, as well as the good, of

their Experiments?

It is much more common with Men to contend in violent disputes about the Excellence of their Studies, their profession and their Countrys, than to exert themselves to do anything that may be for the Credit or advantage of them.

About the Author



Edmund Burke (1729–1797) was an author, statesman, and publicist, born in Dublin. He was an MP in the House of Commons between 1766 and 1794. His writings include *A Vindication of Natural Society*, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, and *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*.

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