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Book Notes #115

September 2022

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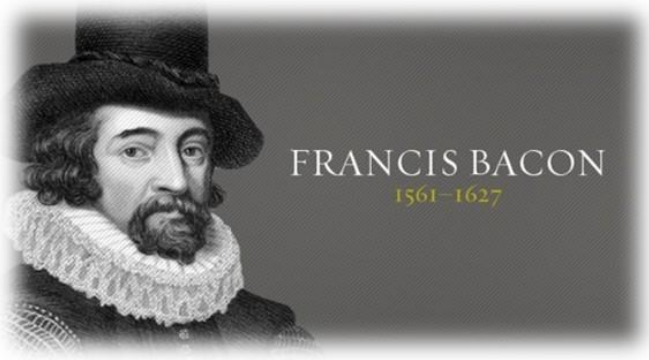
What Is the best "Book Note" Ever Written?



What is the best *"Book Note"* ever written?

I don't mean of mine, which over the course of 100-plus *"Book Notes"* long ago left "note size" and only occasionally touch on the subject of books. They are really essays – I guess in our time they would be called "blogs," although I have never thought of the series as a blog.

Personal essays, they are about whatever is currently nicking my attention. (As a devotee of British crime shows, I've been wanting to use the word "nicking,"

which is British slang for stealing, taking, or snatching.) The greatest essayist was Montaigne, about whom we'll hear more in a future ***Book Note***, but he never wrote anything of *"note"* length. Like me, writing in his retirement, he permitted his mind to rove over a topic until he had exhausted it and like Byron but for different reasons could rove no more.

No, I mean if brevity is the soul of wit (or however the cliché goes), who was the greatest writer of *"note-length"* essays?

There really is no contest.

At least in prose, Francis Bacon's pithiness was matchless.

In his very first essay "Of Truth" (840 words), Bacon asks: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."

Bacon does answer his own question, saying "truth, which only doth judge itself, teacheth that the inquiry of truth, which is the love-making, or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature." [1] It is a memo many current politicos clearly missed, or they might be more sensitive to the bite in Bacon's observation that "There is no vice, that doth so cover a man *(sic)* with shame, as to be found false and perfidious."

Who was Francis Bacon?

In a famous letter replying to a question about the character of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson said that Washington's "mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong, tho' not so acute as that of a Newton, Bacon or Locke …" [2] Which was Jefferson's way of saying that although Washington wasn't as smart as the three smartest men of the English Renaissance, he was pretty smart.

Who were Newton, Locke, and Bacon?

Apple bouncing off his head or not, Isaac Newton postulated the law of universal gravitation in his ***Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica***; John Locke in his ***Second Treatise on Government*** established the philosophical underpinnings of democratic self-government. Preceding both, in addition to a long, if at times fractious and dangerous career as a minister in the royal governments of three monarchs, Francis Bacon was also a master of English prose. Like Machiavelli, he did his most famous work while in exile, having fallen out of political favor. Writing in the late-16th and early-17th centuries, he was the first original thinking English philosopher since William of Ockham in

the 14th century. Ockham asserted the principle ("Ockham's Razor") that states that the simplest answer accounting for the most variables is to be preferred over endlessly complicating an issue. In short, keep it simple (I doubt that he ever said "stupid").

Bacon's great contribution to philosophy was the invention of the scientific method. As a student at Cambridge, he rejected the Scholastic philosophers' endless splitting of a topic into sub-divisions with less and less connections to actual experience at the expense of a succinct, logically rigorous analysis creating knowledge of nature, i.e. things as they are. What Bacon did was reject the Scholastic deductive approach of postulating a general principle and working down from it to explain specific phenomena. Instead, he proposed the reverse. Bacon took an inductive approach in which one makes broad generalizations based on specific observations. Bacon, in short, theorized empiricism. Empiricism is the theory that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience. Bacon, then, articulated the scientific method in which the laws of science are derived not by logic-based arguments but by gathering and analyzing data from experiments and observations.

In his essays, Bacon states the observations from which the reader derives the general conclusion about what constitutes, using the titles of several, "Of Beauty," Of Truth," "Of Ambition," "Of Envy," and "Of Love." About the latter, Bacon writes, "There is in man's nature, a secret inclination and motion, towards love of others, which if it not be spent upon some one or a few, doth naturally spread itself towards many, and maketh men become humane and charitable; as it is seen sometimes in friars. Nuptial love maketh mankind; friendly love perfecteth it; but wanton love corrupteth, and embaseth it."

Of Bacon's many essays, which is the best "Book Note" ever written?

I'll nominate two – his "Of Negotiating" and "Of Studies."

In a Bacon essay, every sentence could serve as the thesis of an entire other essay. Brief, succinct, Bacon's essays supply the data, but leave the final inference to the reader.

Any effective "negotiator" needs to master many styles and techniques of communication. When working with people, one size does not fit all. One of rhetoric's cardinal rules states that one must "fit" one's style to one's audience and as Marshall McLuhan would advise, one must fit the message to the medium. Elizabeth Samets, commenting on Bacon's essay "Of Negotiating," says that many in our Zoom-chat culture would benefit from Bacon's advice for "a suite of diverse approaches." [3] For "Bacon's thoughts on suiting the medium to the message and on the general advantage of the spoken word over the letter, together with his analysis of the role of body language, remain especially useful

for those … so habituated to virtual interfaces that face-to-face communication puts them at an immediate disadvantage." [4]

What are a few of Bacon's "tips" for the artful negotiator? Bacon, like Machiavelli, is not a sentimentalist. He gives hard-edged, practical advice about how the world really works and not about how we might wish it to work. Or, as Machiavelli said of himself, Bacon describes "the true fact of the thing." Bacon concludes "Of Negotiating" with the practical advice that in all difficult negotiations, "a *man [5]* may not look to sow and reap at once; but must prepare business, and so ripen it by degrees." That is, he counsels patience.

Bacon says that if you would "*work* any man," that is convince a person to do something that "you must either know his nature and fashions, and so lead him; or his ends, and so persuade him; or his weakness and disadvantages, and so awe him; or how those that have interest in him, and so govern him."

Work in that sentence means *persuade*. It might strike some that Bacon really means *manipulate*. The distinction between the two leads us into a discussion of the morality of words. I think Bacon here is amoral. He is simply giving a very early lesson in democratic advice. If you do not have the power to compel, then your only other option is to convince by persuasion. To persuade, you must understand the person you are seeking to convince in their own terms and their own interests. For it is, Bacon does not say but understood, a universal truth that people will only do what they believe is in their interest to do. So, if you would *work* a person, then you must understand who they are, what they value, and what they consider to be in their interest. You must convince them that you will help them to attain that *interest*.

So, what is the best "Book Note" ever written? As good as "Of Negotiating" is, my choice is Bacon's "Of Studies." Here it is in its entirety:

Of Studies. (1597; Enlarged 1625) (503 words)

Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability. Their chief use for delight, is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment and disposition of business; for expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one: but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned. To spend too much time in studies, is sloth; to use them too much for ornament, is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules, is the humour of a scholar: they perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: for natural abilities are like natural plants, that need pruning by study; and studies themselves do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience. Crafty men contemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them; for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them, and above

them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention. Some books also may be read by deputy, and extracts made of them by others; but that would be only in the less important arguments, and the meaner sort of books; else distilled books are, like common distilled waters, flashy things. Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man; and, therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit: and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth not. Histories make men wise; poets witty; the mathematics subtile; natural philosophy deep; moral, grave; logic and rhetoric, able to contend "Abeunt studia in mores;" nay, there is no stond or impediment in the wit, but may be wrought out by fit studies: like as diseases of the body may have appropriate exercises; bowling is good for the stone and reins, shooting for the lungs and breast, gentle walking for the stomach, riding for the head, and the like; so, if a man's wit be wandering, let him study the mathematics; for in demonstrations, if his wit be called away never so little, he must begin again; if his wit be no apt to distinguish or find differences, let him study the schoolmen, for they are "Cymini sectores;" if he be not apt to beat over matters, and to call upon one thing to prove and illustrate another, let him study the lawyer's cases: so every defect of the mind may have a special receipt. [5]

Nb. If my Latin translator is reasonably accurate, “Abeunt studia in mores” means studies pass on into character, or more idiomatically, one becomes what one studies for they become habits of mind and heart; “Cymini sectores” means “hairsplitters” or someone who makes excessively fine distinctions in reasoning, a trait Bacon abhorred.

Like me, all readers of these ***Book Notes*** are students either by avocation – personal preference or by vocation – one’s profession requires it. In either instance, readers of these ***Book Notes*** are living examples of the old college mission statement goal to make us “lifelong learners.”

So, what is it we’ve been doing these many years and why?

Bacon answers in his first sentence, “***Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability.”*** He then explains what that means in his second sentence ***“Their chief use for delight, is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment and disposition of business …”***

What other sentences in “Of Studies” could be theses?

Well, the just quoted first line, but also this sentence: "***but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned."***

Why "are the learned" best equipped to lead?

Because they know "stuff." What "stuff" do they know? Ideally, both general principles and those relevant to the situation at hand. In the 21st century there is a discipline known as knowledge management, which understands "knowledge" as the product of a hierarchy of thinking that begins, as Bacon would, with the accumulation of data (facts), the organizing of that data into patterns of recognition (information), that then analyzes that information as to its meaning, applicability, and importance (knowledge), which, in some rare instances, progresses into understanding (wisdom).

So, for any topic there are those who know; if one would lead, one needs to know. But not everyone agrees that this is a good thing. Contemporary populism is essentially a rebellion against the inherent elitism in that hierarchy, for as one moves up that chain of generalizing one encounters fewer and fewer capable of performing it. That some who can do it become arrogant is to their great disgrace, for in their arrogance they alienate others and call into discredit those who can. Collapsing a complex argument into a mere summary, their arrogance arouses resentment among those who can't; those who can't resent being treated as second class, don bear skins and horned helmets and invade the U.S. Capitol and here we are in 21st century America with anti-science proponents, anti-vaxxers, and boorish illiterates running amok. The "learned," apologizing for what they know, are less and less able to govern, manage, and lead.

But I digress.

What are some other Bacon sentences worthy of an essay of their own?

There are a number, but these are my chief contenders. ***"… And studies themselves do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience,"*** which qualifies the observation that those who are learned should lead. Bacon would allow leadership only to those whose knowledge derived from studies is tempered by experience. The sense of which is that one needs studies to understand one's own experience, if for nothing else but to learn that one is not unique, that others have been here before and to offer examples ("counsel") as to how one might proceed. But the reverse might be even more important, for one needs experience in order to understand what one has learned from study. For if one only knows what one has read in a book, one knows very little indeed.

Or, ***"Crafty men contemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them …"*** Why do the crafty condemn studies? Because they fear exposure. How best to avoid exposure? By keeping one's followers ignorant, who being ignorant can then be led by their noses. For current examples mark the war on history being conducted by some politicos attempting to squelch the truth.

Why do simple men admire studies? Not so obvious and not, I think always true, but because many do not want to appear unlearned. And why do wise men use studies? See comments above about those who are learned are often, but not always, the most successful leaders.

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention." As someone who has managed for more than 50 years to earn his daily bread by talking about the things he's read, this sentence always strikes me with particular force. I went to graduate school in the 1960s when the new criticism was still dominant. It taught that a text was to be respected on its own terms, the first of which required a deep and attentive reading. As a result, I have always felt guilty skimming or "skip reading" a book. The practical consequence of which is that I have wasted more than a bit of time on books that did not merit the attention. If I had read Bacon earlier, I could have saved a lot of time!

What books are "to be tasted"? Just about any that would have been better as an article in ***The Atlantic*** or some other journal, which means just about all best sellers about current events! Almost everyone of this genre would have been better suited to 15 to 30 tightly edited pages. I mean him no insult, but Kurt Andersen's ***Fantasyland*** comes immediately to mind (which, by the way, was also an ***Atlantic*** article and very readable at that shorter length).

What books are "to be swallowed"? My short answer would be those that make you think. Over the years, what books have made me think? Fortunately, many. A short sample of those I can see simply by pivoting my chair include Karen Armstrong's ***A History of God***, Jill Lepore's ***This America: The Case for the Nation***, John Lewis Gaddis' ***The Landscape of History***, Louis Menand's ***The Metaphysical Club*** and ***The Free World,*** and Robert M. Persig's ***Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values.*** Actually, I could list hundreds, but I won't.

What books are "to be chewed and digested"? Reversing the Baconian method, I will answer with a proposition. Those books are "to be chewed and digested"

which, as great poets do, bring you more ***present-to-the-present***. So, I'd begin with the poets and move to the great novelists and finish with the great historians, the best of whom are both poets and novelists (although they might not like being described as such). The great historians are definitely not social scientists, most of whose books fall under the category "to be tasted."

Whose books make one more ***present-to-the-present?*** Well, answering that question could lead to a whole new series of ***Book Notes***. I've often said Tolstoy's ***War and Peace*** is the greatest novel ever written, the torturous pages on historical theory notwithstanding, but there are many others and I will answer with examples in future ***Book Notes***. I'll end this paragraph by asking you a question that is admittedly unfair because I am not sure I could answer it – what is ***the*** best book you've ever read and why? Whatever you choose, I'll wager it is a book that made you more ***present-to-the-present.***

A last selection from Bacon's "Of Studies": "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man; and, therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit: *and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth not*. Which must be exhausting to continuously have to perform as if you knew what you don't. Which is why, in the end, fools are almost always exposed. But there are two caveats in that sentence. The first is "almost always exposed," for some fools can fool people for a long time. The second caveat is that during that long time until their act finally fails, oh, the harm they can do; oh, the harm, the pain, and the suffering they can cause.

Which is why it is important to study, so that one knows a fool when one meets one!

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End Notes

1. All quotations from Bacon are from ***Essays of Francis Bacon*** from a "print-on-demand" copy published by **Barnes and Noble.com** or an affiliate in Middletown, Delaware on 18 August 2022. It has no page numbers. All of Bacon's essays are in the public domain and for the curious who want to read them ample PDFs are freely available across the internet.
2. *"Thomas Jefferson to Walter Jones, 2 January 1814"* at **Founders Online, The National Archives** available here accessed September 8, 2022.
3. Samets, Elizabeth. *"Introduction to 'Of Negotiating'"* in ***Leadership: Essential Writings from Our Greatest Thinkers.*** (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2015), p. 378.
4. Bacon wrote in the 16th and 17th century. In his time and until very recently, "man" referred to all humans collectively, but admittedly members of the male sex dominated public life. He was speaking primarily to men. That being so, I will let Bacon speak in his own voice and not clutter quotations with *(sics)* and/or substitute 21st century gender-neutral pronouns for his use of "man."
5. Bacon, Francis. *"Of Studies,"* at **Wikisource** available here accessed August 18, 2022. This essay is in the public domain.

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