No. 154. The inefficacy of genius without learning.

07 Tuesday Sep 1751

Posted by Samuel Johnson in The Rambler

≈ Comments Off on No. 154. The inefficacy of genius without learning.

— Tibi res antiquae laudis et artis
Ingredior, sanctos ausus recludere fontes. VIR. Geo. ii. 174.

For thee my tuneful accents will I raise,
And treat of arts disclos’d in ancient days;
Once more unlock for thee the sacred spring. DRYDEN.

The direction of Aristotle to those that study politicks, is first to examine and understand what has been written by the ancients upon government; then to cast their eyes round upon the world, and consider by what causes the prosperity of communities is visibly influenced, and why some are worse, and others better administered.

The same method must be pursued by him who hopes to become eminent in any other part of knowledge. The first task is to search books, the next to contemplate nature. He must first possess himself of the intellectual treasures which the diligence of former ages has accumulated, and then endeavour to increase them by his own collections.

The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity. The wits of these happy days have discovered a way to fame, which the dull caution of our laborious ancestors durst never attempt; they cut the knots of sophistry which it was formerly the business of years to untie, solve difficulties by sudden irradiations of intelligence, and comprehend long processes of argument by immediate intuition.

Men who have flattered themselves into this opinion of their own abilities, look down on all who waste their lives over books, as a race of inferior beings, condemned by nature to perpetual pupilage, and fruitlessly endeavouring to remedy their barrenness by incessant cultivation, or succour their feebleness by subsidiary strength. They presume that none would be more industrious than they, if they were not more sensible of deficiencies; and readily conclude, that he who places no confidence in his own powers, owes his modesty only to his weakness.

It is however certain, that no estimate is more in danger of erroneous calculations than those by which a man computes the force of his own genius. It generally happens at our entrance into the world, that, by the natural attraction of similitude, we associate with men like ourselves, young, sprightly, and ignorant, and rate our accomplishments by comparison with theirs; when we have once obtained an acknowledged superiority over our acquaintances, imagination and desire easily extend it over the rest of mankind, and if no accident forces us into new emulations, we grow old, and die in admiration of ourselves.

Vanity, thus confirmed in her dominion, readily listens to the voice of idleness, and soothes the slumber of life with continual dreams of excellence and greatness. A man, elated by confidence in his natural vigour of fancy and sagacity of conjecture, soon concludes that he already possesses whatever toil and inquiry can confer. He then listens with eagerness to the wild objections which folly has raised against the common means of improvement; talks of the dark chaos of indigested knowledge; describes the mischievous effects of heterogeneous sciences fermenting in the mind;
relates the blunders of lettered ignorance; expatiates on the heroick merit of those who deviate from prescription, or shake off authority; and gives vent to the inflations of his heart by declaring that he owes nothing to pedants and universities.

All these pretensions, however confident, are very often vain. The laurels which superficial acuteness gains in triumphs over ignorance unsupported by vivacity, are observed by Locke to be lost, whenever real learning and rational diligence appear against her; the sallies of gaiety are soon repressed by calm confidence; and the artifices of subtilty are readily detected by those, who, having carefully studied the question, are not easily confounded or surprised.

But, though the contempler of books had neither been deceived by others nor himself, and was really born with a genius surpassing the ordinary abilities of mankind; yet surely such gifts of Providence may be more properly urged as incitements to labour, than encouragements to negligence. He that neglects the culture of ground naturally fertile, is more shamefully culpable, than he whose field would scarcely recompense his husbandry.

Cicero remarks, that not to know what has been transacted in former times, is to continue always a child. If no use is made of the labours of past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge. The discoveries of every man must terminate in his own advantage, and the studies of every age be employed on questions which the past generation had discussed and determined. We may with as little reproach borrow science as manufactures from our ancestors; and it is as rational to live in caves till our own hands have erected a palace, as to reject all knowledge of architecture which our understandings will not supply.

To the strongest and quickest mind it is far easier to learn than to invent. The principles of arithmetick and geometry may be comprehended by a close attention in a few days; yet who can flatter himself that the study of a long life would have enabled him to discover them, when he sees them yet unknown to so many nations, whom he cannot suppose less liberally endowed with natural reason, than the Grecians or Egyptians?

Every science was thus far advanced towards perfection, by the emulous diligence of contemporary students, and the gradual discoveries of one age improving on another. Sometimes unexpected flashes of instruction were struck out by the fortuitous collision of happy incidents, or an involuntary concurrence of ideas, in which the philosopher to whom they happened had no other merit than that of knowing their value, and transmitting, unclouded, to posterity, that light which had been kindled by causes out of his power. The happiness of these casual illuminations no man can promise to himself, because no endeavours can procure them; and therefore whatever be our abilities or application, we must submit to learn from others what perhaps would have lain hid for ever from human penetration, had not some remote inquiry brought it to view; as treasures are thrown up by the ploughman and the digger in the rude exercise of their common occupations. The man whose genius qualifies him for great undertakings, must at least be content to learn from books the present state of human knowledge; that he may not ascribe to himself the invention of arts generally undetected and undisturbed. Every science has its difficulties, which yet call for solution before we attempt new systems of knowledge; as every country has its forests and marshes, which it would be wise to cultivate and drain, before distant colonies are projected as a necessary discharge of the exuberance of inhabitants.

But, though the study of books is necessary, it is not sufficient to constitute literary eminence. He that wishes to be counted among the benefactors of posterity, must add by his own toil to the acquisitions of his ancestors, and secure his memory from neglect by some valuable improvement. This can only be effected by looking out upon the wastes of the intellectual world, and extending the power of learning over regions yet undiscovered and barbarous; or by surveying more exactly our ancient dominions, and driving ignorance from the fortresses and retreats where she skulks undetected and undisturbed. Every science has its difficulties, which yet call for solution before we attempt new systems of knowledge; as every country has its forests and marshes, which it would be wise to cultivate and drain, before distant colonies are projected as a necessary discharge of the exuberance of inhabitants.

No man ever yet became great by imitation. Whatever hopes for the veneration of mankind must have invention in the design or the execution; either the effect must itself be new, or the means by which it is produced. Either truths hitherto unknown must be discovered, or those which are already known enforced by stronger evidence, facilitated by clearer method, or elucidated by brighter illustrations.

Fame cannot spread wide or endure long that is not rooted in nature, and matured by art. That which hopes to resist the blast of malignity, and stand firm against the attacks of time, must contain in itself some original principle of growth. The reputation which arises from the detail or transposition of borrowed sentiments, may spread for awhile, like ivy on the rind of antiquity, but will be torn away by accident or contempt, and suffered to rot unheeded on the ground.

Post navigation

← Previous post Next post →

Comments are closed.

♦ Essays By Publication

Published in:
- The Rambler
- The Adventurer
- The Idler

♦ The Best Collection of Samuel Johnson’s Essays

It's not all of them, but here's the most accessible collection of Johnson's most popular and influential essays: [Johnson's Collected Essays](http://www.johnsonessays.com/the-rambler/no-154-the-inefficacy-of-genius-without-learning/).

♣ Archives

- April 1760 (1)
- March 1760 (5)
- February 1760 (4)
- January 1760 (4)
- December 1759 (5)
- November 1759 (4)
- October 1759 (4)
- September 1759 (5)
- August 1759 (4)
- July 1759 (4)
- June 1759 (5)
- May 1759 (4)
- April 1759 (4)
- March 1759 (5)
- February 1759 (4)
- January 1759 (4)
- December 1758 (5)
- November 1758 (4)
- October 1758 (4)
- September 1758 (3)
- August 1758 (4)
- July 1758 (5)
- June 1758 (4)
- May 1758 (4)
- April 1758 (3)
- March 1758 (1)
- February 1754 (2)
- January 1754 (2)
- December 1753 (3)
- November 1753 (3)
- October 1753 (3)
- September 1753 (1)
- August 1753 (3)
- July 1753 (2)
- June 1753 (2)
- May 1753 (2)
- April 1753 (2)
- March 1753 (4)
- March 1752 (4)
- February 1752 (9)
- January 1752 (8)
- December 1751 (9)
- November 1751 (9)
- October 1751 (9)
- September 1751 (8)
- August 1751 (9)
- July 1751 (9)
An Overview of Johnson’s Major Works

Here's a collection of the most influential and popular writing by Dr. Johnson: Samuel Johnson - the Major Works.

Read More Samuel Johnson

- The Major Works
- Selected Writings
- The History of Rasselas
- Journey to the Western Isles
- Selected Essays
- Johnson's Dictionary

More Info

- About Dr. Johnson
- About This Blog
Samuel Johnson on Twitter

- Stay up to date with these essays by following @JohnsonEssays
- Find a humorous version of Johnson on Twitter at @DrSamuelJohnson

Samuel Johnson's Collected Essays

Samuel Johnson's Major Works, Oxford Classics

James Boswell's Life of Johnson
No. 154. The inefficacy of genius without learning. Samuel Johnson's Essays