

VIII. Excellencies of Learning enumerated

(1) To proceed now from imperial and military virtue to moral and private virtue; first, it is an assured truth, which is contained in the verses:—

“Scilicet ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes
Emollit mores nec sinit esse feros.”

It taketh away the wildness and barbarism and fierceness of men’s minds; but indeed the accent had need be upon *fideliter*; for a little superficial learning doth rather work a contrary effect. It taketh away all levity, temerity, and insolency, by copious suggestion of all doubts and difficulties, and acquainting the mind to balance reasons on both sides, and to turn back the first offers and conceits of the mind, and to accept of nothing but examined and tried. It taketh away vain admiration of anything, which is the root of all weakness. For all things are admired, either because they are new, or because they are great. For novelty, no man that wadeth in learning or contemplation thoroughly but will find that printed in his heart, *Nil novi super terram*. Neither can any man marvel at the play of puppets, that goeth behind the curtain, and adviseth well of the motion. And for magnitude, as Alexander the Great, after that he was used to great armies, and the great conquests of the spacious provinces in Asia, when he received letters out of Greece, of some fights and services there, which were commonly for a passage or a fort, or some walled town at the most, he said:—“It seemed to him that he was advertised of the battles of the frogs and the mice, that the old tales went of.” So certainly, if a man meditate much upon the universal frame of nature, the earth with men upon it (the divineness of souls except) will not seem much other than an ant-hill, whereas some ants carry corn, and some carry their young, and some go empty, and all to and fro a little heap of dust. It taketh away or mitigateth fear of death or adverse fortune, which is one of the greatest impediments of virtue and imperfections of manners. For if a man’s mind be deeply seasoned with the consideration of the mortality and corruptible nature of things, he will easily concur with Epictetus, who went forth one day and saw a woman weeping for her pitcher of earth that was broken, and went forth the next day and saw a woman weeping for her son that was dead, and thereupon said, “*Heri vidi fragilem frangi, hodie vidi mortalem mori.*” And, therefore, Virgil did excellently and profoundly couple the knowledge of causes and the conquest of all fears together, as *concomitantia*.

“Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
Quique metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum
Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari.”

(2) It were too long to go over the particular remedies which learning doth minister to all the diseases of the mind: sometimes purging the ill humours, sometimes opening the obstructions, sometimes helping digestion, sometimes increasing appetite, sometimes healing the wounds and exulcerations thereof, and the like; and, therefore, I will conclude with that which hath *rationem totius*—which is, that it disposeth the constitution of the mind not to be fixed or settled in the defects thereof, but still to

be capable and susceptible of growth and reformation. For the unlearned man knows not what it is to descend into himself, or to call himself to account, nor the pleasure of that *suavissima vita, indies sentire se fieri meliorem*. The good parts he hath he will learn to show to the full, and use them dexterously, but not much to increase them. The faults he hath he will learn how to hide and colour them, but not much to amend them; like an ill mower, that mows on still, and never whets his scythe. Whereas with the learned man it fares otherwise, that he doth ever intermix the correction and amendment of his mind with the use and employment thereof. Nay, further, in general and in sum, certain it is that *Veritas* and *Bonitas* differ but as the seal and the print; for truth prints goodness, and they be the clouds of error which descend in the storms of passions and perturbations.

(3) From moral virtue let us pass on to matter of power and commandment, and consider whether in right reason there be any comparable with that wherewith knowledge investeth and crowneth man's nature. We see the dignity of the commandment is according to the dignity of the commanded; to have commandment over beasts as herdmen have, is a thing contemptible; to have commandment over children as schoolmasters have, is a matter of small honour; to have commandment over galley-slaves is a disparagement rather than an honour. Neither is the commandment of tyrants much better, over people which have put off the generosity of their minds; and, therefore, it was ever holden that honours in free monarchies and commonwealths had a sweetness more than in tyrannies, because the commandment extendeth more over the wills of men, and not only over their deeds and services. And therefore, when Virgil putteth himself forth to attribute to Augustus Cæsar the best of human honours, he doth it in these words:—

“Victorque volentes
Per populos dat jura, viamque affectat Olympo.”

But yet the commandment of knowledge is yet higher than the commandment over the will; for it is a commandment over the reason, belief, and understanding of man, which is the highest part of the mind, and giveth law to the will itself. For there is no power on earth which setteth up a throne or chair of estate in the spirits and souls of men, and in their cogitations, imaginations, opinions, and beliefs, but knowledge and learning. And therefore we see the detestable and extreme pleasure that arch-heretics, and false prophets, and impostors are transported with, when they once find in themselves that they have a superiority in the faith and conscience of men; so great as if they have once tasted of it, it is seldom seen that any torture or persecution can make them relinquish or abandon it. But as this is that which the author of the Revelation calleth the depth or profoundness of Satan, so by argument of contraries, the just and lawful sovereignty over men's understanding, by force of truth rightly interpreted, is that which approacheth nearest to the similitude of the divine rule.

(4) As for fortune and advancement, the beneficence of learning is not so confined to give fortune only to states and commonwealths, as it doth not likewise give fortune to particular persons. For it was well noted long ago, that Homer hath given more men their livings, than either Sylla, or Cæsar, or Augustus ever did, notwithstanding their great largesses and donatives, and distributions of lands to so many legions. And no doubt it is hard to say whether arms or learning have advanced greater numbers. And in case of sovereignty we see, that if arms or descent have carried away the kingdom, yet learning hath carried the priesthood, which ever hath been in some competition with empire.

(5) Again, for the pleasure and delight of knowledge and learning, it far surpasseth all other in nature. For, shall the pleasures of the affections so exceed the pleasure of the sense, as much as the obtaining of desire or victory exceedeth a song or a dinner? and must not of consequence the pleasures of the intellect or understanding exceed the pleasures of the affections? We see in all other pleasures there is satiety, and after they be used, their verdure departeth, which showeth well they be but deceits of pleasure, and not pleasures; and that it was the novelty which pleased, and not the quality. And, therefore, we see that voluptuous men turn friars, and ambitious princes turn melancholy. But of knowledge there is no satiety, but satisfaction and appetite are perpetually interchangeable; and, therefore, appeareth to be good in itself simply, without fallacy or accident. Neither is that pleasure of small efficacy and contentment to the mind of man, which the poet Lucretius describeth elegantly:—

“Suave mari magno, turbantibus æquora ventis, &c.”

“It is a view of delight,” saith he, “to stand or walk upon the shore side, and to see a ship tossed with tempest upon the sea; or to be in a fortified tower, and to see two battles join upon a plain. But it is a pleasure incomparable, for the mind of man to be settled, landed, and fortified in the certainty of truth; and from thence to descry and behold the errors, perturbations, labours, and wanderings up and down of other men.”

(6) Lastly, leaving the vulgar arguments, that by learning man excelleth man in that wherein man excelleth beasts; that by learning man ascendeth to the heavens and their motions, where in body he cannot come; and the like: let us conclude with the dignity and excellency of knowledge and learning in that whereunto man’s nature doth most aspire, which is immortality, or continuance; for to this tendeth generation, and raising of houses and families; to this tend buildings, foundations, and monuments; to this tendeth the desire of memory, fame, and celebration; and in effect the strength of all other human desires. We see then how far the monuments of wit and learning are more durable than the monuments of power or of the hands. For have not the verses of Homer continued twenty-five hundred years, or more, without the loss of a syllable or letter; during which the infinite palaces, temples, castles, cities, have been decayed and demolished? It is not possible to have the true pictures or statues of Cyrus, Alexander, Cæsar, no nor of the kings or great personages of much later years; for the originals cannot last, and the copies cannot but leese of the life and truth. But the images of men’s wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages. So that if the invention of the ship was thought so noble, which carrieth riches and commodities from place to place, and consociateth the most remote regions in participation of their fruits, how much more are letters to be magnified, which as ships pass through the vast seas of time, and make ages so distant to participate of the wisdom, illuminations, and inventions, the one of the other? Nay, further, we see some of the philosophers which were least divine, and most immersed in the senses, and denied generally the immortality of the soul, yet came to this point, that whatsoever motions the spirit of man could act and perform without the organs of the body, they thought might remain after death, which were only those of the understanding and not of the affection; so immortal and incorruptible a thing did knowledge seem unto them to be. But we, that know by divine revelation that not only the understanding but the affections purified, not only the spirit but the body changed, shall be advanced to immortality, do disclaim in these rudiments of the senses. But it must be remembered, both in this last

point, and so it may likewise be needful in other places, that in probation of the dignity of knowledge or learning, I did in the beginning separate divine testimony from human, which method I have pursued, and so handled them both apart.

(7) Nevertheless I do not pretend, and I know it will be impossible for me, by any pleading of mine, to reverse the judgment, either of Æsop's cock, that preferred the barleycorn before the gem; or of Midas, that being chosen judge between Apollo, president of the Muses, and Pan, god of the flocks, judged for plenty; or of Paris, that judged for beauty and love against wisdom and power; or of Agrippina, *occidat matrem, modo imperet*, that preferred empire with any condition never so detestable; or of Ulysses, *qui vetulam prætulit immortalitati*, being a figure of those which prefer custom and habit before all excellency, or of a number of the like popular judgments. For these things must continue as they have been; but so will that also continue whereupon learning hath ever relied, and which faileth not: *Justificata est sapientia a filiis suis.*

Revision #1

Created 2019-08-13 15:42:41 UTC by Textpedia

Updated 2019-08-13 15:43:14 UTC by Textpedia