

The Preposterous Reading of Books

EXCERPTED FROM

The Practice of Physick

BY

GIORGIO BAGLIVI

London 1704

T H E
Practice of Physick,
Reduc'd to the Ancient Way of
OBSERVATIONS
Containing a Just Parallel between
The Wisdom and Experience of the Ancients,
A N D
The Hypothesis's of Modern Physicians.
I N T E R M I X'D
With many *PRACTICAL REMARKS*
upon most *DISTEMPERS.*
Together with Several
New and Curious *Dissertations* ;
Particularly of the
T A R A N T U L A ,
And the Nature of its Poison :
Of the Use and Abuse of *Blistering-Plasters :*
Of *Epidemical Apoplexies, &c.*

Written in Latine, by GEO. BAGLIVI, M. D.
Professor of Physick and Anatomy at Rome.

Opinionum Commenta delet dies, Naturæ judicia con-
firmat. Cic. de Nat. Deor.

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INTRODUCTION

Giorgio Baglivi (1668–1707) was a physician of Yugoslavian origin, whose fame today rests chiefly upon his extensive contributions to anatomy and physiology. After completing his medical studies at Naples and serving in the hospitals of various Italian cities, he became the pupil and assistant of Marcello Malpighi, the famous Italian anatomist, who directed many of Baglivi's investigations. After Malpighi's death in 1691, Baglivi dissected his late master's corpse and later wrote a valuable account of Malpighi's last illness. He then joined the papal court as Pope Innocent XII's second physician; in 1701, Pope Clement XI appointed him professor of theoretical medicine at the Sapienza. Baglivi's last years were devoted to biological research and to his lectures and anatomical demonstrations, for which he achieved a widespread European fame. In 1696 Baglivi published his *De praxis medica*, an expression of his belief that contemporary physicians were becoming less concerned with practical medicine and increasingly enslaved to abstract philosophical systems and hypotheses. To counteract this alarming trend, Baglivi advocated a return to the Hippocratic principles of sound clinical observation, outlining a sensible and lucid program for medicine to follow in the future. The following excerpt, "The Preposterous Reading of Books," taken from the English translation of 1704, forms part of Baglivi's attack on abstruse medico-philosophical systems and those who follow them. The advice contained therein, however, is of such general import that it easily applies to any field where too much book-learning, coupled with too little experience, can be a dangerous thing.

ONE will never make any Progress by the reading of Books, unless he first fixes upon a Method of Reading. A tumultuary and inconsiderate way of Reading, accompany'd with an insatiable Desire, do's but cloud the Mind: but when 'tis seasonable and considerate, and attended by the Conversation of learned Men and the Use of Experiments, it becomes fertile and usefull. For as over-feeding do's not improve Health, neither do's insatiable Reading enlarge solid Knowledge. And 'tis for this reason, that those who consider but a few things with Prudence, not only judge more perfectly of things, but give their Sense of them with greater readiness and facility. I own that we owe a great deal of our Improvement to Books; but before we can reap from them any plentiful and compleat Benefit, we must be a long time diligent in discovering and surmounting the Errors that Authors are usually liable to, and with which they taint our Minds, and seduce 'em from the Paths of Truth. By the reading of good Books we are quickly benefited; but by the perusal of sorry ones we unlearn instead of Learning Those who read Books, use to employ their Memory more than their Reason; they seem chiefly to aim at the Learning what this or that Author advances, and are altogether Ignorant what Sentiments they ought to form to themselves upon the bottom of their own Experience. If we look a little narrowly into the Writings of some of our modern Authors, we'll find, that they value themselves upon a long Genealogy of new Opinions, and a medley of various Colours, but not upon any design of making new Discoveries, or con-

firming former Inventions. Now, I cannot assign any other Reason for this, but that incredible Inclination for Reading and almost Dying upon Books; or rather their Laziness in never using their own Reason, or consulting Experience. And hence it comes to pass, that the more they read, the more confus'd they are in their Sentiments of things; and their Confusion throws them headlong either into Scepticism or Madness. For since the Capacity of the Brain is not Infinite, 'tis no wonder that the innumerable Impressions of Idea's are mutually confounded, and take the Mind off from just and distinct Judgment; by which means Men coming to a disuse of their own Thoughts, contract an Impotency of ever using them. This sort of Men, who imploy their Memory more than their Reason, use to be of a stately supercilious Temper, and are apt to arrogate to themselves a right of determining every thing: And indeed nothing less can be expected of 'em; for that false sort of memorial Knowledge (if I may so call it) puffs up the Mind, and entitles them to a sort of shining Quality, with which they are wont to anticipate those who mean to oppose them, especially if it is accompany'd with an imperious Boldness, and a formal Gravity of Speech.

But least any of the ignorant Tribe, should falsely charge me with the dissuading of young Men from so useful and laudable an Exercise, as the reading of Books; I think myself oblig'd in this place to confess Ingenuously, that, as I owe to the reading of Books some Progress in the way of Physick, which, tho' small, is not hurtful; so I shall ever ex-

hort and encourage young Men to pursue and cultivate the same Study. However, that they may avoid those Sands upon which I have oftentimes necessarily struck, I think it proper to give them a few preparatory Cautions. In order to reap a speedy and compleat Advantage by the reading of Books, they should always read the approv'd Authors; and if there's one approv'd beyond all the rest they should never want him out of their Hands, as containing the Sum of all that Wisdom, which they'll scarce ever find in a hundred Authors of an inferior Character . . . You cannot profit by reading, without you understand what you read; and what you understand, you must not give your Assent to it, till you consider whether 'tis true or false. Make use of your own Reason in resolving the Questions you see prefix'd in the Titles of Books, and by joyning Experience to your assiduous Reading, endeavour to make a just Judgment of every particular. For unless Reason directs your Studies, Study will not only fail in perfecting your Reason, but will blunt it, and seduce it from the right scope of your Labours. To dwell upon Books till one is almost dead and languishing, speaks a specious and empty Lazyness; to abuse them in a softer way, signifies Ostentation and Ignorance: For 'tis well known that Letters perfect Nature, and 'tis equally known that Letters are perfected by Experience; and when they enjoyn some general things, unless these be determin'd by Experience, we shall never compass the wish'd for End. 'Tis manifest from Experience, that those who Die as 'twere upon the reading of Books, become stupid and unqualified

for all the other Actions of Life; nay, that is not all, by reason of their perpetual Abstraction from things, and the Confusion of their Idea's occasion'd by over-reading, they are incapable to serve either themselves or the Commonwealth. On the other hand, a great many Men that have read but very little, have always been esteem'd and admir'd by Men, because they form'd their Thoughts and Judgments of things with Prudence and Sagacity. When you find your self indispos'd for Study, that is, when you have not a chearfull Desire and Inclination for't, abstain from it at that time; for tho' you then read a great deal, you'll get little by't. Wherefore, that such a Space of time may not be spent in vain, imploy it either in conversing with learned Men, or making Experiments.

Your cunning Men use to despise Letters, and simple Folks admire 'em; but prudent Men take the middle way, and only use 'em in so far as the Publick or private necessity requires. To read Books with a design of contradicting, or for an external Ornament, or to assent to all their Precepts promiscuously without any Examination, speaks an Affectation of Knowledge rather than true and solid Wisdom . . . 'twill therefore be proper for a young Student to have by him a Manuscript divided according to the Titles of the most remarkable things, under which, he may mark down the Sentences of greatest Moment that he meets with in Books, and which he may always be reading over at his leisure Hours; by which means these Sentences and Precepts being more firmly riveted in his Memory, will improve

and perfect the Mind . . . The writings of approv'd Authors Ancient or Modern, which treat of nice Subjects, are not only to be read once, but over and over again, and always consulted; so that our Mind may be as 'twere new modell'd according to their Pattern. Authors of lesser Note are only to be read here and there; or if they're read over, it must be without dwelling long on 'em, or losing much time. And as for the Books of the lowest Form, we ought to read 'em only in Epitome's drawn up by a fellow Student or an Amanuensis. By this means we shall acquire an extensive Knowledge of Sciences and Learning without any great loss of time and health.

COLOPHON

The Preposterous Reading of Books by Giorgio Baglivi has been prepared for presentation to the members of the Roxburghe and Zamorano Clubs on the occasion of their joint meeting in San Francisco on September 10 & 11, 1980, by Warren R. Howell, Lawton Kennedy, Arthur E. Lyons, M.D., and Jeffrey Thomas.

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